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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In post-Partition novels such as Sidhwa's (1991) *Cracking India*, the "cracking" of the nation seems synonymous with the "cracking" of women's bodies. For instance, Ayah in the novel, who is Hindu, is abducted and raped because she is found on the Muslim side of a divided India. In a later novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, Badami (2006) shows similar patterns of violence through women like Nimmo a victim of both the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan and the 1984 anti-Sikh riot. Like Ayah, she is enmeshed in the violence of politics not of her own making. According to Moira Gatens (1997), the consummation of the female body is symbolic of the position of the woman in modern (body) politics or, in this instance, postcolonial Indian politics. The woman is subsumed into a masculine political body and has no voice or autonomy. Somewhat contesting this position, Jacquelynn Kleist (2011) rightly identifies that Cracking India demonstrates degrees of female agency (an argument that can also be made about the female characters in Badami's novel); however, Urvashi Butalia's article on "women's agency during partition" (Butalia 1993, 12) makes it imperative to question the forms of female agency in the

Parsee household, an "object of decolonization … expandable and usable for its own purposes" (Hai 2000, 391). She rightly identifies that although Ayah is Hindu, a majority group in India, in the context of this novel, she is minoritized by virtue of her economic position as a nanny, one of a different religion, an object of the upper-class Parsee women's charitable efforts, and primarily an object of male desire.

Further to my point, from the onset of the book, Lenny impresses the effect of Ayah's extreme physical attractions upon the reader:

> Ayah is chocolate-brown and short. Everything about her is eighteen years old and round and plump. Even her face. Full-blown cheeks, pouting mouth and smooth forehead curve to form a circle with her head … she has a rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colorful saris and the half-spheres beneath her short sari blouses. (Sidhwa 1991, 12-13)

The rather explicit depiction of Ayah's sexualized physical qualities as well as on-going narration of her romantic interaction with her admirers suggest that she is mainly a fetishized object of male desire. This recalls Gatens' analysis of the woman in modern politics where she argues that, rather than a figure of autonomy, the woman is represented in terms of her sexual and reproductive parts. Ayah isportrayed as a deeply fetishized object of desire, embodying an idealized and unattainable beauty that captivates the men around her. Her physical allure, described through her "chocolate-brown" skin, "rolling bouncy walk," and "stunning looks," is a magnet for a diverse group of admirers, including the butcher, gardener, masseur, and Icecandy-man. These men, representing various religious and social backgrounds, are united in their obsessive pursuit of Ayah, reducing her to a symbol of sensuality and objectification. Her body becomes a site of both admiration and possession, as the men vie for her attention, often crossing boundaries of propriety and respect. This possible within

the context of postcolonial nationalist politics. In this paper, I examine the ways in which Ayah, Nimmo, and the other historical women represented in the novels function as sites of contestation in postcolonial Indian nationalism and I question the types of female agency possible in this context.

According to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1993), the 1947 Partition of India into India and Pakistan occasioned violence and the movement of refugees with about eight million refugees and half a million people who lost their lives. They, as well as Butalia (1993), report that much of the violence of Partition was meted out on women on both sides of the Hindu-Muslim divide. These women were either abducted, raped, forced to convert into new religions, forced into marriage by their abductees, or forced back into whatever was considered their homes through the post-Partition recovery efforts of both governments. In looking at the figure of Ayah in Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, Madhuparna Mitra (2008) argues that the act of violence against women during the 1947 Partition is a recontextualization of an existing trend. According to her, this is becausein prevailing Indian cultural attitudes, women's bodies were used as contested sites over nation and religion. Thus, the strong motif of sexual predation, visible in Cousin's predatory relationship with Lenny, or Papoo's forced marriage, are examples of the disregard for female consent and autonomy which underpins the abduction/rape of women during the Partition.

One could say that such attitudes were further heightened by the conception of the "ideal" Indian woman in nationalist/postcolonial Indian nationalist rhetoric. Suresht R. Bald (2000), for instance, links this to Gandhi who referred to historical figures like Sita, Draupadi, and Damyanti as emblematic of courage, chastity, and self-sacrifice, qualities expected of the Indian woman. Consequently, as Partha Chatterjee (2010) explains, the "ideal" woman was supposed to uphold and maintain the spirituality and chastity of the nation. In other words, the body of the woman was equated to the body of the nation and an

attack on the woman was considered an attack on the nation's honor and purity. Sidhwa (1991) and Badami (2006) address this idea in their respective novels. Following Ayah's violation in *Cracking India,* she is left as a shell of her former self, renamed and transformed into Mumtaz to suit Ice-candy man's notions of womanhood. In *Can You Hear*, Nimmo's mother Kanwar, unable to clean herself of the "impurity" of her violation, hangs herself leaving Nimmo to suffer the painful memories of this loss as well as future loss of other family members. This paper attempts to locate female agency within the violent context of postcolonial Indian politics and the postcolonial nationalist framework of the "ideal" woman.

