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**DISCOVERING THE SELF AND THE SOCIETY THROUGH PERSONAL TRAGEDY: THE
HERO'S WALK BY ANITA RAU BADAMI – A STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Anita Rau Badami's second novel, *The Hero's Walk*, is an acknowledgement of ordinary and extraordinary acts of heroism in daily life. Anita Rau Badami won the Commonwealth Best Booker Prize in the Canada/Caribbean region for her second novel *The Hero's Walk* (2001). This novel is about an Indian Brahmin family finding its way within the Hindu tradition at the end of the twentieth century. Intensive reading examines the poignant feeling to connect back to her native country but also being confronted with contemporary problems they have to adapt themselves. Reconsider their opinions about what is important in life and rooted in the new culture. Through the fluctuated characters of Badami, the novel highlights the cultural conflict between east and west in the form of physical as well as emotional integration. The research paper aims to exhibit the discovering the self and the society through personal tragedy of few character in Badami's novel *The Hero's Walk*. When the question of identity begins, definitely the answer of struggle for assimilation, the yearning for acceptance- secrets shared by immigrants, who strive to conform, who alter himself or herself to adapt, who imitate to blend capture the attention for his or her survival of life plays a significant role.

Key words: culture, assimilation, immigrants, emotions, identity, education.

KY PUBLICATIONS

Anita Rau Badami's second novel, *The Hero's Walk*, is an acknowledgement of ordinary and extraordinary acts of heroism in daily life. Anita Rau Badami won the Commonwealth Best Booker Prize in the Canada/Caribbean region for her second novel *The Hero's Walk* (2001). This novel is about an Indian Brahmin family finding its way within the Hindu tradition at the end of the twentieth century. Intensive reading examines the poignant feeling to connect back to her native country but also being confronted with contemporary problems they have

to adapt themselves. Reconsider their opinions about what is important in life and rooted in the new culture. Through the fluctuated characters of Badami, the novel highlights the cultural conflict between east and west in the form of physical as well as emotional integration. Igor Maver writes, "There has recently emerged a pronounced shift to emphasis in contemporary Canadian diasporic writing, for many new texts are set outside Canada and feature reversed migration back to a home place by a westernized / Canadian protagonist who

does not so much want to return home as to write back home (e.g. Anita Rau Badami, Michael Ondadje, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Rohinton Ministry, M.G. Vassanji etc.)”

The Hero's Walk is a milieu fluctuates from Toturpuram to Vancouver. A cosmic cultural bay separates the two places. Badami artistically manipulated the character of Nandana is only to reflect the realistic picture of both the culture. Nandana, a nine year old girl, projects a greatest concert of cross- cultural conflict. Nandana comes from an open-minded, free from the limitation of social customs and conventional manacles. Nandana's true world is only her young parents especially at Vancouver and not her grandparent's extended family back in India. She is plunged into a new conventional adaptation and traditional bound society of her mother's (Maya) large family with two generation living together, whereas Nandana belongs to the third generation. There are noticeable cultural differences which can be discovered between the east and the west. Vijay Mishra remarks that, “diaspora connect themselves with the ideas of home and homeland or ‘desh’ against which other lands are foreign or ‘videsh’ and carry their homelands in the series of the objects and fragments of narratives and memories in their head or in their suitcases and struggle hard to preserve them in other land and culture” (Harish Trivedi, Meenakshi Mukherjee and Vijay Mishra, 68).

Anita Rau Badami expresses her true feeling, once said in an interview: “Five Years ago, I was still teetering between whether to stay here (in Canada) or to go back. I was totally torn. I'd sit over here and long for all that chaos, and contradiction, and the challenges that country represents, and I'd want to go back. But then I go back and start yearning for the silence of this place”. *The Hero's Walk* is an extended look of family living in the small city of Toturpuram on the Bay of Bengal. Through Sripathi's family Badami made a colourful analysis of intergenerational dysfunction, and the erosion of the caste system. There was a Brahmin street it is named by the specific reason because Brahmins lived there in a large number. Krishna temple bell continued its sound Sripathi crackled his newspaper with irritation because one of the devotees had paid

the amount for the loud speaker. How man is ready to offer something to the God as a bribe for his prayers. Even in the mosque they have megaphones - all the sounds of bells and the sounds from megaphone are considered as a nuisance. Sripathi raises a complained against the sound of the holy bell. But the head priest rejects the complaint with a smile and says “This is God's music. How can you object it?” (Badami-7)

