

WALKING TOWARD THE CALL OF BEAUTY:  
BEAUTY AND AFFECT IN BADAMI

WALKING TOWARD THE CALL OF BEAUTY:  
BEAUTY AND AFFECT IN BADAMI

By ANDREW ELLIOT APONG, H.B.A

A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

© Copyright by Andrew Elliot Apong, February 2015

McMaster University MASTER OF ARTS (2015) Hamilton, Ontario (English)

TITLE: Walking toward the Call of Beauty: Beauty and Affect in Badami

AUTHOR: Andrew Elliot Apong, H.B.A. (University of Toronto)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Chandrima Chakraborty

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 93

## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a reading of Anita Rau Badami's novels *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* The interpretive frame constructs a theory of affect to explore the human experience of beauty through a reading of Badami's texts. This work's approach to beauty is derived largely from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* and from musings on beauty by Simone Weil. Following Weil, I understand beauty as the ascription of value or worth to various things, actions, or ideas, and I position beauty as an undergirding affective experience that is always present in the human encounter of the world. This thesis examines how Badami's novels depict the ways in which a Weilian sense of beauty leads characters to develop affectual attachments to various ideologies and discourses represented in the diasporic landscape of the texts. Through a critical consideration of the depicted effects of such attachments on Badami's characters' lives, this study also locates potential instances of what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism. I contend that the novels often portray instances of cruel optimism to critique traditional practices and perspectives while ever working towards building their own pronouncement of what constitutes a more genuine, higher sense of the beautiful.

*In Loving Memory of Emmanuel Rampersad and Bernadette Tang*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could only have come into fruition with the dedicated effort of Dr. Chandrima Chakraborty, Dr. Donald Goellnicht, and Dr. Roger Hyman to guide me in my work. I often had to rub my eyes in my experience of their great patience and precision. They have taught and inspired me with their humility, strength, expertise, and conviction. I am indebted to them for all their toil and could not be more grateful. Should any wisdom shine through these pages, it was made possible only through their guidance. The shortcomings are all my own. I am grateful to all the staff at McMaster University, especially, Ilona Forgo-Smith, Aurelia Gatto Pinto, and Antoinette Somo, who have all worked tirelessly and compassionately to provide me with an opportunity and a place to create this work. I thank my family for their unwavering tolerance and constant support. And lastly, I thank *all* the teachers and friends whom I have had the good fortune to meet and learn from so far in my journey in academia. Had we exchanged only a few words or even a simple kind smile, I assure you that your lessons were not lost on me—I move forward in your debt as well.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....	i
Descriptive Note.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter 1: Approaching Beauty in Badami.....	1
Chapter 2: Walking Beautifully.....	27
Chapter 3: Cruel Beauty.....	56
Conclusion: Holistic Humility.....	84
Bibliography.....	89

## **Chapter 1: Approaching Beauty in Badami**

### **Introduction**

Anita Rau Badami is a Canadian author of South Asian heritage. Her collected works now stand at four novels: *Tamarind Mem* (1996), *The Hero's Walk* (2000), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), and *Tell it to the Trees* (2011). Badami weaves numerous thematic threads throughout her novels, which yoke them together into a distinctive oeuvre. One such common aspect is that her novels feature characters who, each in their own way, search for purpose, worth, and stability amidst impinging tensions that stem ostensibly from a confluence of various cultural sensibilities. The other shared feature is some significant narrative reference to travel between the Indian subcontinent and Canada, which seems an open autobiographical allusion to Badami's own experience as a member of the South Asian diaspora—Badami immigrated to Canada in 1991. While we might be tempted to mark these sensibilities as simply South Asian and Canadian, Badami's creative vision expresses far more nuanced subtleties. The apparent East-West ideological binary of her novels is dappled with an assortment of socio-cultural discourses that we might observe as traditional, progressive, religious, secular, trans/nationalist, environmental, and capitalist—if only to name a few. Her characters' encounters with the discourses and practices of their environs form much of the base action of her novels. In essence, her novels stage an implicit comparative exploration of a myriad of socio-cultural discourses by illustrating, through their respective narratives, the potential effects of these discourses on human life.



In this study, I want to turn attention towards this human encounter with socio-cultural discourse and practice—a critical endeavour that may be conducted productively through a consideration of the affective or emotional basis of such encounters. The aim is to craft a reading of a selection of Badami’s novels in a way that explores how her characters relate to notions of personal and cultural value. This reading further explicates how these depicted conceptions of value influence Badami’s characters’ lives and the ways that they relate to their surrounding sociality and environs. The underlying contention is that the human encounter with the world is always necessarily structured by a discourse of an aesthetics of value and beauty, which is to say that, ultimately, the ideas or things that individuals deem or feel to be most worthwhile or beautiful have a determining impact on how those individuals relate to each other and to the world at large. Beauty moves and inspires us, and yet at times seizes us when we stand gaping in awe of its presence—we become hard-pressed and perhaps a bit terrified to let go of what we find beautiful. We may approach beauty in persons, paintings, sculptures, songs, poems and novels—yet we also approach the beautiful in other less conventional modes as in beautiful ideas, perspectives, beliefs, or beautiful ways of being and courses of action. My concern is with these often unacknowledged and less conventional modes of beauty and how individuals go about deciding or feeling which ways of living and being in the world are more beautiful, more valuable, or more desirable than others. The human encounter with and pursuit of the beautiful is an affectual phenomenon that is at the heart of how individuals define themselves and make their way through the world. With whatever degree of mindfulness, as human beings, we are impelled to make judgments

about the best ways to live—I propound that, at their base, these judgments are really aesthetic valuations that are fundamentally informed by affect. The attempt to critically attend to subjective ideas of value and beauty is therefore indispensable to any understanding of what it means to be human. This is to say that to better understand individuals, even ones presented in fiction, one would do well to consider deeply their connection to and ideas of the beautiful.

In particular, this study offers a reading of Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by positioning these novels as effective case studies for thinking through potential encounters with contending modes of being that might be considered beautiful. Both novels present their casts with an array of situations where their central characters must attempt to navigate and adjust to the ideological and discursive frameworks of each novel’s respective settings to arrive at new ways of living in the world. These novels lend themselves ideally to my purpose because each narrative illustrates a different outcome, or concluding mood, resulting from a process of individuals who feel their way through a milieu of unsettled and conflating discourses: *The Hero’s Walk* ends on a lighter note, whereas *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* offers a bleaker final vision. These narratives, I will ultimately suggest, can be read in ways that advocate for a standard of what ought to constitute the highest beauty in terms of human values—that is, for values that are more conducive to cultivating affirmative and respectful dispositions for life and congenial human social relations. With the intent of exploring what in particular might lend or impart a quality of beauty to differing perspectives or ways of being in the world, I will bring the ideals and values that

Badami's characters dedicate themselves to or live by to examine how her novels engage with beauty and illustrate its influence on human life.

To help think through how Badami's novels represent potential encounters with beauty, I draw upon theories of affect. In their preface to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg comment that "affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*...affect is found...in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances" (1). As such, I argue that Badami's novels, since they centre on characters who live amidst and pass *in-between* disparate ways of being and seeing, are an ideal site to examine the representation of affect. In her fictional representations of this passing in-between, we can observe the ways in which sentiments towards feelings of beauty, or senses of what is ideal, attract and move Badami's characters through her narratives. How individuals navigate discursive and ideological systems, how they move about the world, and even the ways in which individuals are interpolated as subjects, each with particular and sometimes changing dispositions and tastes, I suggest, can be understood through their affectual appraisals of their surrounding social systems. The heart of my endeavour is to illustrate how Badami's novels, with their portrayal of the human experience of living in a world of eliding cultural sensibilities, can contribute and speak meaningfully to such aesthetic valuation and the affectual and worldly consequences of such valuations.

In much the same vein as Sara Ahmed's recent work with applied affect theory in both *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and *The Promise of Happiness*, I examine

Badami's *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by employing a specific question as a unifying interest, namely, *what do conceptions of the beautiful do?* I trace Badami's characters' various, contending conceptions of beauty and value—be they recognized as traditionally South Asian, foreign, western, conservative, progressive or other—to show how these ideas can, at times, engender great agony, yet at other times, bring reflective solace and pleasure. I elucidate both the effectual and affectual consequences of the ideals of her character's habitual modalities of thought and action largely in light of Elaine Scarry's 1999 treatise *On Beauty and Being Just* where Scarry provides a case for how the human propensity to encounter the beautiful can assist in the creation of just and fair social relations. I complement and temper this reading with Lauren Berlant's idea of cruel optimism. Berlant defines cruel optimism as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (21). This study correspondingly observes and comments on instances of cruel optimism represented in Badami's texts as in cases when her characters hold on to or commit themselves to values and beliefs that are effectively outmoded and inhibit their thriving in the present. Both Scarry and Berlant's work is relevant because in Badami's novels we find characters dedicating themselves to principles, ideas, and ways of being that they appraise as more valuable than others—and in this sense they can be understood to offer a robust meditation on an aesthetics of value and beauty.

The subsequent balance of this initial chapter establishes and develops my overarching theoretical context by drawing on Scarry's work to reflect on and index beauty as an experiential encounter. I then situate this encounter within past thinking on

affect before moving on to think through other various felt implications that arrive with the experience of beauty. Also, since I discuss *the beauty of ways of seeing and being*, I show how beauty relates to Slavoj Žižek's understanding of normative ideology, since ideology itself as a phenomenal-theoretical concept forms the inherent essential backdrop upon and within which all our seeing and being, including our affective, aesthetic evaluations, must necessarily occur. I close this chapter by turning attention to human action and ask whether any kind of aesthetic standard of beauty can be applied to how we live our lives and allude to how an effective way of reading Badami's novels speaks to these issues.

### **The Experience of Beauty**

My take on beauty is in line with the thinking of the twentieth-century philosopher-mystic Simone Weil, whom Scarry herself turns to as a cornerstone thinker in her own work (51, 131). Like Weil, I interpret beauty “not [as] an attribute of matter in itself. [But instead as]...a relationship of the world to [human] sensibility” (Weil 164). Weil conceives of beauty as the relational attribution of an essential feeling of pleasing value ascribed to any given object or idea. Drawing on Kant, she discerns beauty as that finality of agreeability in any given thing, act, or idea (Weil 165; Kant 80). As such, a sense of beauty is therefore immanent, at least to a degree, in any and every human endeavour—“[o]therwise there could neither be desire, nor, in consequence, energy in [any given] pursuit” (Weil 167). This is to say that beauty—this designation of agreeable value—both inspires and motivates human thought and action. When understood in this way, we can think of beauty as an intrinsic rousing or catalytic feeling that is produced in

the relationship between a subject's awareness and that subject's encounter and ongoing interactions with "things" in the world. In this sense any idea or thing that emotionally or affectually moves a person to act can be described as possessing a degree of beauty for that specific person—the term might be applied to objects, ideas, and perspectives. The prerogative to consciously and overtly declare that something is beautiful ultimately belongs to the beholder, and yet a beholder might not even be aware of the specific beauty that moves him or her. I turn to this Weilian notion of beauty to consider how it influences the life and circumstances of a selection of characters in Badami's texts by examining how potential valuations of beauty move and influence them.

Therefore, when I speak of the *experience* of beauty or of the beautiful, I am referring to the appraisal of a thing, idea, or circumstance encountered as a *felt* event that brings a concomitant sense of value. The worn truism tells us that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder"—my overall focus, however, is less on beauty's relativity and more on the affectual experience of the beholding of beauty. In this sense, I position and constrict my definition of the encounter with beauty as a specific affectual phenomenon that arrives as a clearly discernable experience, an experience that we, as critics and theorists of affect, may isolate and examine. In this process, I acknowledge Seigworth and Gregg's idea that "affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units" (4) and further that my own endeavour may seem, at first, to too easily (and too cleanly) read or rationalize what experiences of beauty actually are and how they function. Yet, in doing so, my approach nevertheless follows Seigworth and Gregg's recognition of a particular angle into affect's

theorization that attempts to categorically identify specific affects and subsequently determine the potential human and worldly effects that stem from the presence of such affects (7). In commenting on the affectual experience of encounters with beauty, I therefore propound a methodical way of attempting to peer into the opaqueness of experience to think about both what constitutes an experience of beauty and what that experience actually feels like and does to people. My aim in doing this is not to silence the experiential aesthetic evaluations of others in regards to what *can* be beautiful, but rather my tactic is a rhetorical and critical technique employed to help structure and approach (albeit if only in an arguable and provisional way) the question of *why* exactly we find and feel that certain things are beautiful in terms of beauty's effect on us.

The way in which I isolate and identify the human encounter of beauty as sectioned off from the greater contiguous "muddy, unmediated relatedness" of experience parallels Ahmed's method in approaching the affect behind happiness. Ahmed begins "with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near" (30). In the same way, beauty brings us into intimate contact with what is close to us, both spatially and affectively. The experience, likewise, can be considered a generally positive affect if only for the reason that I cannot imagine anyone unconditionally declining an open invitation to experience something beautiful. In this sense, then, my study also heeds Ahmed's counsel to take good feeling as a suitable starting point for new roads into the theorization of affect. My approach is to interrogate the feeling of beauty without "presuming that the distinction between good and bad will always hold" (30). However,

what in part differentiates the feeling of beauty from Ahmed's take on happiness is that beauty is a particularly *evaluative* affectual response to the things, ideas, or circumstances that we come across; that is to say, that the experience of beauty necessitates that we make an evaluation of our experience and rank it against other things that we have known or imagined previously. To proclaim that something is beautiful, then, is to make an assessment—and this proclamation, because it is an assessment, would seem a potential prelude towards further critical analysis.

My conceptualization of the human response to beauty adapts Scarry's theory on the shared attributes of beautiful things. While Scarry makes no effort to speak of "unattached beauty"(23), that is, of beauty as a phenomenal quality or feature in and of itself, she nevertheless argues that there exists an arrangement of at least three traits common to *all* things that individuals might proclaim as beautiful. We can simultaneously regard Scarry's list of beauty's shared attributes as affectual responses to the encounter of beautiful things. First, beauty is unprecedented (Scarry 24)—we judge beautiful things as superlatively unmatched or aesthetically better, more pleasing, than other comparable things or experiences. The particular affective presence here requires some explanation. The implication is that when something strikes us as beautiful, we are stirred by an affectual current that engages us in a process of evaluation. We end our evaluation concluding that the beautiful beheld object or idea appears to be above other experiences that we might have deemed similar, or the first in a new category of experiences. In this way, the experience of beauty sparks in all of us, often without our direct cognition, a process of discriminating deliberation. When I read a beautiful essay, I make an implicit



aesthetic evaluation—perhaps based on the combined quality of the writing, my estimation of the novelty of the argument, and its overall appeal to my taste. In turn, I move to place or rank that essay above a number other works that I have encountered previously, works that now rank lower in my aesthetic appraisal. To unfold the deceptively simple act of beholding is to see how we are each moved by beauty—we are induced by couched affect to become critics of beauty and value.

Second, beauty sustains life—or as Scarry captures the rush of the feeling: “Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living” (24-25). Here Scarry’s recognition of one of beauty’s attributes is at its closest to an affectual response. The experience of beauty enhances or contributes to one’s felt quality of life by instilling a sense of vivifying meaning through the encounter itself, that is, through one’s felt experience of and relation to the beautiful object. We are able to derive purposeful meaning from our experience of beautiful things. Both a beautiful vista or an estimation of a beautiful philosophical treatise, for instance, can be enough to inspire and fuel one’s worldly endeavours with renewed vigor.

And third, Scarry claims that beauty appears, on some level, as sacred to us (23). That which we find beautiful calls out to us and petitions our respect and veneration on some level. The exact nature of this veneration, of course, can take diverse forms. I might read a beautiful novel, for instance, and be inspired or moved to praise and recommend the work to another person. Or, stepping outside one morning, I turn my head and happen upon a beautiful person and my gaze is fixed on him or her for few moments longer, seemingly through no conscious effort. I may continue to think of this person for the

duration of my day—my prolonged gaze and mental preoccupation in this instance are further examples of a form of veneration. Such encounters charge us with rousing affect that impel us irresistibly to act and think in ways that honour or pay tribute to the object of our beholding. To summarize, then, beauty is an affective experiential evaluation in which one is motivated to reverence of a beheld thing, impelled to comparative deliberation, and bequeathed, on some level, with a sense of purpose. This succinct list of attributes captures beauty's influence on us in unquestionably broad strokes. How each individual distinctively expresses or experiences these base effects, however, varies drastically and with very real and serious consequences.

