

Review

Journey from a Timid Provincialism to Global Consciousness: Heroism in Anita Rao Badami's *The Hero's Walk*

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Anita Rao Badami's *The Hero's Walk* is a story of a middle aged man Sripathi Rao, with a pedestrian job and a disintegrating family, who encounters the most unusual events in his life and presents heroism in life itself. The gradual expansion of Sripathi's consciousness, process initiated after his daughter Maya's death, and his inner conflict, with otherness, is well traced in the narrative by the novelist. The novel deals with the postcolonial themes of displacement and belonging, and tensions between old world traditions and new world mobility. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the strategies of survival to face and surmount the obstacles and Sripathi's journey from a timid provincialism to global consciousness by balancing between the preservation of identity and the embrace of difference, between recalling the past and lodging in the present.

Keywords: Anita Rao Badami, Heroism, Provincialism, Global Consciousness

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Rau Badami's (Badami, 2001) *The Hero's Walk*, is a novel of an ordinary man's struggle. The novel traces the territory of family through the lives of an energetic cast of characters befuddled by the rapid pace of change in today's India. Each member of the Rao family pits his or her chance at personal fulfilment against the conventions of crumbling caste and class system. Anita Rau Badami explains that

"The Hero's Walk is a novel about so many things: loss, disappointment, choices and the importance of coming to terms with yourself and the circumstances of your life without losing the dignity embedded in all of us. At one level it is about heroism- not the hero of the classical epic those enormous god-sized heroes- but my fascination with the day-to-day heroes and the

heroism that's needed to survive all the unexpected disasters and pitfalls of life." (Badami: interview)

The novel opens in the small town of Toturpuram in South India where Sripathi Rao, a middle aged man with a mediocre job and a disintegrating family, is about to encounter the most extraordinary events in his life: the death of his estranged daughter in Vancouver and the arrival of the orphaned granddaughter who is now his responsibility. Jolted out of his pseudo important, self-satisfactory writing of daily letters to a newspaper editor anonymously signed "Pro Bono Public," Sripathi is forced to come to an understanding about his family's history as well as his own past, in order to make room in his heart and mind for little Nandana, whose bitterness at her fate silences her.

But Sripathi's slow transformations into consciousness are accidental. Sripathi's imposed existential crisis opens a window into the lives of his wife, mother, sister, and son, all given complex portraits that reflect both the modernizing movements of India and their contentious relationships to the past. When Sripathi's daughter Maya dies, young Nandana crosses borders from Canada to India, and enters this circle of adults uprooted by hidden injustices of the past asking through her silence for each to think about the meaning of their own lives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Postcolonial theory deals with "doubleness" in terms of identity and culture, which, as a problematic legacy of colonialism, affects postcolonial peoples. In this diversity and hybridity, the colonized have lost their original selves. The present condition of the once colonized is nothing more than a fragmented state, which comes to mean that the indigenous people are devoid of a unified self. They do not know exactly who they are and where they belong because they show the characteristics of both their own cultures and the western culture. For this reason, it may be stated that they are, in Bhabha's (1990) words, in the "third space," "the in-between" where "we will find those words with which we can speak of ourselves and others. And by exploring this hybridity, this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity" (209). Those once colonized are multicultural people, and colonized cultures cannot be considered "pure"; rather than pure, they are heterogeneous cultures. Colonialism, even though it is said to have ended, has left its traces in the postcolonial age making the colonized cultures a mixture of Western and indigenous qualities.

At the age of this cultural chaos and identity crisis, place and displacement turn into issues of central concern in postcolonial literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) argue that it is at the point of displacement

that "postcolonial crisis of identity" emerges (8-9). As a result of the experience of the imposition of Western style and culture on indigenous cultures and of the problematic meeting of two different cultures, a great clash eventually leading to an internal conflict in the indigenous people may be observed: One may become alienated from one's surroundings together with one's own self with the result that the healthy, unified self-changes into a split, fragmented, rootless and dislocated one.

In the *Location of Culture* (1994), the theoretician Homi Bhabha argued that so long as the way of viewing the human world, as composed of separate and unequal cultures, rather than as an integral human world, perpetuates the belief in the existence of imaginary people and places like- "The First World", "The Second World" and "The Third World".