Sites of Contestation: Telling Ayah's Story in *Cracking India*

Cracking India is an account of the 1947 Partition through the eyes of Lenny Sethi, a young Parsee girl living in Lahore in the 1940s as a member of an upper-class Parsee family. At the start of the novel, she is about four years old and afflicted with Polio. Perhaps because of her physical limitations, she is much attached to Ayah and lives vicariously through the myriad relationships between Ayah and the men who both admire and desire her. Lenny first introduces Ayah as "my Ayah" (Sidhwa 1991, 12) with the possessive pronoun "my," both denoting Lenny's closeness and affection as well as Ayah's occupation as a nanny or a nursemaid. Subsequently, Lenny calls her Ayah, a fact which further suggests that Ayah is unnamed in the book. Except on few occasions where she is called "Shanta" (Sidhwa 1991, 21, 38), it would seem that Lenny's Ayah is more representative of a group of under-privileged caregivers than herself. Also critiquing Ayah's apparent depersonalization, Ambreen Hai points out that Ayah who is "the most critical figure of the narrative (and) the center of fascination for the upper-class child narrator" (390) is nevertheless unnamed; instead, she is "called Ayah – as if she were no more than her function" (390). Hai argues that the nominal position imposed on this central character due to the lack of a name emphasizes her

position as a minority figure in the Parsee household, an "object of decolonization … expandable and usable for its own purposes" (Hai 2000, 391). She rightly identifies that although Ayah is Hindu, a majority group in India, in the context of this novel, she is minoritized by virtue of her economic position as a nanny, one of a different religion, an object of the upper-class Parsee women's charitable efforts, and primarily an object of male desire.

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The rather explicit depiction of Ayah's sexualized physical qualities as well as on-going narration of her romantic interaction with her admirers suggest that she is mainly a fetishized object of male desire. This recalls Gatens' analysis of the woman in modern politics where she argues that, rather than a figure of autonomy, the woman is represented in terms of her sexual and reproductive parts. Ayah is portrayed as a deeply fetishized object of desire, embodying an idealized and unattainable beauty that captivates the men around her. Her physical allure, described through her "chocolate-brown" skin, "rolling bouncy walk," and "stunning looks," is a magnet for a diverse group of admirers, including the butcher, gardener, masseur, and Ice-candy-man. These men, representing various religious and social backgrounds, are united in their obsessive pursuit of Ayah, reducing her to a symbol of sensuality and objectification. Her body becomes a site of both admiration and possession, as the men vie for her

attention, often crossing boundaries of propriety and respect. This fetishization culminates tragically when Ayah is forcibly abducted, her autonomy stripped away, and her identity further diminished as she is thrust into the exploitative world of the Hira Mandi. Through Ayah's story, the novel critiques the societal norms that commodify women, exposing the devastating consequences of reducing them to mere objects of male desire.

Lenny's portrayal of Ayah as a central figure, a "Queen Bee," surrounded by a coterie of diverse admirers also highlights her as a symbolic political object in the novel. In this instance, she is presented as a unifying force in the pre-Partition era, while also used as a foreshadowing of the fragility of the harmony between the admirers from different religious, cultural, and political affiliations. I deliberately use Queen to reference the "Queen's Garden" (104) in the novel, which is a physical space, indirectly a politicized space, an obvious reference to British spatial colonization in India, and possibly a critique of the British role in the 1947 Partition. At the beginning of the story, it was a space of pre-Partition multi-ethnic and multi-religious harmony. At that point in the narrative, Lenny's world was limited to her family and Ayah's romantic affairs. She considered Gandhi, Nehru, or Jinnah irrelevant to their existence. But gradually, these names start to take on new significance, denoting religious differences during the conversations in the "Queen's Garden." As Lenny notes, "one day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindle into symbols. Ayah is also a token" (101). While Lenny observes that the sense of harmony in "the Queen's Garden" (Sidhwa 1991, 104) gives way to rigid definitions of ethnic identities and political affiliations, as a child, she does not recognize that perhaps Ayah was always a *token* even in pre-Partition India.

Building on the previous observation, the portrayal of Ayah's diverse admirers and the symbolic use of the "Queen's Garden" underscore the fragile and fleeting nature of pre-Partition unity, which is ultimately

shattered by rising nationalist and religious divisions. The novel suggests that this sense of unity may have been a transient one built around Ayah. This is because, as a myriad of nationalist rhetoric couched in religious sentiments became more popular, this seemingly unified admiration fragmented and was re-directed at nationalist tokens like Gandhi, Jinnah, and Nehru. Also, reflecting on the Queens Garden "membership" of thirteen, Lenny is worried that the number is unlucky. Subsequently, her cousin explains to her that it is "something to do with Jesus Christ … He had a farewell party, you know. Something to do with that" (Sidhwa 1991, 142). What Cousin references is the betrayal of Jesus Christ at the last supper as narrated in the *Bible* (Matt. 26 [NKJV]). Similarly, Ayah is betrayed by Lenny (who unwittingly gives away Ayah's hiding place), Ice-candy man (her abductor), and other male community members that condone and support the abduction.