Sripathi hears the ring of the telephone but he hesitates to respond to the call as some intuition alarms him and warns that it must be of Maya her daughter from Vancouver. While having a conversation with Dr. Sundreraj, Sripathi faces a shock of hearing the name Maya Baker, he did not recall Alan's full name. It shows Sripathi's mental trap to accept a foreigner as his son-in-law. Sripathi hears about Maya and her Canadian husband Alan's death in a car accident. Immediately the arresting picture of *Yama*, Hindu mythological God of death flashes in his mind. His eyes are filled with tears on seeing Maya's family photograph. His tears and sorrowful mood fills the burden with bitterness. Even though the living soul is not treated with love and forgiveness, after the death people may regret a lot for their absence; it is a fact of the real world. Maya means an illusion, something which is not real but it seems to be true. The death of Maya may be a real earthly death but actually it is not a real death, because only the Celestial death is considered as the fruitful death. Through Maya's death, transformation of soul is to reach heavenly God; Spiritual Message is also given in the state of illusion.

Mrs. Poorna still waits for her daughter's return. Every day she makes sugar parathas, she waited on the patio and every day she continued to hope for getting her lost child, an eight year old child. “She would beat her breast, clutch her grey hair and beg to God to return her darling child” (25). Psychological hurt of missing her daughter drives her into madness. It gives the visible perception that even a crazy woman also gained a hope by praying to the almighty with the spring of chaos. God is powerful in spinning a wheel of human fate, which has more ups and downs in order to investigate the human spirit with his or her own life.

Sripathi's wife Nirmala as all perfect Indian women wore a bindi, but later modernity crushed her ritual, accepting the cream, red powder, packs of stickers which turned in new shapes and colours. Nirmala kept herself busy with teaching the classical Indian dance form called Bharat Natyam to girls, "she herself had studied this traditional dance form until she got married" (13). Through traditional art of dance, Badami skilfully expresses the art of Bharat Natyam and explores that the human life always deals with the mixtures of all 'Rasas' in reality. The pictures include Nandana's sorrows, happiness, Sripathi's angriness, pain of unforgiveness, Nirmala's calmness, etc. Nirmala was comfortable with the additional income she was making at home but, "A good Hindu wife had to maintain the pretence that her husband was supporting the family"-14. It reminds one of the patriarchal cultures which is prevalent in India where a husband is the cash earner and a wife is a bread maker. Nirmala and Sripathi created a picture of a perfect married couple with the happy turns of life, through arranged marriage.

Sripathi is a man who treated himself with pompousness and to forget his daughter, Maya's betrayal of chosen herself her marriage, out of her caste and race, which resulted in embarrassment because the earlier suitor back in India was jilted. "It was true that it was he, who had told her never to come home, who had refused to reply to her letters or her phone calls, but by dying she had stolen from him the opportunity to forgive and to be forgiven." (137). Krishnamurthy Acharye, the old priest who had presided over the ceremonies when Maya was born, during annaprashna on her first birthday, blessed Maya before she left Totupuram. Nirmala was dissatisfied with the thought that Maya was cremated in a foreign country where proper death rites could not be followed "her soul will float like Trishanku between worlds"(173) but she was relaxed with the thought of herself dying before her husband, Nirmala continued relentlessly, "She should have gone to yama -raja as a sumangali in a bridal finery with her wedding beads around her neck and kum-kum on her forehead"(173). Sripathi calmed Nirmala that, "We performed all the rites. Dr. Sunderraj got the Hindu Temple priest to do it

for Maya. Alan's ceremonies were done in the church"(175). The priest, "he recited prayers for Maya's soul and Alan's, the latter in spite of Ammayya's objections."(257). The conventional family members are fulfilling their responsibility even for the floating soul in the heaven.

William J. Long seems to be quite germane in his observation when he states, "... it is nevertheless true that good literature knows no nationality, nor any bounds save those of humanity. It is occupied chiefly with the elementary passions and emotions, -love and hate, joy and sorrows, fear and faith, - which are essential part of our human nature; and the more it reflects these emotions the more surely does it awake a response in men of every race" (5).

At some extent Nirmala waited for her daughter Maya to come home but now she lost her daughter too. She feels the sickness of all people. "All these years I listened to your father and your grandmother and this person and that. I should have done what I thought was right. Then none of this would have happened. I was stupid. Stupid"(304). Bitter experience made her to realise the fact and Nirmala has transformed her entry into a new world where she can have her own thoughts, rights and actions are truly possible. She has believed herself with all her hope which ends everything in a positive note.

