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Memory as a Diasporic Element in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*

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Abstract

This paper deals with mutability of memory as a diasporic tool in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*. Anita Rau Badami is an Indo-Canadian Diaspora writer. Her critically acclaimed first novel *Tamarind Mem* (1996) explores the sweet-sour nostalgic confrontation of mother-daughter relationship through mutability of memory while focusing on Indian domestic life and life in Canada. The relation of diaspora and memory contains important critical and may be even subversive potentials. Memory can transcend the territorial logic of dispersion and return and emerge as competing source of diasporic identity. In diaspora literature memory is a performative, figurative process.

Keywords- Diaspora, Memory, Mutability, Literature, Nostalgic, Confrontation

Introduction

With the globalization, transnationalization and internationalization various aspects of life, diasporic communities and novelist have emerged as vibrant of research in India as well as diasporic writers with lavish gifts crossed barriers of nationality and own nationality. Anita Rau Badami, and Indo-Canadian writer of South Asian diaspora is a prominent voice of the modern Indian diaspora. The term "diaspora" comes from an ancient Greek word which means to scatte about. Like most of the diaspora writers, Anita Rau Badami too deals with the issues like this location, lost home, nostalgia for the home land, loneliness and alienation. Anita Rau Badami portrays India and Canada with abovecative descriptions, memories and

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reminiscences. Anita Rau Badami brings to our attention the discrimination at home front too.

This paper explores that Badami's *Tamarind Mem* tackles the perception of memories in a quite a clever way. This novel is a brilliant portrait of two generations of women. The novel is divided in two parts and is described from two views of point: the first half from the daughter Kamini's point of view and the second from mother Saroja's point of view. *Tamarind Mem* deals with the complex problems faced by women. It has many autobiographical similarities to author's own life. Kamini Moorthy in the novel is an inhabitant Indian at present residing in Canada. The author has spent her own life in the railway colonies of India; show does this book which is set in both India and Canada. Just like author's father, Kamini's father works for railroads. But the author strongly claims that this story is not an autobiography. Though the author Anita Rau Badami agrees that the basic backdrop from her own experiences the rest of the characters are fictitious. She simply initiated writing through memories of her past that later came out to be a fictional story.

Johny S has recorded Badami's views about the selection of the title of the novel, "I was interested in exploring the lives of women separated not only by the time (in terms of age, that is), but by space as well.

Kamini has moved from the old world into the new. Her mother, who grew up in a different world, was trapped in it and therefore developed an acidic tongue to deal with her frustration. Saroja's acidic tongue was her only defence against the rule bound world in which she found herself. She uses sharp words to carve a place for herself in that world." (Johny, 2014, p.8)

Memory plays a vital role as a diasporic tool to unfold the story of the novel, *Tamarind Mem*.

Nostalgic Vividness

Anita Rau Badami's first novel *Tamarind Mem* deals with the bitter-sweet nostalgia, depicting the description of Indian domestic life. The novel is set in India and describes the story of a family of females fettered in a house-hold through happiness and sorrow. The father and husband, Dadda, is away most of his time as he is an engineer in the Indian Railway. Children Kamini and Rupa are left to the care of one man servant and the maid servant Linda under the supervision of their mother Saroja. Set in Calgary and in the

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Indian Railroad Colonies the novel centers on the complicated relationship between a young graduate student in Canada and her widow mother back in India. The nostalgic vividness is reflected through the whole novel which is full of pungent thought bitter feelings and a few cherries moments.

Mutability of Memory and Kamini

This novel tackles the perception of memories in quite beautiful way the first half of the book is narrative of Kamini, a daughter who reminiscence about past growing up in India. Kamini, Saroja's daughter who rejoices her father story in the childhood becomes in different in her teen age for which she regrets. Kamini, a woman of twentieth century, has moved to Canada to begin her graduate studies. Kamini feels home sick in her basement apartment recalling her childhood from the birth of her sister when Kamini was six to the day she leaves for Canada.

She describes a complex family and conflict between a family that she barely understands, a bitter mother and a father who's always away on tours. Badami shows how people can have very different perspectives about the same incidents by dividing the book into two parts: one, the recollections of Kamini, the other, those of Saroja, The father, Vishwa is old and tired and is unable to forge a connection with his family. Kamini questions everything and Roopa is one who simply accepts things the way they are.

