

Sites of Contestation: Postcolonial Indian Nationalism and Female Agency in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006)

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of female agency within the violent contexts of British (post) colonialism and postcolonial Indian nationalism as depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006). Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theories, the paper interrogates the ways in which women's bodies are symbolically and physically subsumed into the masculine political body, becoming sites of contestation over national and religious identities. While both novels explore the gendered violence experienced by women during the 1947 Partition of India and its enduring legacy, including the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the 1985 Air India Flight 182 bombing, through characterization of Ayah and Nimmo, the paper highlights the complex interplay between victimization and agency and questions the forms of autonomy available to women in the face of systemic violence and patriarchal nationalism. The paper critiques the appropriation of marginalized women's voices by elite narrators and examines the role of upper-class women in post-Partition rescue missions, which often perpetuated state patriarchy. While *Cracking India* portrays marginalized women as tokens of male desire and objects of exploitation, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* offers a more nuanced depiction of female protagonists, granting them authorial voices to narrate their own experiences. Ultimately, the paper argues that both novels reveal the pervasive victimization of women in postcolonial Indian history, but they also uncover potential spaces for female agency, albeit within the constraints of a patriarchal and nationalist framework.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, Anita Rau Badami, Colonization and Postcolonial Indian Nationalism, Partition, Gendered Violence and Women's Agency