



GENDER DYNAMICS AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S FICTIONAL NARRATIVES.

Ms. Swati Nalwaya

Associate Professor in English, Samrat Prithvi Raj Chauhan Government College Ajmer

Ajmer (Rajasthan)

Abstract

*Anita Rau Badami is an Indo-Canadian novelist who has authored four extraordinary novels. Her critically acclaimed novels are known for truthful depiction of Indian families and strong-minded women. Woman victimization is one of the evils confronted by women all over the world; this evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. Partition literature explores the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition. This in many ways substantiates the fact that inequality of sexes is neither a biological fact nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct. The paper aims to discuss the victimization of women and their traumatic experiences through the perspective of a female writer namely Anita Rau Badami in her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* a novel on the theme of the Partition of India and Pakistan.*

Keywords: Gender Dynamics, Societal Expectations, Anita Rau Badami, Fictional Narratives.

Introduction

Anita Rau Badami is a writer of South Asian Diaspora living in Canada with a strong voice of the modern Indian Diaspora. Her novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. Her first novel 'Tamarind Mem' deals with bittersweet nostalgia, of her Indian sensibility portraying her memories of her past days depicting the descriptions of Indian

domestic life. Her second novel 'The Hero's Walk' could be the best illustration to her alien feeling which is clad in a fine garb of refinement.

Badami's third novel

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call explores the Golden Temple Massacre and the Air India Bombing is set against the back drop of Punjab Division, it is a medley of series of stories which centers around three Indian women each in search of peace, during the tumultuous scenes in Punjab, both personally and politically. Woman victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world; this evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. Partition literature explores the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition. This in many ways substantiates the fact that inequality of sexes is neither a biological fact nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct. The paper aims to discuss the victimization of women and their traumatic experiences through the female perspectives.

The paper brings to light how the novelist has used her protagonists to explore 'a female consciousness and value system', an aspect that is conspicuously missing in the Partition fiction of the male writers. The novel substantiates how women's writings are produced from within women's experience or from their sub-conscious. The novelist has been influential in drawing attention to the differential history of women's experiences during the Partition. The paper emphasizes how narrating the stories of women characters who experienced the migration and violence, a women novelist contains the potential to reveal the complex dispossessions which is both psychic and material. The trauma, anguish, pain and ambivalence that mark the experience of Partition have been made evident and visible. The novel is an imaginative response to the traumatic events of the Partition, portraying the great impact of the external events on the human psyche.

The Exposé of Women Victimization

The Exposé of Women Victimization in the novel '**Can You Hear the Nightbird call**'? is the story of three women: Bibiji, Leela and Nimmo whose roots are in India, immigrate to Canada, where series of situations lead to their catastrophic lives. Sharanjeet Kaur better known as Bibiji in Vancouver, Leela Bhat, her neighbour from Bangalore and Nimmo, Bibiji's niece, who is orphaned by the devastation that

engulfed India after the Partition, is now rebuilding her life in Delhi. The lives of all the three are once again shattered as the conflicts of the past and the present re-emerge and devastate. The Nightbird is a bird, whose songs are supposedly a portent of ill-luck. Bibiji, steals her sister Kanwar's fortune to gain entry into Canada, and she is given to luxuries at Canada, her sister Kanwar is left behind to face the rapidly changing political crisis of partition, of India and Pakistan in 1947.

In the meanwhile, she disappears making Bibiji penitent and guilty all through her life. Kanwar's daughter at last makes her life happy by marrying and saving her own life from the clutches of orphanage. She establishes her own family skillfully. Badami's technique in sketching the Indian scenario and her skill in knitting the plot so as to make the ambitious reap the consequence is special to her. Bibiji believes that it was a punishment for having stolen her sister's fortune. Finally, she composes herself and utilizes all her energies in establishing a restaurant called "Delhi Junction". This restaurant becomes the place where members of the growing Vancouver Indo Canadian stream come to discuss & dispute their ideas, probably Badami made use of one such meeting place where the Indo-Canadian stream of writers meet in reality in her works of fiction. This might be an attempt to ravish the ambitious women who even "stoops to conquer". Though Bibiji was penitent for her misdemeanor, she never redeems herself, when given a chance she again deceitfully adopts her niece's eldest son Jasbeer, and brings him to Canada as she doesn't have a heir. Jasbeer, who is a resentful youngman, finds solace in Paji's stories that made him bound to his Sikh ancestry.

