
THE THEME OF DIASPORA IN ANITHA RAU BADAMI'S NOVEL THE HERO'S WALK

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Received: Aug. 2019 Accepted: Sep. 2019 Published: Oct. 2019

Abstract: People are lured to travel overseas for better life, materialistic achievements, education, money etc. Their migration has paved way for the emergence of Diaspora literature. Their writings depict the problems of immigrants; struggle for re-establishing themselves, quest for identity and cultural conflicts. The strong urge in them to express their up rootedness and isolation has been the reason for the flourishing of expatriate literature. Anita Rau Badami is a prominent writer of south Asian Diaspora. She is born in Rourkela, Orissa but migrated and living in Canada. She has carved a niche for herself as an Indo Canadian Diaspora writer. She has written four novels. She writes about the frustrations of immigrants. Her second novel *The Hero's Walk*, published in 2001, has won the prestigious Marian Angel Award for excellent fiction. It has won her international acclaim as an expatriate writer. The novel deals with the repercussions of immigration of a middle class Indian migrating from Toturpuram to America. The complexities of traditional middle class Indian family and the consequences of migration are depicted in the novel skillfully. The paper deals with the theme of diaspora in the novel *The Hero's Walk*. It focuses on the insecure lives of immigrants leading to cultural conflicts, emotional tensions causing turbulent ripples in the house hold of the protagonist, Sripathy back home in India. The unexpected fatal accident of Maya and her husband abroad crumbles the family abandoning their young granddaughter as an orphan in the new land. The trauma, loss and grief of immigrants are highlighted in the paper.

Keywords: Cultural Conflict, Insecurity, Grief, Quest for Identity.

Introduction: Anita Rau Badami is one of the Indo- Canadian diasporic writers. She was born in Orissa, living in Canada. She had a mobile childhood as her father, a railway engineer, was transferred frequently to different places. She earned her B.A. in the University of Madras. She migrated to Canada after marriage and pursued an M.A. from the University of Calgary, Canada. She has written four novels. Expatriate experience, impact of immigration, nostalgia, cultural conflict and grief are some of the prominent themes discussed in her novels. She is the recipient of many awards, including Marian Angel Award for excellence in fiction and Regional Common Wealth Writer's Prize for her novel *The Hero's Walk*.

Badami through her second novel, *The Hero's Walk* takes us to the patriarchal, conservative, traditional, Hindu Brahmin house hold of fifty eight year old stereotypical character, Sripathy Rao in his "Big house" in a fictitious town, Toturpuram in Badami's home town in India. He works as a copy writer for an advertising agency. He lives with his orthodox and uproarious mother Ammaya, a docile and diligent wife, Nirmala, unemployed activist son Arun, 40 year old spinster sister Putti and his only daughter Maya. Badami through this novel shows how the tumultuous problems and complexities that crop up in an Indian middle class family, when one of the family members migrate to Canada. Badami focuses on the problems of Diaspora such as, cultural conflicts, quest for identity, cultural gap that caused in the family of immigrants as her themes. She deals with the pathetic state of immigrants, emotional tensions undergone by the immigrant's family and at last how peace evolved causing much turbulence, loss and grief.

The novel is set partly in India and partly in Canada. It is written in third person narrative. The novel begins with a phone call from Vancouver, Canada received by Sripathy informing them about the death of his only daughter, Maya and her husband in a fatal accident in Canada. He is asked to fulfill the legal formalities, perform final rites and fetch his granddaughter from Canada back to India. The news disturbs the whole family. Sripathy, the patriarch, and the sole bread winner of the family is shocked and taken aback. The whole family remains quiet though the accident is a big blow to the whole family. Sripathy never makes any attempts to sue and investigate about the accident abroad. He hails from a middle class family and his poor financial conditions do not allow him to probe into the matter. "They had no money for legal fees. Besides how could he, Sripathy Rao, a man of no consequence in this world, sue somebody thousand miles away in another country". Sripathy regrets that due to poverty he is unable to sue or punish the person responsible for the accident. Another strong reason is that the blemish marked by his daughter in marrying a foreigner has made him feel ashamed in the society. Here an Indian marrying a native of America is treated as shameful in India.

