



“Across the Shadowy Landscape of Memory”: A Relational Reading of Liminal Traumas in Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

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ABSTRACT

Liminal trauma narratives provide access to the formal representation and the affective dimension of trauma. Anita Rau Badami’s multigenerational and transnational novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) is a case in point, in which in-betweenness is not merely a source of affliction but may develop into a stepping stone to a belated understanding of past tragedies in twentieth-century India and Canada. Through a relational and dialogical approach encompassing Indra’s net, postmemory, rhizomatic theory, and multidirectional memory, liminality is addressed in the family and historical spheres, tracing vertical and horizontal connections between characters and episodes, which, it is argued, challenge event-based models of trauma studies, stress the importance of emotional alliances, and promote the establishment of communities of memory. Ultimately, chronologies and hierarchies are discarded in favour of network arrangements as the most suitable way to deal with interconnected traumas.

KEYWORDS: Affect; Canada; Indian diaspora; Liminality; Melancholic migrant; Multidirectional memory; Partition; Postmemory; Relationality; Trauma literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of a traumatic event generally unfolds in a state of in-betweenness, with affected subjects swinging between their affliction and the possibility of its overcoming. The irony of it is that in addition to being intimately connected to trauma, liminality may also be its source given its relation to identities which flow between cultures, geographies and social realms. In fact, addressing these issues invokes yet another threshold, namely that between the traumatic

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memories that can be recalled and verbalised as opposed to the ones which, in line with the predominantly aporetic approach adopted by Yale School critics, cannot be fully comprehended nor faithfully represented, for they constitute belated experiences (Caruth, 1996, p. 92) or even untranslatable testimonies (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 159). This partly explains why the genre of trauma narratives tends to be riddled with experimental techniques, whereby authors orbit the aftereffects of a shocking event without directly putting into writing what is, in principle, impossible to convey. However, while such literary strategies are a somewhat standardised “outline of a general trauma aesthetic” (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 88), Stef Craps maintains that they are not a sine qua non of writing about life-changing matters (2013, p. 39) and, most importantly, that the bulk of trauma literature suffers from the same serious flaw as its theory: being traditionally Eurocentric, although not irredeemably so (2013, p. 33). It follows that “the hegemonic trauma model thus obstructs entry to meanings underlying vital cultural non-western practices and beliefs” (Visser, 2011, p. 279), which, in turn, demands a loosening of the formal and thematic criteria that restrict not only the number of works that qualify as a trauma narrative, but also which traumas are worth narrativising.

Significantly, the ongoing decolonisation of trauma studies, which is itself an ethical and long-overdue process, dovetails nicely with liminal trauma narratives, because, “through the reality of the separation from some inassimilable memory, trauma provides the conditions for some ceaseless movement towards Otherness, and liminal trauma narratives build up the textual modalities of such openness” (Onega & Ganteau, 2014, p. 11). In other words, shedding light on the grey areas of a borderline existence enables a both ethical and theoretical –or theoretic– approximation to painful memories such as those depicted in Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), which portrays the intersecting stories of three women over the course of nearly sixty years in the mid-twentieth century, all the while shifting between Canada and India. Bibi-ji is a self-made Sikh who lost track of her family during the partition of the subcontinent and who keeps open house for fellow immigrants in Vancouver. Among the latter is Leela, a mixed-race Hindu who, by some quirk of fate, helps her locate the whereabouts of Nimmo, Bibi-ji’s missing niece residing in New Delhi, who was only a child in 1947 and thus doubts whether they truly are related. Nonetheless, Bibi-ji does not care about ascertaining their consanguinity and will eventually foster one of her supposed grandnephews, Jasbeer, convinced as she is that the West will enhance his prospects. Moreover, their lives are inextricably bound to personal and national traumas beyond the Partition that reverberate across continentsⁱ, from the *Komagata Maru* to Air India Flight 182, spanning the Bangladesh Liberation War, the insurgency in Punjab in the 1980s, and the everyday difficulties of being a diasporic subject.

