

## VICTIMS AS HEROES: WOMEN'S AGENCY WITHIN BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S *THE HERO'S WALK*

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### **Abstract**

The caste system of India has its deepest affect on the lives of women, whether of the upper castes or of the dalits. The upper caste women of India occupy an intricate position in the caste system. Though they enjoy some kind of supremacy in the social hierarchy, they are subjected to strict rules of conduct because the control of female sexuality is seen as essential for maintenance of caste purity. The present paper attempts to examine the condition of upper caste Indian women of contemporary time within Brahmanical patriarchy, i.e., the control and subordination of women in the name of tradition, as depicted in Anita Rau Badami's novel *The Hero's Walk*. Focusing on the female characters in the novel, the paper also analyses the possibility of women's agency within the system.

**Key words:** caste system, brahmanical patriarchy, women, agency.

In her essay "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India", Uma Chakravarty, the renowned feminist scholar, uses the term 'Brahmanical patriarchy' to refer to the control of women and women's sexuality through the prevailing practices and beliefs among the upper castes of India. Caste system is a social stratification system unique to India, and like any other discriminatory system, caste system of India has its deepest affect on the lives of women, whether of the upper castes or of the dalits. Chakravarty observes that the maintenance of the caste system depends on the control of female sexuality, and it is controlled through the practice of endogamous marriages i.e. marriage within the same caste. "The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has been institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guided"(Chakravarty, "Brahmanical Patriarchy" 579).

However, the position of the upper caste women in the Indian society is a complicated one. They are definitely subordinated to their males and are subjected to strict patriarchal rules of conduct, but they also enjoy superiority over the lower caste men and women. Discussing women's relation to the caste system in contemporary time, Chakravarti comments:

If we look at women today their lives are located at the intersection of class, caste, and patriarchy/ies. These structures can all work to oppress them, as in the case of dalit women, but most other women are located in a

way that they can be both subordinated and also wield a degree of power. This is so especially, if women belong to an upper caste and have access, through their menfolk, to economic resources and social power. (*Gendering Caste* 144)

The women of the upper castes give their consent to the system that dominates them, because they derive certain benefits from the system, both material and symbolic. Another important point noted by Chakravarty is that the compliance of women to structures that oppresses them is invisibilized under the notion of upholding tradition or the specific cultures of families or of communities. Leela Dube, the famous anthropologist and feminist scholar, observes that women play a crucial role in the caste system because it is they who maintain purity rules in the kitchen. Thus, whether by conforming to the codes of conduct, by upholding family traditions or by maintaining purity rules in the kitchen, women perpetuate the caste system and its restrictions in their everyday lives.

Anita Rau Badami's novel, *The Hero's Walk* (2000), relates the story of an Indian Brahmin family standing at the crossroads of tradition and modernity at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the novel mainly centers around Sripathi Rao, the 52 year old family father, the novel makes in-depth portrayals of the five female members in the Rao family: Ammayya, the aged mother of Sripathi; Shantamma, Sripathi's grandmother; Nirmala, Sripathi's wife; Putti, Sripathi's unmarried sister, and Maya, Sripathi and Nirmala's daughter. Focusing on these women characters in the novel, the paper aims to examine the role and position of today's women within 'Brahmanical patriarchy' and analyses the possibility of women's agency within the system. The paper's main argument is that if women are the main tool of perpetuating the caste system, as observed by scholars such as Chakravarty and Dube, then they can also be a major force in changing the system as shown in the novel in question.

Anita Rau Badami is a writer of Indian Diaspora living in Canada. Born in Rourkela, Odisha, India, Badami emigrated to Canada in 1991. Her novels are mainly based on her past life in India and her experiences as an immigrant in Canada. She explores in her writings the complexities of Indian family life with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the West. Her first novel, *Tamarind Mem* that grew out of her graduate thesis, was published worldwide in 1996, except in the US where it was published as *Tamarind Woman* in 2002. Swinging between India and Canada, *Tamarind Mem* is about the ties of love and resentment that bind mothers and daughters. *The Hero's Walk*, her second novel won the Regional Commonwealth Writer's Prize, Italy's Premio Berto and was also named Washington Post Best Book of 2001. Badami's third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) tells the stories of three women, linked in love and tragedy over a span of fifty years, sweeping from the Partition of India and Pakistan to the explosion of Air India flight in 1985.

