

ANITA RAU BADAMI'S *TAMARIND MEM*: A PLURICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Tanuka Chatterjee
Research Scholar
Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Banaras Hindu University (U.P.)

Abstract

The process of Globalization has not only unsettled people and cultures but has created new identities and affiliations in terms of both conflicts and collaborations. Multiculturalism, seen as a part of a larger human rights revolution in relation to ethnic and racial diversity, posits the idea of identity as multiple, heterogeneous and hybrid. It becomes imperative to trace mixed and multiple identities, while interrogating possibilities of identities. Cultural identity, unlike that of the traditional identity politics is positional. It defines itself through difference with that which is being resisted. It is the politics of recognizing that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not of one. In Anita Rau Badami's seminal *Tamarind Mem* (1997), pluricultural perspectives of ethnic renewal of identities can be seen as the reconstruction of one's ethnic identity by reclaiming a discarded identity, replacing or amending an identity in an existing ethnic identity repertoire. The constant struggle against marginalization, objectification and subsequent erasure of women forces the protagonists to confront and negotiate issues of representations. The novel foregrounds how the identity of women serves as a subjective process constantly restructuring itself.

Keywords: Pluriculturalism, identity, Anita Rau Badami, *Tamarind Mem*, multiple identifications, marginalisation of women.

Traditional identity politics were premised on a veritable quagmire to create a singular space while ignoring one's fluid and shifting positions within a complicated nexus of gender, race, religious, cultural, sexual and nationalist positionings. But more recent (and complex) cultural identity politics has gained ground as a matter of Becoming as well as of Being. Authentic identity has become a matter of choice, disposition, relevance and a feeling of rightness. It defines itself through a difference with that which is being resisted. It is the politics of recognising that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not a singular one. Pluriculturalism is an approach to the self and others as complex, atypical rich beings which act and react from the perspective of multiple identifications. It is premised on the fact that we are all complexly constructed through different categories and different antagonisms; these may have an effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not yet operate on us in exactly the same way. In this case, identity or identities are the

by-products of experiences in different cultures. Various cultures (national, regional or social) and their consequent manifestations do not simply coexist side by side; they are compared, contrasted and validated through the fruitful interactions within the cultural paradigm which comprise them (Brah 175).

Cultural identities are defined by heterogeneity of features, racial, cultural and social. Heterogeneity and diversity becomes necessary to posit a concept of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; which survives by being hybrid. In a culture suffused with heterogeneity of experiences, a need arises to resist a politics that involves an easy identification, which substitutes one set of positive images with another set of negative images. As an effect, multiple identifications create a unique personality instead of or more than a static identity, wherein people possess and profess multiple identities while belonging to multiple groups with different degrees of identification. This dismantles the notion of identity as always being distinctly singular in character, resembling spontaneous, momentary and non-transferrable coinages that possess validity only within the context of their most immediate employment.

Stuart Hall has argued that far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, cultural identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power (396). Thus, negotiations of identity politics, consumerism and urban space is based not only on affiliations (gender, race, religion and class) but upon two or more social categories each of which signifies a specific type of power relation produced and exercised in and through a myriad of economic, social and political practices. The activation of these various affiliations is context-specific. This leads to a multitude of paradoxes in the constitution of identities where hybrid identities tend to develop into plural personalities and plurality is shaped and created by the difference it contains. Trinh T. Minh-ha assiduously observes: “The search for an identity... is usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized” (74).

Anita Rau Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* (1997) [published in the United States under the title *Tamarind Woman* in 2002] refuses monolithic representations of women and their selfhood force-fed into our nationalist construction of identity, a part of the ossified definition of Indian culture and Indian womanhood. The novel’s multiple-voiced subjectivity prefigures the lived-in resistance to competing notions for one’s allegiance or self-identification with one’s cultural milieu. In the novel, the novelist tries to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective identities; certain fixed identity categories are both a basis of oppression as well as a basis for power. The theorizations of different subject formations and a historicized politics of location here offer strategies by which an entire culture in transition has been grasped. *Tamarind Mem*’s female characters are locked into interiors and corners, circumscribed by rules, traditions, customs, expectations and duties. Through a trope of revisiting (and rewriting) memories, the narrative prefigures the two main characters; the rebellious, argumentative and opinionated Saroja and her sensitive, demure and saintly elder daughter Kamini. The very practise of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Here, writing often becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself (Alexander 1984). The first part of the novel is an account of Kamini’s coming-of-age trials and tribulations of her childhood recorded with an embarrassing flippancy and frivolous self-indulgence; Saroja’s recollection of her life accounts for a third of the later part of the narrative. The novel records how each person in that cultural milieu experiences the microcosm of their lives differently. It also posits the fact that identity often distorts, rather than illuminates, individual differences.

