

## **Identity Construction and the Struggle for Recognition: Anita Rau Badami and Vijay Agnew**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims at studying how the novelist Anita Rau Badami and the social scientist Vijay Agnew have constructed identities through self-presentation of subjects either imaginary or actual, after they immigrated to Canada from India. Badami studies discrimination in India at gender and race positions. Agnew meets with racial discrimination in Canada and it influences her theories. As Fukuyama points out, it is argued, the fights that we have today over issues of race, gender, gender orientation, and the like, are often more over offended dignity than over material resources. Badami's alienation and nostalgia for her home and Agnew's hybridized identity in a globalised society are responses to offended dignity at some level in the context of immigration though Badami brings to our attention the discrimination at home front too. A heightened awareness of any type of discrimination has become the hallmark of the century all over the world, as humanity strives for dignity and equality.

**Keywords:** Anita Rau Badami, Vijay Agnewidentity, recognition, gender, race, immigration

Anita Rau Badami, the novelist was born in India in 1961 and immigrated to Canada in 1991. She completed an M.A. at the University of Calgary, for which she wrote a novel called "Railways and Ginger." In 2000, Badami was the recipient of the Marian Engel Award. Her first novel was *Tamarind Mem*. Her second novel, *The Hero's Walk*, won the Regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Italy's Premio Berto. Washington Post selected it for its "Best Book" section. Also it was long listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction, and was named a finalist for the Kiriyama Prize. Her third novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* was published in 2006 and was long listed for the IMPAC Award, and was named a finalist for the City of Vancouver Book Award.

Vijay Agnew, Professor Emeritus in the department of Social Science in York University in Toronto, migrated from India in 1970. Her books *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (2005) and *Where I Come From* (2003) discuss her experiences of growing up in Delhi and Bombay, her days in Toronto as an immigrant student, her search for belonging in a community in Canada, her experiences of being an Indian and becoming a Canadian and her

work as a Third World academic being recognized by fellow academics as a Canadian New Delhi.

This paper analyses Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem* and Vijay Agnew's *Where I Come From* and her interviews, and studies how these writers at creative and critical levels negotiate with the experience of emigration.

Anita Rau Badami writes about India with evocative descriptions, memories and reminiscences. *Tamarind Mem* is a novel that discusses the bonding involving mothers and daughters. The story depicts Indian family system, its culture and the distinctiveness of Indian women. Kamini has immigrated to Canada and it is she who reminisces about her mother and home country, recalling growing up in India. She attempts to re-understand her past. The narrative describes the story of a family in which the father who is working for the Indian Railways is always away, and consequently the women control the environment of home and emerge as powerful and authoritative, managing servants and others. Saroja, with a disposition of strong individuality, acquires a strong acid persona and speaks unsympathetic and pungent words that she is nicknamed as the tamarind mem. The story narrates the life of Indian middle class women who do not have choices to select husbands, remain loyal to the family, holding bitterness in the heart secretly hating everyone around breeding unhappiness.

The novel is depicted nostalgically from the perspective of Kamini who tries re-look into the past and tries to understand the rigid life her mother Saroja lived in India and why she became so pungent and harsh. The responsibilities of the family and her duties are found to be difficult by Saroja that she becomes unpleasant and disagreeable most of the times. When her mother is in her birth place, Mandya, Kamini notices that she is relaxed, free and cheerful. The oppressive and hierarchic atmosphere in Indian families is portrayed by Badami very sensitively in the novel and Kamini acquires many insights about her people in India.

Kamini moves back to the present and describes the weather conditions of a stinging, freezing cold Canadian city where even the traffic sounds are muffled by the snow. The snow capped mountains looking like silver cones do not bring her loneliness down. Kamini describes the bitter and bitter cold and her isolation and aloneness in Canada. She feels she is buried alive in her burrow slowly feeling sad, distressed and disconnected from her relatives (*Tamarind Mem* 111). The novel keeps swinging back to the past in India and comes back to the present in Canada as memories of India keeps biting into the reality of isolation in Canada.