I would argue that all our experiential actions and encounters are to some degree contingent on similar affective evaluations. My focus throughout this work is with beauty as a category of phenomena that is commonly discounted, or at least steals by unacknowledged in contemporary critical debates, as open to aesthetic appraisal—this is the broad category of human perspective and action. I want to consider how and to what extent various ways of seeing and being might be thought of as beautiful, to the degree that they live up to the affectual experience of beauty, and lastly whether some ways of seeing and being might be actually thought of as more beautiful than others. Beauty should not be dismissed as a mere subjective, qualitative evaluation of particular experiences that may evoke a powerful or sentimental aesthetic charm. The experience of beauty is not a simple hedonistic indulgence. An individual's ideas of beauty constitute a central affective fulcrum upon which she might weigh, consider, or feel out her direction through the world. The experience affects her decisions, what she might choose to

encounter and avoid, and what actions she might find most fitting or acceptable for each passing circumstance in her life. And one's conceptions of the beautiful may not be static—rather they can shift and change dynamically as one encounters new perspectives, new beautiful things in the world. Some perspectives, once thought to lack value, may one day seem to grow vibrant with beauty, while other ways of seeing and being that were once held as beautiful, may, for a number of reasons, fall in their esteemed value. These ideas give rise to a host of questions and concerns: *How conscious can we be of the affect involved in aesthetic evaluation? What is the relationship between social discourse or ideology and aesthetic taste? Can we in a sense take beauty by the reins, and gain some control over what we find beautiful and meaningful?* For now, however, it suffices to acknowledge that as an individual moves about her life, in the background of her choices, she continually feels through or ponders over which ways of living she ought to devote herself towards and over which courses of action may hold the most beauty for each fleeting moment of her life. Her subjective standards of beauty effectively function as a guiding touchstone that holds potential sway over her every encounter with the world and over how she conducts and sees herself.

### **Interrogating the Affect of Beauty**

What I think complicates matters is that the human encounter with beauty, according to Scarry, is an experience over which we hold limited conscious control. We cannot always decide what phenomena will suddenly move into our perceptual gaze and evoke the precise response: *this, right here, is beautiful* (31). Likewise, we cannot always decide when something that we felt lacked aesthetic charm, suddenly shifts in our estimation to now strike us actually beautiful—and vice-versa (12-15). In this sense, Scarry claims that beauty often comes to us, unasked for, through no *real* work of our own (53). We see this in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, discussed in Chapter 3, when the character, Bibi-ji, despite living in an impoverished part of West Punjab in the 1920s, develops an attachment for Canadian commercial goods and harbours an aspiration for a “better”, more beautiful life in Canada. Bibi-ji’s particular attachments are made possible only through the reshaping of the global economic infrastructures of her time, which grant her both the possibility of seeing Canadian goods as they trickle into her rural village and make her dream of moving to Canada a realistic prospect. Badami also tells us that Bibi-ji is rather greedy such that her greed must also play into how she goes about pursuing her aspirations for the good life. One’s encounter with beauty, then, appears to be shaped largely by capricious worldly happenstance and by one’s own individual unconscious dispositions and processes. For such reasons, beauty itself seems to inherently demand our critical consideration if we are ever to have any understanding of the processes by which aesthetic pleasure seizes our attention, thoughts, and feelings and of the resulting consequences of these processes.

If we think of beauty as a bodily or emotional experience, then we ought to examine the developmental nature of the affective process we are dealing with. Ahmed informs us that a person's individual taste—presumably both his moral and aesthetic dispositions—is not as erratic or random as we might initially assume. Drawing on Teresa Brennan's work in *The Transmission of Affect*, Ahmed explains that an “outside in” model has been predominantly accepted in the history of crowd psychology and sociological studies on emotion to explain how we come to feel (36). This model implies that affect, in my case *the sense and feeling that something is beautiful*, hovers about in the external social environs and enters into subjects living in a particular place through a process of socialization—we learn standards of taste, and consequently ideas of what is beautiful, from our cultural environment and social interactions. The opposite of this idea would be an “inside out” model where distinct sentiment or attitude is generated inside a particular person, through some willed process, as a person looks about and personally evaluates her surroundings. The first process presumes that we enter the world as *tabula rasas*. This means that we are at the mercy of what has been previously designated as beautiful before our belated arrival in the world. The second process assumes that we are capable of developing and sustaining a kernel of self that is able to act in and affect the surrounding world—a self that is potentially exempt from social conditioning and able to evaluate its experience autonomously. I would argue for a reconciliation of these two perspectives and advance that one's taste and disposition towards the beautiful is a ceaseless negotiation between internal feeling and external experience.

In further examining the human encounter with beauty, Scarry propounds an idea that effectively carves an inroad between the “outside in” and “inside out” models of affect, at least in terms of aesthetic evaluations of the superlative. She explains that there exists a mutually empowering relationship between a subject and what a subject deems to hold aesthetic value. For Scarry, neither the external nor the internal is completely empowered in and of itself. She notes that the phenomenon of beauty is a joint “contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) *and* the perceiver” (90, emphasis added). In line with the second attributive commonality of beauty, the beautiful thing confers both life and personal or social meaning to the perceiver in a way that echoes the “outward in” model of affect. Our surroundings so bequeath us with meaning. And conversely, in line with the third attributive commonality, we as perceivers value and seek to honour that which sustains and vivifies us. With the affectual energies starting from the inside, we look out to affirm, preserve, and celebrate the beautiful objects and ideas that we encounter. In Chapter 2, for example, I examine the character Sripathi Rao in Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk*, and the contract that he forms with a conservative, patriarchal tradition. This tradition, he feels, is beautiful and valuable and carries personal meaning for him in as much as it promises emotional protection from ways of being that deviate from the cultural norms he is accustomed to. And in turn, Sripathi tries his best to carry this tradition forward and pass it on to his children—resulting in much of the novel’s narrative tensions. However, in the course of the novel, it becomes obvious that Sripathi must renegotiate his ideals. In this way, the inside and outside models work in tandem. The affect of the experience of the beautiful implies an active relationship of continual

negotiation between self and exteriority. Scarry's view takes into account that "beautiful" things may precede an individual's arrival in the world and affect us, yet simultaneously affirms the power of a subject to negotiate a relationship to those beheld objects. The affect behind beauty, then, can help us better understand how Badami's characters relate to their surrounding world.

Unlike Ahmed's theory regarding happiness, which avows a unilateral socially sanctioned affect, Scarry's conception suggests that the experience of beauty follows a bilateral structure. For Ahmed, we feel happy because we happen upon circumstances or objects that *already* have the idea or affect of happiness attributed to them through previous social practice and convention (37). For Scarry, we feel beauty through circumstances or objects as they are in themselves, already existing with potential socially constructed meaning *and* through our evaluation of and relationship to those things. Scarry's idea illuminates why taste and preference can be shared by clusters of people who develop collective tastes and attitudes towards the same things—as in types of shared, socially sanctioned dispositions towards the splendor of nationalist principle, religious creeds, or heteronormative discourse. Harold Bloom, relatedly, ever championing his own aesthetic standard, affirms something of the idea of how taste and social convention work in Scarry's conception:

We all of us go home each evening, and at some moment in time, with whatever degree of overt consciousness, we go back over all the signs that the day presented to us. In those signs, we seek only what can aid the continuity of our own discourse, the survival of those ongoing qualities that will give what is vital in us even more life. This seeking is the ... making of signification into meaning, by the single test of aiding our survival. (8)

We believe in the truth of what is beautiful because it somehow empowers us. However, because our relation to what we find beautiful can feel so enabling, and consequently positive, we, in our rushing embrace of that beauty, can likely overlook the deeper nature and effect of the experience.

One such embedded effect is what Scarry recognizes as beauty's "clear discernibility" (31). She means that a particular effect that arrives obliquely in the encounter is the beholder's experience of certitude, which can be described as a feeling of being correct about one's assessment and a sense of approaching an element of subjective truth about experience. For example, when I come across something that I perceive as truly beautiful, perhaps a lovely sunrise, a poem, or an elegant philosophical tract, it engenders in me the sense of a sureness in my own aesthetic evaluation—the sense may be transient and liable to change as I may potentially revise my appraisal in the future, but for the moment of the encounter, it remains a certitude. The world, in effect, becomes intelligible to us through the experience of beauty. Scarry explains that the "beautiful ... acquaints us with the mental event of *conviction*" (31, emphasis added). In Chapter 3 I illustrate this by referencing Jasbeer, from *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, pointing to his conviction of a radicalized and militant interpretation of Sikhism. Convinced of this militant conceptualization of Sikhism, Jasbeer embraces it, and it fills him, at least temporarily, with motivating purpose. And since Jasbeer *feels* such conviction without any great mental endeavour, I want to understand it principally as a type of conviction rooted in an affectual reaction with an arguably non-rational base.



As Scarry comments, one's feeling of conviction is "so pleasurable a mental state...that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, [and] wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true" (31). The pleasure we feel in those moments when we stand before beauty is, in essence, a beckoning that invites us ever onwards to discover novel, deeper truths, and in turn, more profound experiences of beauty and conviction. This, she reasons, is why we each seem to have a natural propensity to gravitate towards a subjective sense of veracity, that is, to what *feels* right to us. Bibi-ji, Sripathi, and Jasbeer, among others, as I discuss in the forthcoming chapters, all find a subjective truth in the discourses and practices that they esteem. Crucially, I want to note that, for Badami, the "truths" that these characters initially affirm are often of lower or misguided nature. Her novels, in various ways, work to question such truths through her characters emotional and affectual journeys, which lead them towards a higher, more genuine conception of both beauty and truth. Such ideas relate to Keats' famous coupling of beauty and truth—that there is some connection between what we each feel is true and what we deem is aesthetically pleasing.

But this idea is not by any means a new one. Turning back over two millennia, we find Diotima of Mantinea drawing a similar conclusion about beauty. Diotima teaches Socrates about a conceptual Platonic staircase that ascends to a beauty, pure and unsullied—this staircase, she reasons, represents the life path we might take if we choose to become devout seekers searching for a more complete awareness of beauty. Like Scarry, Diotima informs us that the beautiful can assist us in approaching the ever more beautiful, continually, so that at last one can "complete the process of learning what

beauty really is” (Plato 49). Diotima sees beauty’s purpose, if utilized in the correct way, as edificatory. Diotima’s main concern in her dialogue with Socrates is the knowledge of love. At the staircase’s uppermost platform, beauty is linked to ideal understanding. She teaches that the function of beauty is to attract us to these higher truths of being (49). To us today, the idea that experiences of aesthetic pleasure can impel us to set out in pursuit of a transcendent truth, however, can be suspected as naive romanticism. There is always the possibility that a man’s conviction in his own estimation of beauty may also tie him down or limit his perception and perspective to just and only that specifically beheld object or idea—precisely because he finds that object or idea so ineluctably compelling and attractive. In other words, there is always the risk of stalling on the Platonic staircase.

### **Attractive Ideologies**

Slavoj Žižek’s understanding of the inner mechanisms of social ideology would seem to locate human beings as always positioned at some level on Diotima’s staircase. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, for instance, Žižek explicates at length the ways in which we are constantly caught inside, performing, and propagating ideology—how we are always standing on a Platonic step. He starts from a traditional Marxist definition of ideology—“they do not know it, but they are doing it” (Žižek 24). He claims that we enact and enunciate ideology, that is, socio-cultural practice and thought, in ways that bypass our rationality and our propensity for critical conscious awareness (24). Alluding to the late eighteenth century bifurcation of the beautiful into the subdivisions of the

beautiful and sublime, as made famous by Burke and Kant (Scarry 85), Žižek explains how this *not knowing* is made possible through the human encounter with ideology as something inherently sublime. He turns to Kant who tells us that “[t]he sublime ... is an object (of nature), the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach...” and to Lacan who tells us that the sublime object of desire is “transcendent [and] transphenomenal” (229). Social ideology because it is transphenomenal and perceived as ultimately beyond our present conscious apprehension, must therefore effect and affect us in ways that are unknown to us. We are thus blindsided progressively and interpolated as subjects by the sublime social realities that we are each born into, which precede our arrival in the world, each with their own respective socio- ideological conditions. These social realities imbue us with values, morals, identities, and with circumscribed possibilities as to what we might become in the world. This is all, of course, a decidedly barebones presentation of Žižek’s ideas; however, my concern is with attempting to come to better terms with these ideological apparatuses that bind and inform us in order to provide insights into how we approach our ideological ways of being through aesthetic thought.

Žižek already mobilizes the aesthetic category of the sublime to make his own assertions about the workings of ideology. This is likely the best way to approach the topic, for if the classic Marxian conception is indeed correct and we cannot scrupulously *know* the ins-and-outs of our ideological quandary, then perhaps we can still take an Ahmedian approach and *feel* our way through it. We can do this by directing focused attention to how we sense and appraise our realities both aesthetically and affectually.

Žižek tells us that, even though we may enact our ideologies in ways unbeknownst to ourselves, “ideology is not simply imposed on ourselves ... [rather] ...we, in a way, enjoy our ideology” (“Slavoj Žižek: The Pervert's”). He means that we derive a certain pleasure in the unconscious ways of being that we cling to. This enjoyment, I suggest, is not unlike the enjoyment and pleasure we find in our conviction towards the beautiful. How we are connected to and informed by ideology, then, is similar to Scarry’s explanation of how we come to feel pleasurable conviction in our own subjective, aesthetic appraisals of beautiful things. Both would seem to be spontaneous affectual happenings rooted in some sphere of unconscious feeling rather than in overt mental awareness. This is all to suggest that we are attracted to certain ways of being and seeing—and to certain ideological dispositions—over others because, at the core of things, certain perspectives and actions *feel* potently beautiful and aesthetically pleasing to us. If we can allow that ways of seeing and living in the world can be subject to a kind of aesthetic consideration, then aesthetic theory, and thinking about beauty in general, would be a suitable means to interrogate, understand, and judge our *felt* connections to socio-cultural discourse and ideological thinking and behaviour. A consideration of the affectual aesthetic response to various ideological perspectives, then, can help us see how we might once again move up (or down) on Diotima’s staircase.

We can observe a noteworthy instance of the *felt* connection to socio-cultural discourse and ideological thinking and behavior in Lauren Berlant’s idea of cruel optimism. Berlant defines cruel optimism as an individual’s attachment to a particular object of desire—an object that is yearned for and thought of as promising, but is in

actuality paradoxically inimical to the flourishing and continued well-being of that individual. The object of desire may be a person, an idea, habit—anything (93). When read in light of Žižek’s proclamation that our lives, ideas, and emotions must necessarily be informed and framed by ideology, we must view the affective attachment of Berlant’s cruel optimism, and the object itself to which we direct our longing, as phenomenon that are in themselves ideologically construed. That is to say, we might feel attachment to things that inhibit our thriving precisely because we are conditioned to do so ideologically. Berlant explains explicitly “where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object or scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place” (94). Cruel optimism is therefore about an attachment that, like Žižek’s assertion about the workings of ideology, circumvents our present conscious awareness. We are ideologically-duped into desiring, valuing, and simultaneously misrecognizing and appraising as beautiful those things that hold us back and harm us by creating “compromised conditions of possibility” in our lives (94). We can therefore consider the affective connection of cruel optimism as an inimical ideological attachment. In terms of the affectual aesthetics that I am gesturing towards, cruel optimism is an attachment based in a deceptive or misguided appraisal of beauty.

Yet, Scarry argues that beauty has a level of objectivity that we can find and sense even within the mystifying confines of ideological and cultural relativity. And for Scarry, beauty also serves a serious pragmatic purpose—beauty is a call to fairness and justice (108-109); we feel and experience beauty so that we may turn around and set out to make

our lives and world ever more beautiful. Badami's highest, most genuine conception of beauty, as evinced in my discussion of the two novels in Chapters 2 and 3 also points to such ideas of fairness and justice. Both novels prompt their characters to strive towards a compassionate awareness of the ways in which they are connected to others and an awareness of their attachments and what their attachments do.