Soon after Maya's and Alan's death, Maya's Six- year-old daughter Nandana whom Sripathi had never seen is now his responsibility. Sripathi's family has to accommodate this troubled little girl and Nandana must come home to terms with the death of her parents and her new life in India. The responsibility of the grandparents is to treat Nandana with more care and affection. Earlier Nandana felt unfamiliar with the roots, customs, people, neighbour, environment, education system of India, etc. just like that she hated most of the things and dwells only with the symbol of silence but towards the end of the novel she accepted the reality of missing her parents, understood the deep love of her grandparents, develops the curiosity to know the difference in the things with the reasoning ability, makes herself more comfortable with the adaptation of new (Indian)culture and she

started speaking with her grandpa too. It depicts clearly how even a small child is overcoming the difficulty in the adaptation of new culture.

"The Hero's Walk is a novel about so many things: loss, disappointment, choices and importance of coming to terms with yourself and the circumstances of your life without losing the dignity embedded in all of us. At one level it is about heroism- not the hero of the classical epic those enormous god-sized heroes- but my fascination with day-to-day heroes and the heroism that's needed to survive all the unexpected disasters and pitfalls of life." (Badami: interview)

Sripathi's disintegrating family is to encounter the most extraordinary events in his life: the death of his estranged daughter in Vancouver and the new arrival of orphaned granddaughter who is now in his hands of responsibility. Sripathi was blessed and jolted out of his pseudonym as "Pro Bono Publico," it reveals his self satisfactory writing of daily letters to a newspaper editor. Sripathi is forced to draw closer to an understanding about his family's history as well his own past, in sequence to make space in his heart and mind for his little Nandana, whose bitterness at her fate silences her. Sripathi's slow transformations into consciousness are accidental one. Sripathi's obligation of existential crisis opens a window into the lives of his own family members and all given complex portraits that reflect both the modernising movements of India and the contentious relationships to the past. After Maya's death, little Nandana crosses borders from Canada to India, and get into this encircle of adults pulled up by unseen injustices of the past enquiring to her silence for each to think about the meaning of their own lives. On the other hand, on behalf of the people Sripathi was one "who tried to address the problems of the world with pen and ink instead of sword and gun and fist" 9. It results how education is gaining more significance and power with its own writing implement of explaining with the contemplative words of reality. Conspiracy of the initiate words of Dear Editor, and remaining words are the truth reflection of the society always in the favour of the people. Malala highlights her closing words in her speech "one child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world. Education

is the only solution, Education is first". These words are deep-rooted even through Sripathi's writing which accomplished his satisfaction in advance.

Sripathi worried a lot about his son's future because simply wasting time by waving flags and banners and shouting slogans will not make him a bright future. At Arun's age Sripathi was earning a living and looking after a family of four. Sripathi was not such a person to encourage Arun's involvement in political activism. Arun stated to his Appu (Sripathi)

"And I will try to explain. See, you had your independence of India and all to fight for, real ideals. For me and my friends, the fight is against daily injustice, our own people stealing our rights. This is the only world I have, and I feel responsible for it. I have to make sure that it doesn't get blown up, or washed away in the next flood, or poisoned by chemicals." (239)

The contradiction arises in different forms of blow in human life. Sripathi knew that his son had a valid point but still he is simply against his son's idea. Sripathi's expectation is exclusively different from his son's idea. Sripathi had a homely war with the long struggle of life and to preserve his ancestral home as a note of cultural heritage. It highlights the Indian culture of the East. Arun's becoming of political activist is an influence of West. It openly suggested a struggle between his life and the welfare of the society.

Ammayya's words towards her daughter Putti, when Putti doesn't respond with her usual anxious and queries. It leads the controversial situation between two characters. Putti made her strong argument about her marriage from a low caste family and she refers them that, they are nice people. Ammayya tried to change her daughter's mind but it resulted in vain. Ammayya addressed bitterly "And don't think I will give you any jewellery to wear. From today you and I are strangers. You are a piece of dirt that my womb voided and that I kept by mistake, idiot that I am".(330) Even Putti also suffered from the same bitterness and she decided not to get anything from her mom. And she reminded the words to Ammayya "You only said that if somebody really wants to marry me, he will

not want any jewellery or dowry. Keep everything.” (330)

Ammayya's contemplation makes her to analyse Putti's shameless behaviour; it has an impact of too much of television which corrupting the poor innocent mind. Suddenly Ammayya felt sorry for her harmful words on Putti and thought she could have given her a suggestions and advice to driven away the corrupting influence of Nirmala (daughter in law). Mainly Putti has been spoiling her mind with Maya's influence which had a shameless marriage to a foreigner. Maya's fate directs her straight to Lord Yama's kingdom. Putti should have been aware of all these things.