While the Queen's Garden initially symbolizes a fragile pre-Partition harmony, the novel later reveals the devastating consequences of fractured unity, as Ice-candy man's betrayal of Ayah, despite his political rhetoric, exposes the personal exploitation and violence that women endured during this turbulent period. Ice-candy-man's abduction of Ayah in Cracking India is a pivotal moment that highlights the intersection of personal betrayal and communal violence during the chaos of Partition. His transformation from a harmless admirer to a possessive and morally corrupt figure reflects the dehumanization of women in times of political upheaval. The abduction symbolizes the societal breakdown, where women's bodies become battlegrounds for male dominance and communal vengeance. And through this act, the novel critiques patriarchal and communal forces, exposing the devastating impact of Partition on individual lives and the fragility of human relationships in the face of societal collapse. Nevertheless, as Mitra (2008) points out, the abduction is also an opportunistic sex crime. And this is made clearer by Ice-candy man's claims of love and imposition of the name Mumtaz, recognized as a Muslim name, as well as a new religion and identity. Earlier in the novel, Ice-candy man is one

of the few to refer to Ayah with her actual name, Shanta, "'Shanta bibi, you're Punjabi, aren't you?'" (Sidhwa 1991, 38), he asks. He not only identifies her cultural origin but also questions why she does not wear Punjabi clothes. Therefore, the deliberate decision later to alter Shanta's (Ayah's) name to Mumtaz emphasizes her vulnerability as a female house servant and the patriarchal power he wields over her.

In that moment of abduction, the novel also casts Lenny in the role of Ayah's unwitting betrayer, emphasizing how her innocence is exploited and contributes to the tragic consequences of Ayah's objectification and exploitation during the chaos of Partition. Manipulated into revealing Ayah's hiding place to Ice-Candy-Man, Lenny unknowingly causes her abduction. This act, born out of innocence rather than malice, underscores how even the most vulnerable can become complicit in the chaos of communal violence but it also points to the dangers of attempting to tell an *other*'s story. As Lenny mourns the abduction of her beloved Ayah, she shows a high degree of self-loathing, particularly for what she calls her "truth-infected" (Sidhwa 1991, 196) tongue:

> For three days, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue. I hold the vile, truth-infected thing between my fingers and try to wrench it out: but slippery and slick as a fish it slips from my fingers and mocks me with its sharp rapier tip darting as a poisonous snake. I punish it with rigorous scourings … until it bleeds. (Sidhwa 1991, 196)

The above vividly describes Lenny's anger at her inability to both control her actions and her tongue. But more importantly, the "truth-infected" tongue can also be read as a metaphor for the third person narrator who arrogates the voice of the victim. Although, as Hai notes, the choice of a Parsee narrator "ruptures the Hindu/Muslim binarism by producing a third perspective" (Hai 2000, 389), nevertheless, Ayah's

story is not Lenny's to tell. The novel supports this point by depicting Lenny's tongue as a "poisonous snake" (Sidhwa 1991, 196) and by highlighting the importance of including the actual victim's voice through the insertion of "Ranna's Story" (Sidhwa 1991, 207) in the novel. While "Ranna's Story" is not under discussion here, the presence of that story shows the importance of being allowed to tell one's own story and acts as a critique of voice appropriation. Through Lenny's "truth telling" incident, Sidhwa depicts "the limits of literary representation" and shows that literary testimony is a conflicted one as "disclosure is dangerous business" (Deepika Bahri 1991, 217, 218). The incident therefore not only critiques voice appropriation but also suggests the third-party storyteller's complicity in victimization and the possibility of *silence* as a form of agency.

Butalia (1993) also looks at questions of female agency by examining the role of the Indian/Pakistani governments and women who participated in the enforced recovery of women. She contends that, especially in cases where women resisted recovery, those who participated in the rescue efforts could be classified as agents of the state patriarchy. It can be argued that the female rescuers displayed agency through the recovery acts. This is an idea suggested by the Sethi family women in *Cracking India*. The novel describes their rescue missions as a form of feminist parade:

> Back and forth, back and forth, go our mothers on their secret missions, carrying their sinister freight in the dicky of our Morris Minor. And the more they absent themselves, the higher rise the flames in the walled city, and all over Lahore – and the quicker they return, the closer swirl the angry billows of sooty smoke (Sidhwa 1991, 184).

Although at first, Lenny assumes them to be arsonist, she later discovers the true purpose of the rescue missions. According to Kleist, unlike most Partition novels, *Cracking India* provides a female counter

narrative through characters like Lenny, Lenny's mother, and Godmother. She explains that although these women have class privilege, their stories offer a nuanced depiction of the variety of ways in which women influenced and in turn were influenced by the Partition, and that this re-directs "the gaze" away from women's bodies/victimization to their own accounts of the Partition. This may be true, but it is also important to examine those examples of upper-class female agency alongside the beneficiaries/victims of the rescue missions. In many real-life cases, as Menon and Bhasin (1993) point out, the women resisted the recovery attempts:

> Sometime in 1950 I was required to escort 21 Muslim women who had been recovered to Pakistan. They did not want to return but the Tribunal had decided that they had to go … we had to use real force to compel then to go back. I was very unhappy with this duty - they had already suffered so much, and now we were forcing them to return … the girls were desperate (and) cursed me all the way to Amistar, loudly and continuously. (Menon and Bhasin 1993, 5)

Thus, one may say that in cases of resistance as shown by this instance, female rescuers may be equated to western feminists or upper class "third world" women who Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) criticizes for assuming the voice of marginalized women. Seen in this light, the post-Partition recovery of women can be tantamount to a new degree of violence because women were not given a choice in these missions; instead, they were forced to give up their identities, families, and in some cases, to have abortions in order to be subsumed back into the roles and communities. *Cracking India* then shows that it was not only the male patriarchy that fostered such "rescue" missions but also other women. Consequently, the assumption of female agency, which Kleist points out through the Sethi family women, cannot be generalized in this history because they themselves might equally be victims of the state, acting out roles assigned to them.

Menon and Bhasin's (1993) article further problematize the situation by pointing out that the Indian and Pakistani governments' decision to carry out the recovery operation was mainly based on the identities imposed on the women. They record one MP saying:

> We all know our history … of what happened in the time of Sri Ram when Sita was abducted. Here, where thousands of girls are concerned, we cannot forget this. We can forget all the properties, we can forget every other thing but this cannot be forgotten! And again, as descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive. (Menon and Bhasin 1993, 3)

The statement makes it clear enough that the rescues were not motivated by a specific desire to assist the women but rather because of the construction of their identities as "Sitas" - pure, courageous, and long-suffering. In the Bangladesh context, similar female victims were "honoured" as birangonas, meaning brave women (Mookherjee 2015). Unfortunately, like the Indian/Pakistani women, they served as symbols of the nation's bravery and past suffering.

A case in point in the novel is the "rescued" Hamida, who, though a seemingly minor character, highlights one of the instances where the woman's voice is absent. On first meeting her, Lenny depicts her as docile and servile, one who has been a housewife and yet does not live with her family. The novel does not explain if the family/husband she mourns is her pre-Partition family or the new family she acquires after abduction. Yet, the fact that she is traumatized is obvious in Lenny's words: "sometimes her eyes fill and the tears roll down her cheeks. Once, when I smoothed her hair back, she suddenly started to weep" (Sidhwa 1991, 205). Certainly, the argument of silence as agency can be made for Hamida; however, she is not given enough space in the novel to allow the reader to determine this. In other words, the narrative voice of *Cracking India* is too limited and does not encompass Hamida's experience. In a seemingly different position, Ayah, a prominent

character, voices the desire to be rescued and reunited with her family. This is possibly because her family and home represent a sense of safety (questionable in view of Hamida's post-rescue situation). One could argue that her request is a show of autonomy; however, even this seeming act of agency is undermined because it is possibly a realization of her new status as Ice-candy man's victim, Mumtaz. As Lenny narrates, unlike the formerly assured Ayah, this person slips to "the floor like a floating bundle of crumpled silk" (Sidhwa 1991, 275) begging to be separated from Ice-candy man. To stress the difference in Ayah's new situation, Lenny alternately refers to her as both Mumtaz and Ayah in this scene. This fractured identity further emphasizes the tenuousness of her position as a marginalized female in early postcolonial Indian society.

Overall, both Hamida and Ayah's cases symbolize the complex nature of choice and female agency. As I have argued, the reader does not really know Hamida because she is not given sufficient room in the novel to narrate her own story. But even Ayah, who is a major character, is also mostly unknown, except for what we learn from her young and inexperienced narrator, Lenny. The novel alternately depicts her as Lenny's Ayah, Ayah the *token* of male desire, and Ice-candy man's *Mumtaz*. It seems there is no room in the novel for Shanta, the woman. On the one hand, she shows agency by the power she appears to wield over her admirers at the beginning of the novel (Kleist makes this argument); however, this agency is limited to what temporary attention she receives pre-Partition and even her sexuality is eventually appropriated by the opportunistic Ice-candy man. Also, asking to be reinstated with her family depicts a form of agency but taking into consideration the description of the new Ayah (or traumatized Mumtaz), it is possible that she is left without a choice and can no longer exist in her old life. Menon and Bhasin's (1993) article also force the reader to question the role of the female agents who participate in rescue missions. Does Lenny's mother, for instance, act out of self-will alone or is she also a victim of the government enforced program? Why does the novel initially frame the rescue missions as arson, one wonders.

Although the novel does not clearly state its position concerning the rescue missions, the deliberate framing of the missions as arsons, with implied sense of dread, can be read as a way to show the violence of the rescue missions and make the reader wonder about the purpose or result of these missions. Maybe the missions cause more conflicts or flames around the city. Through Ayah, Hamida, and other women in the novel, Sidhwa's *Cracking India* demonstrates the complexity of addressing female agency in post-Partition Indian history.