As a painstaking testament to trauma, the novel has garnered considerable attention in the academic sphere through analyses, which usually focus on the struggles of migration (Bhat, 2018; Randall, 2014), gender inequalities (Kumari, 2022; Sur, 2015), or specific historical

events (Bhatia, 2015; Chakraborty, 2016), but not so much on the connections that could be established between these areas (Dean, 2012). Hence, the present article seeks to remedy this oversight from a dialogic rather than hierarchical perspective, tracing unapparent links between the insidious traumas caused by systemic prejudice (Root, 1992) and the haunting nature of postmemory (Hirsch, 2012), as well as entertaining the possibility of an extranarrative response to human suffering. Through relational frameworks encompassing the Vedic metaphor of Indra's net, the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987), and multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* will be read as a liminal trauma narrative in which the precarious state between watersheds prevails over episodes themselves, thus challenging traditional event-based models of trauma theory and, ultimately, involving readers in the memorialisation process.

Relationality, as defined by Ella Shohat, eschews isolation and "argue[s] for stressing the horizontal and vertical links that thread communities and histories together in a conflictual network. Analyzing the overlapping multiplicities of identities and affiliations that link diverse resistant discourses helps us transcend some of the politically debilitating effects of disciplinary and community boundaries" (2006, p. 207). The two sections that follow are devoted to the ramifications of unresolved communal traumas: first, exploring them in connection with the hardships of migration and resulting alienation, and then, highlighting parallels between historical events, or, rather, how viewing them in light of other happenings can enhance their interpretation. Both cases stress the importance of relations, be they a dialogic approach to trauma, affiliative connections among survivors, or communities of memory.

2. POSTMEMORIAL TRANSMISSIONS: FROM MELANCHOLY TO IMPLICATION

The extensive array of national and collective traumas presented in Badami's novel can only begin to be properly understood when read in conjunction with the individual suffering that is passed down from generation to generation. In this regard, the work of Marianne Hirsch gains special relevance because, despite being framed in the predominantly Eurocentric field of Holocaust studies, some of her theories are applicable to postcolonial (con)texts. Postmemory, for instance, "is *not* an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 35), and, as such, the process of disseminating knowledge is valued over its culmination. This pertains to the concurrence of familial/vertical –i.e., from parents to their children– and affiliative/horizontal –i.e., from descendants to their contemporaries– identification (Hirsch, 2012, p. 36), which further complicates the relationship with the past. Trauma narratives are "*relational* apparatuses allowing the principle and concerns of the ethics of form and the ethics of affects to meet" (Onega & Ganteau, 2014, p. 11), and this link is also significant for Hirsch, who contends that "the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is the performative index, shaped more and more by affect, need, and

desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and ‘truth.’ Familial and, indeed, feminine tropes rebuild and re-embody a connection that is disappearing” (2012, p. 48). As might be expected, Hirsch’s insights have not been exempt from criticism, not only because handing down memories to people beyond the family unit may result in appropriation, a false sense of identification, or dubious empathy (Behrendt, 2013, p. 56), but also because conferring the authority of witnesses upon indirect observers has led some literary critics to a misguided interpretation of postmemory as an inherited trauma when their perusal should have been orientated towards imagination and the possibility of reconnecting with the past (O’Donoghue, 2018). Still, the action of looking back is hardly exempt from risk in the absence of a supporting network of friends and family.