In the novel, Kamini learns to cope with her transitional life as the daughter of a Railway civil servant who uproots the family from one post-Independence Indian Railway community to another. Being unable to deal properly with her own feelings of estrangement and loss, she finds refuge and stability in stories. Stories do more than allow Kamini to see and listen to the “hidden words that seethed beneath the surface of the ordinary” (Badami 24); they offer both a temporary reprieve from the “tight lines of anger and frustration” which envelop her parents’s lives and they help her to better understand the complexities of human behaviour (24). Vividly imaginative and extremely sensitive to every nuance of her parents’s being, she confesses:

I was always alert to the rivers threading their way through every house we inhabited. I had developed a fine instinct for these unseen bodies of water, knowing which ones ran deep, where the currents were dangerous and the whirlpools lurked. I knew that a chasm gaped between my parents, a hole so deep that even Dadda [her father] with his engineer hands could not build a bridge to span it. (Badami 23)

For Kamini, the visage of identity is a construct; after it ceased to be, its essence was captured and nurtured in the memories that identity entailed. The fluid, shifting boundaries of identities never perturbed her; the memories kept her warm and satisfied. While fierce waves of nostalgia washed over her repeatedly in Calgary, the freezing cold city where “. . . even the traffic sounds were muffled by the snow” (Badami 1), Kamini rued:

In real life, I reflected, you warmed yourself on cold winter days in a foreign land by pulling out a rag-bag collection of these memories. You wondered which ones to keep and which to throw away, paused over a fragment here, smiled at a scrap. You reached out to grasp people you knew and came up with a handful of air, for they were only chimeras, spun out of your imagination. You tried to pin down a picture, thought that you had it exactly the way it smelled and looked so many years ago, and then you noticed, out of the corner of your eye, a person who had not been there before, a slight movement where there should have been the stillness of empty canvas. (33).

Adolescence brought an awareness of individual differences in Kamini. She sought a way to re-enter herself by writing or dreaming herself into existence through strong individualistic notions of selfhood. She never failed to (re)construct the past through the sinuous threads of memory, narrative, fantasy and myth. For Kamini, the process of reinvention began with language. In Calgary, language not only separates her from her past and from the Canadian community of her present, it also separates her from herself. An uncharted landscape, an acute sense of dislocation (even where being dislocated is the norm) and an equally acute challenge of having to invent for herself a place and an identity without her traditional supports- beguiled and terrified her. She was in exile, from herself as well from the secure ‘rootedness’ her family provided her.

Saroja, on the other hand, resists generalization. Brash, opinionated, rebellious, defiant, argumentative, assertive and yet fiercely sensitive to her husband, Dadda’s “merciless quiet”, her notion of selfhood is a veritable mosaic of fragments, it is multiple in that it binds together collectivities. Patterns of her life have been so disrupted that she’s unable to find a straight line amidst the disarray. For her, the notion of marriage is “. . . like escaping from one locked room into another, forever wandering in a maze, hitting my nose against closed doors” (Badami 69). Harboring a mortifying fear of silence, stasis and passivity (silence, for her, is morgue-like; symbolizing the emptiness of life), her rebellious nature stifles her, obfuscates her instinctual

drives. In a bigoted patriarchal prejudiced society, where a woman is considered to be her husband's shadow and a 'headache', fit for the gendered spaces like the kitchen and home, she feels her individuality throttled. She ruminates, "It is as if I live within a series of dreams. As long as a dream holds I know where I am. I try to fix myself in one place, a single context" (90). But her identity is that which is constantly producing and reproducing itself anew, through transformation and difference. With Dadda's filial ineptitude, all he does is make up stories to entertain both Kamini and her younger sister, Roopa. Saroja's quip "Are stories enough to bring up a child?" (74) is met with silence. Having imbibed a fierce sense of duty towards her responsibilities as a wife and a mother, she develops an equally fierce, rancorous tongue to fight and subvert the essentialized notion of a meek, submissive and obedient wife. To assert her gradually dissembling identity, she takes recourse to strategies of narrative subversion and use of language suited for specific struggles. This earns her the nickname of 'Tamarind Mem' ('tamarind' for the sourness of her tongue) from Paul Da Costa, the casteless Anglo-Indian mechanic, who she falls for but baulks when "words like duty and loyalty clamour in [my] ears" (131). She believes, "I marry a man who is already old, who fulfils his obligation to society by acquiring a wife. I am merely a symbol of that duty completed" (130) and goes on to deliberate:

