

FEMALE HEROISM IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S NOVELS

*Dr. S. Karthikkumar
Assist. Professor of English
Department of English
Annamalai University
Annamalainagar*

*We shall have to train the woman also, then in both
kinds of skill, and train them for war as well and
treat them in the same way as the men. - Plato*

A Major development in modern Indian fiction has been the growth of a feminist or women-centered approach, an approach which seeks to project and interpret experience from the view point of feminine consciousness and sensibility. Feminism assumes that women experience the world differently from men, and write out of their different perspective. One of the consequences of now putting more emphasis on female heroism in literature is the differentiation between the conventional heroine on the one hand and a female hero on the other. Heroine stands for the conventional, more passive woman within a novel, whereas a female hero implies the concept of an active female protagonist who is not exclusively subordinate to a male hero.

One of the newest women writers in the vibrant field of Indian sub-continental literature is Anita Rau Badami. She is an eminent woman novelist who contributes to the emancipation of woman's status as her novels have strong female protagonists and deal with their peculiar problems. Though her novels have only female protagonists, she is not a radical feminist. Anita Rau Badami once said about feminism in an interview:

Well, it depends on what you mean by 'feminist'. If you mean that being a feminist is that somebody expect both sexes to be equal, so long as you both have equal opportunities and the chance to make a decision about where your life is going and the opportunity to work that decision through, the fair chance to do so, then yes, I'm a feminist. [...] now there is more awareness that women have a right to be treated as equals so perhaps the need has faded a bit. I mean there is still a need to yell and shout and scream a bit.

Badami portrays not traditional heroines but female protagonists who fight against the malechauvnistic society. "I didn't want to make her the stereotypical boring, submissive Indian woman because most women I know aren't that way." Saroja, an acid-tongued woman in **Tamarind Mem**, and Nirmala, a traditional Brahmin woman in **The Hero's Walk** are the female heroes. These women characters are struggling to survive as women in the patriarchal society. In general one can say that traditionally the woman is subordinated to the man throughout her life: as a child she has to obey her father, as an adult, she is under her husband's control and after his death under her son(s)'s or other men's control. Badami accuses the conventional rules of the society which oppress women. Women are supposed to respect the tradition and follow the conventions more than men. By preventing her from getting equal

education to men, women are confined within her households. Badami portrays how a woman acquires equal power in her family by her unique skills. In many activities, women are not just as good as men are, but better. Therefore, in a single generation, the caged birds have learned to wing their way to the sky. Badami's women characters Saroja and Nirmala want to be bossy in their family and learned to wing their ways to the sky.

In **Tamarind Mem**, Saroja, who desires to be doctor, is forced to get married by her Parents. Badami highlights the necessity of a marriage for a woman in the words of Saroja's mother, "a woman without a husband is like sand without the river. No man to protect you and every evil wind will blow over your body" (158). From this we can know how woman is threatened about life without marriage. Badami points out the traditional belief, "A woman's happiness lies in marriage" (159). Saroja's fight for studying medicine is every woman's desire to get her own room for herself. She is married to a man much older than her who cannot fulfill her romantic dreams. Saroja does not get a comfortable life after her marriage. Her disappointment makes her a sour-tongued woman. She is just a parcel wrapped in silk and gold given to the stranger in the name of marriage. Her married life seems to be a silent war for her. Saroja's marriage life is unaffectionate and uncommunicative, and she feels as if she were living in an "immense silence" (204). Badami shows how the past cultural restrictions in India hindered women in their personal lives and aspirations. Saroja feels caught in her traditional role as an Indian wife and mother who must always be the epitome of an ideal woman— cooking, keeping the house and raising children. Saroja's only weapon is her sour-tongue with which she shows her revenge upon her disappointed life and protects her daughters from the traditional rules that have enslaved her and destroyed her romantic dreams. She allows her daughters to make their own lives.