The first major trauma addressed in the novel is that of the SS *Komagata Maru*, a real-life incident evincing the adverse impact of certain immigration laws and political manoeuvres on those legislated for and, by extension, on their inner circle. In May 1914, 95% of the 376 Punjabi passengers aboard the steamship were denied entry to Vancouver on the legal yet mala fide grounds that theirs was not a continuous journey from their home country—they had sailed from Hong Kong as no direct tickets from India were available—and that they had brought less than \$200 each—a considerable sum of spending money. After two months of insufficient provisions and uphill court battle, they left for India, where their revolutionary and supposedly anti-imperialist behaviour would be met with bloody hostility (Johnston, 2021). Needless to say, “as both countries at the time were under the British crown, one part of the British Empire had refused entrance to British subjects from another part” (Damböck, 2009, p. 180)ⁱⁱ. The as-yet-unborn Bibi-ji would have her childhood blighted by the emotional unavailability of her father, a former passenger: “sometimes it seemed . . . that her father was not really there at all, that he was just a shadow. It would take many years for her to understand that Harjot Singh was *not* in fact there. In his mind he was continents away” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 10). His emotional detachment foretells an eventual abandonment of his family due to the same unbearable memory that instils an idealisation of “Abroad” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 15) in his daughter, who will relocate to Canada as a newlywed. Although she will prosper financially and establish herself as a pillar of her community, deep down she just tries to win “the country that had turned her father away all those years ago” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 36), an effort making Bibi-ji the heiress to the unspoken pain of her father and, inadvertently, to a reluctance to voice their now-shared trauma.

Any signs of affiliative or horizontal identification that may have appeared between Harjot and fellow passengers had transformed into the familial type with Bibi-ji, who in time replicates that vertical transmission with her foster son. In adjusting to a Canadian lifestyle, Jasbeer epitomises a melancholic migrant, walking the fine line between keeping alive the memory of a painful past and erasing it in a futile attempt to achieve the promise of happiness. It should be noted that “if an affective community is produced by sharing objects of loss, . . .

then the melancholics would be affect aliens in how they love: their love becomes a failure to get over loss" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 141). Therefore, while other Indo-Pakistani migrants in the vicinity have managed to put their religious differences aside in order to bond over the partitioned subcontinent they have left behind, Jasbeer cannot overcome the personal losses he has suffered after being uprooted from his immediate family nor the ones he has inherited from both Bibi-ji and his mother, with the latter being a still-fearful Partition survivor. As previously stated, postmemory serves an indexical function in which authenticity is gradually replaced by affective ties; hence, finding a relatable backstory, regardless of its accuracy, could provide him with the sense of community and belonging he desperately craves.

In his role as Jasbeer's alleged great-uncle, Pa-ji sustains that "without history you were nothing, . . . unaware of your origins, careless of your destination" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 206), so he implants myths of origin in the boy's mind, hoping to redirect his melancholia towards a positive emotion. However, "melancholy is not simply an individual condition, but sign of deeper social, even civilisational pathologies. . . . It is also a paradoxical anti-illness, a melancholic person being . . . extremely difficult to cure. Finally, melancholy will be identified as the par excellence existential feeling corresponding to permanent liminality" (Szokolczai, 2017, p. 127). Being herself a recipient of her father's longing, Bibi-ji foresees they are instead loading the child with "a feeling of grievances unresolved" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 198), and proof comes when, after a classmate refers to his uncut hair as a sign of effeminacy, Jasbeer brandishes a knife in a misguided impersonation of his legendary Sikh ancestors. Their subsequent meeting with the headteacher features well-intentioned yet condescending remarks on the part of the host, and, although Jasbeer is "too young to know that the word to best describe that tone was patronising, he was not too young to understand the thread of meaning that ran through it" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 210). Myths, as opposed to personal stories, turn out to be ineffective inasmuch as they may allow for the stereotyping of communities. In this particular case, with Jasbeer constructed as fearsome, "fear sticks to these bodies . . . that 'could be' terrorist, where the 'could be' opens up the power to detain" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 135). He will indeed become fodder for terrorist acts when a radical pro-Khalistan leader capitalises on his alienation, takes him under his wing, and paints the historical fight for a separate Sikh state as a passport to belonging. Motivated by the lure of finally finding a community, and much to his family's dismay, Jasbeer will grow to enrol in the orthodox Sikh organisation Damdami Taksal, engaging through the years in criminal activity that, albeit unjustifiable, is explicable as a delayed reaction against pervasive family traumas.