“I know what i am saying,” bawled Ammayya from behind the close door. “Putti, if you marry this loafer you will be dead for me forever. My curses will be on your head. A mother's curse is the blackest of them all. Your children will be born deformed. They, too, will abandon you. And that evil fellow will beat you every single day!” (332).

It daringly conveys how Ammayya is rebellious and correspondent to uphold the prestigious family name as a Brahmin. After Ammayya's death Putti muttered with her tears that she was angry with me, she didn't forgive me. Tradition plays a critical role as an incarnation of religion (Brahmin) which engaged in the contrivance of culture. Only after a strange shocking experience, catastrophe razes the internal ideal of house and family can gain such a liberation from the tension of their past.

Sripathi carefully un-wrapped the thick envelope letters which were received from Maya. One of the letters she began, “*My dear Appu, Mamma, Arun ...*” (357) it always shows priority ranks according to age. He glanced at the neat slanting script and at last the tears rolled forth unrestrained. At that time a small interruption happens near the door of his room and he assured it was Nandana her grandchild. She asked in an innocent voice “Are you crying because of your mother died?” (357). Sripathi replied yes, and wiped his face with one of the hanging towels. Instantaneously Nandana articulated that my mother also died. Nandana's mother was a daughter

of Sripathi. They both become friendly with full of emotions. Nandana demanded the big box which placed on the table. Box contains full of pens. She wish to have her own particularly a small red pen. Sripathi greeted her with a smile of acceptance to be the owner of that red pen. It made him to think just like her mother, she liked to make her own choices. Eventually, it finds heroism in small sign and in their own courage to move on with their life. Their bond of relationship is stuck with the touch of emotional regret.

“Dear Editor,” Sripathi wrote finally. “Early this morning, at the Toturpuram beach, I saw the most amazing sight ...” (356). This is the conclusion statement of the novel but it is the real beginning of the life which reflects the chance of existence, the loss of beauty and hope always accompanied in life and wisdom of pebble roll gradually off Sripathi's heart. It claims that life is like an unknown journey from one sea to another; a turtle might meet one of its offspring and slither throughout with un-acquaintance. Half a century later, baby turtles' desire engraved into their memories to return this same shore. Even the silent creatures are the epitomes who understand the life as a part of human being. Human beings are consecrated with their rational mind but in some cases they are failing to understand and accept the life as it is. Culture is not to masquerade to terminate our novelty by discerning the nationality such as India/Canada or by adapting the west of globalization but it is a priceless tool to access our life with a fullest satisfaction.

Badami discusses the recent trends of globalization and trans-nationalism. Edward Said says in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, “although authors are not determined “mechanically” by their cultures, they influence and are influenced by the event of their time”. Anita Rau Badami reflects the newer forms of imperialism and their effects on the microcosm of family and the macrocosm of society, and is a testament to the process of shaping as pointed out by Said. Though old forms of colonialism disappeared in south Asia in 1947, colonialism has since been transformed into a creature of many heads, of which

globalization/westernisation and trans-nationalism are the newest.

Badami's effort is formerly based on hackneyed 'the illusion of reality' going back to the very daybreak of the genre. It recklessly concludes in escalating the diverse the hiatus between the reader and writer. The techniques of post-colonialism are revolutionary of instituted literary practices and these are often united with 'outrageous' subject matter. *The Hero's Walk* mirrored the struggle of Sripathi, who acclimatize to transform and cross the borders between old and new world, by means of inflict as channelling pattern and zeal as strength for accommodating new environment. This is scrutinised as Bhabha writes, Is how the future is made: "The present of the world, which appears through the break-down of temporality, signifies a historical intermediary, familiar to the psychoanalytic concept of "a transference function, whereby the past dissolves in the present, so that the future becomes (once again) an open question, instead of being specified by fixity of the past" (Bhabha: 1994). When the question of identity begins, definitely the answer of struggle for assimilation, the yearning for acceptance- secrets shared by immigrants, who strive to conform, who alter himself or herself to adapt, who imitate to blend capture the attention. Badami's *The Hero's Walk* is an effort to bring out the transition in the postcolonial literature of both East and West.

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