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MAPPING IMMIGRANT LIVES THROUGH THE GENDERED LENS OF VIOLENCE AND SILENCE: EXPLORING BINARY BETWEEN AGENCY AND DISEMPOWERMENT IN ANITA BADAMI'S *TELL IT TO THE TREES*

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Abstract

The feminisation of migration and the wider implications of identity attributed to an increasing awareness of women in diaspora literature focussing on their experiences, articulatory space and avenues of involvement. The voyage of the women of Indian diaspora as cultural agents has left indelible prints in the annals of Diaspora Literature. Ideological groundings of domestic violence in South Asian families are centered on gendered binaries which delineates the males as performers of violence and females as its recipients. This aspect resonates in Anita Badami's work *Tell It to the Trees*, which also weaves together intergenerational trauma, geographical displacement of the immigrants and the conflicts between east and west. The immigrant land of Canada has shattered the dreams of the female protagonist, Suman who reminiscence India as a place close to her heart. This study critically investigates the lives of immigrant women through the theoretical lens of "subaltern" who are always positioned in a liminality. Gayatri Spivak's essays like 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and 'Diasporas old and new' conceptualized adequate methodological framework to this study. The parallel co-existence of domination and subordination, visibility and invisibility, voice and voicelessness has attributed gendered subalternity a brawny presence within the diaspora. It is the need of the hour to appropriate immigrant women dilemma as an abhorrent social reality than to typecast its occurrence.

Key words: Women diaspora, Subaltern, Violence, Resistance and Social Realism

Introduction

The contemporary era witnessed the increasing prominence of diasporic communities and neo colonialism. The writings of Indian women in the context of diaspora channelized a new space in the new land, offering opportunities to encounter and modify culturally emblazoned roles. The critics and theoreticians ponder on the realities of diaspora, either becoming an agency to women, who evolve from a nationalistic chronicle to a transnational involvement or their marginalization in the host society. Badami's works theorize amalgamation between Canadian literature and diaspora studies and arbitrates the results of global reshuffling with disintegration of national and cultural identification. In "Diasporas and Gender", Nadjé Ali has opined; "Indian women are bound to their roots even in new geographical location, where they embody motherland and must fulfil men's expectations of a faithful and reassuring reproduction of Indianness" (119). Badami's *Tell It To The Trees* deftly interweaves the immigrant lives of women characters forced to live in the margins despite the rise of transnational space and myriad possibilities in the new locale. Being confined to the roots and tradition, these women crop up as cultural heralds of homeland culture.

The sense of both exile and of home are strong components in Indian diaspora within Canada. Borders become a recurrent motif in the literary and sociological theory of diaspora. "People who move away from native countries occupy a liminality – an uneasy pull between two cultures. In my poetry, I call this as Trishanku's curse" (Uma Parameswaran 1988). Thus an immigrant's self is always a divided one and whose deepest bonds are wedded within the diasporic family.

Objectives of the Study

The study critically examines the marginalized position of women in diaspora land being exposed to severe vulnerabilities. It further tries

- -To investigate the liberation of women from the suppression by challenging authoritative voices of patriarchy.
- -To rediscover hidden historical narratives of family there by unveiling the thick layers of dominance at multiple levels.
- -To reconstruct the immigrant women's consciousness and emphasise their need to be independent.

Methodology of the Study

The critical and cultural contributions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak challenged the heritage of colonialism and focussed on marginalized by dominant western culture specifically the subaltern or sub proletarian women in the Third World. Her subaltern research in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" investigates the silencing of female subjects both by male dominated west and east, closing the avenues for woman's voice to surge up amidst the global social establishments that tyrannize her. The essay posits women as double colonized, whose voice disperse into the shadows relegating them as "subalterns" or voiceless. Spivak's essay "Diasporas Old and New" establishes the term 'new diaspora' as 'new transnationality' which conceptualizes the rooting of people from developing nations to developed places. She observes that the migratory practice of transnationalism gets reflected in "Eurocentric migration, labour export both male and female, border crossings, the seeking of political asylum and the haunting-in place uprooting of 'comfort women' in Asia and Africa" (Spivak, 245). Exploring some of the issues involving women in the transnational realm, Spivak speaks about "home working" which involves women with no control over wages and assimilate the notion that feminine ethics is unpaid domestic labour. These women internalize gendering as part of their survival technique.

Like Chandra Mohanty, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Nawal El Saadawi and Kumari Jayawardena, Spivak has engendered an important rethinking of feminist thought. She suggests that independent definition of women leads to the very binary oppositions that perpetuate women's relegation in culture and society. Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism", which stands in opposition with the binary way of thinking, mimes the negative representation of minority groups like women and subaltern or working class. The process of eroding of the civil structures of global society has always victimized women as "super dominated" and "super exploited" (Spivak, 249). This makes the notion clear that women along with other disempowered groups have never been elevated as subjects or agents. In *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco states that "women who resist and reject their politico-cultural description and collectively take the risk of acting as subjects of and agents in the civil society of their nation state are not necessarily acting for all women" (11). Accordingly, few women transcend as the subject of migrant activism while others are victimized by the violent patriarchy which is being activated in the name of an old nation. The binaries of the margin/centre, agency/ disempowerment and third world feminism/ first world feminism deconstruct the accepted associations and baggage.