Saroja finds no way out of the disappointments trap but through a whiplash of words. Badami gives reason for giving sour-tongue to Saroja: "life was hard for her, so I gave her a sharp tongue to deal with it," (Interview). Saroja as a mother wants her daughters to be better than others "you have to be one step ahead of the rest of the world", she declares, "better than the best. Don't let anybody be ahead of you" (119). No one escapes from the caustic slice of her tongue. Yet, most of the time, she is quietly contented as a railway wife, responsible mother, trying to line up to the band epithets sowed in her mind by her mother. Her struggles to keep her faith in these beliefs which at one level, she knows these are shoes of cement in the sea of life. Saroja's in-between life was an exact fact in every woman's married life. Because for Saroja there are two lives one is life for her daughters and the other life for her own according to her own wishes. Heritage for Saroja is her mother and her grandmother. From her mother she learns the wifely duty, and from her grandmother she inherits her sour-tongue and a desire of making a room for her own. Saroja, a woman, who needs a romantic life, (attraction to very dark complexioned young Anglo-Indian motor mechanic, Paul da Costa) also cares her daughters, and gives them safe life. So Saroja inherits her mother's submissive life who never wants to miss her husband, wants to be a shadow for her husband. Although she likes her grandmother's individual life who has bequeathed her the sour-tongue, teaches her to act as an individual and make her own shadow not caring about others.

Even though she has a sour tongue, she never tries to break the traditional family bond. Not Because of she loves her husband but she loves her daughter. She never wants to destroy

their life. She recalls her mother's words; "I didn't want you children to grow up with shame" (215). Saroja a female hero refuses Paul's offer and maintain her unhappy married life only for her daughters' future. Here Saroja proves women's common character of leading their life like a candle to give light to their next generations. Saroja's sour-tongue protects her from her romantic dreams. Badami reveals women's modesty in using the power because of the Indian culture and motherhood qualities which are considered important for an Indian woman. She gives whatever she missed in her life to her daughters. Her younger daughter Roopa's marriage without permission never made her angry or disappointed, but she protects her daughter from her relatives' scorns by using her sour-tongue, "My girls know how to pick their fruit" (148). Saroja's permission to her elder daughter Kamini's to do doctorate in Canada makes her orphan. Badami pictures Saroja as a woman escaping from the traditional prison to the modern independent world. First she forces her out from her orthodox parents and then from her disappointed married life and now she unconsciously slowly escapes from the motherly duties. Saroja sends everyone away from her life like a tamarind tree, and takes to the railroad, a middle class, modern-day *sanyasi*, seeing places that her husband would not take her to on his frequent business trips. Her life is fulfilled in this journey. Her sour-tongue protects her from her daughters' convince. She completes her duties as a woman, as a daughter, as a wife and a mother. Now she is ready to lead a life for her own happiness without others impinge in her life. Badami's advice to a woman like Saroja is "going away is the easiest thing in the world. It is like dying. So simple it is to die. Living is hard, to make this small amount of time loaned to you by the gods worthwhile is hard. The real test is life itself, whether you are strong enough to stay and fight."(208). Saroja a Tamarind Mem never allows anyone under her to live. Her love for her family members is only a distance love. Badami portrays Saroja as a frustrated woman trapped in the cultural expectations of the time period. Only after her husband's death and her daughter's maturity may make Saroja to leave her traditional role and travel as she pleases.

Like Saroja, Nirmala in **The Hero's Walk** too leads a passive wife in a traditional Brahmin family under her patriarch husband Sripathi who is waiting for a retirement from the copywriting job which he has no passion. Nirmala's mother-in-law Ammayya, orthodox Brahmin woman, spinster sister-in-law Putti, her son Arun, who has no regular job even at the age of twenty-eight and her daughter Maya a professional medical person lives in Vancouver. Under these problematic surrounding family members, Nirmala, is one descent, long suffering anchor in this vortex of dysfunction. Maya's great crime, for which Sripathi will never forgive her, is having married someone of her own choice. After the death of Maya, she realizes her fault of fails to protect her because she was under the patriarchal rule of her husband Sripathi. Nirmala is a passive wife to her husband. But For malechauvnic Sripathi, Nirmala was just like a bar of lifebuoy soap functional but devoid of all imagination. After Maya's death, a new arrival in Nirmala's life was her granddaughter Nandana. After Nandana's arrival, Nirmala slowly learned to wing her into the modern world. She never wants to be a passive wife, no longer. Even she changed into a rebel for her survival still she maintains a peace in the home. As a woman, home is still her life and soul. In short, Badami represent Nirmala as a predictable line of a woman who while fulfilling societal expectations as a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother. It makes enough chutzpah in her to question such role-playing. Her resilience and adaptability finally make her a survivor (when her daughter dies), and a pragmatist (when she initiates the marriage between Putti and Gopala and crosses caste boundaries). Her daughter's loss makes her a survivor and her granddaughter makes her a protestor. Badami's description of the title **The**