Sites of Contestation: Bibi-ji and Nimmo's self-directed Narrations in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Can You Hear centres on the intertwined narratives of Nirmljeet/Nimmo, Sharanjeet/Sharan/Bibi-ji, and Leela, whose personal histories are deeply affected by the events of the 1947 Partition, Indira Gandhi's government and her later assassination in 1984, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, and the Air India bombing of 1985. Their stories explore themes of displacement, trauma, and resilience as they navigate the challenges of local and international migration, communal violence, and the expectations of cultural and nationalist ideologies. Like *Cracking India*, the novel highlights the political and cultural place of women in their fictional Indian communities and, at the same time, shows how the assertion of their own voices and choices help to shape their lives and communities, whether it is through acts of survival, resistance, or just by telling their own stories. By intricately weaving the narratives of these three women and their families across generations and continents, the novel explores the complex interplay between female agency and victimization and shows that while the women may be cast as predominantly victims, their agencies persist in nuanced, often silent, and sometimes tragic ways.

The novel is a later date post-Partition novel that not only depicts the immediate aftermaths of the 1947 Partition and its effect on women but also demonstrates the connection between this bloody history and later political and community upheavals such as the anti-Sikh riots of

1984 and the bombing of Air India, Flight 182. As Radhika Purohit (2012) aptly notes in her analysis of the novel:

> One can assert that 1947 was not the year of the partition. It was in fact only the beginning … All the events and incidents of communal hatred and violence and terrorism that India has been witnessing since 1947, can be traced to the partition of India. Hence the partition cannot be viewed as a single event of 1947, but as one which has cast its sinister shadow on the future as well. (Purohit 2012, 460)

In an interview with Kat Tancock (2006), Badami says that the novel was inspired by personal witness of the mass destruction of Sikhs in 1984 following the assassination of Indira Gandhi and thus became a way to explore the complex and violent issues borne of nationalist politics that occur in the lives of ordinary people. And because of this focus on individual experiences, she presents the novel through the voices/introspections of the three women, Bibi-ji, Leela, and Nimmo. They are linked through the ties of blood and friendship but most importantly are connected through the political tumults starting from 1947 and culminating in 1985. This section of my paper focuses on Bibi-ji's and Nimmo's self-narrated accounts of their direct and indirect experiences of the Partition and post-Partition. Bibi-ji is portrayed as a resourceful and ambitious woman who actively seeks her own destiny and consequently uses her beauty and intelligence to secure the type of life she yearns for through marriage and migration to Canada. The section highlights her ability to navigate patriarchal constraints with cunning (and deviousness), ultimately showing her complexity as victim, agent, and beneficiary of her societal structures. Nimmo on the other hand is trapped in memories, doubts, and fears about the future, and this is evident in her reflections concerning the Nightbird, which, as she notes, sounds sweet but portends ill luck and death (Badami 2006, 240). But while she is perhaps the most tragic figure in the story, further marginalized by her struggles to survive and care for her family, she and Kanwar (her mother) ably represent strong maternal agencies

in the faces of wider and lasting physical and psychological effects of postcolonial Indian nationalism.

Bibi-ji is first introduced in the novel as Sharanjeet Kaur (Sharan), a young girl growing up in the village of Panjaur in West Punjab in 1928. The narrative opens with her memories of her family's poor background and longing to escape from poverty. This is evident in her wish to be "like the Arabian princess … [who] … might wake up and find herself in a different home altogether, carried there by the jinns in the service of a handsome prince" (Badami 2006, 13). This desire captures the young Sharan's yearning to escape her difficult reality. But as will become increasingly obvious about this character, she is so resourceful and ambitious that she does not wait for her own "handsome prince" but instead appropriates her sister's (Kanwar's) Indian Canadian suitor. In essence, she locates a "prince" and does not wait for the "prince" to come to her. The novel shows that Bibi-ji is able to steal her sister's suitor because of the latter's less obvious physical attractions and Bibi-ji's acclaimed beauty (Badami, 2006 23-24). While Bibi-ji is not described in the explicitly sexualized manner that Ayah is depicted by Lenny in *Cracking India,* she is also a focal point of male admiration and is referred to as "the pretty one," "the one with skin like a sheet of moonlight, [and] the one with eyes like the night sky" (Badami, 2006 24). In the following lines, we see that she is not only aware of the power and advantages that certain physical attributes give to her but is determined to use this power to further her personal ambitions:

> She held up the mirror and gazed at herself, pleased at the sight of her oval face framed in the shining glass, her eyes (which one of the village loafers had compared to the night sky with a single star in the centre of each), her full lips and slender nose. She was beautiful and she knew it…. Was it her fault that she, Sharanjeet Kaur, was so pretty that even the old half-blind grandpas sitting around the banyan tree

> turned their heads to peer at her when she walked past? ….
> She was meant for better things, and when chance came galloping towards her she would leap on its back and ride like the wind. (Badami, 2006 23, 24)

"Chance" did indeed eventually present itself in the guise of Khushwant Singh (Kanwar's suitor), who not only becomes Bibi-ji's husband but also enables her to realize her dreams of migrating to Canada (30-31).