I am married to a man who has no feelings to spare for a wife. A dried-out lemon peel whose energies have already been squeezed out caring for a sick mother, worrying about his sisters, inheriting his dead father's unfinished duties. It ate up his youth. With my tamarind tongue, never yielding a moment, I use my grandmother's strategy of words to ward off the pain of rejection. His aloof, merciless cool, my defensive anger. I will not beg for the affection that is due to me, his wife. (Badami 124)

Kamini is perhaps more faithful than Badami herself in delineating Dadda's character as whatever gloss we get over his character is through Kamini's account of her childhood. Kamini remembers Dadda as an affectionate, attentive, caring and nurturing father who whetted her imagination with endless stories of 'going on line' and other Railway tales. Even though Dadda's identity as a child was unknown to Kamini, she "tried to make up [my] Dadda, build him from the things he told me, or from the few things that remained from his childhood" (Badami 39). But Saroja, tied to Dadda by the 'tenuous thread' of marriage, harboured a different impression of him altogether: "I have nothing to discuss with this stranger who takes me from one town to another, showing me a whole country. He sits with his daughters about him, telling his tales, while I hover in the penumbra of their shared happiness" (130). Thus, Dadda is variously portrayed as a nurturing father as well as an incognisant husband, his real identity buried behind the newspapers and the 'wall' of silence where he hides himself from Saroja's acrid tongue.

Saroja, locked into the fiction of white superiority, reveals a chasm between the modern and the traditional values of Indian culture. Her penchant for Western received notions of superiority is, in spite of herself, curiously stereotyped and bigoted. She prefers Convent schools and an English education for the girls; Indian educational institutions are a 'rubbish-pile place' for her (Badami 20). Her identity, far from being fossilized, fixed or monocentric, the inveterate collision of these two cultures leads to her being victimized by these cultural restrictions. The novel deals with the trope of simultaneous absence and presence. Saroja's prominence in the narrative is to provide a bedrock and a centre of stability for Dadda's peripatetic life, to provide succour to his identity as a Railway civil servant (just as Dadda provides her with a new identity as a Railway Memsahib even if she's consciously absent from his life and struggles).

James Clifford has taken the lead in rethinking ideas about one's home and dwelling place in the context of an increasingly globalized world. He argues that we need to rethink our received notions of stasis and movement, home and elsewhere and posits the term 'dwelling in motion' and tries to account for the persistent dis/re/locations in the late twentieth and early twenty first century (Clifford 175). Clearly such a notion has an implication for this novel as well. Saroja's re-signification for home and location explores the way her diasporic journeys throughout the country disrupt conventional assumptions of the patterns of gendered occupancy of space. The narrative of the metropolis as a liberating space for the postcolonial female subject is refused here. Kamini is represented here as immobilized, with a fixed, unmoving identity of being nostalgic for her home. The spatial distance between her and her family hasn't separated them; Kamini still feels Saroja's presence everywhere and *knows* in her dreams that Saroja is protecting her:

I jerked out of an uneasy sleep gasping and sweaty, relieved that even from thousands of miles away, my mother could reach out and pull me away from the nebulous terrors of a nightmare. . . and almost as if my dream had summoned it up, another of Ma's weekly postcards, bringing with it the warmth, the smells, the sounds of another country oceans away from Canada. (Badami 64)

Whereas Saroja, incessantly travelling on the Railways and telling stories to all and sundry, is seen as the 'travelling light'. She loses the constricting identity of 'Memsahib' as she encounters all classes of people in the course of her journey. Here, she builds a new identity altogether; she becomes a 'weaver of myths' (Badami 152). Her identity changes from a precocious child to being a new bride with eyes full of hopes and dreams to falling for a casteless Anglo to being a duty-conscious and responsible wife and mother as she unfurls her narrative with utter, and sometimes surprising, honesty. Her move into the public sphere can be understood as a parodic retracing of her husband's earlier life as an employee with the Railways. But she refuses the logic of the territory; Kamini rues, ". . . she moves around leaving no trace. . . the point of origin lost, the destination uncertain" (122). She even succeeds in bringing the domestic sphere into the public space, 'making herself at home' in the train compartment, in a striking example of Clifford's 'dwelling-in-motion' which problematizes any easy distinction between movement and stasis, public and private, local and global. She tries to forge a new identity of her own, she wants to be 'in [my] own place (149). She diligently argues, "Once I travelled because my husband did. Now it is time for me to wander because *I wish to*" (151). And she goes on to say, "When I left that life, I felt naked and vulnerable, the rough and tumble of the ordinary world scraping against my skin. Only after you lose something do you realize how valuable it was. Then you get used to the loss, dust the memories off your body and begin anew" (147).