Berlant's caveat of cruel optimism assists me in understanding Badami's characters' contemplative journey towards more beautiful ways of being. It functions as an "analytic lever", a theoretical apparatus that can be employed to assess the characters' affective attachments and determine whether these attachments do indeed enervate their drives and stifle their conditions of possibility (97). Berlant's idea implies that an affectual state does indeed exist which is categorically opposite of the mood that cruel optimism brings one to. This more beautiful mood would be an unrestricted, conducive drive towards life, to open and congenial attitudes towards difference, and to renewed or sustained life-vigor and an affirmative awareness of a wider range of potentialities and possibilities. This mood, I suggest, is in essence closer to what Scarry encourages us to strive towards—a striving made possible through an ongoing contemplation of what is beautiful in life and in the world. We therefore need to clearly understand which ways of seeing and being—which perspectives, actions, and values—are indeed most beautiful in Badami's novels. What prevents the recognition of Scarry's life-affirming, vivifying beauty and what beguiles characters into feeling aesthetic attachment for ideas and things that limit and restrain them is habitual, ideologically informed patterns of thought and behavior. Berlant assumes that "the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary

world...are [in fact the] conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject” (97). Force of habit rooted in quotidian life practices and circumstances carry with them the potential to wear individuals out—circumstances engendered by a personal and communal “(unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality” (Žižek 30); circumstances which constitute that unconscious social reality-convention of ideology itself.

If Žižek is correct and ideology is an *inescapable* fantasy-convention that structures our very thinking and feeling, then our conceptions of beauty must necessarily be a part of and an extension of our ideological reality. This would mean that beauty is ideologically defined and culturally inscribed. Scarry, however, calls us to attend to what *makes* something beautiful through its affect on us (111). Using Scarry’s project as part of my theoretical frame, I want to understand Badami’s novels as creative endeavours, within the ideological ties that bind, to think through the human encounter with beauty and show how beauty affects individuals. *The Hero’s Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* can be read in ways that address these problems of beauty and habitually performed ideology. Arguably, her novels ask for this kind of reading and understanding. The strongest recurrent theme of Badami’s work has to do with her characters’ encounters of intercultural experience, movement, and change. The settled dust of her characters’ life practices and perspectives, so to speak, is raised. Quotidian social-discourse and custom is in effect disrupted—it wafts about like floating particles of dust. In this unsettled state, her characters must make choices about which life paths to follow and which perspectives to adopt. My study in the following two chapters demonstrate that her

characters gravitate towards the modes of living that hold or offer the most value to them, that present the most potential in terms of personal and social meaning—that are, in short, affectually sustaining. In this sense, then, her novels trace her characters’ journeys towards beauty.

Chapter 2 is concerned with how in *The Hero’s Walk* notions of right living produce various narrative conflicts. Its focus is on Sripathi’s affective attachment and consequential performance of a traditional, socio-religious patriarchy and the journey he takes towards what Badami positions as a more just sense of beauty in the world. Sripathi’s character development, as I show, hinges on his relationship to the women and children in his life—as they too strive to reach this more holistic, more genuine sense of beauty, an ideal made clearly manifest only at the novel’s end. Picking up on and complementing this notion of a more holistic and more integrated conception of beauty, Chapter 3 focuses on the interpersonal *relations* between the cast of characters in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Focusing primarily on the characters, Bibi-ji, Leela Shastri and Jasbeer, it analyzes how the affect behind the experience of beauty can ripple out to have wider worldly, social implications. This chapter adapts and leverages Berlant’s “analytic lever” of cruel optimism to discuss occasions when individuals cling to and affirm notions of “beautiful”, good living, to the potential detriment of themselves and others.



I am aware that this project, in its theorization of the experience of beauty, might seem to drift dangerously close to a generalized or essentialist account of human nature. My ultimate aim however is not to explicate relations of difference but rather to conjecture a personally empowering model in regards to how human experience is persistently influenced and produced through the affectual processes involved in the course of encountering beauty and value. Both *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, as I strive to show, are also attempts to take stock of and consciously affirm a guiding, beautiful set of values within that otherwise unconscious hodgepodge of ideological ideas and practices that comprise daily life.

**Chapter 2:****Walking Beautifully: Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk******First Steps***

To encounter *The Hero's Walk* with a mind turning towards how the novel depicts its characters' estimations of good living opens an aperture into the work's perspective on the human encounter with beauty and value. To recapitulate, my base theoretical claim is that beauty leads to the attribution of value and renders an action or thought as more deserving of our time and energies as opposed to other potential actions and thoughts. When we engage in any endeavour it is because that endeavour appeals more to our bodily/affectual sensibilities—it appears to possess a greater degree of beauty over other potential actions or thoughts—and we thus confer greater value to that particular endeavour. As *The Hero's Walk* takes its characters through their respective travails, we can observe how their represented affectual relations to their individual conceptions of beauty and ideality—that is, to their ideas of what constitutes the good life—guides and informs their actions and reactions to the difficulties that they encounter. The overarching curve of the narrative moves to challenge, bend, and transform its characters' conceptions of beauty. In order for its main characters to better cope with and confront the challenges they face, they must arrive at refined conceptions of beauty and perspectives that are better suited to the novel's depicted world of cultural change and exchange.

This chapter aims to bring to light *The Hero's Walk's* main characters' estimations of and relation to their conceptions of beauty by thinking through the affectual

mechanisms that give rise to and condition these conceptions. In doing so, my method also presents a theory of affect that is in part derived from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* with an aim to open up a conversation about the sway of conceptions of beauty on human life. The implied assertion throughout this chapter is a modest but important one—namely, that our attractions, and by extension our conceptions of the beautiful, both guide and largely affect us and our circumstances, and how we react to life. I want to show why it is so crucially important to maintain and cultivate a critical awareness of what our attractions do—of what our conceptions of the beautiful do. The internal logic of the novel, I argue, speaks to these ideas because it itself gestures towards a certain, related aim: for *The Hero's Walk* to accomplish its task and complete the telling of its principal characters' stories, it must challenge and transform their lower conceptions of beauty and ideality and raise them to refined, higher standards in terms of how they live and see. The end result of this process, I interpret, as a closing statement on what constitutes the beautiful, good life in a world of ever changing and conflating discourses and cultures. Some relatively recent criticism on the novel, while not moving directly in my specific trajectory, serves as a point of departure towards my interpretative stance.

Prior critics have positioned Badami's *The Hero's Walk* as a work that conforms meaningfully (and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly) to the conventions we would expect to find in postcolonial and diasporic narratives. Heike Härting, for example, argues that the novel stages "diaspora as a political category of identity [that is] not necessarily dependent on transnational mobility" (Härting 65). Härting, referencing Avtar Brah's

work, explains at length why the novel's main character, Sripathi Rao, can be considered diasporic, even though, by the end of the novel he "stays put" in the town of his birth (57). *The Hero's Walk*, according to Härting, presents the idea of "becoming diasporic" as involving a shift away from one's original normative political, social, and psychological systems, while not *necessarily* requiring a permanent physical crossing of national boundaries (58). Her argument is that a type of diasporic space opens up in the novel as its narrative depicts the ways in which contemporary "environmental and economic global restructuring" (44) have the potential to pervade, disintegrate, and transform traditional and localized norms and customs. Susie O'Brien recognizes Härting's claim of a diasporic presence in the novel through Sripathi's experience of growth "from a timid provincialism to a more global consciousness" (13), as depicted in the novel. O'Brien specifically shows how *The Hero's Walk* is relevant to a discussion about how literary texts can function in specific theoretical projects of postcolonial, ecocritical, and globalization studies. But, for all their great critical worth, readings such as Härting's and O'Brien's, I suggest, veer somewhat away from, and possibly even eschew, the heart of what is most deeply personal and most commonly human in Badami's story. Coarsely put, *The Hero's Walk* can be read as a novel about human beings each encountering and coping with various challenges in an increasingly interconnected world where cultural systems are conflating rapidly with ensuing tensions and conflicts in tow. One way to understand how the novel's characters address these challenges and tensions is through an examination of its characters' views and impressions of beauty and ideality. In addition, the novel, through its depiction of a "diasporic", postcolonial space, offers a productive

place to examine how humans go about navigating a landscape of diverse ideals and standards of beauty. What follows is a reading of the novel that is less a comment on the experiences of *those* diasporic and postcolonial “others” and more about what the narrative expresses about our *shared* experience as affectual beings who must necessarily encounter the world through the ongoing flux of our attractions.

This chapter primarily focuses on the novel’s main protagonist Sripathi Rao’s continual negotiation of ideality and beauty—a process that I recognize as a predominant theme in the novel. Sripathi is the primary protagonist—the novel’s third-person omniscient voice is, on the whole, focused through his character—and so it is largely through Sripathi that we, as readers, encounter the events of the narrative. My argument is that through Sripathi’s negotiation, the novel, by its end, establishes its foremost pronouncement on what constitutes an ideal, beautiful way of seeing and being. The first half of this chapter discusses how and why Sripathi adopts conservative socio-religious ideology and demonstrates how his relation to this ideology conforms to the encounter of beauty as I have discussed in the previous chapter. I proceed to show how novel traces Sripathi’s ideals as they come into conflict with those of his children, Maya and Arun, and his wife and sister, Nirmala and Putti, respectively. Towards the second half of this chapter I discuss how the novel develops and reconciles Sripathi’s ideals with its other supporting characters’ journeys towards reconciling their own conflicts, which are accomplished again through the affirmation of renewed standards of personal ideality. Badami depicts and dramatizes her characters’ felt experiences of beauty and attraction and explores how these experiences colour their encounters with and reactions to the

problems they face. These attractions have a significant impact on how and why the novel's characters embrace or move towards new ideological, political, social, and psychological systems. More specifically, Sripathi, Nirmala, and Putti, must move away from ideals and practices grounded largely in traditional Hindu conservatism whereas Maya and Arun move to ideals reflective of an increasingly culturally interconnected world. Key to my endeavour is the assumption that a person's presence in the world is influenced fundamentally by an ongoing affectual-evaluative relationship to his or her encountered experiences. Scarry gestures towards these ideas when she asserts that the manner in which "one walks through the world, [with] endless small adjustments of balance, is affected by the shifting weights of beautiful things" (15). *The Hero's Walk*—as its title suggests—is a novel that is also about *how* individuals walk through the world. Sripathi is the novel's primary hero. And as we read, we walk along with him. Our personal journeys and values may not always be the same as his; however, in reading his story, we might come to think of the ideals that move us, of the discourses that attract us. The differences in the myriad values that we bring to reading and interpreting Sripathi's story do not matter as much as Badami's final aim in *The Hero's Walk*, which is for the novel to usher its readership to a higher, shared vantage point to see what constitutes a more genuinely beautiful way of being and seeing in our increasingly interconnected world.

### *Normative Beauty*

When we first encounter Sripathi, he is a struggling copywriter, working as the chief provider for his family, father of two adult children, living with his wife and son, and his elderly mother and middle-aged sister. He seems dutiful to a fault, inflexibly dedicated to preserving notions of cultural tradition. Through Sripathi's representation we can think through how the affectual energies and mechanisms behind a person's experience of beauty and ideality work to inform that person's actions and perspectives. We can observe how Sripathi's experience of ideality comes to be and how that experience impels, restrains, and animates his very being.

A particular flashback episode in the story gives insight into a crucial moment of the establishment and development of the conservative ideals that Sripathi holds towards the beginning of the novel: a fleeting encounter between himself, his mother, his father—and the unexpected appearance of his father's mistress at Sripathi's own Brahmin initiation ceremony becomes for him a traumatic, childhood memory (59-60). Standing alone with his mother while his father walks off with his mistress, the young Sripathi feels at once horrified, humiliated, and abandoned (60-61). Sripathi feels an enervating sense of betrayal in his father's lack of dedication to their family unit—but the moment is also generative for him. Through this experience Sripathi comes to know what it would mean for him to live a beautiful, ideal life, as his father's actions push him towards an affirmation of ideals that are ostensibly opposed to those of his father. The novel recounts Sripathi's avowal clearly:

“*Never* would he [Sripathi] fail in his duty to his family or subject them to such shame. He did not want either his father’s fame or stature because the higher one was, the greater the fall. ... [Instead Sripathi] would be a simple man, respected for nothing other than his qualities as a father and husband. He unlike his father, would always remain dutiful ... to the woman he married, to the children he had—first and above all else” (61).

The novel reaches back into Sripathi’s personal history to demonstrate that this experience is a critical formative event in terms of how he will live. It shows how an individual’s standards of beauty and ideality are informed by and connected to past experience. It is Sripathi’s childhood experience of his father’s betrayal that steers him towards a particular way of being in the world. In contrast to his father’s actions, which deviate from Sripathi’s ideas of normative standards, Sripathi begins to deem localized normative discourse as beautiful. Hence, the Sripathi that we meet at the beginning of the novel is attached and attracted to a discourse of normative ordinariness, as it has been traditionally practiced in Toturpuram, Tamil Nadu. In his budding personal spectrum of value, normative standards rank higher than social practices that may deviate from the status quo. Traditional discourse is beautiful to Sripathi in the sense that his relation to and perception of normative discourse, as evinced throughout the greater part of the narrative, and which I shall proceed to demonstrate, follows Scarry’s threefold affectual response to beauty that I have discussed in chapter 1 (9-11).

First, in Sripathi’s experience, we can see how beauty and ideality come as an unsought for encounter, though provoked by his surroundings. Sripathi does not himself freely choose, for example, to affirm normative discourse as valuable. His avowal of normativity is a reflexive response to his father’s actions and the five hundred guests at the Raos’ dinner party who seem to have “had [themselves] chosen that very moment to



stop talking and stare at the scene at the centre of the room” (60) towards the young, embarrassed Sripathi. In turn, Sripathi finds consolation in his newfound dedication to traditional discourse that encourages marital fidelity and the upholding of socio-religious duty. Yet the experience, nevertheless, may seem like an entirely volitional appraisal, since to value something as beautiful would seem to necessarily involve a willed comparison between the beautiful beheld object or idea and other things deemed not as beautiful. We see this in how Sripathi comes to “[hate] his father completely at that moment” (61) during the initiation ceremony. Sripathi is moved quite suddenly by unconscious affectual and more conscious emotional energies to place or rank one mode of being, that is, his notion of normative ordinariness, over and above other modes of being, such as his father’s more deviant values and practices. It can be easy to overlook such a natural, reflexive reaction; however, this is precisely why I argue, as does Badami’s novel in recounting Sripathi’s affirmation of normativity as ideal, that attention to such moments and experiences is itself invaluable. The recounted flashback emphasizes how such instances in Sripathi’s personal history have informed his sense of ideality; of what for him will constitute the beautiful, good life.

Second, the level of importance that Sripathi attributes to his perception of normative discourse is in itself significant. The body of ideas and ideals that comprise this discourse, which precede Sripathi’s arrival in the world, suddenly acquire a newfound, central significance to him through his association to or alignment with them. Scarry explains how experiencing beauty has a direct effect on a subject’s sense of self, and how upon experiencing beauty, a person is put into a state of “opiated adjacency” (Scarry

114). She means that through an encounter with beauty a subject is put into a state of pleasure in which she is decentred, because, for the moment, that perceiving subject cedes ground to the perception of a beautiful object or to the contemplation of a beautiful idea. She must, physically or mentally, refrain from thinking solely about herself and instead concentrate or focus on the object or idea. The perceiver so finds delight in her own lateralness in relation to the beauty that she perceives. Scarry argues that the experience can be a way to curb selfish, egoistic desire because the process can train a person to shift her focus away from herself and towards the beheld object or idea.

