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# Traversing the Domestic Space of Third World Women in Transnational Realm: Re-Inscription of Female Identity in Anita Badami's *Tell It to the Trees*

Dr. Reshmi S.\*

## Abstract

The women from the Third world countries tussle with social realities like gender inequality, gender-based violence, and stereotyped stratification. This kind of problematic positioning reverberates in South Asian writing which chronicles the status of women as objects and victims of male violence or patriarchal conditioning. The paper tries to theorize diaspora through Feminist frame by questioning the concept of hegemony visible in patriarchal families across borders. The study employs an intersectional approach and cross examines the interconnectivity of gender violence to unequal power relations based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture. Indo-Canadian writer, Anita Rau Badami intrinsically portrays the lives of immigrant women who are circumscribed within the domestic space dictated by the male heads through her work *Tell It To The Trees*. The paper looks in detail the aspects of spousal citizenship, memory and violence hidden within the familial space with a view to analyse the instances of multiple discrimination and injustice. The work of Chandra T. Mohanty - *Feminism without Borders* critically examines the concept of intersectionality in the alliances and coalition between women throughout the world. The inclusive framework of feminism beyond the borders stands in stark opposition to the entrapment and isolation of immigrant women straddling between two cultures. Like Bell Hooks' brand of feminism, which calls forth an end to gender based inequalities, Badami also stresses the need of the women to liberate themselves from domestic space to 'woman space.'

**Keywords:** *Third World Women, Spousal Citizenship, Intersectionality, Borders, and Violence.*

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\*Dr. Reshmi S., Assistant Professor, Department of English, MES Asmabi College, Azhikode, Asmabi College Road, Kodungallur, Thrissur-680671, Kerala, India, Email: resritsan@gmail.com

Gender Justice has always been a pivotal concern for the women writers with transnational consciousness. The disempowered woman in the diaspora cannot act as critical agents of civil society and they often become a failure to tackle the despoliations of global citizenship. Gayatri Spivak astutely posits in "Diasporas Old and New" that,

The disenfranchised new or old diasporic woman cannot be called upon to inhabit this aporia of decolonization of mind. Her entire energy must be spent upon successful transplantation or insertion in to the new state often in the name of an old nation in the new. (251)

The denial of access to the basic civil rights at homeland and hostland accentuates their state of insecurity and instigates gender-based violence. Melanie Klein has suggested the possibility of connecting male violence,

as a reactive displacement of the envy of the Anglos and the Angloclones, rather than proof that the culture of origin is necessarily more patriarchal. (215)

The positioning of women, who are on the fringes of society by the linkages of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, remain invisible and such is the dilemma of the immigrant women from Third World countries. The experience of migration triggers diverse ways of defamiliarization, disempowerment, dislocation, and the women immigrants are exposed to gender linked vulnerabilities and powerlessness. Individuals in society occupy positions of privilege and oppression based on their unique subject locations, which in turn are determined by the intersecting or interlocking axis of race, class, gender and other determinants of identity (Hill). In *Incorporating Intersectionality*, it is stated that the theoretical practice of intersectionality

"focuses on the simultaneity and multiplicity of oppressions" (Murphy, et al. 2009). The majority of immigrants who arrive in Canada are women and these racialized minority group enter with an immigration status dependent on marriage. Leslye Orloff and Rachael Little state,

Immigrant women often feel trapped in abusive relationships because of immigration laws, language barriers, social isolation and lack of financial resources. (1)

The categorization of space by the female theoreticians like Virginia Woolf's "Room of One's Own," Elaine Showalter's historical space of women's writing or Julia Kristeva's ascribing women experience more in terms of space than time, traverse beyond the metaphysical tradition that binds women. The attribution of space in the spatial social order is modelled along the codification of gender constructs wherein, men occupied the public space of the political and economic realms and women were assigned to dwell the private space of the home. Allison Blunt and Gillian Rose describe this spatial dichotomy as constituted by gender difference;

The social construction of gender difference establishes some spaces as women's and some as men's; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity. (3)

Noeleen Heyzer's work *Working Women in South-East Asia* clearly demarcates the positioning as;

Women are culturally perceived as really responsible for tasks associated with the private sphere, especially for the family...It is in the public sphere that bonds of solidarity are formed with others sharing similar views of the world. (131-32)