There is a conflict of generations and emotional separation between Kamini and her mother who does not understand Kamini's isolation. Most of the times there are long silences during the conversation between the mother and the daughter. She waits for her mother to

interpret these silences between her words, to sense her loneliness in Canada (*Tamarind Mem* 15). Kamini's mother fails to comprehend the silent longings of her daughter and Kamini's mind reverts back to the past and she begins to long for her beloved Dadda and quite naturally the past.

Kamini reflects how when she is nine years old they move to Ratnapura and there she becomes friendly with a Nigerian which her mother doesn't permit and stops her from meeting him because of his race, his colour and also because he is a foreigner. In Canada, she understands these experiences more acutely and hence she remembers vividly how her mother kept her away from an African.

Kamini and Roopa grow up into young girls, and Saroja starts concentrating on their exterior appearance. She doesn't allow Kamini to play in the sun that might darken her skin. Badami describes racial discriminations and skin colour bias that are found in the domestic space in India and represents scenes that show how these social perceptions affect personalities. Mothers take care that girls are not tanned in sun to keep their suitable place in society, as a lighter skin decides the social position and has become a cultural obsession. Internalized racism is part of the Indian families and social hierarchies are built on skin colour and it is this truth which is not often talked about, which is fashioned by Badami. Skin colour of Indians make it difficult for them to acclimatize with the white Canadians, and this awareness of race heightens the impact of similar issues in India.

Kamini specially remembers that in India girls are taught to be cautious and self-conscious in society. Her mother warns her often: "Listen to me! A woman is never safe" (*Tamarind Mem* 127). A constant comparison between India and Canada runs in Kamini's mind. Indian gender discrimination and racial preferences are often discussed by Badami. When Saroja was born, Ajji asks whether the "child is a boy" (*Tamarind Mem* 9). When Roopa is born, her grandmother remarks acidly that she looks like a "sweeper-caste child" because of her mild brownish skin. Colour of the skin has other meanings and "caste may have been about more than just occupation: the darker you looked, the lower your place in the social hierarchy" (Abraham quotes Bhatia).

The novel also delves into a description of the life of child widows. Chinna is a child widow who toils like a servant in her relatives' houses as her family send her out. "Chinna moves from house to house, cooking, looking after expectant mothers, bathing newborn babies, soothing quarrelsome children with sugar cubes and stories" (*Tamarind Mem* 178). These stark realities, when remembered, bring down the pain of current isolation and alienation for Kamini in Canada. *Tamarind Mem* was given mixed receptions. In India the novel was described as "tiresome" (Kanika Luthra in *India Today*). In UK it was referred to as the "best seller" which had the "precise narration of Indian culture" (Sumeet Grover in *Huffpost*).

Vijay Agnew's outlook is different from Badami as she does not refer to the racism and colour politics in India which is sensitively described by Badami in her fiction. Agnew says: "I grew up in India, spending my girlhood in Delhi and young adulthood in Bombay. Then I immigrated to Canada where I was first a foreign student...I realized that (while) living in India ... I had taken for granted many class privileges, hardly noticing the oppressions of gender, caste, and class... I believed that the values by which I was raised were universal" (*Where I Come From* 2). Agnew says that since coming to Canada, her overriding concern has been with race and racism, and the powerful impact of each experience on the lives of immigrants and women (*Where I Come From* xii). She remembers with love and respect how her Canadian friends gave her food and comfort after an accident which made her feel that Canada is her "home" (*Where I Come From* xiii).

Agnew comments on her being identified by society as an Indian feminist in Canada at the University of Toronto: her involvement with concepts like patriarchy, oppression, and exploitation and her analysis of gender-centred white feminism made her part of the academic feminist community but she still feels like an outsider sometimes, she says. Her negotiations with her academic world eventually made her realize that being an Indian woman made a difference in how she thought about things and she began to realize the limitations of these perspectives. Her identity became established as a non-white Third World woman intellectual. Race, class and gender discrimination in Canada and its impact on immigrants became her academic pursuit. Memories of home and her old way of life still tied her to Bombay and whenever she came back to Bombay she began noticing masses of people living in poverty and how the untouchables have been excluded from mainstream Indian life. Interestingly, she talks about this only after her exposure to Canada where her sensibilities have been sharpened due to discrimination of race and gender.