This is by no means to say that postmemory constitutes an inherited trauma. If anything, and as already hinted, it is a seeming memory perceived as genuine by the generation after, whose incomprehensible origins have deeply-felt repercussions. While Jasbeer's alienation originates within the family, his eventual radicalisation shall be interpreted as the outcome of a head-to-head clash between his new mentor and Bibi-ji. Since "women are often construed as the bearers of tradition, more emphatically so when in transition" (Gunew, 2009, p. 33), the

foster mother sees her position as guardian of stories threatened by a man who reshapes history at his convenience, crafting elaborate speeches in which “he continued to believe every soaring piece of fiction, every half-truth, every fact reconfigured to fit the theories that he conjured up” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 254). He weaponises affect for a land until his envisioned nation stops being a purely symbolic, economic, and geographical entity to become a welcoming network for the emotionally stateless. Granted that Jasbeer’s fate may suggest otherwise, his mentor’s winning the rhetorical battle does not contravene Hirsch’s aforementioned proposition of feminine tropes favouring remembrance. In fact, the unverified consanguinity of foster mother and son still “allows for the theorisation of how transgenerational acts of storytelling can create communities of memory, not just consolidate existing ties of blood, language or place of origin” (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 16). Bibi-ji’s error of judgement lies in trying to prevent a vertical transmission by carefully silencing traumatic stories. In doing so, she severs familial ties through miscommunication; she pushes Jasbeer to seek answers elsewhere; and, what is worse, she implies that not all memories deserve a community.

At the end of the novel, an unnamed (and hence renamable) man presumed to be Jasbeer is “nearly home” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 402) while walking the streets of his Indian birthplace, in a scene that offers a tinge of hope for the future by going back to origins. However, and this is crucial, his redemption is not obtained in the traditionalist fashion of pro-Khalistan militancy, as he had been led to believe, but through a restoration of missing affiliative bonds which, at this stage, is more of a possibility than a reality, yet one worth entertaining. If postmemory is a transmission rather than an identity, then “natural” communities of memory (Margalit, 2002, p. 69) predicated on a shared sense of self are less transformative than the emotional bonds established around collective remembrance. Contrary to characters like Bibi-ji, who cannot come to terms with the traumas of her forebears, Jasbeer re-emerges ready to renounce his violent ways and move forward, having understood that belonging has less to do with national, ethnic, or religious affiliations than with affective ties. Nevertheless, the repentance expressed in a letter sent to Leela’s daughter, Preethi, does not seem to comfort an old school friend who “can read it no more” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 398), aware as she is of his indirect participation in past tragedies. Interestingly, his condolences for Leela’s untimely end in a terrorist attack appear “on a single sheet of paper” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 398), and this arrangement, coincidental or not, neatly separates the Air India bombing from his account of other criminal activities, which serves to obscure historical connections such as those to be addressed in the next section.

Through memory, emotions including “shame and pride . . . show how our past actions are woven into the wholeness of the lives we lead. And it displays the ways in which we are implicated, by virtue of being members of a family, a faith, or a political community, in a mesh of responsibility extending beyond individual agency” (Booth, 2006, pp. 20–21). Although Michael Rothberg has written extensively on the figure of the implicated subject (2019), it is

Cathy Caruth's take that is more relevant at this point, for it directly connects personal involvement and history, defining the latter as "the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996, p. 24). Based on this, the metaphor of Indra's net may be construed as a visual representation of that association, and, curiously enough, it is Preethi who had once told her mother about it, spotting the Indo-Pakistani border while aboard their first flight to Canada. Since the net spreads over the world and has jewels embroidered at each intersection of strands, "as each gem reflected every other one, so was every human affected by the miseries and joys of every other human, every other living thing on the planet" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 106). Still, the sparkle of the jewels, here understood as events, should not divert attention from the strands that connect them, because communities of memory can only exist as long as their members are not impervious to recollections beyond their own nor untouched by the traumas of others.