Badami's best-selling novel, *The Hero's Walk* narrates the story of the Rao family living in the town of Toturpuram on the Bay of Bengal. Falling from the economic prosperity of his father's time, Sripathi Rao, the male head of the family, is struggling hard to keep his family with his mediocre job as an advertizing copy writer. Nirmala, Sripathi's wife usually maintains the house with a calmness though occasionally exasperated by her tyrannical mother-in-law, the dwindling family income, and her longing for her daughter, Maya, who lives in Canada and with whom Sripathi has severed all connections after she had married to a man of another caste and race. The son, Arun, a graduate student, engages in social services rather than finding a job. Putti, Sripathi's sister at the age of 42 has almost lost marital eligibility, because her mother rejects every proposal that comes. Ammayya, Sripathi's mother now in her eighties, makes life

miserable for everybody in the house with her continuous scolding and criticism. But life in the family changes when one morning they get the news of the death of Maya and her husband in a car accident leaving Sripathi as the legal guardian of her daughter, Nandana. Maya's death makes everybody in the house rethink over their actions and beliefs.

Badami, in the novel, shows the changes in the caste system in contemporary India. The ancestral house of the Rao's, referred to as the Big House in the novel, was once a landmark of the Brahmin Street, but now is in a crumbling state. The condition of the house itself symbolizes the falling status of the family. The low caste family next door, headed by a dairy man, copes economically much better than the Brahmin family headed by Sripathi. However, the ideology of caste has still not vanished from the minds of the people. Sripathi and Ammayya still look down upon their low caste neighbour, Munnuswamy's family. Ammayya, resenting the rise of Munnuswamy from a milk-man to a local member of the Legislative Assembly, says: "This is no longer Brahmin Street. Cow-shit Street would be a better name for it ...If only we had known that the rogue was saving our money to drive us out of here, we would have drunk water instead of milk. Much safer for all of us it would have been"(20). Except buying milk from them, the Rao family maintains a safe distance from Munnuswamy's family. "Nirmala had never been inside Munnuswamy's house. All her conversations with Mrs. Munnuswamy had been conducted over the wall or near the gates"(317).

The author examines the caste system especially through the female characters in the novel. The women in the novel can be divided into three groups. First, there are women who belong to the previous generation and who experience the real tyranny of the Brahmanical patriarchy. Sripathi's mother, Ammayya and his grandmother, Shantamma belong to this group. Secondly, there are women who are at the crossroads between traditional beliefs and present changes. To this group belong Nirmala and Putti. And the third group is of the new generation who do not care about the sentiments like caste and creed. Maya represents this group in the novel.

Each of the female characters in the novel has different perceptions of the traditional Brahmanical rules of conduct prescribed for them, and each tackles with them differently and according to their situations. Ammayya's character is very interesting because of her self-imposition of the old rules on herself. It is kind of her tactic to fight with her decreasing social and economic status. Her husband Narasimha Rao, once a famous lawyer of the Brahmin Street, had kept a mistress openly and when he died he left nothing for his family except burdens of loans and shame. Ammayya's only hope was that Sripathi would become a famous doctor and would bring her back her past honours. But her dream was crushed as Sripathi could not complete his medical studies and ended up being an advertising copy writer in a small local company. When all her hopes of better days were broken into pieces, Ammayya took on another way to hold on to her earlier social position:

...Ammayya then concentrated on becoming the perfect widow. She was determined to erase all memory of the whore from people's minds, to show the world that *she* was Narasimha Rao's bereaved wife...she insisted on having her head shaved like the widows of the previous generation...She wore only maroon cotton saris...She swore off certain vegetables, like garlic and onions, that were believed to have aphrodisiac qualities and were therefore forbidden to widows. She dug up archaic fasts and rituals and became more rigidly Brahmanical than the temple's own priest (65).

With all these she wants to show that she is a Brahmin widow, and therefore, though economically weak, she is still superior to her low caste neighbours. She holds on to the old norms of social hierarchy rather than excepting the changes around her. It is not that she is unaware of the realities but she ignores them to make use of the only thing she is left with, that is, her caste superiority.

Ammayya's mother-in-law was the one who really belonged to the time when the patriarchal rules were truly strict for Brahmin women. But in contrast to Ammayya, Shantamma took pleasure in breaking the rules. Especially, in her old age when she recovered from a stroke, she stopped caring about rules and manners and "all her secret longings surfaced like lava erupting from a volcano"(51). She started doing everything that is forbidden to her like smoking beedis, drinking liquor, eating eggs or chatting with Rukku, the outcaste woman.

