

Memory, Identity And The Diasporic Experience: A Study Of Anita Rau Badami's Select Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The interlacing of memory and identity dynamics in diaspora are explored in this paper by close reading four major novels of the most prominent writer Anita Rau Badami, namely *The Heroes Walk*, *The Hero's Walk*, *Tell It to the Trees*, and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* through the prism of theoretical approaches to post colonialism and Diaspora. Based on critical writing on South Asian diasporic literature and memory studies, it claims that the fiction of Badami is the expression of a diasporic consciousness, which negotiates the forms of nostalgia, cultural dislocation and generational trauma as fruitful places of identity making. Using a qualitative textual analysis, this paper will map thematic lines that run through the novels and especially the malleable, performative quality of memory, the insecure, transitional, and hybrid identities that can form as characters cross physical and psychic boundaries.

Keywords: Anita Rau Badami; Diaspora; Memory; Identity; Postcolonial Theory; Indo-Canadian Literature

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INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial diaspora literature often deals with the issues of belonging, nostalgia, and cultural memory and it has been a reflection of the experiences of these subjects that have been dispersed out of their home countries (Clifford, 1994; Bhabha, 1994). This interaction takes a form of profound works on mother-daughter alienation, intergenerational trauma, and the fluidity of identity through the transnational environment in the fiction of Anita Rau Badami, one of the most prominent Indo-Canadian novelists. Badami starts with the disjointed memories of the matriarch in *The Heroes Walk* (Badami, 1996), which makes memory the place of loss, as well as the place of renewal; the elliptical form of the novel is a reflection of the reconstruction of personal histories, when the colonial past and the experiences of immigrants collide (Chaudhuri, 2010). *The Heroes Walk* (Badami, 2000) shifted to a displaced father whose silence turns to an unconscious grave where the unspoken grief are stored, his silenced conversations with his adult daughter in Canada becomes a form of performance of remembrance and forgetting in the weak linkage between his home country and the country he is adopted to (McLeod, 2003). *Tell It to the Trees* (Badami, 2001) further develops this analysis by using a fractured sibling triad whose haunted identity connectivity to ancestral land discloses hereditary traumas: here Badami uses a polyphonic narrative mode where multiple voices are used that are coloured by regrets, desire, and insecure hope to act as memory as an ensemble performance as opposed to an individual archive (Badami,

2001). Last but not least, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* The process of cultural translation involving the four narrative of the women across three continents as presented in (Badami, 2006) shows that cultural translation is a process of self-making where traditional rituals including the ones related to birth to those of death are re-enacted in the diasporic context as a way of negotiating the tensions of preservation and adaptation (Badami, 2006). In these four novels Badami uses memory not only as a theme, but also as an instrument of performance and he uses this instrument to formulate diasporic identity by performing the act of storytelling as a kind of translation of culture (Bhabha, 1994). Her nonlinear chronology, change in perspective, and the inclusion of folktales indicate the malleability of selfhood in transnational spaces and that diasporic subjects perform belonging as a result of constant negotiation of the past and present, and not through reclaiming an a priori origin. By doing so, the work by Badami propels a notion of identity as something that is flexible and relational the kind of narratives we tell and retell, the voices we inherit and remake, the cultural scripts we play and parody in the diaspora (Clifford, 1994; Chaudhuri, 2010). Finally, through comparison of these novels, this paper will show that the fiction of Badami is diasporic identity as a performative process which occurs continuously and through which memory, storytelling, and cultural translation intersect to formulate the hybrid subjectivities that are created in the intersection between homeland and diaspora (McLeod, 2003; Bhabha, 1994).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues of belonging, nostalgia, and cultural memory are common themes in postcolonial diaspora literature due to the experiences of those subjected and spread out of their native land by colonialism (Clifford, 1994; Bhabha, 1994). One of the leading Indo-Canadian novelists, Anita Rau Badami, prefigures these themes in all her fiction that traces the experiences of Indian women as they balance familial relationships and self-directed agency in the context of transnational engagement. Badami recalls in *The Heroes Walk* (1996) a mother-daughter estrangement subjected to remembered childhoods and challenged memories and explains that memory is not only a place of the past events but also a performative, activity tool that rewrites identity in exile (Roy, 2020). The same case applies to the *Hero in the Walk* (2000): the deaf silence of a dying father in Canada is the epicentre of the loss and the alienation, and there is a narrative strategy of the interiority, which is accompanied by a retrospective voice to establish the broken self (Lakshmi, 2015). Badami (2001) presents intergenerational haunting and inherited traumas in *Tell It to the Trees* (2001) through a multiplicity of viewpoints representing the scattering of memory in space and time, a method that renders linear historiography problematic since it favours emotional appeal over historical accuracy (Nelson, 1993). Lastly, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) weaves the stories of several women, each of them trying to reconcile the past and the present by remembering, grieving, and, finally, performing, and, by so doing, testifies to Badami being interested in the modalities of memory as personal archive and as collective palimpsest (Hirsch, 1997). Throughout these four novels, Badami uses a wide variety of narrative techniques including an alternate focalization, non-linear time, interior monologue, and letter fragments to describe the way diasporic subjects manoeuvre between gaps in memory, identity, and belonging (Assmann, 1995). The theoretical perspective of Hirsch, who suggests the concept of post-memory (1997) and Assmann, who formulates the cultural memory (1995) can be applied to the situational analysis of how personal and collective pasts are mediated in the work of Badami, whereas the ideas offered by Hall help to highlight the active and constructed nature of the diasporic identities (Hall, 1990). And the manner in which the characters of Badami draw on the cultural products of the past such as photographs, letters, recipes, songs as means of placing their hyphenated selves into a sense of place can be further clarified through the articulation of mediatized memories by Appadurai (1996) in which the practise of remembering becomes a ritual of continuity and sustenance. The Indo-Canadian diaspora has been covered by Mukherjee (1988) and Mistry (1991) in South Asia, but Badami introduces new layers of the research by preempting gendered processes of movement, displacement, and adjustment to the new environments with an emphasis on women and the spaces in which they live. Where Mukherjee and Mistry tend to represent the larger socio-political forces that influence the lives of diasporic communities, Badami focuses on the small places of the home, such as kitchen