Edward Said, in the book *Orientalism* (1978) have argued that in dealing with non-western people, European scholars applied the high abstraction idealism inherent to the concept of "The Orient" in order to disregard the existing native societies, and their social, intellectual, and cultural ways of life in Asia and the Middle East.

The postcolonial provenance of its author, Anita Rau Badami, is established in her response to the question of where she is from originally: "it's hard to say" (Badami, Interview). Born in the south of India, she spent most of her life in the north and east, traveling frequently because of her father's job, before moving to Calgary with her husband in 1991. Not surprisingly, her fiction, *The Hero's Walk* deals with themes of displacement and belonging, and tensions between old world tradition and new world mobility.

DISCUSSION

The Hero's Walk, which takes place in the fictional India town of Toturpuram, describes two journeys: the metaphorical journey of a middle aged Indian man, Sripathi Rao, from a timid provincialism to a more global consciousness, and the literal journey of his seven year old granddaughter, Nandana, who comes from Canada to India to live with her grandparents after the death of her parents in a car accident. For both Sripathi and Nandana, the Journey involves a kind of culture shock, followed by a gradual opening out towards otherness.

Sripathi's self enclosure is symbolized in his residence, Big House on Brahmin Street whose "*dean strong walls*" stand as a monument to a world in which caste and colonial structures guaranteed that everyone and everything knew its place (6). Its current state of disrepair is mirrored in the chaotic geography of the town itself which has been remapped in accordance with a state decree ruling that no street can have a name that indicates a particular caste. Thus Brahmin Street

becomes merely “*Street*” as (does) *Lingayat Street, Mudliyar Street and half a dozen others in Toturpuram*” (5) in a gesture of egalitarianism whose effects are literally, as well as symbolically, disorientating. The sense of displacement is compounded by changes that have occurred on the street itself over the last few decades-

“instead of the tender smell of fresh jasmine.... in scented sticks and virtue, instead of the chanting of sacred hymns the street had become thud with the haggling of cloth merchants and vegetable vendors, (and) the strident strains of the latest film music from video parlours” (5-6).

The incursion of these loud and nestling registers of cultural change into the sanctuary of Sripathi’s study mirrors more significant assaults on his sense of traditions including most worryingly, the refusal of his children to lead the lives he has imagined for him: his daughter Maya has broken off her engagement to an Indian man to marry a Canadian with whom she now lives in Vancouver, and his son Arun has rejected a tradition job in favour of a career as an environmental activist. Sripathi responds to the affronts by ceasing to communicate, literally, in the case of Maya, with whom he has stopped corresponding, and figuratively, with Arun and the rest of his family, through a retreat into an increasingly self enclosed world. The narrative traces the gradual expansion of his consciousness, a process initiated by Maya’s death in a car accident, and his forced confrontation, in both imaginary and physical ways, with otherness.

In one sense, the expansion of Sripathi’s global consciousness follows an explicitly postcolonial course. His early educations, in conformity to the Macaulayan formula, has produced in Sripathi a peculiar mix of arrogant worldliness, bolstered by enforced memorization of large chunks of the Encyclopedia Britannica, and timed provincialism, informed by a confused allegiance to traditional caste and race hierarchies. Coming of age in conjunction with the birth of postcolonial India, Sripathi is briefly inflamed by the passion of nationalism which eventually turns into a tepid, secular Hinduism, characterized not so much by positive adherence to spiritual tradition as by suspicion of cultural difference, and a residual attachment to the politics of caste. His position affords him the luxury of an attitude of superiority towards his wealthier but lower caste next door neighbour and a vague fear about the world outside India. When Maya sets off for graduate school in the US, Sripathi contemplates with incomprehensible impulse that leads people “*to leave the familiar*” (126). “*What was it?*” he wandered, that had pulled his own daughter into the unknown world begins with his voyage to Canada to identify Maya’s body and to collect her seven year old daughter, Nandana. The expansion of Sripathi’s concept

of family to accommodate his Indo-Canadian daughter corresponds to a more general movement towards the embrace of postcolonial hybridity. Once a proud rationalist who disdained his wife’s faith, he derives comfort from the observance of the traditional rituals ceremonies to mark Maya’s death. Thus, his accommodation of the chaos of the modern world is accomplished in tandem with recognition of the need for ritual through which to exorcise the ghosts of his personal and cultural past.