The cultural theorist, Stuart Hall identifies diasporic identities as constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference. The cultural practices and forms of representation centralize the problem of identity of woman subject at the centre. Identity is a translucent thing and that the practice of representation is correlated with the position of articulation. To Hall, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think...instead, identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" ("Cultural Identity" 222). *Tell It To The Trees* explores imaginative rediscovery and identity grounded in the retelling of the past by the female characters. Hidden histories, shared ancestry and culture play a very crucial role in connecting our past with future as well as in positioning ourselves within the narratives of the past. In the essay "On National Culture", Frantz Fanon states that "inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms, its silences are not resisted, they produce individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels" (170).

Textual Analysis

The portrayal of the crisis in the Indian family settled in a fictional rural town, Merrit's Point, in British Columbia against the backdrop of multiculturalism becomes the core concern of Badami's work. Joel Kuortit has observed in "Writing Imagined Diasporas" "In Canada, men are statistically more likely to commit acts of domestic violence than women and immigrant women are statistically more likely to experience domestic violence" (102-103). Badami's work conceals how the pattern-gendered binary of male perpetrators as violent and female victims as silent, complicates the familial and non-familial web of relations. The patriarchs in the family of Dharma- father Vikram and grandfather J.K. Dharma are the violent representatives who exercise their authority over women and child characters. The patriarchal presence has remained unchallenged and gender policies have been manipulated to reproduce the principles of the patriarchal family. The Dharma family moves from India after the grand father's decision to settle down "in the middle of nowhere" (Badami 12). The home in which Dharmas live is situated in a remote and isolated landscape, which Badami describes as a place of "fearsome emptiness and silence" (60), that is "wiped clean at regular intervals by the snow" and where histories are surely recreated a hundred times over, memories minted anew, and nobody minds or cares" (70). More than the enactment of silence within the spatial boundaries of the domestic premise, Badami delves in to the negligence of Canadian community at times of violence. Badami says; "The whole world knows, but nobody says a thing" and some respond that domestic violence is a matter between husband and wife" (128).

The gender pyramids within the family are applied to the building of the new nation and family becomes the primary conveyor of gender ideology. Highlighting the lives of five women characters caught within the patriarchal turmoils, Badami positions them in both real and metaphoric space. Her attempt to portray their strategies of survival in hostland and within the male space exemplifies the heightened trauma of diasporic women attempting to emancipate from male despotism. Though the male character, J.K. Dharma's is minimally represented, his life is arbitrated through other characters and his power remains ubiquitous in the Dharma home even after his death. His words "This is all mine" (23) exerts a subordinating position to all female characters. The instances of domestic abuse are quite common in transcontinental arranged marriages. Harini -Vikram's first wife, Varsha- Vikram and Harini's daughter, Akka- the grandmother, Suman- Vikram's second wife and Anu- a tenant at Vikram's house are the silenced and marginal attributes of victimization. For diasporic women straddling multiple sites and realities, "context consist not only of home and host world but also of the various geographies of gender, that informs a woman's subject position" (Handa 116).

Suman

The romantic idealization of a perfect Indian woman in multiple assigned roles is well portrayed through Suman. She is conditioned to cook Indian food and wear saris even in the scorching winter. Denied of personal likes and dislikes Suman's life becomes a glaring instance of male assertion over the female object. Assimilated with Indian culture, Suman relocates to Canada after her marriage and feels; "Even after eight years with him, I feel on shifting hands, fearful of his reactions to everything, anything" (38). Being subjected to violent physical abuses and even when her mother-in-law asks her "Go, leave today, Run. Run" (38), she is confused; "How? I have no money; how can I leave? Where do I go?" (38). Suman emerges as doubly repressed character who has hardly a choice other than to abide by the sanctity of marriage as dictated by her father. Silence over rules her life as she closed herself off from the outside world and comments about her loneliness; "I used to sing to myself to defeat silence... such is the power of this place that it drove my own voice out of me" (120-121). The need to assert her individuality amidst all patriarchal odds blooms within her mind after meeting Anu. The kitchen becomes the powerful site of resistance. The two women share a collective sense of solidarity and bonding through food preparation and consumption thus allowing their unspoken emotions and unvoiced thoughts to surface. Along with her husband's petrifying behaviour, Varsha's decision of hiding passport shuts off Suman's possibility of escaping from the land of Canada and leads her to a disempowered identity. She gathers strength to confess the violence inflicted by her family to Anu. Suman evolves from a timid, fragile and weak stereotype to a bold and confident woman, much sure about the possibilities and future she tries to carve

by her own; “I have to get out, I owe it to my child. And to myself. It will be difficult, but I will manage. I have made up my mind, and that is a start” (250).

