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VICISSITUDES OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ANITA RAU  
BADAMI'S TAMARIND MEM

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Abstract

The emergence of feminist literary criticism has a great impact on the twenty-first century literary studies. The cultural construction of gender has always been a pertinent concern in feminist criticism. Feminism attempted to re-position women in opposition to men, by giving centrality to women's experiences. It evaluates the secondary spaces within culture, economy and education that women are thrust into, which prevents them from realizing and giving expression to their creativity. The feminist literary movement interrogates the cultural identification of woman as the "other" and man as the dominating "subject". The present paper titled "Vicissitudes of Indian Womanhood: A Feminist Analysis of Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*" analyses how Saroja and her daughter Kamini cope with the vagaries of gender discrimination they confront in different spaces and in different circumstances.

Key words: feminism, gender, identity,

Twenty-first century feminism comprises a diverse and vast collection of social theories, political movements and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women, especially socially, politically and economically. The horizon of feminism has expanded to include new theories like multiracial feminism, which revolves around women of color and their experiences. Exploring multi-racial communities like African Americans, and other immigrant communities like Asian Canadians, British Asians, Asian Americans, and so on, multi-racial feminism foregrounds women's subordination in the context of cross-cultural interaction. Though these diasporic communities have gained recognition in the foreign space, the women in the diaspora are not

wholly equal to their European counterparts, and they experience subordination and denial at multiple levels.

Women's movement in India evolved through several phases, each of which has contributed to the conceptual basis of Indian feminism. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri says, ". . . it is almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas" (xii). The cultural positioning of Indian women has its roots in mythology, among many other factors. Brahmanical tradition envisages woman as Goddess with different dimensions like *shakti*, *prakrti* and *maya*. This feminine energy is expected to be controlled. Also, only the benevolent goddesses are upheld as the exemplars of ideal female behaviour. The

concept of 'Sati' the pure woman and 'pativrata' the devoted wife have been culturally indoctrinated into the minds of Indian women. The stories of Savitri who brought her husband back to life from death and Sita who followed her husband to the forest are extolled in every household and have been internalized by women. The institution of marriage frames women within such restrictive and traditional behavioural patterns. Motherhood is another aspect that erases the selfhood of women. The projected image of an ideal mother as a self-effacing entity denies women personhood. Other than these factors, Indian feminism is largely influenced by colonial history, freedom struggle and the partition of the country. During the colonial phase, issues like sati, child marriage, widow remarriage and polygamy were highlighted as part of the imperial strategy to dominate Indian women. Women came to symbolize motherland and they became custodians of culture. However, the freedom struggle ensured women's participation in the political sphere and they found a legitimate public space for themselves. But they were not able to transcend or subvert gender roles. Their involvement in the movement was strictly confined to conventional moral framework which eulogized sacrifice and self-effacement. Jasbir Jain writes in *Writing Women Across Cultures* about how partition affected Indian women, "The State performed a patriarchal role in asserting its right to reclaim and rehabilitate women: women themselves by committing suicides in order to prevent rape or abduction followed the tradition of jauhar and sati" (116).

The image of woman projected in the canvas of English fiction in India is multifaceted. The traditional representations vary from the chaste, suffering wife, to the seductress and the embodiment of the primal force 'Shakti' which protects as well as destroys. Nevertheless, ideas and taboos were indoctrinated in her mind right from childhood so firmly, that she herself perpetuated the idea of her inferiority and essential self-effacement. The woman represented in Indian fiction in English of the first half of the twentieth century was a victim of subjugation as revealed in the novels which portrayed characters who coped with the rival pulls

of tradition and modernity in their search for identity, independence, fulfillment and love whether within marriage or outside it. In the case of immigrant literature, the female protagonists struggle to cope with the problems and promises of the host country they inhabit. The immigrant authors fictionalize the Indian woman's experiences as she struggles with her roles as an individual, a wife, a lover, a mother and the keeper of culture and tradition in the face of an alien world with which she must integrate. Writers are seen going beyond multiculturalism in exploring new dimensions of their gender, by juxtaposing their cultural memories and experiences in the bigger canvas of their stories.

Anita Rau Badami, recipient of the Marian Engel Award, moved to Canada in 1991 and in 1995 was awarded a Master's degree in English literature from the University of Calgary. She lives in Montreal with her family. Her major works include *Tamarind Mem*, *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. Badami's first novel, *Tamarind Mem*, published in 1996, is set in India and Canada and discusses at length the matters of gender and tradition through the strongest and unbreakable bond of mother-daughter relationship. The writer brings into her canvas three generations of women: Kamini, her mother Saroja as well as her grandmother, Putti to show how the changing times as well as sensibilities affect the lives of Indian women.