3. MULTIDIRECTIONAL PASTS: WEAVING AFFECTS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

Other than to a Vedic conception, Indra's net is roughly comparable to the Deleuzoguattarian philosophical notion of rhizome, as already advanced by Laurel Ryan in an article on Badami's fiction (2008, p. 166). Yet, three characteristics of the rhizome merit closer examination. First, it is an antigenealogy privileging transversality over the hereditary nature of family trees, something the novel acknowledges by incorporating non-linear transmissions, as seen already. Secondly, the amalgam of lines deprives it of a centre, calling into question any "binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions" of a standard structure (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 21). Although often predicated on dichotomies, the traumatic events Badami selects offer a degree of complexity, which only comes at odds with the rhizome in that the book requires points of reference, for historical episodes are salient in the grand scheme of things. Lastly, the concept is an antimemory inasmuch as there is a preference for short-term over long-term memory, and this, irrespective of viable connections, discards rhizomatic theory as the most suitable system to analyse the traumas presented in a novel that is not about the ephemeral but about its remembrance.

Nonetheless, there is another feature of the rhizome –favouring alliance rather than filiation– that links it to the far more appropriate multidirectional memory: "The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and... and... and...'" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 25). From an ontological standpoint, *being* carries less weight than *being in relation to* others, whether they are people, events, or memories. Rothberg's theory likewise draws on unusual connections and cross-references to paint history with ampersands, as does Hirsch's model, which Rothberg perceives as a "particular version" of his own (2009, p. 271). The allusion to intersections brings to mind the idea of nodes, and these, defined by Leela as

“where two or three things cross” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 105), match the scholar’s coinage of dynamic *nœuds de mémoire* or knots of memory. Being transversal rather than situated, this archive of the past “cuts across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions” (Rothberg, 2010, p. 18) in a clear parallel with Shohat’s unbounded relationality. Indeed, “memory emerges from unexpected, multidirectional encounters—encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present, to be sure, but also between different agents or catalysts of memory” (Rothberg, 2010, p. 9). This includes the imbrication of traumas, along with an equally shifting collective remembrance now commanding attention for fictionalised incidents, which, despite sharing a strong connection with (not only) Sikh history in the Indian subcontinent and beyond, have not always been recognised as knots in the same mesh.

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? recounts the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 with its accompanying trickle of refugees; it compares the Emergency in India in the mid-1970s to Pierre Trudeau’s invocation of the War Measures Act a lustrum earlier; and it delves into Operation Blue Star, which marked 1984 as the year when hundreds were killed in the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The huge backlash that followed led to the retaliatory assassination of Indira Gandhi, and this, in turn, to deadly anti-Sikh riots. The coexistence of these events with chiefly personal afflictions such as those addressed in the previous section transmutes their presence in the novel from a mere chronology to a chronicity of trauma involving “centripetal and centrifugal tendencies” that “can negatively affect individuals and communities, forcing open fault lines,” or “positively affect” them “by consolidating a sense of belonging, of kinship and mutual trust” (Visser, 2014, p. 109). Each tragedy sends a tremor through the net. In the case of the Golden Temple massacre, for instance, people there “suffered physically as well psychologically, and those who heard of it through media or other means felt a collective shock” (Bhat, 2018, p. 61). Grief becomes contagious and centripetally brings together Sikhs with opposing viewpoints on the Khalistan movement while centrifugally fuelling an anti-Hindu sentiment. For Bibi-ji, whose husband perished in the temple, her growing wariness towards Hindus concerns Leela, so Bibi-ji does not bother to inform her former friend of the rumours of sabotage upon hearing that she is bound to take a flight operated by Air India. Consequently, Leela finds herself among the 329 victims of the *Kanishka* bombing in June 1985, dying just as she had lived, “literally between two worlds” (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 392). En route from Montreal to Delhi via London, the wreckage of Air India Flight 182 fell near the coast of Ireland, a location halfway between Canada and India that, in the context of the novel, mirrors Leela’s permanent liminality.