Objective

1. To study Badami's third novel
2. To study on The Exposé of Women Victimization

The Author: Anita Rau Badami

Anita Rau Badami is an Indian writer born in 1961 at Rourkela, Odisha, India. Badami grew up and spent the first thirty years of her life in India where she received a Catholic education, earning a B.A. in English from the University of Madras and studying Social Communications Media at Sophia College for Women in Mumbai. She worked as a copywriter and self-employed journalist, publishing stories in magazines for children, in her home country until 1991 when she moved to Canada "Anita Rau Badami," 2nd par.). As one of her protagonists, Badami's father was a mechanical engineer and train designer, which made their

family move at least eight times before she was twenty. Her parents, coming from different parts of the country, spoke two different Indian languages. Therefore, English became a bridging language to communicate among them, Hindi being acquired by Badami as a second language. Her journey as a writer began at a young age, publishing her first work when she was only eighteen years old, but her first novel was not published until much later. After Badami moved to Canada with her husband, who was also pursuing his Masters in Environmental Science (“Anita Rau Badami Biography,” 2nd par.), she attended the University of Calgary, earning an M.A. in creative writing in 1995. It is here where her first novel was created as her M.A. writing project, **Tamarind Mem**

The Novel: Tamarind Mem.

Tamarind Mem is the title of Anita Rau Badami’s first novel, born as her M.A. writing project at the University of Calgary and immediately published in 1996 by Penguin, Canada. This novel is set in Calgary and in the author’s childhood environment, the Indian railroad colonies. The first part of the book focuses on the complicated relationship between Kamini, a young graduate student in Canada at the present moment of the novel, and her mother Saroja, a now widow, nicknamed “Tamarind Mem” because of her sour tongue, that lives alone in India (“About Tamarind Mem”). Badami uses the two different narrators, Kamini and Saroja, to give two radically different versions of the same story, exploring “the powerful but constricting forces of memory and familial expectation” (“Anita Rau Badami”). Besides, the author allows the reader to understand the characters better not only through the different points of view given by the narrators but also by going back and forth in time.

A Feminist Literary Approach

Nowadays, feminism is a topic that, when mentioned, not a single person in the conversation lacks his or her own opinion about. Unfortunately, many of those opinions are driven by an incorrect definition of what feminism means. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, feminism can be defined as the belief in equality of sexes in 8 fields such as politics, economy, social structure...(Brunell). Even though we find the origin of the first manifestations of feminism in the West, it is a movement that can be found worldwide, and which different institutions represent by committing to stand for women’s rights and interests (Brunell). The feminist approach will be the one followed in this paper, and it can be described as the examination of the means, literature uses to reinforce or undermine the oppression of women in the previously mentioned areas (Tyson 83). As Tyson (85) very accurately states, most of us can be considered

“recovering patriarchal women,” meaning that we are women, or men, who have been exposed to the norms and values of patriarchy during our whole lives, internalizing a culture that supports traditional gender roles. Several characteristics are, in a way or another, traditionally linked to men and are considered rather masculine such as being strong, rational or protective. On the other hand, there are others that are conceived as feminine, like being emotional, hence irrational, weak or submissive. These have been the arguments that throughout history have been used to justify any inequality related to gender, these qualities became norms of behaviour for the two sexes and anyone who did not follow them was, and very frequently still is, a victim of social marginalization. Nowadays, gender roles still rule gender discrimination, making it difficult for women to access leadership or important positions, allowing men to gain a higher salary for the same job and making women believe they are not made for careers in scientific fields.

Indian Feminism.