I have suggested that Sripathi perceives normative discourse and its body of social mandates as beautiful. But Sripathi's case, however, would appear to nuance Scarry's argument. Sripathi's affirmation of normativity does indeed grant him a sense of pleasurable opiated adjacency in as much as it offers him the promise of emotional protection, but the experience does not necessarily reduce his ego. Rather, Sripathi's case shows how such moments can enliven the self through a subject's identified relation to what he or she finds beautiful. In this sense, the self is not diminished but *augmented* and vivified through a connection to a beautiful object or idea. Certain ideals and values such as Sripathi's dedication to and his cultivation of a status quo ordinariness all become a part of Sripathi's perceived selfhood; his subjectivity is further consolidated through these conceptions. Normative discourse offers him a template for his personality; for instance, as a child, Sripathi dreams that in the future "[h]e would only be an ordinary man, but one with good standing in the eyes of the world" (61). Sripathi *identifies* himself with notions of pre-existing conservative normativity and its notions of duty and ordinariness. A

discourse that sponsors socio-religious duty, consequently, feels right and true to Sripathi. This explains why later in Sripathi's life, when he shares his marriage bed with his wife, Nirmala, he "feel[s] a quick, guilty delight that eased into pure pleasure when he remembered that this sharing had been sanctioned by the priest before Agni, the fire god" (110-111). Sripathi derives a sense of personal delight through his affirmation of normative practice and its particular injunctions. This alignment bequeaths Sripathi with a sustaining affect that carries both Sripathi and this internalized discourse of idealized conceptions of normativity towards a future state. This future-oriented direction motions towards the next phase of the affectual response to beauty.

Sripathi's early avowal and conception of what will, for him, constitute a beautiful, good life also necessitates that he, going forward, be and act in some way that is relatedly generative. The way in which Sripathi chooses to remain constant in his vow to "always remain dutiful" (Badami 61) is indicative of the third part of the affectual response to beauty—the experience seizes us and makes us bring copies of our perception of it into existence (Scarry 3). This speaks to the idea of the beautiful and ideal as always felt as something sacred (Scarry 23). Sripathi becomes so closely aligned with his notions of ideality that they effectually impel and characterize his actions and behaviour in the novel. A few examples from the opening chapter, when we are first introduced to Sripathi in his adulthood, begin to illustrate how this process has produced him as a person. The novel begins, for instance, with important observations about Sripathi such as his reluctance to purchase a television and erect a TV antenna over his house—Big House, Sripathi's home, is the only house lacking an antenna (2); his stooping posture

developed from habitual slouching in his childhood, since he hated being taller than his friends in his youth (4); and an account of his marriage to Nirmala, his wife, in which they are described as “a pair of bullock yoked together, endlessly turning the water wheel round and round and round, eyes bent to the earth [with not] even a note of eccentricity to set them apart from other couples” (16). These examples paint Sripathi as living with a decided reticence. He does not want to stand out in any way that might parallel his father’s “fame and stature” (61). And yet in this everydayness, Sripathi derives a certain pleasure. The way the novel describes the finer minutiae of Sripathi’s days is evidence of the extent to which Sripathi has achieved his longed for personal aesthetic. The narrator notes that in his study Sripathi waits as usual for his wife to bring him the “tumbler of coffee [that] would merely complete the sense of harmony in his being. It was the full stop at the end of a perfect sentence” (106). His quotidian life is like a piece of finely written prose. As the Rao’s patriarch householder, Sripathi sits back, enjoying the pleasure of having procured a status-quo ordinariness, as his wife dutifully services him. His characteristics, his personality, his way of living, I suggest, all stem from, or exist in ways that honour his conceptions of beauty and ideality, which he adopted and avowed in his childhood. Such conceptions inform Sripathi’s underlying dedication to a traditional heteronormativity.

Sripathi’s commitment towards his ideals also works to insulate him from other modes of being in the world that deviate from his sense of beauty. We are told that Sripathi “liked to think that he was the only person in his family who had any taste at all, but he was also shy about his opinion and felt a delicate, hidden pleasure in keeping it to

himself" (177). His is a world where he exists as the prime arbiter of value with little regard for the opinion of others. Others' values do not rank highly in his personal aesthetics of value. By keeping his estimations of ideality to himself, he further barricades himself, his ego, from other ways of being in the world; and consequently, his own estimations of beauty become increasingly sturdy. Yet, the editorial letters that Sripathi writes to local newspapers are suggestive of an attempt to transcend his isolated self and productively engage with or connect to his surrounding community. Through the letters, for instance, he sees himself as "one who tried to address the problems of the world with pen and ink" (9); however, as O'Brien astutely notes, "his concern about the issues he writes on is almost incidental to the frisson of pleasure he gets from the writing itself" (O'Brien 150; Badami 248). Sripathi's coming to writing, here, is another encounter or engagement with something he deems beautiful—it is an action through which he consolidates a vision of himself (as a heroic public figure) through the felt pleasure of analyzing and offering critical commentary on his surrounding world. The thrill that Sripathi feels in seeing and signing off his letters with the pseudonym "Pro Bono Publico" (8) again demonstrates the way he sequesters himself. To uphold what he deems is a beautiful public persona—a persona that engages with the world through writing but remains distanced through anonymity—Sripathi does not use his actual name. He remains dedicated to his ideals of maintaining an unassuming public profile.

Therefore, when we meet a Sripathi, whom Härting condemns as a "contemptuous, egocentric, paternalistic character" (59) towards the beginning of the novel, we ought to remember that he is only striving to live up to, to actualize his own

embraced, though socially sanctioned, ideals to be a humble, ordinary, dutiful Toturpuram father. He is living up to, and giving a living expression of, a localized system of values and social practices. He is mystified in a Žižekian ideological sense by what he deems is a beautiful way of living (cf. Chapter 1, 19-21). His conception of a conservative ideality constitutes what he believes it would mean for him and his family to live the good life—a conception that he experiences affectually, that vivifies him, and that he holds in high esteem. Such a reading of his character reaches closest to the heart of the novel's dominant theme of ideals. Sripathi's main struggles, which emerge as the novel's central conflicts—such as his challenging relation to his children, wife, and sister—all stem from his unwillingness to veer from his conservative ideals. In the greater part of the novel we thus read and witness, as I proceed to discuss, Sripathi's efforts to relate to his family while endorsing endogamous social relations, productive economic activity, and a largely patriarchal household structure. These struggles are resolved through the novel's tracing of “the gradual expansion of [Sripathi's] consciousness...and his forced confrontation, in both imaginary and physical ways, with otherness” (O'Brien 146). This expansion of Sripathi's consciousness entails walking upwards on the Platonic staircase towards, what is for Badami, a higher, more genuine, conception of beauty (cf Chapter 1, 18-19).

### *Twilight of Ideals*

Picking up on Härting's idea that the novel's main cast becomes "diasporic" because they stay in their homeland and witness "the ways in which the material effects of global developments transform their quotidian lives" (58), we can observe how the novel illustrates why and when conceptions of ideality need to be questioned or reconsidered. To be clear, Härting terms this type of diasporic identity as "intra-diasporic" to differentiate it from more recognized conceptions of South Asian new and old diasporas (Härting 44; Mishra 422-423). The concept nevertheless remains near the heart of the concerns raised in *The Hero's Walk's* and is also an important conceptual signpost that guides our way to its concluding sentiments on beauty.

Sripathi's standards of ideality, how he believes that his life and his family's life ought to unfold, are problematized precisely because of changes in global and cultural infrastructures that characterize the setting of the novel. His daughter, Maya, with her decision to study abroad, and the emerging socio-infrastructure venues and institutions that allow her to do so, make way for new modes-of-being which challenge an established status quo. Maya's decision to pursue an exogamous-love marriage disrupts Sripathi's conservative notions of how his family's life ought to unfold. The event seems a typical South Asian, familial dramatic trope: a daughter rejects her arranged marriage. Sripathi, in honouring and advocating for his idealized standards, estranges Maya because of her decision to veer away from traditional practice and instead marry Alan Baker, a white, Canadian man whom she met abroad (108-109). Sripathi takes her choice as an assault to

his own normative values as evinced in a caustic line that he considers writing back to Maya: “you are trading in [our] good name and family honour for some foreigner” (109). However, in firm opposition to Sripathi, Maya forwards her own ideality against that of homeland practice as she writes: “I want to cancel my [arranged] engagement... I am in love with Alan... I cannot help the way I feel about Alan” (108-109). Here, the normative ideals that colour Sripathi’s life and character are first challenged and we witness a clash of ideals. In the wake of changing social practice, Sripathi seeks recourse to his traditional-familial values with the idea of retaining a certain cultural purity and integrity. Härting points to this instance to show how “the constitution of diasporic identities [may be] contingent on normative gender identities” (59), which suggests that Sripathi’s own intra-diasporic identity depends on his perception of and attempts to regulate and endorse localized social practices for his female relations in the changing world. When Maya (and her husband) are killed in a car accident, Sripathi loses the potential chance to ever personally reconcile his relationship, or intervene in and exercise influence over Maya’s life. Consequently, Sripathi’s dutiful wife, Nirmala, blames him for pushing Maya away by never seeking to resolve his quarrel with their daughter--resulting in Nirmala’s prolonged silence towards him. Sripathi tellingly wonders, “How is that I don’t see any beauty in Nirmala any more?” (208-209). The beauty and value in his life so begin to vanish before him.

Sripathi’s desire for control is also echoed in his relation to his twenty-eight-year old son, Arun, who vexes Sripathi by rejecting a more traditional occupational route in order to pursue a career in academia and environmental activism (Badami 26; O’Brien



148). Sripathi reproaches Arun, “Here I am, head full of grey hair, going to work everyday like an ox, and my son sits at home dreaming useless dreams...At your age I was earning a living and looking after a family of four” (238-239). Sripathi’s notion of ideal gender norms then is not restricted to his female child; he also wishes for his son to play the role expected of an adult man who has come of age in Toturpuram society. He would prefer that Arun become a productive economic agent to contribute to the Rao household expenditures rather than have Arun cultivating his various activist strategies, which Sripathi deems as impractical reveries. Arun retorts, ““See, you had your independence of India and all to fight for, *real ideals*. For me...the fight is against daily injustice, our own people stealing our rights”” [emphasis added] (239). He later cites the dumping of industrial toxic waste into the sea as one such injustice (246). Again, the quarrel here, as Arun tells us, is over perceived ideals: Sripathi’s pitted against his son’s. What is also important to note, for my purposes, is how changing configurations in the political, economic, and commercial infrastructures, which distinguish a young Sripathi’s India from Arun’s, produce the conditions for the potential conflict of professed ideals. Their ideals, in other words, hinge on their surrounding sociality. The burgeoning yet wasteful capitalist economy of a late twentieth-century India pushes Arun to fight for what he believes are the most pressing concerns of his time.

Sripathi and his ideals are not exempt from South India’s changing social infrastructures either. Such economic shifts, which Sripathi has no real control over, appear to put him at odds with his surrounding world. Trends towards increased urbanization in Tamil Nadu, for example, cause Sripathi’s manager to contemplate

moving his company to Madras for better business opportunities and schools for his children (210). This is a prospect that threatens Sripathi with the loss of a job and would force him to either find some way to pay off his loans—an unlikely option, or sell his ancestral home, Big House (307). In the past, Sripathi had refrained from selling Big House out of duty and dedication to his elderly, ailing mother (68-67). Changing times and economic conditions, however, now pressure Sripathi to break from tradition as well as these past notions of familial duty. What he once deemed a beautiful way of living, what he once saw some value in, no longer seems at all practical nor practicable in this changing world. And Big House itself stands as a metaphoric-architectural representation of Sripathi's quandary. The house, described as once clean, strong and beautiful, is now worn out and decrepit (6). What was once thought to hold value seems to now need to be re-envisioned and perhaps discarded. With Big House's beauty now faded and presently in need of restoration, we can see how the interminable march of a developing futurity, in various ways—whether in the economic development that forces businesses to move to more metropolitan areas or the deterioration of Big House—has outpaced Sripathi's life and his more static valuations.

And so the ideals of our self-centred, aesthete-protagonist are challenged as his relations to his family members are strained and his company's looming move to Madras threatens his job security—all of which results in a most peculiar psychosomatic problem for him. Sripathi's physical body trembles and seems to start disappearing before his eyes at various points throughout the narrative (161-162; 275) pushing him towards a

state of fear, incoherence, and debilitation. Sripathi's vision of ideality, his perception that his life is unfolding along desired, normative (read: "beautiful") standards, worked in such a way that held his sanity, and his vision of himself, together, and grounded his daily activities. And this, of course, harkens directly back to the affectual mechanisms that underlie the felt experience of beauty that I have already charted. Our experience of beauty and ideality, the novel suggests, ideologically structures, without our earnest awareness, the contours of our lives and personhood through functioning as a cohesive affectual energy that holds us together and impels our actions—it gives us our very sense of ourselves in the world and provides coherence and purpose to our actions. As Sripathi's ideality is interrogated and becomes outmoded, this cohesive energy wanes, and he begins to lose his capacity to perceive and recognize his own being. Taken to its ultimate conclusion, this idea suggests that an individual's selfhood and psychological stability are rooted in a personal store of ideological conceptions of ideality, encountered through the experience of beauty, which afford one the base conditions of one's ego and one's visceral sense of self. And this is precisely why a stout ego, with all its subjective valuations in tow, becomes a problem for Sripathi. Scarry tells us that in those moments when we reevaluate our judgments about beauty, the event often "comes as a perceptual slap ... that itself has emphatic sensory properties..." (12-13). We see this demonstrated in the novel when Sripathi's ideals collapse and fail him, and he feels a "dreadful fear" and "terror" as he moans in a frantic attempt to see his disappearing limbs (161). The degree of beauty Sripathi sees in holding on to what his value system entails, that is, to

his duty to keep Big House, to promote endogamous relations, and to structure his children's lives, leads him toward a debilitated and incoherent state.

Sripathi's difficulties can be explained through Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism". We might be tempted to speedily conclude that the problematic object to which Sripathi is attached and that effectively impedes his flourishing is surely his own ego. Härting has already indicted him as "egocentric" (59). However, using my discussion as a lens to more deeply assess Sripathi's depiction, we can observe that his ego is inextricably rooted in his relation to and perception of the collection of contextual ideals that he deems as beautiful and which all go into forming his subjective being. He is attached to his ideals because, for him, they carry with them an implicit cluster of promises to provide him with personal, emotional and social stability. He believes that they may keep his world and social relations in order. Berlant's notion provides an elegant "explanation for [Sripathi's] sense of [his] *endurance in the object*" (Berlant 20) of his beholding, that is, in the ideological conditions and discursive ideals that inform his ways of seeing and being. Cruel optimism is present when the "animating potency of an object ... contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible by the work at attachment in the first place" (21). Sripathi's attrition is made manifest through his "body's shenanigans" (Badami 275) such as his intolerable quivering and the hallucinogenic-erosion of his feet. Sripathi's attachments are indeed cruel in Berlant's precise sense of the term since he does "not well endure the loss of [his] object ... even though its presence threatens [his] well-being" (Berlant 21). For Sripathi to overcome this suffering he must negotiate new conceptions of beauty or somehow

widen his perceptual horizon beyond his present standards, beyond the blend of discursive ideals and ideological conditioning that gives essence to his being.

***“Beauty is Lifesaving” – Scarry***

Before further illuminating the novel’s concluding pronouncement on beautiful ways of being, I want to briefly address its representation of women since this depiction is integral to grasping the novel’s final idea in its totality. Women are ostensibly relegated to supporting roles in *The Hero’s Walk*—the story is largely Sripathi’s. Nirmala even believes this: she teaches Bharat Natyam lessons in Big House to bring in extra funds necessary to support the household; however, she does not inform Sripathi of his inadequate income, reasoning that “[a] good Hindu wife [must] maintain the pretense that her husband was supporting the family” (14). The same ideology prevents Nirmala from establishing closer contact with Maya after she marries Alan in Canada—Nirmala cannot defy Sripathi’s wish to sever ties with their daughter. Nirmala is also incapable of stopping her mother-in-law’s invasive secret exploits around Big House because she cannot rupture her own ideal of unmitigated deference to elders. Nirmala’s model of a willed subservience to her elders embodies an ideal of purportedly “honest devotion” (286) expressed through self-denial and self-negation conducted in alleged deference to or for the support of others. Her own subjective position is consolidated and characterized by a sacrifice of herself, an alleged curbing of her ego, for the sake of others. To an extent, she finds some beauty in living in this traditionally dutiful manner, despite her unhappiness with the family’s debt and Big House’s dilapidated state. With the aim of maintaining a conciliatory peace in Big House, Nirmala suppresses any desire

to confront Sripathi and instead opts to play the role of an archetypal passive and obedient Hindu housewife. If we critique Sripathi as culpable of managing and advocating on behalf of unfair paternalistic ideals towards the start of the novel, he does so with the willing and complicit support of Nirmala who endorses and supports aspects of his conservatism. Nirmala's compliance is an ideological habit that marks her towards the start of the novel and affectually organizes her selfhood in a way that, to an extent, parallels Sripathi's dedication to his own ideals. Nirmala holds a cruel optimistic attachment to ideals that limit her agency and prevent her from acting as a force for reconciling family tensions. Of course, the ideological system represses Nirmala's freedoms far more than it does to Sripathi.