Immigrants try to help and support each other as they prefer to stay together in the new land. The family friends of Maya Dr. Sundarra, who is an Indian doctor and his wife Mrs. Kiran, inform Sripathy about the fatal accident. They also take care of Nandana until he comes to Canada to fetch her back to India. They assist him in fulfilling all legal formalities. When Maya and her husband go out on a drive before they met with an accident, they leave Nandana at doctor's residence. They inform her about the accident and console her. They take care of her during hard times and convince her that her grandfather will take her to India. She will be looked after by them. They help Sripathy in performing the final rites of Maya and her husband. They extend their help in packing the things before they leave for India.

Diasporas migrate for better prospects. They dream of travelling overseas when they get an opportunity. They think that their wheel of fortune will be turned and their dreams can be realized abroad. Maya migrates to America to pursue higher studies. She gets selected for the prestigious fellowship in America. Sripathy feels delighted that Maya would fulfill the dreams of Ammayya. His wife Nirmala doesn't give her consent to send her abroad before she gets married. Hence she is betrothed to Prakash Bhat working in Philadelphia before she leaves for America. Parents feel insecure to send their spinster daughter to a foreign country. Young and grown up girls are treated as a burden and responsibility until they are married in Indian lower and middle class families.

Expatriates feel uprooted after migrating to the new land. They feel alienated and nostalgic. Hence they try to communicate frequently with their dear ones in their homeland. Maya has neither friends nor acquaintances to receive her in America. She manages to settle down in a room shared by fellow Indians. She feels lonely and isolated. She writes letters regularly to her parents and also communicates her feelings about the new place with them over phone. She writes a series of letters to her father describing her roommates, professors, assignments, food and so on. She yearns for the acidic taste of the pickle made by her mother. "She was lonely in the beginning and didn't like the meal of meat, when cooked by her roommates in the shared kitchen" (Badami 5). Maya is born and brought up in a traditional conservative Hindu Brahmin family. As she is a vegetarian she doesn't like her roommates cooking non-vegetarian dishes in her shared kitchen, but she adjusts as she wants to realize her dreams and fulfill the expectations of her parents. Her father expects Maya to honor her family name and "fit into the life in the west without losing sight of our Indian values" (100). Maya's parent expects her to preserve Indian values while living in west.

Immigrants have an impact of the new culture. They undergo cultural conflict. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. Gradually they try to adapt and assimilate western culture. Maya gains ground in the new country and starts taking major decisions in her life independently. She thinks that Alan Baker, a native of American, suits her as a life partner when compared to Prakash. She does not hesitate to convey her parents that she is in love with Alan. "I am in love with Alan Baker, whom I have known for two years. We want to get married with your blessings. I cannot help the way, I feel about Alan" (109). Sripathy is shocked to know about Maya's decision.

According to Indian culture a woman is not given freedom to choose her life partner. It is her parents who decide the bridegroom based on the family back ground and horoscope. Though marriage is a private affair, it is common in India that parents arrange marriages for their children. Daughters have to oblige and accept the decision made by the head of the family. Retorting and going against the fathers decision is considered as ill manners in Indian society.

Sripathy is perplexed because Maya, a traditional, mature, submissive Indian girl, who cannot even bear the smell of meat when her fellow roommates cook in her shared kitchen does not hesitate to marry an American. He becomes suspicious about the change in his daughter's perspective towards life. He thinks "had Maya slept with that fellow? Was she pregnant? Was that the way she was marrying him? How could she share her bed before marriage?"(110). He warns her seriously that marrying a foreigner will ruin the reputation of the family. Maya does not compromise, "she explained in an equally resonate tone that she could not change her mind about loving somebody and wanting to spend the rest of her life with him" (121). Sripathy becomes furious and dismisses Maya from the family. He erases her totally from his mind. He says, "She is dead for me" (113). He refuses to read the letters written by her from Vancouver.