Kamini's voice forms the first narrative. She speaks to us from Canada and her narrative expresses the bicultural pull she goes through in Canada. Saroja's voice dominates the second part and chronicles "different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to . . . male domination, and to the final resolution of women's struggle for a non-exploitative society free of class, caste, race and gender bias" (Bhasin, and Khan 4). While the daughter speaks to us from Canada, we see and hear the mother telling her story to a group of women in a railway carriage in India. The mother has been widowed some years and she is now, no longer a discontented woman. She is now a travelling woman. In fact, these two characters, along with a host of other female characters reveal the vicissitudes of Indian womanhood.

Saroja dreams of becoming a doctor but her parents force her into a marriage with a man double her age and totally different from her in terms of nature and sensibility. Gender discrimination becomes a reality in all aspects of family life including the upbringing of children. Saroja's husband is very indifferent towards his wife and their relationship leaves her embittered. When Saroja complains to her parents about the meaningless and dreary existence that she leads, her father only says: "He is a worthy man, your husband, we did the best we could for you" (204). In a patriarchal setup, the blame always falls on women. Saroja painfully narrates her difficulty in getting adapted to new places every time her husband, a railway employee, is transferred:

Before my marriage, the world seems a smooth, round place. . . . We live in one little town from birth to marriage or death and thereafter. . . . You know everybody as if they belong to your own family. . . . Your happiness lights up the whole place. Nothing is steady after my marriage. I have no friend to talk to. Friendship is like a tree, it needs, time to mature, and we never stay in one place long enough for that! And my husband is a gypsy whom I see for a short while every month. (236)

Dislocation becomes a bitter reality in her life. Unable to bear the suffering any more, Saroja develops an acidic tongue to vent her frustrations, which earns her the nickname "tamarind mem". Her feminism is seen in those parts of the novel where she uses her tongue as her only weapon, which gives her enough strength to face life with her two daughters and an indifferent husband. Though initially Saroja assumes the role of a cultural caretaker, her attempts to emancipate herself from the shackles of male domination is shown by her outbursts of anger and the later silence that she willingly resorts to. She literally sinks into an abyss of silence and indifference after pouring out her feelings through her caustic tongue. Also the brief love affair that she develops with Paul da Costa, the "Anglo car mechanic", shows her desperate attempts to be unconventional. She realises that it is not her high class railway officer husband, but a car mechanic who understands her and makes her

happy. What Jasbir Jain writes about Indian women writers is worth quoting in this context:

The questioning of Indian women writers problematizes the struggle between male ego and female desire for freedom. This freedom cannot be worked out only through education or economic independence; it has to be achieved through the body because it is on the basis of its attractiveness, docility and productivity that traditional models have been constructed. Women have been worshipped through these virtues and discarded when they have failed in them. Thus any need for personal space, for working out new definitions of freedom, for loosening the hold of tradition without destroying it has to begin with the body and by redefining the values placed on womanhood (127).

However, Saroja will not break up her family in order to have a life with Paul. When the daughters are no longer dependent on their mother, Saroja takes a bold decision to break free from the shackles of the family, and resists the attempts made by Kamini and Roopa to control her. Saroja now embarks on a journey, a pilgrimage. If earlier she travelled, it was because her husband did. Now she wants to wander around the country all by herself because she wishes to. Saroja's story is the evolution of a middle class Brahmin girl into a railway memsahib, a perfect mother and finally into a strong independent woman, who believes in her own inner strength.

The novel also projects the story of an Indian immigrant woman, who grapples with gender issues and bicultural pull. Kamini's emigrates to Canada to pursue her doctoral research in Chemical Engineering. She goes through the experience of "unhomeliness" in the host land. Kamini's narrative, depicts her memories about her life in the homeland and she finds it hard to cope with both the loneliness and freezing cold of the new space.

Kamini accepts Canada because it offers her higher education as well as an alternative to the repressive native culture. She has witnessed the subordination and suffering of her mother Saroja at the hands of the patriarchal society and she hates getting into the trap of marriage. However, in spite of the nostalgia and loneliness, she withstands her

urge to go back to her homeland. Leaving the homeland is Kamini's own way of revolt and resistance. She achieves independence, staying away from the oppressive indigenous culture. Both Saroja and Kamini fight against oppression in their own different ways. Though Kamini admits how she is torn between her native and foreign spaces and that "belonging" becomes a challenge for her, she hates being trapped in the male-dominated native culture. And Saroja breaks all the fetters that bind her to cultural expectations and becomes an independent travelling mem.

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