Badami's *Tell It To The Trees* has congruence with Stuart Hall's concept of "cultural identity." Hall defines it in terms of,

shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. (223)

Further he examines that:

cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but positioning. Hence there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental "law of origin." (226)

Exile, memory, and desire are the diversified concepts which follow a recurrent pattern in colonial, post-colonial, and diasporic age. Memory provides continuity to the dislocations of individual and social identity; for it unites time, place, and generations. The patriarchal head, J. K. Dharma, instigates migration from India to Canada and his granddaughter, Varsha, seeks out information about his life;

He didn't even leave a record of his thoughts - I know because I looked everywhere - just a few words scratched with purple ink in an empty little notebook: This is all mine. (Badami 11)

The silent space charted out by the eldest male member suppresses the women characters of the succeeding generation and is delineated further by Varsha when she imagines;

... he could see the starry sky instead of dust, and all around him his eyes landed only on quiet mountains and giant trees

standing in silent clusters, bearing in their wooden hearts the secrets of all the creatures that live here. (11)

The father character, Vikram Dharma, mistreats his two children - Varsha and Hemant and his second wife, Suman. Varsha frequently tells "Hemant that he must only tell his secrets about the abuse he experiences to a tree in their yard" (8) and she explains that being vocal about this violence would ruin their image as the "ideal Indian family" (115). The migrant women at times become doubly marginalized victims:

first by the violence perpetrated against them, and then by Canadian society, which often fails to provide the appropriate support and interventions that would empower these women. (Chokshi et al. 151)

The silence inherent within the Dharma family facilitates the reproduction of domestic violence even after the death of J. K. Dharma and it is frequented by the deeds of his son, Vikram. Himani Bannerji states in her seminal study *The Dark Side of the Nation*, that the host society is a potentially terrifying place of exile for women of colour for whom the immigrant struggle is compounded by the multiple or converging patriarchies of the community of male elite and the Canadian state. Akka, the grandmother, finds parallelisms between their violent behaviour and acts as a connecting link to share the hidden traumas of past with the children. Aleida Assmann lucidly states;

written record of life and memories is a key method of making memories potentially accessible to those who do not live within spatial and temporal reach. (6)

The transmission of violence from one generation to the next facilitates intergenerational

trauma, which Marianne Hirsch connects with "post memory." To her, the concept of post memory is "a structure of inter and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is the consequence of traumatic recall" (106).

Akka suggests the cause behind male violence; "This [demon] is embroidered in to the pattern of his skin, it is coiled in his intestines" (88). The internalization of male violence and its silent acceptance has triggered negative impact on child characters, especially Varsha. Being haunted by the past memories, she becomes the victim of anger management issues, after a boy at school called her a "dirty name so [she] stuck his face in the snow and sat on his head until his legs stopped kicking and he nearly suffocated" (33). Varsha even tries to bully her younger brother Hemant and forces him to conceal such instances of violence to the adults.

The girl child, Varsha grows up in the Dharma family witnessing marital discord between her mother and father. Victimization of physical and psychological violence forced Varsha's mother to move beyond the familial and domestic space. Abandoned by her mother and silenced by her father, Varsha experiences the traumatic moments and turmoils of her life. She is prompted to erase her mother's memory;

He told me I was to forget her absolutely. I was never to talk about her. Ever...she was an unmentionable. We've not forgiven her. Papa and me. (13)

Even a daughter feels restricted to speak or lament about her mother's absence. This sort of estrangement degraded her mother as a wicked woman, a traitor, and even as one who deserves an untimely death. The fatal loss of her mother and memories about her cannot be easily erased from the mind of a daughter, who finds expres-

sion to her suppressed emotions in the form of violence:

But it's hard to forget. And [Helen] refused to leave me. She was everywhere in the house. I would wake up at night sometimes, sure she was sitting in a corner of my room - a loud and strong and beautiful ghost. I tried to hate her but I couldn't. I wanted to reach out and hold her tight, I wanted to rub my face against her belly, and kiss her, and feel her softness. And then I'd remember that she'd left me without a backward glance, and the rage would come rushing in. (9)

The new mother or stepmother, Suman assimilates into Dharma family after marriage with Vikram. As critic Mala Pandurang writes of the transnational South Asian woman;

[i]t is crucial to formulate analytical tools to assess states of subjectivity at the point of departure. It is only thus that we can arrive at any conclusion about shifts of identity and dilemma of liminality that take place after arrival. (89)