The distance from India gave her an insight which she otherwise would not have acquired. She says: "Home ... became an illusion wrapped up in warm memories rather than a reflection of concrete reality" (*Where I Come From* 3). After living in Canada for thirty years albeit with frequent visits to India, she no longer seemed to be an insider in Indian society. She was more like an outsider and she says: "Now I feel I am both an insider and an outsider – in Canadian and Indian society." Agnew self-creates a new identity, rather, society constructs an identity for her – "belonging to the South Asian immigrant community in Canada" (*Where I Come From* 4). The hybridized and globalised Indian intellectual of today has built a multicultural, interactional, situational, socio-historic, identity that one cannot be culturally and territorially pinned to one nation any more. Agnew represents this hybridized identity of contemporarily times.

The following account of Agnew exemplifies how the Third World intellectuals feel that their home countries and their customs and practices have not been given the due respect by the

western centers of academics and thus have created a need for the production of a fresh identity changing the existing one. She says both the westerners and Indians have portrayed the identities of women differently: “On one side were the colonial administrators, missionaries, Orientalists, Indologists and journalists, among many others. Although they didn’t agree about everything, they all tended to share a belief in the superiority of the ‘civilization’ of western nations.” They critiqued the lack of education, systems like the purdah, early marriage, and social rules that did not favour widows remarrying. The western scholars created a need for third world countries to adopt western norms and practices. In India “it was mostly upper-caste Hindus who argued that a misinterpretation of their scriptures that had led to practices injurious to women, such as the custom of early marriage. Other Indians simply stood their ground and defended the norms and customs as they were” (*Where I Come From* 91). Racial and cultural integration between Indians and Canadians is a complex issue that has to be understood from the perspective of individuals. Accommodating cultures and pluralism are ideologies that are intricate and complicated to be practiced with ease. As long as the person from another ethnicity with different traditions searches for recognition and appreciation, he/she stands outside of the host country’s culture.

Agnew shifts into relocating herself and seeks for a space to present her home country in a better light. Identity politics based on ethnicity, race, sexuality or religion has classified people into smaller groups in a globalised society as Agnew points out. Women have complex identity construction issues either in their own country or elsewhere, as Badami has shown in her fictional works commenting on Indian discriminatory systems of skin colour, gender and other marginalizations.

Political scientists are also studying the issues of contemporary identity building and Fukuyama argues that the identity construction of modern times has been the source of philosophical movements and socio-economic reforms. It is a kind of mission of the contemporary world where we have begun to make sure that everyone is treated equally- socially and culturally. Post structural theories of 1960s that put Derrida in the forefront who argued that centres are not permanent and are fluid also have sprung from the need to treat everyone as equal. Fukuyama says that “The modern concept of identity is built around self-esteem—that is, the idea that we have hidden selves that are undervalued by other people, leading to feelings of anger, resentment, and invisibility.” There is a growing need in society seeking to raise people's self-esteem. “This therapeutic turn coincided with the great social movements of the 1960s, which increasingly saw low self-esteem linked to the marginalization of African-Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the like.” Accordingly, social issues of the contemporary world “of race, gender, gender orientation, and the like,” are born out of “offended dignity than over material resources” (Fukuyama in “Can Liberal Democracies Survive Identity Politics?”). People who immigrate to other countries struggle to create a space for them in the new land and search for recognition.

Badami and Agnew take great efforts to establish their dynamic identities and individualities in foreign lands battling to cope up with another culture and its ability to dislocate one's own ethnicity. Badami handles it by becoming nostalgic and by evoking scenes of discrimination in her home country. Agnew rationalizes how immigration changes the immigrant and how such a person becomes hybridized and also tries to justify the cultural practices of the home country. As Fukuyama argues the need for self-esteem of humanity in liberal democracies has sensitized the consciousness of people towards any type of prejudice and this has become the characteristic of the century all over the world, as humanity strives for self-respect and egalitarianism. As language is easily the best mode for identity building, writers and social scientists strive to represent differences and inequalities in society through fiction and research.

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