However, perhaps inspired by her own daughter's expression of independence, Nirmala gradually moves away from traditional social models and towards increased expressions of her individuality. She is, by the novel's end, able to break the attachments that affect her. Nirmala, for instance, eventually questions and deviates from the conventional practices that she believes in hindsight to have kept her "like a faithful dog" (287). She breaks traditional taboos and social mores by seeking help from her next door low caste neighbours and encouraging and sanctioning her sister-in-law Putti's marriage with their neighbours' son, Gopala (305; 319-320). Putti's intercaste marriage is itself another way that the traditional "regimes of the normal of everyday life" (Härting 58) are overturned and reformed in the novel. Whereas the traditional is upheld as beautiful by Sripathi, the breaking and adaptation of tradition becomes beautiful for the Rao women. Nirmala's and Putti's movement from self-negation to self-affirmation makes their lives

beautiful. Through their journey the novel avows movement towards self-expression and self-respect in response to ideological attitudes that might repress and limit personal freedoms. Through these women *The Hero's Walk* affirms self-empowerment as a beautiful, new standard of ideality—a standard measured against those practices that may inhibit the flourishing of one's potentiality and life opportunity. These ideas of recognizing self-worth supplement the novel's closing pronouncement on beauty, delivered through Sripathi's own development.

In the face of such changing social discourse and practice, it becomes necessary for Sripathi to also recognize a new standard of beauty because his old ideas of beautiful living lose their life sustaining affectual influence. Sripathi's son, Arun and Sripathi's orphaned granddaughter, Nandana are respectively the literal and symbolic means through which Sripathi comes to appreciate this new standard of ideality. In establishing closer relations to each of his living progeny, Sripathi comes to embrace a more holistic sense of empathic relations to others and to the world, and this is what constitutes the novel's concluding pronouncement on beauty.

As a dedication towards the protection and preservation of life even beyond human concerns, Arun's environmentalism comes to have a deeply reformative influence on Sripathi's ideality of honouring normative custom. Arun's ethic arises in response to specific needs of the times—needs that are effected by changing socio-economic and cultural restructuring of the novel's setting, such as the aforesaid increased industrialization that sees the dumping of chemical waste into the Bay of Bengal as a

byproduct of commercial production. Sripathi and Arun take Ammayya's ashes out to the bay towards the end of the novel allowing them an opportunity to connect with nature and to each other—and allowing Sripathi to arrive at his new ideal standard. The novel describes the sea as “luminous, a body of motion, *living*, mysterious, *beautiful*” (354, emphasis added). Father and son watch as the mother Olive Ridley sea turtles come to lay their eggs in the beach sands (Härting 65). While watching the turtles, Sripathi thinks “about the chanciness of existence, the beauty and hope and the loss that always accompanied life, and [feels] a boulder slowly roll off his heart” (355). The novel continues with an account of his musings: “Perhaps in [the turtle's] long, unknown journey from one sea to another, across oceans and past shifting continents, a turtle might meet one of her offspring and glide by without knowing it” (356). Sripathi, here, first turns his attention to the sea, viewing it as one continually flowing body, which contrasts symbolically with his old notions of a more static normative belonging as beautiful. His empathy for the mother turtles, here, is an empathy that transcends both his gender and species, which is to say that it flows past the normative discourse that he has endorsed and committed himself to for so long. The idea conveys something of an oceanic, inclusive sense of belonging to life, which locates humans, to paraphrase the novel, as merely dots amidst a prolonged spectrum of life (Badami 355). Sripathi sees his own existence as less important when considered as but a small point within a grand continuum—this is the curbing of Sripathi's ego-centred nature. As Härting comments, in coming to terms with his son's environmentalism, Sripathi develops “a consciousness that recognizes the interdependence of local and global developments” in a way that is



contiguous with Arun's environmentalist commitments (65). To wit, Sripathi comes to understand and affirm a conception of beauty that transcends his old affirmation of localized cultural convention and its incumbent implications of imposing normative practice.

This new conception posits an idea of a striving to respect life *in general* as beautiful and valuable in a way that challenges and attempts to bypass the more traditional political and discursive categories of belonging present in Totupuram. This idea is emphasized symbolically when Sripathi, gazing out at the sea, imagines a mother turtle swimming by without recognizing its own offspring out in the ocean, amidst shifting continents. The shifting landmasses could represent the shifting discursive practices of the novel, and the turtle's unawareness of its offspring shows it living without a sense of direct attachment rooted in those set brandings that bind beings into social relations with one another. And interestingly, this moment is what finally allows Sripathi to empathize with Arun on an emotional and intellectual level (356). Sripathi at last connects with his son's ideal convictions that "[w]e are all a part of nature...[and that if] the natural world goes, so do [humans]" (246). Thus, Sripathi gets much closer to comprehending the common predicament of all beings, that is, of each of us existing within a shared global ecology, as a base essentialist category that undergirds and marks all peoples and all life. This idea bequeaths him with a sense of connection to others in spite of the presence of discursive and ideological differences. This new conception of beauty implies a grounding respect for all life as sacred—it undercuts the ego with its subjective valuations as a separate beautiful entity to be exclusively revered. It is a

perception of beauty that comes to Sripathi unasked for, he identifies and aligns himself with it, it motivates him, resolves his emotional struggles, and sparks future creative activity: he returns home, regaining his ability to write, and pens an editorial letter celebrating the turtles' egg laying as "the most amazing sight" (359). He discovers, in short, a new sense of beauty in the affirmation of life and the will for life to continue—and this is far beyond Sripathi's prior brandishing that life ought to unfold in accordance with set conventional standards. This refined beauty has the effect of reenergizing and reconsolidating Sripathi's ego anew—in a way that is particularly less self-centred. That vitality be preserved and that *life should live on* is the zenith of the novel's discourse of values—all other ideologies and discourses are but of ancillary importance when juxtaposed to this crowning beautiful ideal. In this way the novel ultimately sponsors an ideology that promotes a convivial mood of openness to difference with a simultaneously respect for life—akin to what I called the "more beautiful mood" in chapter one (23). And all this seems but a distillation of Scarry: beauty is sacred and lifesaving (28).

I interpret Nandana and her relation to Sripathi and the Rao family, more specifically, as an actual and symbolic expression of this new conception of a norm transcending and lifesaving beauty. Nandana is literally the outcome of Maya's decision to deviate from traditional norms. Being of mixed-race, Nandana lives and embodies a hybridity that itself bypasses more conventional categories of discursive belonging in terms of race and country, of "East" and "West". Nandana also carries into Toturpuram a persisting knowledge of her western cultural heritage—as evinced in her longing for Mars candy bars or traditional Halloween celebrations (214). Nandana becomes a living point

of connection between cultures, countries, and social practices. Relatedly, Härting comments that Nandana also brings the postcolonial moment of Bhabha's famous notion of the "unhomely" into the privacy of the Rao household (Härting 63; Bhabha 9). "Unhomeliness", to remind us of Bhabha's concept, refers to a feeling of estrangement or disorientation that is the "condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural" encounters (Bhabha 9). The orphaned Nandana is "unhomed" as Sripathi takes her into his foster care resulting in her diasporic crossing from Canada to India. In this unhoming, Nandana brings "the global realities of displacement and [the] uncertainties of belonging" (Härting 63) into the Raos' lives in a way that is indeed forcibly disorienting as per Bhabha's notion. Härting points to Nandana's temporary unwillingness to speak and Sripathi's disappearing body parts as examples of this disorientation (63). Moreover, Nandana's appearance also plays a catalytic role in displacing the traditional norms that govern the Rao household since her arrival coincides with Sripathi, Nirmala, and Putti each learning to reconcile and to adapt the norms that govern their lives. And yet, Sripathi and the Rao family's relationship to her remains one of nurturing—such that through Nandana, they are figuratively and effectually called to nurture and raise an unhomely norm-transcending hybridity in support of the continuity of life. In this embrace of Nandana's life, then, rests a promising beauty that allows the Rao family to come together with stronger resolve and purpose to endure despite Maya's deviation from traditional values, and despite her death.

How the novel at last depicts the reconciliation between Sripathi and Nandana also carries significance that is worth reading into. In its closing scene, Nandana walks into a room to find Sripathi crying. They share a brief exchange:

“‘Are you crying because your mother died?’ [Nandana] asked.  
 ‘Yes, partly that,’ [Sripathi] replied. He wiped his face with one of the towels hanging on the railing.  
 ‘My mother also died’”(357).

Here, grandfather and granddaughter bond through a recognition of the common predicament of life, with mortality as the inevitable end that awaits us all. It is one of the first times in the narrative’s plot that we see them able to connect to each other. Both characters come to an implicit empathy by recognizing an inherent commonality in their shared loss. To demonstrate his goodwill to Nandana, Sripathi also subsequently offers her a pen as a gift from his treasured collection, at first recommending that she select his valued silver Japanese Hero fountain pen. Nandana however, opts for the cheapest pen of the collection—and, significantly, Sripathi lets Nandana have her choice (358). This concluding act between Sripathi and his granddaughter is metaphorically indicative of how Sripathi has changed. He does not interfere with Nandana’s expression of her agency in her decision over which writing utensil to keep. The moment symbolically suggests that in posterity Nandana will be able to affirm or “pen” her own relation to discourse without Sripathi attempting to guide and structure her life as he once did Maya’s. Sripathi is able to affirm his newfound conception of right living through the relation he develops with Nandana.

Sripathi’s idea of what constitutes beautiful, right living for himself towards the beginning of the novel changes by the time we reach its resolving coda. *The Hero’s Walk*

paints Sripathi's journey in contrast to the journeys of his wife and sister. Whereas Nirmala and Putti must each learn to find greater value in their own living presence and affirming their own egoistic estimations, Sripathi must conversely refine his ideals *away* from an assertive self-centredness and towards a respect for the equality and value of others regardless of ideological standards. In expressing these dual movements, the novel pushes towards a closing harmonic balance in terms of its overarching conception of beauty. Relatedly, Scarry, in crafting her own argument draws from the twentieth-century philosopher-mythic Simone Weil to support her assertion about beauty's relation to notions of equality and how the experience of beauty affects those who devoutly seek for it. Weil's own thinking motions towards an unequivocal sense of equality and an affirmation of life, love, and beauty:

To empty ourselves of our false divinity...to give up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers ... this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter of free choice at the center of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love...is the love of our neighbour...or love of the beauty of the world... (159-160)

Weil's logic reflects the implied idea that Sripathi learns throughout the course of the narrative and bespeaks something of the idea of the novel's closing sentiment: that in order to live in a right and true way—in order to live beautifully, we, as if by mechanical (or affectual) necessity, are required to cultivate a respectful and considerate affection for all individuals as equally beautiful centres of the world. This allows for a wider, less self-focused, consideration of the world in general—just as Sripathi's subjective vista of the beautiful now swells to include even sea turtles. Through Sripathi we learn that we must find value in the lives of others even when they shift past our socio-discursive

expectations. In disavowing Sripathi's egoism, the novel does not propose a philosophy of self-negation, for as Putti and Nirmala remind us, one's self also deserves to be valued. The novel's pinnacle of ideality, then, calls for a way of living that aims towards an equilibrium between seeing self *and* other as beautiful and valuable.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Cruel Beauty: Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?***

##### **Indirect Attachments**

This chapter develops a reading of *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (hence: *Nightbird*) that underscores how the experience of beauty, an intensely subjective affectual phenomenon, can potentially extend outwards to impinge upon interpersonal relations and other persons. In the preceding chapter I interpreted *The Hero's Walk* as culminating in the eventual avowal of a holistic affirmation of the interdependency of life as a beautiful thing. Through its reading of *Nightbird*, this chapter moves to nuance and complicate those foregoing assertions by showing just how difficult establishing such idealized affirmations of interdependence might actually be. *Nightbird*, through its thematic concern with the diasporic tensions and connections produced both during the 1947 Partition and experienced by Indo-Canadian diasporic subjects in the 1980s, becomes a fertile space to explore how individuals navigate diverse cultural paradigms and the resultant stresses and frictions that can arise under such conditions. This context presents a setting of unsettled cultural systems and situates subjects—i.e. the novel's characters—in places where they must each negotiate (or renegotiate) what it exactly means to live the good, beautiful life. To this extent, *Nightbird* does not fly very far away from the thematic territory that I argued lay at the heart of *The Hero's Walk*. This chapter examines *Nightbird* focusing more pointedly on how affirmations of beauty and ideality influence the *contacts* and *connections* between individuals rather than focusing on the affect behind beauty's relation to individual subjectivities per se.

My concern with the felt experience of beauty and its relation to interpersonal sociality can be read as a variation on Berlant's caveat of cruel optimism. In reading *Nightbird* I intend to think through a mode of cruel optimism in which a subject's cruel attachment, rather than solely inhibiting one's own thriving, instead inhibits the thriving of *others*. Indeed, we might charge that such an attachment holds an even greater degree of cruelty. This is because a subject's probability of both recognizing and severing such a relation is likely to be far slimmer since maintaining this kind of relation poses no threat of compromised conditions for the attached subject—the compromised conditions are instead directed, whether knowingly or unknowingly, towards others. And the attached subject may, regardless, show the same vested interest in maintaining the said attachment all for his/her own exclusive benefit. I call this an inflection of Berlant's notion: *indirect cruel optimism*. This term emphasizes how the life compromising cruelty of a given attachment or affectual attraction can be redirected towards others while still providing the optimistic and promising feeling of attachment for the attached subject. Like Berlant's idea, we might employ indirect cruel optimism as a conceptual device to help us interrogate and critique the values and beliefs that attract and move us, assisting us in our contemplative journey towards achieving a higher, more genuine standard of beauty. Only through a critical meditation on the affect inherent in human attachment and how they generate elusive influence throughout the world does the presence of indirect cruel optimism come to light. *Nightbird's* particular contextual landscape lends itself ideally towards a reading that highlights the workings of indirect cruel optimism. What follows is an effort to lay bare *Nightbird's* portrayal of indirect cruel optimism by showing how this



mode of attachment operates in intimate conjunction with the affectual experience of beauty. I hope to illuminate how and why characters in *Nightbird* develop attachments of indirect cruel optimism while also casting attention on the affectual energies that drive affirmations of ways of being and seeing that individuals find beautiful and worthwhile.

A likely assumption might be that a discussion about beauty and ideals would be focused generally on positive feelings, yet *Nightbird*'s overall vision and concluding tone are rather tragic. The fact that many of the narrative's most heartrending moments are actual historical references—e.g. the Partition of India (1947); the two Indo-Pak wars (1965, 1971); Operation Blue Star (1984); the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1984); the Delhi anti-Sikh riots (1984); the Air India Flight 182 bombing (1985)—only serves to emphasize its tragic sentiment; the novel's tragedies in many respects are also real world tragedies (Bharwani 1-2). However, by deploying my particular tilt of Berlant's idea to approach *Nightbird*, I aspire to transfigure the novel's moments of anguish and despair into what I hope is instead a promising critical admonishment. This chapter therefore emphasizes how certain instances of human suffering must ultimately have affirmations of "beauty" as their source. I particularly discuss and show how *Nightbird*'s recounted tribulations of Bibi-ji, Leela, and Jasbeer, with all their fictional and non-fictional elements, can remind us of how strivings and affirmations of ideality can impinge upon the lives of others.