In thematic terms, *The Hero’s Walk* conforms neatly to the conventions of post-colonialism, rejecting the hierarchies of colonialism and nationalism; it re-imagines identity as the product of an ongoing engagement with the changing world. The world, in this conception, takes the form of a city whose shifting physical structures, like its human inhabitants, bear the imprint of elsewhere. The challenge confronted by Sripathi is in some senses the fundamental challenge of the postcolonial condition: to discover a balance between the preservation of identity and the embrace of difference, between remembering the past and dwelling in the present. If we complicate the postcolonial perspective with an eco-critical one, a more interesting picture of the novel emerges. Nominally the story of a man, *The Hero’s Walk* is also the story of a place, whose physical environment powerfully influences the lives of its inhabitants. The story opens with the description of a heat wave that has cast Toturpuram into a state of suspended animation:

“Only idiots ventured out to work” in such heat and once there, sat stunned and idle at their desks because the power had gone off and the ceiling fans were still ... The more sensible folk stayed at home, clad only in underwear, with moist cloth draped over their head and chests, drinking coconut water by the liter and fanning themselves with folded newspapers” (2).

Survival, it is suggested from the beginning, depends on an accommodation not just of human difference, but of the otherness of the physical environment: accordingly, the world Sripathi finally begins to admit encompasses nature as well as culture. When he travels to Vancouver, his horror of the foreignness of the place and the disorder which has been produced in his life, are expressed by imagery in the novel. More than a symbol of the life of his daughter that he has shut out and now completely lost, nature here signified the vitality of all life forms, denied by a human culture that is fatally insensitive to its own interdependence with them. According to Edward Said,

“That the cultural representations generated with the us-and-them binary relation are social constructs, which are mutually constitutive and cannot exist independent of each other, because

each exists on account of and for the Other."
(Said, 1978)

The principal agent of Sripathi's developing ecological consciousness is his son, Arun, who counters his father with his activism by pointing out

"you had your independence of India and all to fight for real ideals. For me and my friends the fight is against daily injustice, our own people stealing our rights. This is the only world I have and I feel responsible for it" (239).

The interconnections between the human world and the natural environment are highlighted through the significance of water, with functions in the novel as both a symbol of expression vs. expression, of fluid relationships is contrast to rigid identity, and so on and as a literal force of mortality, whose life and death giving properties connect the fates of human and non human animals. As Arun starkly puts it all the industrial effluents being dumped into the sea are destroying the turtles, and soon they will destroy us too. Before long the water table will be affected and instead of drinking water we will be drinking chlorine or whatever poison is being unloaded there. The significance of water is heightened by the drought that persists through much of the book, given away at the end to storms that end up flooding Big House with Sewage. Metaphorical and material implications of the flood converge in Ammayya's horrified response to the liquid sloshing around her knees.

*"Whose is that?" she asked faintly.
"What do you mean, whose Ammayya?" demanded Putt. Now her anger had been replaced by contempt for her mother.... "All the drains on this road are connected. So it could be our neighbour's for all I know. Maybe Chocobar man's Maybe Munnuswamy's. Does it have a name on it you want me to check? (343).*

The image of the cast distinctions Ammayya has so fastidiously upheld being washed away in shit effectively cancels the authority of all social hierarchies, exposing the biological underpinnings such hierarchies seek to deny. It is those underpinnings that Arun is committed to protecting.

Sripathi gains some understanding of the meaning of Arun's work when, after depositing Ammayya's ashes in the sea, the two men wait all night on the beach to watch the arrival of the turtles. Watching the holes laboriously dig for their eggs, Sripathi is

"humbled by the sight of something that had started long before humans had been imagined into creations by Brahma, and had survived the

voracious appetites of those same humans. In the long continuum of turtle life, humans were merely dots" (355).