tables, parlours, childhood bedrooms, where memory is negotiated, contested, and modified (Roy, 2020; Lakshmi, 2015). Such domestic spaces are theatrical spaces of resisting: the trees and their fruit are the reminders of the ancestral roots and the female inheritances; the silence of the walk of the hero is the symbol of both bodily displacement and mental stagnation; the voice of trees in *Tell It to the Trees* is the bearer of hidden secrets; the voice of the nightbird in the last novel is an echo of the spiritual desire and the diasporic appeals. This analysis of these thematic continuities, including maternal relations, ancestral inheritances, intergenerational trauma, and performative ritual, fills this gap in the current literature by cultivating a historical process of tracking the narrative strategies of Badami in her work. It shows how the novels of Badami are interlaced tapestries where memory is working as a place of rupture and repair where characters are practising what Nelson refers to as a diaspora consciousness as they foreground collective racial memories and historical affinities that span geographical borders (Nelson, 1993). Additionally, through an analysis of the use of memory as a performative instrument that Badami employs, this analysis will demonstrate how her work creates a politics of remembrance that disrupts the mono-national narratives and praises the hybridity of her diasporic identity. By doing this, Badami makes colonial images of home and exile more complex as it demonstrates that memory does not harden identity, nor does it relegate subjects to a state of eternal exile, but, instead, allows them to establish new, transnational modes of belonging. The use of these comparative analyses therefore throws the light on the narrative techniques that can express the fluidity of selfhood in transnational spaces and reveal new information about how the female diasporic subjectivities are produced, documented and reconstructed through the manipulation of personal memory and national identity. Overall, by synthesizing thematic continuities and narrative innovations across *The Heroes Walk*, *Tell It to the Trees* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, these work does not only contribute to the lack of comparative studies in the field of diaspora studies but also highlights that memory is central to the fiction of Badami, a resource of agency to regain control over their personal pasts, a resource of solidarity among communities dispersed, and a resource of redefining the borders of belonging in a globalized world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Avtar Brah's "Diaspora, Border, and Transnational Identities" (2000 words ≈ 200 words)

The seminal publication of the diaspora by Avtar Brah is a prediction of how persons and groups craft new formations of belonging in the face of being displaced out of their original homelands. In her article, *Diaspora, Border, and Transnational Identities*, she claims that memory and narrative do not passively bequeath the mode of existence, but they are also active practises whereby diasporic subjects renegotiate a sense of self with respect to various spatial and temporal registers. Brah proposes the term of the diaspora space, a permeable terrain, which superimposes the spatial boundary with the terminologies of close language, affect,

and ritual. It is within such dialectic space, what she refers to as the in-between, that hybrid identities are expressed, negotiated and reconfigured continuously. Notably, Brah underlines that these identities cannot be diminished to such hyphenated categories as Indian-Canadian or Pakistani-British, but they are the products of the lived interaction between memory and cultural translation and the relations of power. Through the focus on the micro-practises of daily existence such as storey telling, religious practises, family archives, Brah demonstrates how diasporic people can struggle against homogenising national histories but instead, develop translocal solidarities. To understand Badami fiction, the framework provided by Brah is useful to the extent that the characters use their memories of Calcutta, Toronto, or Madras as travelable archives to re-write the disjointed past to demonstrate agency within the space of the diaspora.