Kamini and Saroja's reminiscences of their shared lives and experiences are similar in many respects. Both Kamini and Saroja are fiercely sensitive (though Saroja doesn't like to reveal it), both are inclined towards academic pursuits instead of settling down into the 'comforting boredom' of the 'waiting terrors of marriage' (Badami 89). Afraid of their (respective) mothers' disapproval, both grovel for their attention, affection and cognisance. Both of them suffer from the same insecurities regarding their notions of selfhood and (in)dependence. Saroja's reminiscence "[But] we do not demonstrate our affections in that house, so I hide my fears beneath a bruising tongue and an argument for everything she says" (113) applies partly to Kamini too. Both share an undefinable bond with their own childhood memories and the way it shaped their identities.

A pluricultural perspective involves the heterogeneity of experiences to (re)construct new identities. Even though the essence of Kamini's and Saroja's shared experiences are the same for both of them, differences exist. Their memories of the significant people who shaped their lives and gave them a sense of identity and anchorage differ. Both Saroja and Kamini remember Kamini's pure gladness whenever Dadda came home from his tours. Kamini recollects "Ten years ago, I had felt a simmering resentment against my mother. I believed she had wronged Dadda with her rigid anger, her unkind words. I refused to acknowledge the years that Ma had spent being a good wife, looking after her daughters, supervising the household, making sure that Dadda got his meals exactly on schedule" (Badami 84). Kamini's memories and experiences of her childhood memories of her father and their servant Linda Ayah differ from those of Saroja's:

Kamini and Roopa prefer to think of their father as they last saw him, his face calm in death, untouched by cankers that swarmed through his body, eating steadily through the flesh and marrow, turning wholesome red blood pale and sickly. They do not want to acknowledge the slow death that moved through his body, or remember the bottles leaking fluids into him, the tubes draining pitiful wastes away. Such indignity for a man who couldn't bear the smell of his own sweat. (Badami 140)

Saroja remembers Kamini as a saintly, virtuous person who (surprisingly) was opinionated and disobedient; Kamini remembers grovelling for her mother's approval, forever trying to win her cognisance. Kamini further ponders over the dissensions between their memories:

She [Saroja] seemed to have forgotten many things, she might not even remember. Or she might remember it all differently. Sometimes it seemed as if the past was a painting that she had dipped in water, allowing the colours to run and drip, merge and fade so that an entirely altered landscape remained. Perhaps she only pretended that she didn't recollect- knowing Ma, that was far more likely than a fading mind. Ma's memory was as sharp as the afternoon sun. She preferred to spin her own stories. (Badami 78)

Kamini doesn't subscribe to the gendered notion of space and filial duties. But Saroja proves to be a victim to these received notions of cultural obligations; she came to believe that women must constantly reproduce their gendered identities by performing what are taken to be the appropriate acts in the communities they belong to- or else challenge prevailing gender norms by refusing to perform those acts. Kamini was far removed from these notions of cultural stratifications which would re-define one's identity.

The climax of the novel comes when Saroja decides to let her daughters script their own identities as individual beings. Create their individuality themselves. At the end of the novel (which metaphorically serves as the end of the mother-daughter narrative too, trying to make a new beginning as individual entities) Saroja declares:

My memories are private realms, rooms that I wander into, sometimes sharply focused, sometimes puffy and undefined. . . But these are my memories. Why should you worry about them? Why do you allow my history to affect yours? . . . Yesyes, our stories touch and twine, but they are threads of different hues. Mine is almost at an end, but yours is still unwinding. Go, you silly girl, build your own memories. (Badami 150)

And she goes on to say with an air of finality: “I do not belong to anyone now. I have cut loose and love only from a distance. My daughters can fulfil their own destinies. . . I have reached that stage in my life where I only turn the pages of a book already written, I do not write” (Badami 152). Such self-proclaimed (multiple) identities give rise to a certain sense of stability, assurance and quietism. This quietism involves coming to terms with the fact that man, after all, is a complex being capable of varied responses to the situations that shape his identity in a cultural milieu.

Works Cited:

- Alexander, Meena. *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*. New York: South End Press, 1996. Print.
- Badami, Anita Rau. *Tamarind Mem*. London: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Rpt. ed. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997. Print.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Colonial Discourse/Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.
- Mansfield, Katherine. *Bliss and Other Stories*. Toronto: Mansfield, 2008. Print.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.” *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. Ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990. Print.