Feminism as a political ideology is quite related to women’s studies and women’s movements all over the world, but now the focus will be taken to South Asia, particularly India. Before this country got to mid-twentieth century, women’s autonomy was not considered by politics and/or society. There was the belief that all the issues and activities concerning women belonged to the ‘private’ domain, the private sphere. However, a different kind of awareness slowly started to be developed in both sexes and the one to acknowledge the credit for it was feminism and the feminist movements (Ghosal 793). During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Europe saw the first wave of feminism developed and in India it was not as different as it may be initially thought. Under the colonial influence and being part of the nineteenth-century reform movement, feminist ideas began to spread over the country. Before the independence in 1947, the feminist questions that aroused were mainly related to the spread of education, abolition of Sati system, prohibition of child marriage among others.

Nevertheless, the revision of the problems related to women in colonial India was narrow and limited as it only concerned the upper caste Hindu. Hence, it only modernized gendered relations in some upper caste families, but lower caste women were still more vulnerable to male-chauvinism, making it impossible to create a homogeneous group of Indian women as issues like class and caste were a tough obstacle to surpass. Thus, scholars often call feminism belonging to the colonial period ‘Brahminical feminism’ (Ghosal 794). An important figure for the feminist movement in India is, curiously a man,

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, a social activist and thinker belonging to nineteenth century India. He was against the caste system and the restrictions it brought with it, rebelling against Brahmin domination and fighting for the rights of the less favoured by Indian society (Jyotiba).

He is thought to be the first Indian to associate caste with women's issues together with the problems of widows, the most marginal of the women belonging to the upper caste. Besides, he was also a pioneer in opening a school for the girls that nobody paid attention to, the untouchables; furthermore, he created a safe place for the 10 widows accused for illegal sexual encounters (Ghosal 795). Apart from these more 'public' actions, his character is also visible in the private sphere as, because he was childless, he was pushed by society to remarry, however, he and his wife decided to adopt the baby of a Brahmin widow instead.

A Feminist Analysis of the Novel

Arranged Marriage

Arranged marriage in India is still the preferred way of choosing who will be your partner for life, to enter into matrimony. However, as its name suggests, it is not only the bride and the groom the ones involved in this process, they actually have little to no voice in it. A third party is highly decisive, their respective families. Usually, parents take into account different factors, such as caste, class or education, in order to search for a suitable match to link their families to ("Arranged Marriage," 1st par.). When an appropriate person is found, the daughters cannot really just reject them, especially if they are already "too old" for the standard marriage age in India. Evidently, both parties can argue or complain, but, especially in women's case, it often turns out to go the way the elders want it to go.

Saroja as a Wife

Saroja is the first character we are presented that has been affected by arranged marriage. She is the first narrator's mother, married to a railway engineer, whose emotional state needs to be mainly assumed by her actions rather than by her words. However, her real feelings concerning marriage can sometimes be seen through brief sentences she primarily directs to her daughter Kamini, as when this last one was telling her mother she wanted to have a beautiful sari for her future wedding and Saroja answered, your mother knows what from what. Some things look better than they are" by saying that some things are better than they are," it could be understood that she is not only referring to the sari but to marriage itself. Marriage

may seem happy and beautiful from the outside, a way of fulfilling your role as a woman in Indian society, however, once you get married you understand that you are not satisfied with that. The dissatisfaction comes from different channels. On the one hand, society tells you through songs and Bollywood that you must love your husband in order to be happy. This may be one of the most disappointing issues of arranged marriage as, in order to get to know someone, you need a long time, and even after doing so, you may still not find him or her attractive or lovable.