Although it should be conceded that Bibi-ji was in a state of bereavement that clouded her thoughts, the omission of relevant information is one more example through which “the fragmentation of civil society is revealed — a civil betrayal — because what collapses is a sense of responsibility: the ethics that sustain the social sphere” (Anselmi & Wilson, 2009, p. 86). The last telephone conversation between her and Leela had consisted of silence punctuated

by the occasional string of words. Indeed, the prolonged pauses were not merely awkward or self-protective, but an unmistakable sign that the mutual understanding which should strengthen intercommunal relations was broken beyond repair. This rupture in the net is not a first for Bibi-ji, whose sister disappeared during the Partition, nor for Nimmo, who lived through it in another society dichotomised along religious lines. The niece vaguely recalls how, around 1947, her mother had hidden her in a bin of grain from a group of intruders. Still within earshot, she heard a scream and patiently waited for her mother to return, but, when finally taken out of her hiding place, "Nimmo hardly recognized the dirty, bleeding woman who held her and rocked her and wept with a soundless, juddering agony" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 156). As an adult, she is mostly silent and plagued by questions about whether her recollection is an accurate version of events. Her only certainty is that, as "much as she tried, Nimmo could not rid herself of the memory of a pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor, their clean pink soles smelling delicately of lavender soap" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 159). Given the historical context, readers are to assume that, after having been beaten and probably raped, Nimmo's mother committed suicide by hanging, a sadly common practice at the time for "disgraced" women (Butalia, 1998/2000; Mookerjee-Leonard, 2004). Yet, this is all conjecture, for Nimmo's mental block about the incident never corroborates it.

The belatedness of trauma is apparent in Nimmo every time an emotional trigger such as the smell of lavender soap conjures up the image of her dead mother. Moreover, she refuses to speak about her haunting past, even to her husband: "How could she explain to him what it was like to have your life pulled out from under your feet, to wake up one day and find you have no family or home in the land your people had tilled for a hundred years? How could he understand the pain of not knowing whether these memories were in fact memories or only figments of her imagination?" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 159). The liminal space created between fragmented recollections and reality offers a fertile ground for a novel also playing with the same stretches between historical episodes that may involve "a process in which transfers take place between events that have come to seem separate from each other" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 197). By way of illustration, and in an obvious parallel with Partition, Nimmo vows to protect her daughter from aggressive intruders during the escalating tension of the anti-Sikh riots in the mid-1980s, but her plan is a step-by-step replica of her late mother's. The one who had been hidden in a bin of grain locks her daughter in a steel cupboard which, in a tragic turn of events, the trespassers set on fire. After they have left, the senseless violence connects 1947 and 1984 in Nimmo's delusional babbling, which blurs the separation between the two: "*It was the last safe place in the world, that bin of grain, stay there my daughter, stay there, you will be safe. Don't make a noise or they will get you*" (Badami, 2006/2007, p. 361). Both as a daughter and as a mother, Nimmo undergoes terrible losses that leave her suspended between unresolved states. Having lived them first-hand, she cannot be taken for a link in the chain of postmemory, but her story certainly functions as an open invitation to contemplate

multidirectionality, as one event feeds back into the other, thus broadening the possibilities for interpretation.