Akka

Vikram’s mother migrated to Canada when being pressurized by her husband, J.K. Dharma. His violence is revealed by Akka when she explains that her husband “brought her nothing but tears” (10) and children recalls that Akka is “always angry when she talks about dead grandpa” (38). She strictly warns the children- Varsha and Hemant not to share their secrets to anyone including the family members and if the situation demands; “Go tell to the trees... They won’t tell a soul” (19). In spite of being a good supporter to the daughter in laws, Akka remains a staunch harbinger of tradition; “Shame is a big deal in our family, we all have an obligation to the Family Name” (29). Badami surprises the readers with the revelation that after long years of submissiveness, Akka determines to eliminate her husband for ever on a winter night; “He froze to death. Right outside our front door. And me fast asleep inside... Frozen solid, like a statue. God punished him for making my life a misery!” (167). The harsh winter of Canadian landscape enables Akka’s release from victimization of her husband, who dies of hypothermia. Her life narrates the tale of empowerment from the hands of an oppressor and the spirit of gendered resistance as a historical precursor, when she tries to kill her offender after long years of silence.

Harini/Helen

Helen’s character exhibits a crisis of the displaced when she tries to evade Indian identity substituted by Canadian. She never ascribes herself within the patriarchal norms by showing her protest against husband’s insistence to be familial and prepare Indian food. Her daughter remembers her; “It was as if she had sprung out of the earth rootless, with no past, no memory, no history except what she made up. She turned up her nose at Papa, called him a great big bore” (25). Positioned as an aberrant of tradition and family identity, she has been victimized by Dharma through regular beatings. Having failed to preserve family and culture, Dharma incessantly pushes her to the marginalized position, treats her as an outsider and denies her very existence in the family.

Varsha

The intergenerational trauma of the migrants has been intensified through the most problematic character, Varsha who is sandwiched between Canadian and Indian culture. Tormented by her life as an adolescent girl brought up in a Canadian town inclined to the western habits and her upbringing in a traditional Indian family secluded from the outside world and conditioned by the need to protect family honour, identity and secrets drive her to a state of identity crisis. Her intermingling with the outside society and inside the family, puzzles and transforms her as a disturbing personality, gripped with family secrets. Varsha being cautious of her liminal existence exerts a strong hold on her near ones. Incorporation of cultural duties validates her father’s violence; “Poor papa, it’s not his fault that he has to be hard with me sometimes... always worried about our family name” (59). Vikram has succeeded in erasing and alienating the image of mother from Varsha’s mind; “I’d push her away. Not needed here... Go away monster mother, leave us alone I’d yell, we’ve found somebody else to love a new mother... (30). The frantic state of her disturbed mind even persuades Varsha to lock Anu outside the house leading to her death. She literally subordinates the woman outside the family borders and mimics a gripping ancestry of violence inherited by the male members.

Anu

A compassionate Indian writer, who migrates to Canada, with the ambition to author a new book is portrayed as the only independent character; divorced from her husband and childless. Suman’s interaction with the outside world is materialized through this friend, who provides her with financial and legal possibilities of escape. Distanced herself from the traditional roles circumscribed on Indian women, she offers a helping hand to Suman by broadening the latter’s curiosity about the outside world. She admires Anu’s state of independence; “I envied the woman, her control over her life, her money, her future. It seemed she made the decisions, there was nobody she needed to consult” (99). Her friendship

with Suman has been misappropriated by Akka and Varsha and soon she has been victimized by Varsha. The single act of resistance exercised by Anu soon turns out to be her death trap as she tries hard to amend the existing set of patriarchal ideologies and dominance.

Significance of the study

The prominence of women's internal and external states of being in the Canadian context prioritizes the occident and not the orient at the cultural focal point of their plight. The grave subjugation of women propagates to consider the issues of gendered violence as a noticeably Canadian reality. Majority of women enter the migratory space through spousal sponsorship. Badami's female protagonist is a sponsored bride, whose emigration to Canada is facilitated by arranged marriage. Chandra T. Mohanty identifies "discursive category[ies] of analysis used in western feminist discourse...construct 'third world women' as a homogeneous powerless group often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socioeconomic systems" (*Feminism* 23). In Badami's work, the act of gendered violence is perpetrated through impassive reminiscences surrounding hasty marriage and the readings of subaltern women as mere victims of a "gendered despotism". Examining the journey of women from household to transnational realm, Walton Roberts writes:

Gender shapes immigration process...and women who migrate through marriage are subject to increased vulnerability because of their tenuous legal status; something immigration policies often unintentionally amplify by granting control of the immigration procedure to the resident spouse ("Rescaling Citizenship" 268).

Conclusion

The identity formation of a person in a new land is always dictated by the social construct called 'gender'. Enforced silence itself becomes an acute phase of violence for the female characters. The potentials of resistance and negotiation from the confined space liberates the women. As Homi Bhabha argued; "resistance is not an oppositional act of political intention nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the content of another culture...it is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses" (*Signs* 152). Badami's tale of migrant woman adheres the notion of empowerment and becomes a testimony for the future generation by offering models of female resistance who provide a "counter sentence" (Spivak 93) to the orientalist narrative which confines their representation as fragile victims.

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