Hero's Walk, "It's about heroism at many different levels. I find it touchingly heroic to just see people living from the day they're born until the day they dies, so full of hope. You just wake up every morning and expect the next day to go well. And I find that touching... that notion of heroism..." (*Interview*) Nirmala walks a heroic walk every day and succeeds not only in her life but also her success gives a bright future for her next generation women Nandana and Putti. Nirmala's achievement is a common one it's a victory of a modern women. Nirmala's success laid in making a family unity.

For a women's survival she needs to develop her talent and learns to improve her unique qualities. She never wants to be a submissive woman in the male-chauvinistic society. For her survival, women need a special-sufficiency, which can come only with the consolidation of female power. Badami's Nirmala and Saroja are the perfect example of the united power of the women. Even Saroja survives for her romantic dreams to get life she gives the emancipation to her next generation women, her daughters. Nirmala is one step ahead than Saroja because she survives for her next generation woman's future, succeeds in it without breaking the bond of relationship.

To sum up, Badami as a woman successfully portrays different kinds of women survivor in her novel. Their ability, self-respect, self-will, and desire for freedom were shows women's power in general. Saroja's sour tongue is a weapon for every woman to protect her from the patriarchal domination and it is also a vehicle for expressing her anger against her disappointments and her failures in her life. Nirmala's optimistic ways of life and her talent of making her failures as rising steps for success are qualities which make women successful conquerors. Badami predicts not the traditional woman but a modern woman who fights for her rights, who tries to get the power of control in her hand. Badami's focuses on female protagonists is one of the consequences of now putting more emphasis on female heroism in literature, was the differentiation between the conventional, more passive woman within a novel, whereas a female hero as in Badami's novels implies the concept of an active female protagonist who is not exclusively subordinate to a male hero. Badami's female heroes, Saroja and Nirmala, are active female heroes who survives to break the wall of patriarchal society succeeds in it. Thus, from Saroja and Nirmala we conclude that Indian women must try to fulfill two conflicting roles, one as a traditional wife and mother and the other as a modern woman.

REFERENCES

Badami, Anita Rau, **Tamarind Mem**. Canada: Penguin Group, 1996.

--. **The Hero's Walk**. Great Britain: clays limited, 2001.

Krishnasamy, Shantha. **The Woman in Indian Fiction**. New Delhi: Asish publishing house, 1984.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. **A Concise History of Indian Literature in English**. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008.

Mukherjee, Arun P. "Beginnings and Endings." Rev. of "The Hero's Walk. **The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad** 19.3 (summer2001):86-90.

Banerji, Jaya. "The Razor's Edge." Rev. of **Tamarind Mem: A Novel**. Indian Review of Books6.2 (16nov-15dec 1996):40-41.

Nelson, E.S. (ed.), **Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora**. New York: n.p., 1992.

Pabby, D.K... "Diaspora and Beyond: Anita Rau Badami's The Hero's Walk." **Commonwealth Review** 12.2 (2000-2001):167-71.

Richards, Linda L. rev. "Where Sorrow Walks" online Available: [http://www.January magazine.com/fiction/hero's walk/html/](http://www.Januarymagazine.com/fiction/hero's%20walk/html/)

Kozminuk, Angela. "A Conversation with Anita Rau Badami." Online. **The Peak**.7Oct. 1996. Available: [http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the peak/96-3/issue6/Anita./html](http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the%20peak/96-3/issue6/Anita./html)

Sharma, Maya. "The Local and the Transnational in Badami's The Hero's Walk". **South Asian Review** 26.2 Dec.2005: 276-287.