Child Marriage as Depicted through Chinna

In the novel under analysis, Saroja's father starts looking for a man for his daughter when she turns sixteen. For Western culture this is a pretty early age for marriage since she is only a teenager, however, India and other Eastern countries do, or at least did, not share the same mindset. Nowadays, 27% of Indian girls get married before they turn 18, and 7% before their 15th birthday. According to UNICEF, the highest number of child brides in the world is found in India, with 15,509,000 children ("India"). Child marriage principally occurs because of the basic notion of gender inequality that still persists in many parts of the world. Still, in India specifically, there are also other factors that make child marriage a reality. On the one hand, poverty, it is more common among poor households. Then, there is betrothal, some girls are promised in marriage even before they are born, thinking that, in that way, they will have her future secured. The level of education is also crucial. In Indian society, girls are expected to take care of her in-laws, 17 children and husband, not her biological parents, therefore, educating a girl is considered a waste of money. During puberty, girls are more suitable to do household labour and take care of children as they are energetic and strong at that age. Besides, traditional customs make it difficult to stop this practice as, in certain cases, there is huge social pressure to marry before 18. On the other hand, pre-marital sex is considered a significant threat. Marriage is used to preserve purity because, if the girls are young, they are supposedly purer and still keep their virginity, they are worth more. It is considered better to marry them off before their value starts decreasing ("India")

Freedom through Men's Absence

The ways in which men's absence has granted women freedom that would not have been achieved otherwise.

Saroja's character is quite intense. She does not only try to rebel against her family when she is forced to get married, but also defends her ideas insatiably. However, once she gets married this fighting spirit starts to decrease. For the sake of the understanding of the freedom achieved by this character, it is necessary to analyse her attitude in different situations presented in the novel. Chronologically speaking, her youth would be the most sensible point to begin. Her first rebellious action is to reject marriage, she wants to study and become a doctor. As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Saroja is pretty aware that education will give her the wings she needs to fly. She considers marriage a movie where she is the supporting character, Nevertheless, eventually she has to surrender to her family's will and get married. It might have seemed like she actually gained a bit of freedom with it, freedom from her family's orders. However, she knows that even though this may be true, she is not entirely free, she has gone from her father's authority to her husband's, "Amma no longer has the right to punish me for the things I say, for now that I am married, that right has been transferred to my husband".

This again shows the paternalistic role men take within matrimony and the household, he is "his" woman's protector and master, her owner. During her marriage, Saroja is shown as a distant, grumpy woman in the eyes of the world, but the truth is that she just has not been able to find complete comfort in her situation. The only time she seems to be lively again is, in fact, when another man appears in her life, Paul da Costa. Even if this chapter analyses her freedom when there are no men involved, da Costa gives her a sort of freedom that can also be found in, for instance, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood with Offred and Nick. Freedom through a sort of love, freedom through breaking the rules. It was not so much about Paul da Costa himself, but rather the idea of him, the idea of a man, not being her husband, in her life, a man she has willingly chosen. Even if it is not clearly stated that she had an affair with him, it can be assumed through her night escapes, her twenty six conversations with him, Linda Ayah's comments and eventually, her reaction to his death. Because of her meetings with Paul da Costa, Saroja has to endure criticism from her closest environment, in this case, Linda Ayah,

Conclusion

The present study has primarily focused on arranged marriage in India and how it affects its female population as presented in the novel **Tamarind Mem**. Besides, Indian women's freedom in relation to education and the lack of male characters has been deeply analysed, as well as the consequences that a male chauvinistic society's rules have on what they understand as "the weaker sex". After an analysis

based on a Feminist literary approach, it is clear that female characters in Tamarind Mem cannot be free unless there are no men involved. Their freedom can chiefly be achieved through a proper education or through men's absence. For future researches, it would be highly interesting to analyse the character of Roopa in a deeper way, as well as to pay more attention to the gender related roles established in Indian society, topics that would give place to an engaging investigation. The main objectives of this paper have been to firstly analyse the problems that female characters in the novel under analysis have to face and their reactions towards them. Secondly, to find out if they achieved some sort of freedom and, if so, how. Lastly, to prove that the initial hypothesis, men being an obstacle rather than allies in these women's path to freedom, was true. As it has been mentioned, the eventual result of this paper is that the initial hypothesis presented is verified. Saroja, Kamini, Chinna and Putti Ajji are all characters that can be considered to reach diverse levels of freedom, and none of them needed a man to do so.

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