### *Feeling Connected*

*Nightbird* opens by introducing a young Bibi-ji, one of the novel's major characters, with a focus on establishing a strong sense of her emotional distress of having to live in Panjuar, a largely impoverished village located in West Punjab prior to Partition. We learn that even at age six, Bibi-ji "loathe[s]...the smallness of Panjuar...[and]...her two faded salwar kameez suits"(7). Bibi-ji, almost precociously, derides her home and possessions as measly and inadequate, bespeaking her yearning for something other than the poverty ridden part of the Punjabi world into which she is born. She appears to already possess a keen awareness of her own desires and what she would want out of life. Particularly, in Bibi-ji's greatest envy, in her desire for her best friend Jeeti's Canadian soap, we can detect a twentieth-century western economic presence beginning to structure the ideal aspirations of persons living half a world away. Bibi-ji also envies Jeeti's brick and mortar house, as well as her new bangles—Jeeti receives all of these amenities through her father's endeavours working abroad in Canada (4). Harjot Singh, Bibi-ji's own father, also frequently tells the young Bibi-ji of his unfulfilled dreams to travel to Canada, which ended with his aborted journey in the *Komagata Maru*. Harjot's relation to Bibi-ji speaks to the relevance of intergenerational storytelling in shaping the identity and aspirations of individuals. Bibi-ji remains entranced as she "listen[s] open-mouthed" to her father's stories, which she heard a hundred times before (12). In effect, Bibi-ji appears to inherit her own ardent longing to travel to Canada from

her father and through observing others around her who live with more material comforts made possible through funds acquired through their overseas labour.

An Ahmedian outside-in approach to affect might suggest that Bibi-ji's idea of all that Canada can offer emerges as a "sticky object" since a desire for Canadian life and Canadian commodities seems to stick to Bibi-ji; however, this logic does not fully explain why Bibi-ji's sister, Kanwar, does not, to any degree, develop or aspire to similar ideals. Kanwar is quite content with her present state of an impecunious life in Panjaur. Interestingly, Kanwar believes that she is not as pretty as Bibi-ji (22), whereas, Bibi-ji possesses an overt awareness of her own physical appeal: "[Bibi-ji] was beautiful and she knew it" (19). There is an implied correlation between both Kanwar and Bibi-ji's subjective sense of their own levels of personal, physical attractiveness and what they believe they deserve out of life. Kanwar, with a low estimation of her own physical worth, does not demand much out of life, while Bibi-ji, with firm conviction in her own beauty, believes "[s]he was meant for better things" (21). This instance suggests that one's perception or estimation of one's own physical beauty may have an influence on how one lives and goes about striving to achieve a "better", good life.

Regardless, by the time she reaches her teens, notions of ideal living have effectively stuck to Bibi-ji: she must now somehow live abroad or procure its spoils. We might consider Bibi-ji, as she comes-of-age in Panjaur, as an intra-diasporic subject, according to Härtling's definition (Härtling 44), since changing patterns in global economic infrastructures—i.e. the possibility of life in the "west" with all its promised accouterments—appear to shape her mentality and aspirations so fundamentally. Changes

in both Canadian and Punjabi social infrastructure make way for new economic and commercial possibilities, in turn causing Bibi-ji to feel out-of-place in the land of her birth. Her 'home' in the Punjab is not a place that offers her comfort and community that we might associate with what it means to be home; rather being "home" seems to stifle and limit her. Her desire is largely for the material amenities and comforts that she believes she might attain elsewhere. This desire manifests itself in Bibi-ji's imagined, idealized life in the west. Like her father Harjot before her, what stimulates her longing is for a more beautiful "better life" (Badami 17).

Bibi-ji's relation to her own abstracted image of all the enticements that come with life abroad follows my previous examination of the threefold affectual response to beauty. First, Bibi-ji's dream of life abroad is simultaneously an implicit appraisal of other modes of being: for Bibi-ji, a life with access to western commercial toiletries is objectively *better* than an impoverished life in Panjaur. Second, Bibi-ji's dream of life abroad both provides her with a purposeful goal and works to consolidate her ego (27). Her dreams colour her character in a way that she believes makes her fundamentally different from Kanwar: "[Bibi-ji] dreamed about [living in Canada] ever since she could remember...[it] was *her* fate. *She* was the one who longed for Abroad" (27, italics in the original). The text emphatically links Bibi-ji's association with her longing to live abroad to show how much the desire has become a part of her identity. And third, her experience of this promise for a better life abroad impels her to take further action. Unlike Kanwar, Bibi-ji cannot silently accept life in Panjaur (7). Bibi-ji, rather, is impelled to take action to change her fate. Of course, the ways in which Bibi-ji pursues and realizes these

aspirations for the good life has an enduring impact not only on her own life, but also on the lives of others.

The most prominent example of Bibi-ji acting on her dream to head abroad comes in her decision to disobey her mother's order to hide away when Kanwar's prospective Canadian groom, Khushwant Singh (later called Pa-ji), comes to see Kanwar (28-29). Bibi-ji is asked to hide so as to give her homely sister the spotlight of Pa-ji's full attention, but the felt experience of beauty, which is something that Bibi-ji cannot evade—indeed she derives her very identity and being from her vision of a more ideal life—moves her to show herself to the visiting suitor with the specific intention of marrying him in order to get to Canada herself. Bibi-ji's actions, in effect, show her honouring her aspirations for better living over any notions of parental-familial deference. Bibi-ji follows through with her stratagem, which we might view as an affirmation of her ego-centred values, by showing herself to Pa-ji to entice him, and she later marries him. In doing so, Bibi-ji takes action to honour and actualize her aspirations to live a more beautiful life. This decisive avowal of beauty, however, necessarily requires her to shatter the possibility of a successful match between Kanwar and Pa-ji.

Bibi-ji's decision to interfere and claim Kanwar's suitor for herself is an example of indirect cruel optimism. Bibi-ji's striving for a better, more beautiful life comes as a disadvantage for Kanwar. Kanwar's list of failed suitors grows longer while Bibi-ji is whisked away to live a long life of relative economic abundance in Canada. Kanwar stays behind in West Punjab and forever vanishes (she is presumably killed) in the intense violence during the years following Partition. Bibi-ji effectively curtails Kanwar's future

in order to pursue her own image of ideality. Yet the novel tells us that Bibi-ji “loved her sister deeply... [and] knew [that stealing Kanwar’s suitor] was wrong” (Badami 29) suggesting that Bibi-ji nevertheless feels a sense of moral compunction for her actions. Her dilemma is between showing selfless empathy for her sister and taking assertive action to affirm and cultivate her own dreams and desires. The promise of Bibi-ji’s abstracted image of the beauty that exists abroad wins her favour. Indeed, her readiness to discount her sister’s wellbeing in order to secure her own state of ideality says something significant about the conditions of women in mid-twentieth-century West Punjab. These compromised conditions of women’s possibility also play a role in Bibi-ji’s decision. Bibi-ji must resort to subterfuge and duplicity, even if it puts her in potentially unfavorable relations with those close to her, in order to find avenues for greater agency and expression. Notwithstanding, at a more fundamental level, this instance of indirect cruel optimism also calls attention to the idea that affirmations of beauty, while both subjectively vivifying and ego-consolidating, also extends away from the self to affect interpersonal relations.

Bibi-ji’s propensity to develop this type of indirect cruel attachment manifests itself again years later when she resides with her husband Pa-ji in Canada and establishes contact with her estranged niece, Nirmaljeet Kaur (usually called Nimmo), who lives in Delhi. In exchange for Bibi-ji’s financial assistance, Nimmo agrees to send her oldest son, Jasbeer, to live under Bibi-ji’s fostered support in Canada (184). Bibi-ji proposes this exchange primarily as a way to compensate for her inability to have children (181-182). She tells Nimmo that raising one of her sons would fill the “vast emptiness [she

feels] inside” and explains that her son will have opportunities in Vancouver that he cannot have in Delhi, as well as “all [her] love and care” (182). Bibi-ji even feels “a fever of joyous excitement” in completing the legal sponsorship forms to adopt Jasbeer, which again speaks to the enlivening nature of the experience of beauty. We might argue that Bibi-ji’s fervor stems merely from her greedy zeal, but as Weil reminds us, there could be no desire nor energy in Bibi-ji’s actions if it were not for some degree of impelling beauty she feels in pursuing her motives (cf. Chapter 1, 6-7). Again, Bibi-ji’s vision of ideality—this time, her desire to lovingly rear a child—impinges upon the lives of others. Relations between Bibi-ji and Nimmo’s family become strained when an increasingly intractable Jasbeer begins to distance himself from his birth mother, Nimmo, back in Delhi (215). Bibi-ji’s choice to act on her yearning to play a maternal role, which is another way she honours her personal vision of ideality, comes as a wedge that disrupts relations with Nimmo’s family. Bibi-ji uproots and dislocates Jasbeer, and in effect, forcibly casts him as a diasporic subject. To cope with the cultural dislocation and racial discrimination that he experiences in Canada, Jasbeer drifts ever closer to a dangerous radicalized interpretation of Sikhism and farther away from his family. Only in hindsight, does Bibi-ji, as a taciturn recluse, at the end of the novel fully acknowledge the indirect cruelty of how she lived and all the ideals she once affirmed (395).

*Nightbird* thematically references such instances of indirect cruel optimism throughout its narrative. Relating how such moments simultaneously shape Bibi-ji’s life *and* the lives of her kin demonstrates how the ways in which persons actualize their desires and abstracted visions of beauty can have unintended and unforeseen

consequences—such as Bibi-ji leaving Kanwar to a tragic fate and Jasbeer’s estrangement from his family. The affectual experience of beauty, as I have previously argued, gives rise to and necessarily impels worldly affirmations of ideality. Keeping in mind Seigworth and Greg’s prompting that affect refers to those “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing vital forces” (1), Badami’s novel, then, works to concretize and help us acknowledge how these veiled phantasmal experiences operate and impinge significantly upon human life—from one body to another. The narrative shows how happenings rooted in affectual processes persistently tie together the lives of individuals across the globe.

### **Caught in Transcendence**

Indirect cruel optimism stresses the interconnected linkages of presumably disparate human actions and experiences. What I perceive and affirm as beautifully vivifying and how I make this affirmation may cause great distress to another person who resides in a different space or time since that person and myself, in various ways, inherently exist within an interrelated network of connections, whether ecologically, economically, or socially. Through the character of Leela Shastri, *Nightbird* emphasizes this theme of interconnections. One recent critic, Alia Somani, points out that Badami metaphorically captures “the idea of interconnectedness between home and diaspora, past and present” through a significant passage from fairly early in the novel (Somani 132).



The passage portrays an exchange between Leela and her daughter, Preethi, while Preethi reads sitting next to an airplane window:

‘Amma,’ she said, ... ‘what does node mean?’  
 ‘It means where two or three things cross,’ said Leela. She examined the book curiously. ‘What are you reading?’  
 ‘About Indra’s Net,’ Preethi said. ‘Do you know the story, Amma?’  
 ‘No, I don’t.’ Leela stroked the child’s soft hair. ‘Why don’t you read it to me?’  
 ‘Indra, the god of heaven flung a net over the world,’ read Preethi. ‘Its shining strands criss-crossed the world from end to end. At each node of this net there hung a gem, so arranged that if you looked at one you saw all the others reflected in it. As each gem reflected the other one, so was every human being affected by the miseries and joys of every other human, every other living thing on the planet...’  
 Preethi stopped reading and looked out of the window. Far below, from the pitch darkness, a long string of brilliant lights stretched like gems into infinity. The plane was crossing the India-Pakistan border....  
 ‘Amma, look, look!’ She whispered excitedly. ‘It’s Indra’s Net!’ (105-06)

A close reading of this passage reveals a number of connective crossings relevant to my discussion. The passage catches a moment when mother and daughter cross the recently drawn borders of the subcontinent, as they move towards Canada, the main diasporic space of the novel. Also, there is a moment of personal connection between daughter and mother as Leela explains to her daughter the definition of node, and Preethi, in return, relates the story of Indra’s net to her mother (Somani 133). This relation between the two individuals casts edifying influence bilaterally as Preethi learns the definition of node while Leela learns about the story of Indra’s net. Moreover, the descriptive function of the gems and nodes, which are strewn across and connect the world, show that worldly happenings are never isolated or located in only one particular area.

From a related angle, the image of Indra’s all-pervading net can also be evocative of a Foucauldian discursive “network of power relations” (Foucault 96). Such a network

varyingly stations, galvanizes, and encumbers subjects (i.e. the novels' characters) who are each inescapably enmeshed within its widespread grasp. Foucault specifically theorizes this network as a web of "discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions" (28), which captures and exercises a certain power over subjects, bequeathing them with their various ideologies, rules of living, and social parameters. Foucault's web is, in essence, the ideological and discursive cultural system in which subjects must necessarily be situated. I would argue that, in part, what finally consolidates this discursive web's power to ensnare and "enclose" its subjects is *in actuality* that subjects themselves develop affectual ties to the various discourses and ideological apparatuses that constitute the web in itself. In addition, since by definition affect implies that subjects' affective ties occur at unconscious-corporeal levels, then the closest we might ever get to knowing precisely how we are situated within this network is through a persistent striving for an awareness of our attachments—an awareness of what we find most moving and beautiful. Thinking about affective ties, what attracts us, and the effects of these attachments, then, might provide us with invaluable insight into the strands of this web. To this extent, Indra's transcendental net is much like a sublime ideological web of power. Similarly, in Foucault's web, power and influence are never localized in one area or apparatus, in one social institution or set of laws for instance, but rather power is dispersed and "traverses social stratifications and individual unities" (96) such that various forms of social power establish, beyond overt empirical awareness, a network of interconnectivity which ineluctably structures and influences human life. The metaphor of Indra's net implies that no action is completely free from outside influence or

conditions similar to Foucault's suggestion that attempts to rebel against discourses of power are themselves contained "in the strategic field of power relations" (96). Individuals, as Foucault and the story of Indra's net both suggest, are not isolated but exist within a predetermined relation of connections that effectively limits the possibility of complete agency and autonomous choice. We see this demonstrated as *Nightbird* shows how the happenings of the 1965 Indo-Pak war, likewise, are not isolated. As war breaks out on the subcontinent, the influence of the conflict travels along discursive and affectual strands, across the globe and into the diasporic space of Canada. For instance, the patrons of Bibi-ji's restaurant—meaningfully named The Delhi Junction Café, again conveying the theme of connectivity—break their usual inclusive communal behaviour to replicate the contested Indo-Pak divisions by gathering and sitting in separate groups that mirror their places of origin on the subcontinent (67). The patrons sit with the "linoleum floor between them... [acting as a]...Line of Control—an unseen barrier of barbed wire stretching across it" in a way that also parodies Preethi's imagined observation of Indra's "net" as she looks out of the plane window (Badami 67; Somani 136).

Moreover, as mother and daughter travel, they give overt voice to traditional "eastern" discourse with its reference to the Vedic-Hindu deity, Indra. The moment emphatically speaks of the very idea of fluid or *moving* social discourses. The actual story of Indra's net is derived from an East Asian Buddhist scriptural work, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which itself draws from the antecedent Hindu-Vedic cultural system to communicate its teachings, therein representing yet another crossing of cultural discourses—"Hinduism" and "Buddhism" (Jones 16; Mitchell 194). With its hybrid-

discursive lineage, then, the intertext of Indra's gem-studded net teaches the Buddhist moral-cosmological idea of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which translates as dependent arising or interdependence (Mitchell 356). The concept implies that all components of phenomenal existence arise together and are interconnected with the implication that whatever I do for myself must, in turn, eventually affect others in some manner, and what others do must eventually affect me (Mitchell 199). The moment further suggests that no discursive text exists in complete or indefinite socio-spatial or temporal isolation—even the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which was composed around the seventh-century C.E. still manages to have a contemporary presence and effect through *Nightbird's* allusion to the *Sutra* today. The novel alludes to the *Sutra* once more to further push these ideas about interdependent connectedness: “When one gem was touched, hundreds of others shimmered or danced in response, and a tear in the net made the whole world tremble” (Badami 106). The implication is that one's intentional contact with a gem, an action that is itself an assenting gesture towards a beautiful object, may give rise to a rippling host of related-resultant vibrations, potentially also causing destructive effects for others. Or, as Badami states in an interview, the myth is about “[s]omeone wanting to tear something so beautiful, such a beauty connects us all. If someone rips it apart, it's going to break so many connections. It's going to create ugliness” (Badami, “An Interview” 270). *Nightbird*, like the *Sutra's* myth, prods us to take note of those moments when we might reach out to grasp what we deem to be a beautiful gem—that is, when we affirm our ideals—for the effects may be tear inducing.