Nirmala, Sripathi's wife, is presented in the novel as a model of a traditional Indian Brahmin housewife. "She is a timid woman who has spent most of her life observing what she considers are the Rules- rules set down by family, or society, or whatever" (McCarthy). She maintains the family peace by obeying her husband even when she knows that he is wrong and by bearing Ammayya's tortures quietly. She observes the family rituals and does whatever she was taught to do in her upbringing. When Maya gets married to Alan Baker, a Canadian, Sripathi refuses to keep any connection with her. And Nirmala, despite her desire to see her daughter, never dares to go against her husband: "But Nirmala hadn't written either. She could not defy her husband; she had never been taught how to do so and she lacked the courage besides. She had scanned the last brief letter repeatedly, as if she could force her daughter to materialize out of the elegant black script, and had cried over the writing" (113). But the death of her beloved daughter changes Nirmala into a protestant. Her obedience for Sripathi quickly transforms into anger. She realizes that it was her lack of courage to disobey her husband that has taken her daughter away from her. Maya's death makes her look upon herself. "How could she have been so like a faithful animal?"(287) – Nirmala wonders looking back at herself. And she stops playing her role as an obedient wife and daughter-in-law. "Now She no longer cares about obeying Sripathi without question or hurting Ammayya"(286-287). It is as if by fixing Putti's marriage with Munnuswamy's son, Gopala, she wants to defy the system that has driven Maya away from her. She crosses the caste boundaries as she initiates the marriage between Putti and Gopala. She does not even wait for Sripathi or Ammayya's approval as she accepts the proposal. She gathers courage to criticize her husband in his face and goes on following her mind. When Sripathi was critical of her going to the Munnuswamy's, Nirmala says bursting into anger: "...Then I will go, I am fed up with always listening to your nonsense. This is not right, that is not okay, what will people say? You have ruined my life because of all this nonsense..." (294).

Putti, Sripathi's sister, is another women caught up in the vortex of tradition and duty. At the age of 42, she is still unmarried, because her mother wants to marry her off to the "best boy". Putti is one of Ammayya's treasures whom she does not want to let go. And Putti lacks the courage to defy her mother and never expresses her feelings for Gopala, because she knows that Ammayya would never accept a low-caste boy as her son-in-law. It is Nirmala who finally appears as a path breaker for Putti when she accepts Gopala's mother's proposal for the marriage. As expected, Ammayya makes great fuss over the matter. The continuous influence of the caste system can be felt in her following words: "Yes, even our toilet cleaner is very nice, no doubt. Why you don't marry her son? Henh? Why not throw some more shit on our family name? Nice"(330). However, Putti finally gathers courage to come out of her mother's orthodox

Brahmin rules. She prepares herself for a new life with Gopala ignoring all the curses of her mother.

Maya, Nirmala and Sripathi's daughter, appears to be the most powerful and liberated female character in the novel. Though we see her only through the memories of the other members in the family, she remains the most influential presence in the family. Most of the women in the family measure themselves against Maya. Putti, for example, thinks that even though Maya died young she had lived more full a life than most people do who live to old age. And with her death, it is as if she have transferred all her strength to follow her mind- at the cost of breaking traditions, to her mother and Putti, so that the family that had once shunned her for marrying out of their caste and race, now decides to marry off its another daughter to their low-caste neighbour. Her death makes Nirmala forget her *Pativrata dharma* as she hits Sripathi frantically accusing him for the death of her daughter. She breaks the caste boundaries deciding that Putti should not suffer the same fate that Maya had.

Thus Badami, in her novel, makes a realistic portrayal of the condition of upper caste Indian women within Brahmanical patriarchy. The Rao family with its hollow pride on its caste status makes its female members follow the path of 'tradition'. This obligation is specially seen when it comes to their marriage. They are expected to uphold their family pride by marrying within their caste. The pride and ego of Sripathi makes Maya suffer as she dies in a distant land after nine years of aloofness from her family. Putti is another victim of the system that uses women as a means of upholding tradition. To Ammayya, Putti must be married off to a high caste affluent family to add to their family respect. But ultimately the system is broken down as the women in the family developed their agency. Nirmala's transformation from a timid, obedient housewife to an independent being can be perceived well in her conversation with Gopala's mother. Nirmala does not wait for Sripathi or Ammayya's approval, rather takes the decision herself and invites them to the Big House. "I will take care of everything, don't worry"(319)- she assures Gopala's mother who still cannot believe that her proposal is accepted so easily. Nirmala thus makes ways for emancipation not only for herself but also for Putti. In the novel, that celebrates the day-to-day heroism of ordinary people, Nirmala emerges as a female hero. "It's heroic that she has the courage to look at herself in the mirror, as it were, and realize that heroism isn't simply about following rules. Sometimes it's about doing what you think is right, at the cost of displeasing people around you", says Badami in her interview with McCarthy. Like Nirmala, Putti and Maya too resist and challenge the system instead of being passive victims. They subvert the notion of Indian women as submissive and weak, and become active initiators of social change. They have proved that even within oppressive structures women can undertake little acts that will help to subvert the structure or will at least lead to a transformative change in their lives or in the lives of other women in the society.

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