The impact of immigration on the family members of immigrants is immeasurable. The tragic death of Maya and Alan causes turbulent ripples in the house hold of Sripathy in India. He crumbles down from inside as Nirmala blames him for Maya's death for withholding his blessings from her and refusing to communicate with her. Guilt ridden Sripathy flies to Canada to fetch Nandana, who is in shock and unable to digest the fact. She has nobody to share her grief other than Kiran aunty to console her. She is orphaned in an alien land. She is dumb stricken. She does not speak to anybody but her thoughts and imaginations are expressed in interior monologues by the novelist skillfully. Her visit to her home with aunt Kiran is heart touching. At the tender age, she has to bear the huge loss and grief. She hears the voices of her parents as she longs to feel their presence. She is totally at chaos as she is unable to imagine her life without her parents. When Sripathy comes to take her to India, she is reluctant to leave her home because it is her homeland. She hides herself in the bed as she is emotionally attached to it. She is born and brought up and belongs to it. The memories of her parents are still fresh in that home. She visualizes, "if she doesn't speak, if she sat absolutely still, she could see her blue house and her parents and her room with its Minnie mouse lamp shed all reflected in those eyeballs. She could see her mother, moving around in the kitchen, making supper. And her father, hunched over his computer, typing away" (47).

Psychological and emotional trauma undergone by bereft and bewildered Nandana is portrayed successfully by Badami. She doesn't want the image of her parents to be erased from her mind. She is silent because she thinks that if she talks the vision of her parents may be disturbed. It causes great psychic turmoil in her mind. She never speaks to Sripathy because he is a total stranger to her. Her mother advises her not to speak to strangers, hence she refuse to talk. "Never talk to strangers they had said. If some stranger approaches you, start screaming or run away, never accept anything from someone you do not know" (29). Nandana, usually a talkative girl but her undaunted memories create great psychic unease.

Diasporas cannot quell nostalgia. Nandana, after getting down from train at Toturpuram, compares the hot climate of India to Melfalane bathroom in Canada. She doesn't like the noise of the people in railway station. She decides not to stay in the old big house in India. She hates Indian food, the old house, people and climate. She doesn't prefer to play with her neighbors. She plays with her toys brought from Canada with her lips moving soundlessly. She is not interested in attending Indian school.

Badami projects two cultures in the novel. She writes about celebrations of festivals in India and Canada. Nandana hears from the neighboring kids describing about Deepavai festival celebrations, fire crackers, new dresses and sweets. She wonders and recollects the carnival of Halloween celebrated on the 31st of October in Canada along with her parents. Maya, though an immigrant celebrates Halloween.

Immigrants have firsthand experience of Canadian culture. When grandmother celebrates Deepavali for the first time, after coming to India, Nandana realizes that in India, “they didn’t have Halloween, instead there was something called Deepavali, when people got presents and burst fireworks” (278).

Badami, at the end of the novel brings changes in the lives of the people. Reconciliation grows out of tragedy. Sripathy undergoes remorseful feeling looking at Nandana. He understands that chance, hope and loss always accompany life. He gives his consent for his sister’s marriage with his neighbor Munnuswamy’s son Gopala, though they belong to a lower caste community. His unsettled and unsuccessful, political activist son resolves to join a in a small job in Delhi to support his family. The whole family support and nurture Nandana with love and care and help her to overcome the emotional trauma. Nandana regains her speaking ability. The change is evident from Nirmala’s words, “what’s gone is gone. I will always miss my Maya, but tomorrow’s meal still has to be cooked, no?”(323).The family manages to overcome the grief by accepting and shouldering on the responsibility of Nandana. The novel ends on an optimistic note.

Badami deals with the complex problems of the immigrants. Expatriates long to travel abroad to fulfill their dreams and expectations of their dear ones when they get an opportunity to travel overseas to make their lives better. Indian women are always under the guardianship of either father, brother, husband or son, but parents send their spinster daughters alone to an alien land either for education or for employment to explore and fulfill their expectations without hesitation. After migrating they are unable to quell from nostalgia. They stagger between their homeland and the alien country. They long to be in touch with their kith and kin either in phone conversations or by writing to them a series of letters describing the new experience. Though they try to resist the new culture initially they have the undeniable impact of it. When they embrace the new culture gradually there is cultural clash. Badami also depicts the feeling of insecurity, helplessness, loss and grief in the lives of immigrants and its impact on their family members left behind in their homeland skillfully.

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