The allusion to the *Sutra* can help us contemplate how such “attractive” gems, how those beautiful paradigmatic visions (read: sublime ideological conditions), which persons cling to and affirm, influence other characters’ social relations. Leela, herself, for instance, is caught in one such web. After hearing the story of King Trishanku from Akka, the elder matriarch of her family, a young Leela learns that she herself is much like Trishanku who is suspended between two spheres. Neither completely in the heavenly realm nor the mortal, Trishanku is “condemned to hang upside down between worlds” (77). So too is Leela, with her mixed-ethnic background, suspended between her Indian and German heritages, between different spheres of influence. The novel portrays the two spheres in between which Leela is caught as conflicting systems of value. We might think of these value systems as two gems fastened on Indra’s net, one a “western” gem/system, which we have seen Bibi-ji grow so fond of, and the other, an “eastern” gem/system, as represented and espoused through the discourse of Indian ethnic purity that Leela’s Akka endorses. Her Akka touches this eastern gem, with all its specific socio-cultural perspectives and ways of being, whenever she openly mutters, “Half-breed... Worse than an untouchable. At least a toilet cleaner has caste. But [Leela], where does she belong? Tell me, somebody, *where?*” (82). With Partition occurring only a year following this episode, we might read Akka’s avowal of ethnic purity as an attempt to further contest the waning British colonial presence in India by affirming an unsullied Indian-ness. Akka sees beauty in celebrating a “pure” India that is without foreign social or cultural influence. In contrast, Leela’s German mother touches the western gem when she reminds Leela of her own western heritage, warning, “Even though you have their brown

skin, you see the world with my grey eyes. [Your Indian relatives] are wicked, filthy creatures, pigs, dirtyevilpigs” (82). Her mother, in her racist views, attempts to encourage Leela to take pride in and value her German heritage. As such the emotional-affectual ties that suspend Leela between worlds can only vibrate with dissonance. To cope, Leela soon identifies with the dominant discourse of the homeland in which she was raised. Leela’s longing to be purely Indian strains her relations with her mother, whose presence begins to fill Leela with “pity, fear and revulsion” (82).

Leela’s emotional turmoil is produced by her relatives’ appeals for ethnic purity and their avowals of racist discourses. In Leela’s anguish we can read the presence of indirect cruel optimism. Her relatives’ ideals leave no place for individuals who, like Leela, do not fit in to traditional socio-cultural frameworks. Leela’s family’s disavowal of her mixed heritage causes her psychological pain and strains her familial relations. The novel tells us that Leela’s heart “burst[s] with shame and hurt” (78) as she acknowledges her own hybrid ethnic lineage, positioning her at the receiving end of her relatives’ indirect cruel avowal. Leela, wishing for a “beautiful” Indian purity and yearning to erase her German ancestry, practices black magic in the hope of making her mother disappear. The subsequent discordant vibration now moves to affect Leela’s mother who, in becoming a crestfallen portly recluse, appears to suffer great turmoil herself from having to live with her scorning Indian relatives and by being spurned by her self-professed “purely” Indian daughter. She ultimately yields to her dejection when she trips in a shallow marsh and drowns outside their home with Leela watching aghast (86-87). Leela herself remains fated to be swayed by the pulling of conflicting discourses.

Leela's maiden name, "Leela Shastri" might be translated loosely from its Sanskrit etymological roots (from *līla* meaning "play" and *śāstram* meaning "text") to *play of texts*, which gestures to her apparently hapless state of suspension between discourses (Goldman 480; 487). Badami comments that true belonging is impossible for Leela since Leela neither belongs entirely to an "eastern" heritage, nor to a "western" heritage (Badami, "An Interview" 268). Yet towards the end of the novel, as she reclines aboard Air India Flight 182, Leela mulls over a few spirited verses that she learned as child back in South India, musing, "*This is the house that Rama Shastri built...This is the well in the house*" (75 italics in the original). She then plays with these verses, altering them ever so slightly to reflect her experiences after having lived in Canada for a number of years: "*This is the house that we bought. This is the house with pine trees and hydrangeas, roses, and clematis*" (392 italics in the original). Leela's inventive play with the ditty from her childhood indicates some of the success she has made in overcoming the challenges she faced as a child. Living in the inherited Shastri family home in India, Leela seems to have had less agency in determining the outcome of her life. The verse from her childhood attributes the building of home to Rama Shastri, a male progenitor, which suggests that in India, Leela had to live more at the mercy of predetermined patriarchal discourses. However, the revised verses show the adult, diasporic Leela rewriting the narratives of her past to give herself a more significant role in them and recognizing the place she has made for herself in the present. As Badami comments, "in Canada, [Leela] has managed to find a place for herself; [even though] she feels that she will always be excluded somewhere. She had internalized that feeling of non-belonging

until she realizes that it is she who needs to make a space for herself” (Badami, “An Interview” 269). By the novel’s end, Leela is at last able to bend the discursive regimes from her childhood and affirm a hybrid identity as a diasporic subject. This is the closest Leela comes to creating a beautiful, good life for herself. Interestingly, the novel signals to this playing with disparate discourses one last time as a prelude to the Air India tragedy. The bombing suspends the lives of all 329 passengers, who, unbeknownst to them, live and die almost entirely at the mercy of the ways in which others (i.e the bombers) play-out and enact their own ideals (Badami 403). Despite her success in integrating into the diasporic space, Leela’s life is suspended permanently as she too finally perishes at the receiving end of indirect cruel optimism. In this instance, then, I read an implicit narrative linking between how individuals play with discourses to create “beautiful” acts and how these acts may (or may not) ultimately affect the fates of others.

### ***Cruel Creations***

I have argued, throughout this study, and particularly in the preceding chapter, that one’s relation to ways of seeing and being that one considers ideal and beautiful play an integral role in contributing to the ongoing consolidation and subsistence of one’s egoistic self and identity. What I find beautiful and moving affects (and effects) me and contributes to the development of my own individual specificity. The ways in which a person consciously acts and moves about the world bespeaks something of her own particular ideals. The worldly creation or performance of one’s subjectivity, rooted in affectual attraction and attachment, always seems to stand the chance of manifesting and casting an indirectly cruel effect. *Nightbird*, I argue, despite the implications of Indra’s—



Foucauldian net, affirms that individuals do indeed retain at least some degree of power to decide how they wish to organize and perform their own identities. The novel suggests there are always potential dangers present in the ways in which individuals choose to creatively define themselves, in what they remember and in the various projects or modes of living that they subscribe to.

In line with these ideas of constructing identity, Somani reasons that *Nightbird* endorses a practice of strategic remembering of in order to best negotiate a constructive relationship to the past; that is, a relationship conducive to a peaceful, productive future (137). Somani argues that *Nightbird's* central message is that racialized minorities must strive to work through past desires for vengeance that are informed by cultural-homeland narratives or imagined pasts (140; 146). She points to Dr. Raghubir Randhawa's militant Sikhism—which I proceed to discuss shortly—as an example of negative, unhealthy remembering. Somani further claims “that certain forms of memory are useful for the production of a new nation based on remembering, while other forms [such as Randhawa's Sikhism] have the potential to generate further ruptures and ongoing violence” (146). She reads Bibi-ji's husband, Pa-ji, in contrast, as a sympathetic character whose actions stand out as an ideal example of a particularly constructive and harmless “remembering” of past and tradition (Somani 139). Pa-ji's creative remembering, the novel tells us, finds him lining the wall of his study with a dozen framed photographs of people whom he claims are his ancestors, including a picture of his alleged war-hero father, Theka Singh. However, we subsequently learn that all of these “people [in the photographs] are strangers [to Pa-ji]. [He does not] know even one of them” (Badami

201). Pa-ji utilizes the photos to construct an extended, imagined familial history for himself, assembled to help protect him from the “loneliness in a strange land” (203) of his diasporic experience. In this way, Pa-ji is no longer isolated but becomes connected to a sociality that he can take pride in. Bibi-ji reflects on Pa-ji’s strategy through a simultaneous interjection of Badami’s authorial voice, and asks rhetorically, “What harm...could [Pa-ji’s] small private fictions do in a world where larger truths were reshaped to suit those in power?” (204). Somani agrees that Pa-ji’s tactic of inventing his own familial history is a benign, if not, emotionally useful manner of engaging with the past (138). I would point out, however, that *Nightbird*, through Bibi-ji’s inquiry, gestures again towards an example of indirect cruel optimism. Pa-ji’s creative affirmation of an invented, ideal personal history seems ostensibly, as Somani suggests, a particularly innocuous and inspired personal act since no one is immediately hurt in the process. Yet the underlying and unintended cruel effect of Pa-ji’s affirmation is cast towards a young Jasbeer who identifies with a picture of Pa-ji’s alleged-father who carries a kirpan. In response to the prejudice and racialization he encounters in his elementary school because of his Sikh heritage and turban, Jasbeer seeks recourse to his knowledge of his honoured Sikh forbearers and carries a kitchen knife to school in imitation of the photograph—for which he is later reprimanded (209-211). Pa-ji sequentially has an “inkling of the trouble that he had perhaps started with his...fictions” (206). The inference is that Pa-ji’s fictions are at least partly implicated in a process of social conditioning that assists in radicalizing Jasbeer to align and associate himself with militant Sikhism and the Air India bombing (Somani 130). My point is that even the most seemingly harmless creative acts, like Pa-

ji's affirmations of idealized untruths, which Somani honours as "productive remembering" (140), can have potentially unforeseen and far-reaching cruel consequences. The ways in which individuals hold influence on each other through what they affirm, and because of the ways in which we are connected, are not easily discernable, as Pa-ji's influence on Jasbeer demonstrates. The novel again echoes my central theoretical premise of indirect cruel optimism by showing how Pa-ji's affirmations of an ideal history may have had some negative influence on Jasbeer. It is important to note that the consequential cruel effects of Pa-ji's affirmations are unintentional. There are, however, more pernicious modes of indirect cruel optimism in which affirmations of ideality are specifically *intended* to snuff out human life.

In returning once more to *Nightbird's* engagement with purist discourses, as well as Jasbeer's movement towards a militant Sikhism, we can read more overt examples of indirect cruel optimism. As such, Dr. Randhawa's advocating for an independent Sikh nation as reparation for past British and Hindu actions again follows the affectual response to beauty that I have laid out. Randhawa particularly connects ideas of ethnic purity to his argument for the establishment of a just, Sikh nation. For example, he explains to an eager crowd of supporters, "[W]e need our own country where every [Sikh] is treated with respect, where we can practice our religion in peace, where we will not be penalized for it" (290). This notion of establishing an independent Sikh nation is an ideal vision or project that is also an appraisal of the Sikh condition on the subcontinent. The vision enlivens Randhawa, and inspires him to future action. Randhawa's effort to establish a separate Sikh nation (Khalistan) comes as a retributive

response to perceived past injustices against the Sikh peoples (cf. 252).

More to my point, the project to establish Khalistan as a recognized nation-state is a performative honouring of an ideal that manifests an indirect cruel effect. Randhawa's specific vision for this nation—"Khalistan, a land for the Sikhs, the pure and brave"—is an ideal that sustains him via an indirect cruel optimism. Randhawa's method of honouring this "optimistic" vision, expressed through his rallying cry, "*Our Country or Death!*", speaks openly of the deliberate cruelty present in his stratagem to establish Khalistan (253-254 italics in the original). Randhawa's mode of indirect cruel optimism, most importantly, is conscious and intended, which makes it perhaps the most stubborn and malignant example thus far discussed. Randhawa assures his listeners that the endeavour to establish Khalistan calls for necessary fighting and violence. The receivers of this cruelty could very well be anyone who does not presently acknowledge Khalistan as a prospective nation state. The odds of such an individual recognizing and annulling the cruelty of this type of optimistic, ideal vision seem doubtlessly low. Randhawa's hope is particularly engendered by the beauty he feels in defending Sikh rights and interests, all the while calling his supporters to kill others if need be. This mode of indirect cruel optimism would appear to fundamentally occlude the possibility of the optimist, in the present case, Randhawa, from ever developing any level of empathy for those on the receiving end of the cruel effect. The chances for this type of optimist to recognize his actions' cruelty are obstructed by an ideological blindside. My own ideal aspiration, to be candid, is that this chapter's endeavour to bring conscious attention to indirect cruel optimism might prompt all idealists, even those intentionally cruel, to strive

towards greater empathic awareness of the end effects of whatever their employed methods and visions.

The optimistic promise of a Sikh nation sticks to Jasbeer and further impels him towards Randhawa's peculiar orthodoxy (253). Jasbeer, for example, reflects on his life previous to his exposure to Randhawa's envisioning, and remarks, "I wish to live like a true Sikh...I have been living a meaningless life, and now [through Randhawa] I have found a purpose" (289). Jasbeer affirms a personally meaningful nationalist identity for himself through the call to fight and become an active advocate for Sikhism through the Khalistani project. Jasbeer's commitment to this conception of ideality and truth brings anguish to his immediate family when he forsakes them to immerse himself in religious scriptures in the *Damdami Taskal* school in Bhinder in an effort to support Randhawa's fundamentalist project (289). He further admits to engaging in coercive practices (through instilling fear, terror in the civilians he approaches) to procure funds for the Khalistani project (397-98). The exact manner in which Jasbeer affirms his Sikhism is thus also indicative of an intentional indirect cruel optimism. However, by the novel's end, we learn that Jasbeer, in an unexpected empathic turn, comes to realize the cruelty of his ways in a letter he pens, which reflects back on his time fighting for Khalistan. He confesses, "*I had become a monster...I felt more wretched and unsure...I was sick of the violence and the killing*" (397-98 italics in the original). Jasbeer, in hindsight, feels remorse for all his apparent violent anti-Hindu/pro-Sikh actions. This brief letter is the farthest the novel goes into detailing Jasbeer's exact involvement in backing the Khalistani project. Badami perhaps wants us to reserve our judgment of him. Crucially,

however, what finally grants Jasbeer the capacity to critique the indirect cruelty of how he had affirmed his Sikh identity—his ideal way of being—comes through his realization that his good friend’s mother, Leela, was one of the victims of the Air India Flight 182 bombing. In this way, Jasbeer’s discovery harkens back to the novel’s themes of interdependence. That is to say, in such a connected world, an attack that happens far above the Atlantic, neither in India, nor in Canada, which were both at times “homes” to Jasbeer, still manages to shake the heavens (i.e. Indra’s ‘net’-work of interconnectivity) and cause influence throughout the globe. The harsh vibrations of the ostensibly pro-Sikh aggressions in effect ripple home, through specific social and emotional ties, and return to Jasbeer (397). In the end, Jasbeer can no longer affirm his Sikhism through militant fundamentalism precisely because he realizes that he himself is inextricably a part of the connected world—his idealized violent or aggressive acts will eventually come back to affect him.