Both *Can You Hear* and *Cracking India* offer nuanced critiques of marriage and the roles assigned to women, using their female characters to explore the intersection of tradition, agency, and vulnerability. In this instance, it is tthrough the case of her Bibi-ji and Kanwar, who it seems cannot really advance beyond their socioeconomic circumstances without making (advantageous) marriages. Even though we find out that Bibi-ji and Pa-ji do have a successful life together eventually, at this point, marriage is depicted less as a romantic ideal and more as a strategic avenue for women like Bibi-ji, her sister, and mother to alter their circumstances. And the fact that Bibi-ji seems only able to advance her personal ambitions by stealing a suitor/husband suggests that for a girl from a poor family, that may be the only avenue to progress in life. Other than the moral aspects of her actions, which the character continues to reflect on throughout the novel, Bibi-ji does subvert the traditional notions of passive femininity and shows that even within patriarchal confines, there is the possibility of exercising and manipulating the limited power available to women to one's advantage.

I am admittedly reading through the eyes of a Black female scholar, but it is worth mentioning that Bibi-ji's characterization demonstrates feminist qualities that resonate with Obioma Nnaemeka' idea of Nego-Feminism and Akachi Ezeigbo's idea of Snail-Sense Feminism. Nego-Feminism is an approach to African feminism that emphasizes

negotiation and compromise, rather than confrontation or ego-driven agendas, while Snail-Sense feminism, inspired by the snail's ability to navigate obstacles through negotiation, resilience and adaptability, emphasizes dialogue, cooperation, wisdom, and patience. Other than the acquisition of a husband of her choice, subsequent chapters equally show how Bibi-ji is able to advance her position in Canada through patience, cunning, and plotting. And while she is shown to be generous to her niece, Nimmo, and members of her community, she does also expect contributions from them, in Nimmo's case, it is her son, Jasbeer. Her gradual accumulation of wealth and status, and her ability to blend Indian traditions with Canadian practices show the "snail-sense" approach of slow, adaptive progress. And it is these qualities that enable her to plot her way into a marriage and migrate to Canada before the partitioning of India and the tumultuous events that accompany it.

By the time the 1947 Partition happens, we learn about it through Kanwar's letter to Bibi-ji, and in that letter, Kanwar expresses her anxiety about the impending colonial and politically motivated separation of India and Pakistan and the possible consequences of such an arbitrary separation.

> Ever since it was announced that there will be a division of land between the Hindus and the Mussulmans [she writes], there has been unrest everywhere. There are rumours that Punjab will be broken into two pieces—one piece of our heartland to stay in India and the other to go to Pakistan. This is the name that Muhammad Jinnah has chosen for his new country. I do not know which piece we will end up in. Where will my new child be born, I wonder? (Badami, 2006 42)

Kanwar's letter to Bibi-ji encapsulates the pervasive anxiety and destabilization wrought by the impending Partition of India. It shows how the abstract and random decision of dividing land contributes to

fracturing the fabric of everyday life and their innate sense of belonging. For Bibi-ji, who shares this letter with us, despite her anxiety over her sister, at this point of the story, it is only a form of interruption in her everyday life in Canada. Indeed, until Pa-ji is killed during a trip to India in the latter part of the novel, she is reluctant to get involved in Indian politics because she sees it as "distant matters" best left for people residing in India (45). But Kanwar's fears as expressed in that letter are more existential and underscores the loss of control and belonging as well as the rumours and communal suspicions that came with news about the Partition. The concern and confusion which Kanwar expresses in her letter is similar to Lenny's anxiety over the *cracking* of India in Sidhwa's novel; hence the latter asks: "Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother's then?" (Sidhwa 2006, 101). Of course, a larger problem, as both authors highlight, is that the responsibility to create the new nations fell to the British colonial government, who had insufficient knowledge of the lives of the people, and who were more interested in serving the religious/political interests of Britain and Indian Nationalists than the welfare of ordinary people (*The National Archives UK*: "Partition of British India"). Despite the claims that the new countries would belong to the Indians and Pakistanis, the statement in Kanwar's letter "this is the name that Muhammad Jinnah has chosen for his new country" shows the lack of agency and inclusion felt by Kanwar who must contend with new borders and allegiances imposed from above.

In the aftermath of the proposed Partition, the novel narrates the savagery of Punjab where Kanwar lives, where women are killed or killed themselves, as well as the lack of any real information about those issues (Badami, 2006 48-50). Bibi-ji found that in spite of the tumult of news and information, there is silence around the whereabouts of her family. She is unsure if Kanwar and her whole family are among the ones killed during the massacre of whole villages

(Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs) or those whose dead bodies are loaded onto trains to be dropped off at whatever side of the border the government had determined to be their homes (Badami, 2006 48). By noting this lack of news about Kanwar, the author comments on the way in which news about ordinary people, such as Nimmo and her family, was neglected in this history, only residing in family members' memories (see also Butalia). In the novel, we learn about Bibi'ji's family through Nimmo's uncertain memory and what she does recall are traumatic memories of the sounds of her mother (Kanwar) being raped and "a pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor, their clean pink soles smelling delicately of lavender soap" (Badami, 2006 127-28, 131) after her mother hangs herself. In the section titled "A Bin of Grain," Nimmo recalls in a harrowing memory sequence how her mother, sensing danger during the violence of Partition, hides Nimmo in a large bin and tells her to stay silent. From her hiding place, Nimmo hears men pounding on the door, her mother's voice shifting from anger to pleading, and then a scream that turns into an animal-like whimper as she is violated. The narrative does not use explicit language and yet manages to convey through Nimmo's child's memories the sounds, the fear, and the aftermath of her mother being assaulted by the male intruder(s). When Nimmo finally comes out of her hiding place/is let out, she finds that her once strong and fierce mother has become a dirty, bleeding, and emotionally broken person washing herself in the dark.