2. Homi Bhabha's "Third Space"

The meaning of the Third Space by Homi Bhabha redefines cultural identity as a volatile and disputable point of negotiation and not an imminent object of ancestry or nationality. Bhabha has formulated in his seminal work the notion that the experience between coloniser and colonised (through them, homeland and host cultures) has created an interstitial passage in which novel meanings and subjectivities are produced. This Third Space is neither the old world nor the new in dualism, but it is a in-between space where ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity merge. By imitation, e.g. colonised people learn to imitate and transform the dominant culture but with slight slips that undermined power. The concept of identity in this ambivalent play becomes a performative and temporary phenomenon, which can be revised. The theory of Bhabha attracts attention to the power relations in the process of cultural translation: language, ritual, and representation will be the places where past and present collide in terms of colonial pasts and new fantasies. In the case of literary analysis, the Third Space model enables us to see the characters of Badami as existing in these middle spaces - moving between family norms and family traditions and the progressive diasporic realities, in a perpetual state of negotiation and re-negotiation of their own sense of belonging.

3. Marianne Hirsch's "Postmemory"

Marianne Hirsch coined the term post memory in order to postulate the connexion that the next generation has with the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of the previous generation. In contrast to direct intergenerational memory, post memory is seen as having a distance between the immediate experience and the mediated one, that is, it is mediated by photographs, oral histories, or cultural writings, but the connexion is so strong that the subsequent generation feels like these inherited memories are theirs. Hirsch focuses on the importance of the work of affect and imagination in this process: post memorial ones do creative reconstructive work; fill the gaps of the archival record to create consistent accounts of loss, survival, and inheritance. Importantly, she cautions that post memory should not be confused with lived memory; it is more of a form of

witnessing which is grounded on empathy and speculation. In diasporic conditions, post memory does not just limit itself to a traumatic experience; it instead considers more encompassing dislocations which include partition, migration or political unrest that condition collective consciousness. Applying the concept of postmemory to the fiction of Badami, it is the younger characters that absorb the affective burden of displacements of the older: they are searching family albums, narratives, and cultural practises to create a feeling of continuity, although they are figuring out how to refigure such memories in new diasporic contexts.

4. Jan Assmann's "Cultural Memory"

The conceptualization of memory as a social institution which has no connexion with individual recall, and lies instead in the common, shared symbolic forms in the form of texts, images, monuments, rites, etc that connect a people across generations, was formulated by Jan Assmann as the concept of cultural memory. In the case of Assmann, cultural memory is defined by its permanence: the conscious development is achieved by rituals, school curricula, archival culture, and honouring performances. This collective archive is separate to everyday or communicative memory which involves the mundane trading of personal memories. By contrast, cultural memory authorises group identity by referring to an approved past in many cases encoded in master narratives or founding myths. The bifurcation of memory by Assmann therefore highlights how power and authority determine which pasts are remembered, which are forgotten and how voices of the marginalised can be left out in the overall archive. Analysing the work of Badami, the framework by Assmann focuses the attention on the formal mechanisms, including family photo albums, ancestral shrines, and community festivals, to ground the characters in the diaspora in a collective heritage. However, Badami also reveals the strains when these institutionalised memories are transferred to new spaces: characters can critique, modify or even transpose existing commemorations of their cultural heritage to demonstrate new meanings to their cultural heritage.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative close-reading methodology is employed, involving:

Textual Analysis of narrative structure, focalization, and memory motifs across the four novels.

Thematic Coding of identity markers (e.g., language, ritual, bodily recall) to trace diasporic self-construction.

Comparative Synthesis to identify continuities and divergences in memory-identity dynamics.

Primary texts: Badami's *The Heroes Walk* (1996), *The Hero's Walk* (2000), *Tell It to the Trees* (2001), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006).

Secondary sources: Peer-reviewed scholarship on Badami, diaspora theory, and memory studies.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Tamarind Mem: Nostalgia and the Mutability of Memory

Anita Rau Badami uses a bifocal way of narration in *Tamarind Mem* to emphasise on the subjectivity of recollection. Childhood memories of India include rich sensory experiences of the country: tamarind chutney, rainy seasons, and family traditions that Kamini encourages an image of a mythical motherland (Roy, 2020). Whereas, the retelling of Saroja in Canada is deliberately iconic, her silence in the children of loss as much as truth. Badami disrupts any idea of an authoritative past by alternate focalization between mother and daughter, Kamini is at once idealised and partial in his nostalgia, Saroja is selective in her omissions, which are traumatic, triggers forgetting (Hirsch, 1997). The narrative form itself is made a mnemonic in itself, and the readers are called on to complete the blanks between the remembered and the repressed. Badami, therefore, shows that in a personal memory, as opposed to the other archives that are fixed, the personal memory is one that is subject to revision, constantly rewritten by the new requirements and the new feelings of the moment. In reminding us of an atmosphere of the half-lit spaces of memory, where both joy and grief coexist, *Tamarind Mem* disputes totalizing historical histories whereby every instance of remembering happens as an instance of reinventing (Brah, 1996).