The protagonist's departure and arrival are connected through the dichotomies encompassing geography, culture, and family patterns which are in stark opposition with the idealized version:

I too imagined myself a Parvati, or a Mumtaz Mahal, a Juliet or a Laila, the object of a hero's undying love. I too wished to be borne away on horseback, in a train, or a plane... by a man who would allow me to expand beyond my boundaries. (43)

Suman's realization that the institution of marriage whether in India or Canada only en-

titled woman the status of “nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian” (122). Vikram utilises the possibility of finding bride through his label, PIO (Person of Indian Origin) and Suman’s family venerates foreign nationals. Vikram’s distancing from the ancestral land as a cultural outsider has been erased by Suman’s family members despite his social impropriety.

Suman has entered the land of Canada by means of spousal sponsorship, which involves the legal application by a Canadian citizen to bring a husband or a wife from another country as his or her sole dependent. The immigrant status of a woman is co-related with marriage at least on certain occasions and these women are subjected to greater challenges of domestic violence when compared to women who are citizens. The concept of spousal sponsorship, detrimental to the welfare of immigrant women, is often perceived as a prototypical transnational act and a common aspect of the immigrant experience for many South Asian women. The pathetic realities and consequences of this migratory process is challenging for many women immigrants. Suman’s sense of alienation in host society, away from the dependency of her parents and her invisibility as sponsored bride in the state of outsidership is confirmed when she says:

So here I am stuck in a world full of borders and boundaries, unable to travel because I can’t show proof of my identity to the people who guard the entryways and exits. It is not enough to say. I am Suman, daughter of a beloved man, wife of a hated one. I still need a piece of paper with my photograph stamped by the government of a country. Without that I am nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian, my custodian, my prison. (121-22)

Suman’s plight within the diversified framework and perspectives foregrounds the issue of domestic abuse triggered by a number of factors: “individual, institutional and structured” (Chokshi, et al. 148). Her miscarriage is caused by Vikram’s abuse and she realised her confinement within Canadian borders. The landscape also circumscribes her legal and physical disassociation as husband’s dependant. Connell states that “patriarchal hegemony or hegemonic masculinity has a huge impact on social hierarchy and women’s activities in the global south” (846).

The process of social exclusion delimits Suman’s contact with the outside world and accelerates the momentum of violence. Badami states that people in Merritt’s Point are indifferent about others and they observe silence at times of violence. Mr. Wilcox, the bus driver easily accepts children’s remarks that “Varsha fell down the stairs and bumped into a wall” (188) despite knowing that they have been mercilessly beaten by their father. The women and child characters easily internalize violence and indifference of the host society as normativity. The constant fear of being abandoned by the female members disrupts Varsha’s mental stability. She cannot withstand Suman’s absence in the family like her biological mother and hence decides to hide her passport; “I taped it behind the photograph of my dead grandfather. Suman will never dream of looking there... now she doesn’t have it” (50). She even becomes responsible for the death of Anu, the tenant of the house.

The institutional power structures that regulate the lives of Third World Women by Eurocentricism necessitate the need to traverse the world governed by power through resistance. The destructive stratification of the world narrows down the scope of empowerment and this opened up the possibilities of Third World Feminism. In *Feminism without Borders*, Mohanty uses

the term 'Third World' to designate "geographical location and socio-historical conjunctures" (47). The communities of women with "divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination are pervasive and systematic" (Mohanty 51). The hierarchical readings restrict Third World Women in time, space and history.

The social stratum and gender differentiation of patriarchal society enable men to overrule women in all spheres of life. The process of alienation and estrangement becomes fatal for the immigrant women whose lives are administered by the intersecting lines of race, gender and patriarchy. As Francine Pickup remarks:

The violence to which women are subject is not random or abnormal or defined by specific circumstances alone. It is used as a weapon to punish women for stepping beyond the gendered boundaries set for them, and to instil in them the fear of even considering doing so. It is a systematic strategy to maintain women's subordination to men. (303)

Badami urges the inevitability of Third World Women to transcend the barriers in transnational space to their possible extent by dismantling the stereotypes and conventional norms. The failure of her women characters in asserting identity and subjectivity delimited their existence as immigrants. The path of resistance is the need of the hour to ensure women's safety, security and harmony.

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