Yet, it is important to point out that while Kanwar is depicted with "traditional female" characteristics, like self-sacrifice, that, as Bald suggests, may reinforce women as subjects of (post)colonial Indian patriarchy, her agency in the face of rape and death is depicted through her significant acts of resistance and protection of her family as well as the choices she makes leading up to the violence of Partition. In the aforementioned letter to Bibi-ji, she voices her fears, suspicions, and protective instincts for her children; this shows her emotional strength and some awareness and preparedness for the oncoming dangers. And when violence erupts and she faces actual threats, her actions are

marked by courage and self-sacrifice. She safeguards her daughter by hiding her in a bin of grain, instructing her to remain still and silent; it is this act of maternal agency that ultimately saves Nimmo's life. Kanwar's characterization largely complicates the question of agency and female empowerment within the (post)colonial Indian context, at least as depicted in the novels under discussion. Scholars, like Bald and Chatterjee, critique the imposition of the roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers on Indian women because of the limitations it places on the women, but at the same time, it is worth acknowledging that being wife, mother, etc. do not necessarily mean being disempowered because that maternal space can also be a location for power and agency, as Kanwar shows us. She is described in the novel as a loving and uncomplaining woman who accepts everything thrown at her with resilience and steadfastness, Gandhi's idealized woman in fact who, according to Rao, is placed at the centre of Gandhi's "Swaraj" but objectified as an icon for being long-suffering. But it is those same qualities that manifest as agency in the critical moment when danger comes into Kanwar's home. Her decisive actions are not just instinctive but rooted in a lifelong pattern of endurance to hardship and putting the needs of others above her. The question of agency thus becomes complex in Kanwar's case because while she seems the archetypical marginalized female character, her agency is expressed through the practical actions and the courage to make the difficult choices that ensure Nimmo's survival even as she herself becomes a victim of violence and suicide.

The novel does not explicate the reasons for Kanwar's choice to commit suicide, so it is unclear if she exercises her own agency or if she kills herself in submission to the societal/political narrative of the woman as Sati – pure and courageous. Rao maintains that due to the politics of these nationalists, women remained a symbol of sacrifice in the creation of a national Indian identity. And Kanwar's actions preceding her violation suggest that she attempts to rid herself of the "uncleanliness" imposed upon her by the rapists and thus might be such a symbol of purity and sacrifice for the new nation. However,

Butalia (1993) questions the usual assumptions that women who martyr themselves (if this is the case with Kanwar) are *victims* of a repressive postcolonial Indian nationalist government. In her article, she acknowledges the intense victimization of women in this history, not limited to rapes and killing: "women were (also) humiliated in different ways- their breasts and noses were cut off, their bodies branded with signs and symbols of the 'other' religion, pregnant women were forcibly aborted, and often women were made to strip naked and were paraded through the crowded street of towns and cities" (Butalia 1993, 15). But she also records an incident where, like Kanwar, ninety women killed themselves, in that instance, by jumping into a well. Reflecting on this, she asks if the women are agents or victims: "can the act of mass death by jumping into a well be seen as violent or not? … can we see them as victims or did they …play some part in the decision to take their own lives? (Butalia 1993, 15). Her questions bring to mind Achille Mbembe's (2003) discussion of death as agency within the context of slavery and colonization. According to him, "far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it (death) is encountered as a 'release from terror and bondage"' (Mbembe 2003, 39). His point is that in intense situations of human suffering, death can become a way for someone to take charge of their own lives, thus a type of agency. One can make the argument of death as agency concerning Kanwar in post-Partition India. One can also, as Butalia (1993) further suggests, argue that the women are both victims and agents. This is because while accounts from survivors indicate that they took the decision to kill themselves, one cannot ignore the fact that they may have felt compelled to do so in the interest of their communities or to preserve the "purity" of their communities.