A relational view, however, does not conflate events of a similar nature nor group them into a closed set of trauma narratives; instead, it underlines the analogy without detracting from their specificity. This may sometimes serve a greater purpose for authors who, like Badami, memorialise past events to offer a way to remembrance and a potential sense of closure. Although it must be noted that the novel here analysed does not exploit the full potential of multidirectional memory to be found in covering a wider geographical area, it surely weaves such a rich tapestry of interconnected events and contagious affects that readers could be expected to contribute stories of their own. Based on their backgrounds, other examples – experienced or not – of questionable policies, disputed territories, communal violence, or terrorist atrocities are likely to come to mind, even if there is a considerable risk that their resulting comparison may be hierarchical rather than dialogic. Since “collective memories of seemingly distinct histories are not easily separable from each other, but emerge dialogically” (Rothberg, 2014, p. 176), one should avoid turning an association into a “distressing competition over suffering” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 19), something that this particular novel neatly accomplishes.

Speaking of connections, Badami also bridges historical gaps with a couple of press extracts from 2005 that appear between the body of the novel and a closing note. The first one, taken from Canada-based *The Globe and Mail*, states that the accused of the Air India bombing have been acquitted; the second, from India’s *The Tribune*, discusses the recent revelation that only one police officer had been convicted for the anti-Sikh riots. With words not her own, the author recaptures the palimpsestic quality of memory in that the parallel between the excerpts detracts attention from the sequencing of events to create an encompassing net that joins them through their unsatisfactory outcome. Allowing that the trials are examined concurrently instead of taking one as a model for the other and that, in general terms, instances in which characters filter the present through their past are often devoid of a transnational component, the analogous absence of legal retribution still justifies the writing of fiction as a form of contestation and engagement. In this sense, “the theory of multidirectional memory allows us to see that deferral and displacement are among the means through which publics come to terms with troubling histories and begin to integrate them into collective memories” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 229). Furthermore, as quoted earlier, when remembrance becomes less reliable as temporal and spatial distance increase, emotional bonds can strengthen the link to the past (Hirsch, 2012, p. 48), so expanding landscapes and timescapes depend on personal affiliations if they are to give rise to communities of memory. Should the novel be understood as an affective artefact, then the net of memories in its pages could spread beyond the book, enabling a multidirectional reading of other traumas or their representation that ultimately transforms the work into a template for bridging the liminal divide.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A relational reading of Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* presents trauma as a transversal rather than event-based state, in which the liminal position of some main characters accentuates the difficulties for its overcoming while offering affective ways if not to recover, at least to approach, the unfathomable. The intergenerational transmission of trauma that causes an alienated migrant-cum-terrorist such as Jasbeer to inhabit a permanent liminality also shows how a sense of community may favour a healthier relationship with postmemory, provided that it is grounded in affective alliances instead of identity politics. Apart from strengthening or debilitating the social fabric, communication, or lack thereof, determines how historical episodes are remembered both individually and collectively, thus influencing the extent to which they may be viewed through the lens of multidirectional memory. The latter emerges as a useful tool to establish connections between events that can resignify their interpretation, and, notwithstanding the relatively limited sample available in the novel, it could potentially lend itself to a reception studies approach that supplements a rereading of the past by bringing readers’ responses into the equation. Furthermore, since the aftermath of major happenings repeatedly intersects with the afflictions of characters, Hirsch’s and Rothberg’s models, together with rhizomatic and Vedic strategies, harmonise into an organic whole, emphasising the importance of dialogic perspectives in the study of trauma in general and in the construction of communities of memory in particular. As has been demonstrated, Badami casts a net of events to collect(ive) a (re)discovery of history in which new knots can be tied in the mesh, ultimately enabling an evaluation of episodes through the prism of interconnected pasts. Hence, reverting now to liminal terms, the novel acts as a threshold, offering readers what certain characters either were deprived of or denied themselves: an entrance to memory.

NOTES

ⁱ “Partition” is henceforth capitalised as a means to visually stress its momentousness while establishing an analogy with other historical traumas with an uppercase initial such as the Holocaust.

ⁱⁱ It took almost a century for a formal apology to be delivered by Canadian powers (Trudeau, 2016; Vancouver City Council, 2023). To date, no official statement has been issued by British authorities.

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