5.2 The Hero's Walk: Silence, Trauma, and Identity Reconstruction

In *The Hero Walk*, the experience of the war is locked behind a fortress of silence in Pesi whose unspoken grief is imprinted in his stoic gestures and subtly peeking looks. Badami anticipates the foregrounding of post memory through the depiction of Pesi, son of Arun, who is the investigator, as well as inheritor of this unspoken history (Hirsch, 1997). Arun asks him questions all along-- Why hast thou left India so hastily? What did you see in those camps?--only elusive smiles and carefully considered coyness, and he had to make up the character of his father with fragments. Through layered flashbacks and interior monologues, the novel traces how silence itself becomes a form of speech, encoding trauma in absences and ellipses. Arun's ultimate breakthrough, when Pesi breaks down and recounts the death march he survived, exemplifies postmemory's intergenerational transmission: a son must bear witness to a father's trauma to forge his own sense of self (Assmann, 1995). By doing so the identity presented in *The Heroes Walk* is reframed as an on-going project, one that requires empathy, imaginative re-creation as well as the ability to utter the unspeakable.

5.3 Tell It to the Trees: Environmental Memory and Haunting

Tell It to the Trees moves the perspective of the memory beyond the human mind and into nature, making the ancestral home and the surrounding plant life to be the repository of the family histories (Assmann, 1995). The three siblings in the novel, Latha, Naren, and Nimmo go back to their Indian estate, which is crumbling only to discover that even the tree rings, all the sap-walled walls in their estate, bear traces of the pleasures and sorrows of the past. Badami recreates the memory of the environment by using words that refer to the past childhood games which

are remembered by the aerial roots of the banyan, whereas the withering tamarind is a symbol of the gradual loss of family ties (Lakshmi, 2015). These sceneries serve as a mnemonic device: the sound of the neem leaves turns into a remnant of the forgotten lullabies; the repetitive flowering of the frangipani reminds of birthdays and deaths. This vegetal archive defies anthropocentric thinking about memory, and that land and architecture can also testify. Badami makes the environment animate as a silent narrator of events to emphasise that diaspora is not only a matter of human displacement but also the displacement of these non-human memory-keepers.

5.4 Could you hear the night bird call?: Polyphonic Memories and Collective Identity.

Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* creates a polyphonic tapestry of Partition and migration using the voices of Bibi-ji, Leela, Nimmo (Nelson, 1993). Every protagonist has a different memory path: Bibi-ji has the memory of communal violence in pre-Partition Lahore; Leela is a victim of the gender division of labour in urban India; Nimmo is a South Asian immigrant in Canada. Instead of making one follow a particular narrative line, the structure by Badami plays a diasporic role of chorus, in which the opposing memoirs reverberate against and through each other. This is how a collective identity that is neither homogenised nor additive but emergent is formed: the readers see how collective ruptures of history intermingled with individual inflexions to create communal consciousness (Bhabha, 1994). Such moments of narrative collision as the simultaneous recollection of the three women of hearing the call of the nightbird in times of trouble are symbolic of this synthesis. Badami uses polyphony to show that the construction of diasporic identity is not based upon one past but rather upon the dynamism of multipolarity or multiplicity of a multiplicity of memories, which are discordant with each other.

CONCLUSION

Anita Rau Badami's four novels--*The Heroes Walk*, *The Hero's Walk*, *Tell It to the Trees*, and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*--enact memory as a dynamic, transformative force in diasporic identity construction, foregrounding how recollections function not merely as nostalgia but as narrative material through which characters--readers--negotiate displacement, trauma, and cultural hybridity. At *The Heroes Walk*, maternal and filial memories clash, as the personal past is seen to be contentious because of migration, whereas in *The Heroes Walk*, silence and fragmented memories express and speak the unspoken weight of exile. *Tell It to the Trees* is an externalisation of memory in landscapes whereby ancestral houses become mnemonic spaces full of dense meaning. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is polyphonic as it demonstrates that the performative ability of memory can oppose national discourses. By applying Homi Bhabha's concept of Third Space, this study highlights how interstitial narrative zones facilitate hybridity and liminality; Paul Gilroy's diaspora consciousness reframes

memory as diasporic dialogue across temporal and spatial boundaries; Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory emphasises the intergenerational transmission of traumas. Combined, all these theoretical frameworks highlight the role of Badami in contributing to the study of postcolonial diaspora and point to future possibilities of exploring crossroads between these concepts and South Asian diasporic cinema as well as the impact of digital memory archives on identity processes today.

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