The above argument can also be used to examine Nimmo's actions during and after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India. In a scene identical to the aftermath of the 1947 Partition, Nimmo and her daughter Kamal also face potential rioters, killers/rapists. Living with the memory of her mother's death, Nimmo is determined to be prepared and to keep

her daughter safe; therefore, she locks her daughter in a steel cupboard presumably safer than her mother's bin of corn and grabs a heavy iron poker, ready to protect herself and her daughter (Badami 2006, 283-84). Unfortunately, her actions prove fruitless and she has no power against the intruders who burn the cupboard where her daughter is hidden. Driven by grief, Nimmo attempts to kill herself. What this incident depicts is the lack of safety for a woman and it questions the assumption of home as a safe place. Due to the trauma of her mother's death, Nimmo closely guards her home space/family but as the novel demonstrates, her notion of home as a safe place is idealized or like Avtar Brah (1996) says, "a mythic place of desire" (188). As Ayah may have found in the 1947 context in *Cracking India*, Nimmo discovers in the carnage of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, that there is no safety for vulnerable women who are scapegoats of political violence. Nimmo's apparent helplessness in this situation and later decision to kill herself reiterates the point which Butalia (1993) makes about being both victim and agent. On the one hand, Nimmo is the victim of her attackers and the society which condones such random killings, but on the other, the attempts to keep herself and her daughter safe demonstrate agency. Also, one could say that the latter decision to take her own life was a conscious choice where death seems to be the only option or an act of agency as Mbembe (2003) suggests. Yet, this is a difficult argument to make in view of the fact that Nimmo suffers both the trauma of past and present loss of family members. In her complex situation, it seems problematic to even make an argument about female agency.

It may seem equally problematic to consider Bibi-ji's decision to allow Leela to fly to her death as an act of agency in the last part of the novel. Bibi-ji is aware of the possible consequences of getting on the ill-fated Air India flight 182 in 1985, yet she does not warn Leela against this because at this point, after Pa-ji's death at the hands of India's Hindu-led government, she seemed only able to view Leela, her friend, as Hindu, and thus her adversary (see Chapters 22 and 27). It is a situation uncannily similar to the one in which Ayah finds herself when

she is abducted in *Cracking India*. As argued previously, while her immediate abductee, Ice-candy man, is certainly motivated by the desire to own her, it is clear that during the incident when she is taken from the Sethi's house, the other attackers, men she had previously known, no longer viewed her as an individual but merely just another Hindu woman who could be violated in order to appease their outrage (Chapter 27). In *Can you Hear*, Bibi-ji's represents one of those male political figures and an indirect agent in Leela's death. If one assumes that women are non-violent victims, an idea which Butalia critiques as a "myth" (Butalia 2006, 16), it is unclear what one can make of Bibi-ji's decision to allow Leela to fly to her death. While noting that Bibi-ji herself is a victim of the communal conflicts, in this instance at least, she acts out of self- agency and is the victimizer. And it is this type of complex and multidimensional approach to the question of (post)colonial Indian female agency that *Can You Hear* offers through the main characters, Kanwar, Bibi-ji, and Nimmo.

Conclusion

In comparing Sidhwa (1991) and Badami (2006) to male authors of post-Partition novels such as Kushwant Singh, Purohit (2012) contends that while the male authors mainly explore female characters as objects of eroticism, female writers present female narrators who portray their issues in a more complex and diverse way. According to her, this restores agency to these women and other historical victims of the Partition. This paper is largely in support of such an argument because *Cracking India* and *Can You Hear* both present possible locations of female agency and yet show the complexity of locating female autonomy within postcolonial Indian nationalist politics, which gave rise to the violence surrounding the 1947 Partition, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, and perhaps the 1985 bombing of Air India flight 182. Nevertheless, Purohit's accusation against the male-authored post-Partition novels can also be made against *Cracking India* because of the ongoing exploitation of Ayah's sexuality in the novel. The obvious

depiction and possible exploitation of female sexuality seem deliberately absent in Badami's (2006) *Can You Hear*. Instead, Bibi-ji, for instance, shows herself as someone who is capable of forging her own destiny and managing members of her migrant community through her fought-for socioeconomic power.

Furthermore, it is possible that Sidhwa uses the limited upper-class Parsee child narrator as an artistic device to point out the incongruity of attempting to tell another's story and to critique voice appropriation; however, Ayah and Hamida, the narrated, are nevertheless left voiceless and objectified. In fact, Hai (2000) concludes that by portraying Ayah mainly as an object of decolonization, the novel does not offer her any "recuperation" (Hai 2000, 414); rather, she is literally pushed out of the text, across the borders to India still pursued by Ice-candy-man. *Can You Hear* offers a more nuanced depiction of the psychological and emotional lives of her female protagonists because the novel gives them authorial voices and agency to tell their own stories. This makes it possible for readers to view them as complex characters. Up till the end, we witness Bibi-ji struggling with her guilt over stealing her sister's suitor, her culpability in Leela's death, as well as role in Jasbeer's defection to Sikh militancy. As for Nimmo, her traumatic memories, spaces where her memories fail, and struggle to keep her family safe are aspects of her authorial agency.

In her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) rightly contends that the subaltern's speech is always mediated by a dominant group, an elite class, and in the case of women, the privileged gender. To a large degree, this argument describes Lenny and the Sethi women's charitable efforts towards marginalized women like Ayah and Hamida in *Cracking India*. And while the novel might offer this as a critique of upper-class feminist patronage; unfortunately, in doing so, it also silences the voices of the marginalized women. Badami's (2006) deliberate portrayal of the voices of her female protagonists who are the actual victims as well as the nuances and silences she observes in the portrayals of their stories, create room for the subaltern (woman) to speak.

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