Although Badami’s authorial voice criticizes Randhawa’s professed knowledge of these injustices as mere half-truths that seem “reconfigured to fit the theories he conjure[s] up” (254), the novel’s depiction of the Khalistani project, nevertheless, is portrayed as a struggle to create and uphold an ideal vision of justice. Establishing Khalistan is an attempt to address the numerous betrayals that Randhawa argues have befallen Sikh peoples for centuries: “‘The Sikhs have been betrayed! ... We have been betrayed! for two hundred years....*betrayed*’” (252-253 italics in the original). The project to attend to these betrayals, whatever the degree of fabrication may be, is largely what motivates Randhawa, Jasbeer, and other supporters of Khalistan. Under these

circumstances, Operation Blue Star seems a catalytic event that furthers a chain of successive revenge attacks from various “sides”—the “Hindu Raj”/Indian state versus Sikhs (Badami, “Historical Note” 409). In response, Indira Gandhi’s Sikh bodyguards assassinate her for commissioning the attack (Badami 346; 409). In response, Hindus vent their anger in the Delhi Sikh riots. In response, there are the terrorist bombings of Air India Flight 182 and Air India Flight 301. It is as if the perpetrators of violence on both sides continually take it upon themselves to bring balance to the scales and restore a state of harmonic equality through each successive “vengeful” act (Badami, “Historical Note” 409). The idea is arguably in line with John Rawls’ commonly acknowledged definition of justice as “a symmetry of everyone’s relation to each other” (Rawls 87). Scarry links Rawl’s terse definition of justice to an enduring attribute of “the beautiful” that she points out as commonly referenced throughout the western academic tradition, from the classical and Christian periods to contemporary thinkers (97-98). She concludes that, over the centuries, the “attribute most steadily singled out [and associated with beauty] ... has been ‘symmetry’” (96). Scarry argues that human perception seems to innately acknowledge symmetry as beautiful. This affective hardwiring, she suggests, moves and beseeches us to create or advocate for a world, for social relations, that we would each deem subjectively fair. My contention, then, is that all of the provoked anguish and all of the blood spilled cruelly in the aforesaid, so-called “retaliatory” attacks, which *Nightbird* subsumes as integral elements of its narrative, arrive as an after effect of individuals and groups endeavouring to give birth to and actualize an ideal of justice in the world. The violence is knotted into their strivings to make the world a more balanced and “beautiful”

place, such that every implicated violent actor is culpable of an intentional indirect cruel optimism. And so when Randhawa calls upon Sikhs to sacrifice lives in pursuit of the Khalistani ideal, he, in effect, touches a beautiful gem. When Jasbeer fights and instills terror into innocent hearts, he also touches a beautiful gem. When Air India Flight 182 *Kanishka* explodes off the coast of Ireland, the terrorist bombers and those implicated in the attack too, all touch a beautiful gem. Contact with all these particular gems, of course, causes a tremendous rupturing in the fabric of Indra's net, spatially and temporally. The precipitant retaliatory attacks in Punjab would not subside until nearly a decade later—and what to speak of the more enduring scarred memories of all those who lost loved ones in the violence (Badami, "Historical Note" 410).

In an afterword Badami notes that the image of a nightbird recurs as a common portent of doom in traditional folklore found throughout India (Badami, "Author Q&A" 4). When one hears the nightbird's call, one is sure that disaster is imminent. Scarry, in a way that almost parallels this notion, tells us that when we recognize something as beautiful, that perceived idea, object, or setting beckons out to us as well. But the recognition of beauty, she suggests, instead stirs and prepares us for thinking about what constitutes ideality, and excellence, and what constitutes the good life. She asserts that recognizing "beauty is [also] a call" (Scarry 109). When tied with my notion of indirect cruel optimism, the call of beauty casts interrogative attention upon all those good or moving feelings that we might derive from all our various experiences and actions—and even those good feelings derived from our own subjective being. This call asks us to



think about the ways that we are connected to one another and how the world is in turn connected to us. Beauty's call then might also be a precursory forewarning to potential disaster or, at the very least, a warning about the ways that we may negate others' being. The empathic sorrows we might feel as readers in the tragic events that inspired *Nightbird* and which we confront vicariously through its narrative, shows how we *also* exist within the interlacing of Indra's net—with the novel itself as yet another holographic gem that encapsulates the world and reflects it back to us.

Like Badami's text, Renée Sarojini Saklikar's recent poetry collection, *Children of Air India: Un/Authorized Exhibits and Interjections*, also demonstrates the echoing significance of all that transpired on June 23, 1985—as well as the enduring insistence of all the potentialities that led up to and were quelled on that date. Saklikar's collection, also a “weaving [of] fact in with the fiction” (Saklikar “Introduction”), arrives partly as an elegiac effort to give voice to those muted potentialities—the 82 children who died on aboard Air India Flight 182. In a recent public lecture on the collection, Saklikar comments on how the Air India bombing remains an integral part of contemporary history. As the niece of a couple who were killed in the attack, she remarks, from a creative personal context, that all those who live post the 1985 Air India bombing might conceive of themselves as the progeny of that event. In a way that relates to *Nightbird's* themes of interconnectivity and creative worldly performance and remembering of subjective ideals, Saklikar implores us to recognize that “we are all children of Air India” (Saklikar, “Lecture”). Her view is that “we are all implicated” (Saklikar, “Lecture”) in the ideological and discursive patterns and the ongoing litany of violence that gives rise to

and allows for such tragedies to occur (Switzer). We might be implicated and connected to events like the Air India bombing in so many ways—the sublimity of Indra’s net transcends limited mortal vision as it fastens and joins the world together. Spatial and temporal proximity to an event, such as the Air India bombing, however, must indeed play a role in the extent to which individuals actually feel implicated or connected to any given tragedy. Saklikar’s assertion therefore entreats all those who are at risk of forgetting, or feeling distant from, the events of 1985 to instead claim a closer relationship to the tragedy in a way that emulates Pa-ji’s strategic creative remembering of his “forbearers”. Saklikar’s specific claim would further seem to unite us through a common identification with a lineage that we may collectively trace back towards the tragedy of Air India. Her aim is to invoke a creative re-contextualization of individuals’ relation to the Air India tragedy, to make people empathize with the sense of loss involved so that such an event might never happen again. Her collection then is yet another gem and also a call—an “interjection”, as per its subtitle—of creative remembering that we would do well to heed. But not everyone might experience Saklikar’s poems and *Nightbird*’s narrative as an admonishment in this way. Not everyone might hear this precise sounding. Indirect cruel optimism, to be sure, is difficult for optimists, and seekers of beauty, to detect as it happens in an almost unbeknownst manner. And so all we can do is strive for empathic awareness—which is why I contend that Badami’s title for her novel comes in an interrogative mode. Above all, *Nightbird* asks us to listen persistently and attentively for beauty’s call—and all that it entails.

**Conclusion: Holistic Humility**

Through a discussion of Badami's *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* this thesis has suggested that the encounter with beauty, in the Weilian sense, is integral to human experience. Scarry's effort in *On Beauty and Being Just* is in part an attempt to resuscitate a critical discussion of beauty (57). My efforts here may be of some small aid to her project. I have argued that the affectual, subjective experience of beauty and value are fundamental themes in Badami's novels. An examination of two of Badami's novels shows how the experience of the beautiful, to a degree, *always* comes in-between and structures a subject's encounter with the world. We have only to attune ourselves to the presence of this "beauty." Reading Badami's novels by attempting to understand her characters' perception of beauty and their motivating values requires that we read with at least a degree of willed-empathy. It requires that we try to see, or rather, to *feel* what her characters feel and to understand *why* they act in all the various ways that they do. This is a method of reading that is not limited to Badami's novels but can potentially be applied to other fiction in general. Such a reading process, I think, can also help us build on our own capacities for empathy since the process asks us to thoroughly contemplate the fundamental motivating values of fictional others—even when we, as readers bringing our own subjective values, might not at first discern any value or "beauty" in characters' actions. This method of reading requires us to recognize, as Weil tells us, that one's values, reasons for living, and the ways in which one lives, are to some extent always contingent on the beauty that one experiences in the world and the discourses and ideologies that one espouses. This reading practice asks us to aim towards

an understanding of how value and “beauty” function for individuals and in the world at large.

This project began by asking, *what do conceptions of the beautiful do?*

Accordingly, I have attempted to show what the relationship between the beholder and that which he or she finds beautiful *does* by demonstrating how the experience of beauty, beginning with its roots at the affectual level, motivates and animates human action. This project worked on three main levels. First, it proposed that beauty works in such a way that can easily bypass habitual awareness so that only through a critical meditation on how we are swayed by beauty might we come to a fuller awareness of its presence and its affects on us. Second, I turned to two of Badami’s novels as effective case studies to think through how the experience of beauty influences how persons negotiate various complications that can arise within the diasporic experience. The diasporic-narrative landscape of Badami’s novels offered a productive place to think through these ideas precisely because of those novels’ particular representation of different cultures, different perspectives, and different definitions of beauty. And third, I argued that Badami’s novels construct and propound a specific standard of beauty that we might aim towards. *The Hero’s Walk* argued on behalf of striving for a holistic and harmonic balance between valuing the self and others—i.e., other individuals, the external environment—as beautiful and therefore valuable and worthy of our highest respect. My discussion of *Nightbird* emphasized how affirmations of beauty seem to necessarily influence the interpersonal relations and connections between individuals. My analysis of *Nightbird* showed why it is important that individuals pay close attention to how they go about

making their affirmations of beauty. Affirmations of beauty and ideality are not inert, ineffectual valuations merely existing inside an individual's consciousness—rather the beholding and envisioning of beauty has definite personal and worldly consequences.

If this project has developed any practical insight, it has been to emphasize how beauty and value colours and fuels human experience. Critical consideration of human action and experience ought to never be divorced from a consideration of how affect and value come into play. The consideration of affect and beauty, of animating values, provides us with the base reasoning for why individuals act the way they do. This understanding enables us to see how individuals' actions occur largely as an inevitable reflexive response to their conceptions of the beautiful. These reflex-responses, as I have shown, can have potentially ill and unintended effects—if not only on beholders of beauty, but on others as well. The effects of an individual's actions *necessarily* reach out into and influence the world. This is why Badami, stressing notions of interconnectedness, avows and positions a striving for a holistic, life-affirming perspective as her ultimate vision of beauty. Only through such a striving can discourses, traditions, and actions that oppress others (and perhaps ourselves) be effectively curbed and challenged.

The beauty that we would find in the world alights in our minds of its own accord, though we do not ask for it. Beauty seems a given condition of the human affective experience—like a gift bestowed upon us simply by our relation to the fact of mere being. Our experience of beauty can motivate our actions, our lives, and the projects we dedicate

ourselves to—as we have seen in Sripathi’s son, Arun’s dedication to environmental activism. Yet so tempting and pleasurable an experience is beauty, that it can potentially lead us to act in selfish ways—as evinced by Bibi-ji’s attempts to make her own life better, even if it means bringing emotional turmoil to her family. And when we find we have been mistaken about our appraisals, we might begin to lose sight of ourselves, like Sripathi does when we cannot see his feet. *The Hero’s Walk* shows us, however, that mistakes about beauty *can* be productive. In such slips, we might fall from the ideological platform on which we have been standing, and we may successively rise to a higher, more genuine conception of beauty and truth. When we strive to adjust our own individual standards to something closer to the more just and more ideal vision that Badami alludes to in her novels, we might find purpose, and more integrated identities, and reason to continue moving with the flow of life. But in pursuits as lofty as the search for beauty, perhaps it is also best we strive with due temperance. We need not grow overzealous in a frenzy to vault up the Platonic staircase for a sense of some beatific vision or feeling—lest we come to believe smugly and self-righteously that we have risen to a more superior awareness than others. A teenage Bibi-ji encounters something of this idea as she stares out at the Harimandir Sahib, the Golden Temple, in Amritsar. She learns that the sacred building was “built on a level lower than the surrounding land” (317). Bibi-ji admits that she does not know the reason for this architectural decision. Her teacher attempts to enlighten her: “ ‘It is symbolic of [the Sikh] faith, in which everyone is equal. Caste or class does not matter. Every caste is required to go down a step in order to enter the house of God. I think that is a beautiful lesson in humility.

Don't you?" (318). At that tempered level, no head stands out above the rest. Instead, everyone is reminded of how they all stand together, connected, on a common plateau. Whether a person would desire to stand above others, of course, depends on the beauty and value that s/he feels in attempting to become separate and detached from the world, and in effect, detached from the consequences of her/his actions. What is humbling then is to recognize the myriad ways that we remain interconnected. Through that understanding we might come to a deeper awareness of the boundless potential we have to either impinge destructively on others and on nature, or to bring forth into the world a higher, more genuine, sense of beauty and fairness.

## Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Richard Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997. Print.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

---. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. 29-51. Print.

---. *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004. Print.

---. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological States Apparatuses." *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch et al. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

Badami, Anita Rau. "An Interview with South Asian Canadian Novelist Anita Rau Badami." *Broken Passages and Broken Promises: Reconstructing the Komagata Maru and Air India Cases*. By Alia Rehana Somani. University of Western Ontario - Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 266-273. Web. 26 October 2014.

---. "Author Q&A". *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. Toronto: Vintage, 2006. 416-418. Print.

---. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. Toronto: Vintage, 2006. Print.

---. "Historical Note". *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. Toronto: Vintage, 2006. 407-10. Print.



- . *The Hero's Walk*. Toronto: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *Tamarind Mem*. Toronto: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- . *Tell it to the Trees*. Toronto: Vintage, 2011. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Bharwani, Meera. "'Partition and the Sikh Diasporic Consciousness' in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*" *Scholars World-International Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research*. 1.2 (2013): 143-153. Web. 17 November 2014.
- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction: Emerson and Whitman and the American Sublime." *The American Renaissance*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 1-26. Print.
- Boehmer, Elleke and Rosinka Chauduri. "Introduction." *The Indian Postcolonial*. Eds. Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chauduri. London: Routledge, 2011. 1-13. Print.
- Bolan, Kim. *Loss of Faith: How the Air India Bombers Got Away with Murder*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005. Print.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. Print.
- . *The Judith Butler Reader*. Ed. Sara Salih. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing Ltd,

2004. Print.

Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993

Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton:

Princeton UP, 1995. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*, volume 1. trans. Robert Hurley. New York:

Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect*

*Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. 1-27. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial*

*Theory. A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York:

Columbia UP, 1994. 392- 403. Print.

---. "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and*

*Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch et al. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

---. "Identity in Question." *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Eds. Stuart

Hall et al. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Print.

---. "Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Eds Stuart Hall and Paul du

Gay. London: Sage, 2011. Print.

Härting, Heike. "Diasporic Cross-Currents in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Anita

Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*." *Studies in Canadian Literature*. 28.1 (2003):

44-70. Print.

Hirst, Paul. *On Law and Ideology*. Basingstoke: Macmillian, 1979. Print.

- Jones, Ken. *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. Print.
- Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora". *Textual Practice*. 10.3 (1996): 421-447, Print.
- Mitchell, Donald W. *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.
- O'Brien, Susie. "Articulating a World of Difference: Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalization". *Canadian Literature*. 170/171.3 (2001): 140-158, Print.
- Plato. *The Symposium*. Trans. Christopher Gill. London: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta. 1991. 9-21. Print.
- Ruti, Mari. *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. Print.
- . *Reinventing the Soul: Posthumanist Theory and Psychic Life*. New York: Other Press, 2006. Print.
- Saklikar, Renée Sarojini. *Children of Air India: Un/Authorized Exhibits and Interjections*. Gibsons: Nightwood Editions, 2013. Print.
- . "Introduction". *Children of Air India: Un/Authorized Exhibits and Interjections*. Gibsons: Nightwood Editions, 2013. 9. Print.

---. "Lecture". McMaster University. Burke Sciences Building, 1280 Main St W, Hamilton, ON. 24 Nov 2014. Lecture.

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, Princeton UP, 1999. Print.

Slavoj Žižek: *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Channel 4 DVD, 2013. Film.

Somani, Alia Rehana. *Broken Passages and Broken Promises: Reconstructing the Komagata Maru and Air India Cases*. University of Western Ontario - Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. Web. 26 October 2014.

Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004. Print.

Switzer, Joseph Mark. "A prayer for the passengers of Air India Flight 182." *The Source*. N.p., 5 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Dec. 2014. <<http://thelastsource.com/en/2013/11/04/a-prayer-for-the-passengers-of-air-india-flight-182-2/>>

Winston, Joe. "An Option for Art But Not an Option for Life: Beauty as an Educational Imperative". *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 42.3. (2008): 71-87. Print.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Print.

Wolpert, Stanley A. *India*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Berkeley: U of California, 2009. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. Print.