The image of the turtles, which occurs near the end of the book, precipitates the final crumbling of a worldview in which ethnocentrism is entangled with, and bolstered by, anthropocentrism. Sripathi's intuition of the truth of the Darwinian precept that the origins and fates of humans and other living forms are *"all melted together"* culminates not just in a revised worldview, but also in renewed sense of responsibility for the world.

While Arun's activism represents the most obvious embodiment of how that responsibility might be discharged, Badami offers another model of ethical engagement through Sripathi's career as a writer. As a once aspiring journalist who ultimately resigned himself to a career as an ad man, Sripathi satisfies his frustrated ambitions by writing letters to the editor of the local paper. Though the letters which he writes under the pseudonym *"Pro Bono Public,"* he sees himself fulfilling a civic duty: Like his boyhood heroes... he was a crusader, but one who tried to address the problems of the world with pen and ink instead of sword and gun and fist. His commitment to his subject matter, though, is relatively superficial *"he could write about anything under the sun"* and his concern about the issues he writes on is almost incidental to the frisson of pleasure he gets from the writing itself, and from reading one of his published letters that manages to be *"forceful, to the point and with an edge of sarcasm" (10).* Like his encyclopedic world knowledge, his writing style is the product of a colonial education system, *"learnt at the end of Father Schmidt's bamboo cane at St. Dominic's Boy's School" (10).* And notwithstanding the pleasure it gives him he is often surprised, on rereading one of his letters, at how different and removed from himself it look (s) in print. Maya's death, and all the changes it precipitates, prompts a gradual change in his writing. On the morning after his night on the beach with the turtles, Sripathi eschews his preferred mode of withering wit, and begins a letter. *"Dear Editor ... Early this morning at Toturpuram beach, I saw the most amazing sight, .." (359).* The beginning of this letter (which is the final sentence in the book), and the stylistic shift it represents, seems to endorse a kind of writing that aims for a direct engagement with even a submission to the world, rather than self conscious abstraction from it. Where the mode of the latter style, represented in the clever detachment of Sripathi's early letters, is critical analysis, the new style is disposed towards affirmation and synthesis. Such an approach to writing, Badami seems to be suggesting, represents a more generous and perhaps, ultimately, a more cultural and sensitive way of engaging with the world.

In an interview, Badami explains that part of what she sought to do in *The Hero's Walk* was to *"explore the*

notion of heroism, ranging from the epic mythological heroes who are so large, so enormous and so endowed with wisdom and bravery and goodness to the Indian movie hero who's also larger than life completely unbelievable almost a cardboard character" (qtd. In "Author"). Against these images, Badami offers a more mundane vision of heroism represented in life itself, "in simply seeking to traveler's life from birth to death" (qtd. In "Author"). Sripathi moves towards a recognition of the battle in favour of a less oppositional, more complex vision, embodied in the traditional dance classes his wife teaches. Nirmala reminds her students, that Rama, the hero, must walk "with dignity ... with courage and humility" (136), while the walk of Ravana also a great king, "is the walk of a braggart. A man who is too proud and therefore not heroic" (136).

Conclusion

Anita Rao Badami's work is hitherto based on the now clichéd 'suspension of disbelief' or 'the illusion of reality' going back to the very dawn of the genre. This obviously culminates in increasing manifold the hiatus between the reader and the writer. The techniques of post-colonialism are subversive of established literary practices and these are often combined with 'outrageous' subject matter. *The Hero's Walk* reflects the struggle of Sripathi who adapt to change and cross the borders between old world and new world, using need as guiding standard and passion as strength for accepting new environment. This, as Bhabha writes, is how the future is made:

"The present of the world, which appears through the break-down of temporality, signifies a historical intermediacy, familiar to the psychoanalytic concept of "a transferential function, whereby the past dissolves in the

present, so that the future becomes (once again) an open question, instead of being specified by fixity of the past." (Bhabha: 1994)

The questions of identity, the struggle for assimilation, the yearning for acceptance—secrets shared by immigrants who strive to conform, who adjust to adapt, who emulate to blend capture the attention. Anita Rao Badami's *The Hero's Walk* is a modest attempt to bring out the transition in the postcolonial literature of both the West and the East.

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