Mutability of Memory and Saroja

After her father's death, Kamini's mother, Saroja embarks upon a solo journey across India by train, because she thinks what the use of a lifetime railway pass is if she doesn't use it. The trip brings the past rushing back for Saroja and Kamini, as both are forced to confront their dreams, disappointments, and long-guarded secrets. Plunged into the past by acrimonious telephone calls and odd postcards from her mother, she tries to make sense of the eccentric family she has left behind. She did not understand why her mother was as bitter as a tamarind with her lot in life, why she seemed to love her younger sister, Roopa, more, rubbing almond oil on her skin at bath-time and never scolding her for getting her sums wrong. And where she disappeared while Dadda was away on business, leaving her daughters in the care of a superstitious old ayah.

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In the story, the chasm between the mother and daughter, their inability to communicate with each other, is both sad and humorous. As a child, Kamini blamed her mother for being angry all the time and sympathized with her father who always loved and was gentle with his daughters. As an adult, she understands it must not have been an easy marriage for her mother because her father left again and again and every time he came back, he needed to be readmitted into lives altered daily during his absence. And her mother could never have lasting friendships or was admitted into her husband's private world of journeys. Saroja shocks everyone by making an unconventional choice after her husband death, when she sells her house and travels across India, alone, by train. She wants to see the country on her terms, according to her schedule, and through her conversations with other passengers we learn exactly why she is so defensive, what her disappointments and dashed dreams are. Portrayed in her early years as a determined and wise girl, Saroja turns out to be an acid-tongued, repulsive woman. She yields to pressure once, and succumbs absolutely to the demands of domestic life, unwillingly. Saroja's forced and hence pretentious love for her husband is described in the following lines: "A person grows on you like an ingrown nail. You keep cutting and filing and pulling it out, but the nail just grows back. Then you get used to the wretched thing, you learn to ignore and even become fond of it." (Badami 56) A dissatisfied woman's thought about her disturbingly frivolous husband is brought out well. In the second half of the novel the author switches the narrative to the mother and her unsatisfied thoughts about her husband and about her life and the reason of her bitterness and acid tongue is brought out when through the mutability of memory.

Past Cultural Restriction and Memory

"The book is a sincere fiction, written astutely and perceptively, looking back in time to analyze the relationships in a complex family. At its core lies the eternal conflict between mother and daughter." (Banerjee 40-41) This book is told from two different perspectives, the eldest daughter's point of view and the mother's point of view. The daughter tells the story in the first half of the book and the mother finishes it in the second half. The mother is a lot more interesting as she has an affair, bitter like tamarind, and travels alone. Thus, Badami also plays around with the conflict that occurs when two cultures collide, when traditional values clash with modernity.

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She has a good eye for minute details, the gift of capturing memories in their entirety and translating them into fiction. Details of a life tinged by the Anglo-Indians' manners and habits are well documented in *Tamarind Mem*, the awareness of the railway life and feel of trains and stations and the superstitions narrated by servants to the children. In this novel past cultural restriction is presented through the help of mutability of memory.

Quest for Identity and Memory

In this novel the quest for identity is reflected through the mutability of memory. The novel attempts to reflect the sensible Saroja's heart which longs to be in the company of her spouse during his trips of inspection. All the female characters seem locked in to interiors, circumscribed by rules and expectations, when they move from one place to another, they again go to the same kind of railway colonies, with the same set of costive values.

Later in her widowed life Saroja lives on her own accord using her railway pass to travel alone to places where her husband refused to take her. Saroja, nicknamed as Tamarind Woman due to her sour tongue, is bitter because of her loveless marriage and her thwarted ambition to become a doctor. Saroja is also the eldest daughter, a smart girl whose ambitions to become a doctor are subverted when her family pushes her into an arranged marriage to a man 15 years older than her. Her marriage remains as stunted as her ambitions, and Saroja welcomes the attentions of a half-caste auto mechanic. She narrates all this to the women who share her train compartment as she tours places in India she could not visit while raising her daughters. The quest for identity is one of the diasporic elements which is beautifully presented through the help of one of the prominent diasporic tools, memory.

Conclusion

Anita Rau Badami is a major literary figure in Indian continent and a powerful voice in Canadian literary circles. With *Tamarind Mem*, she establishes herself as a distinctly original authoritative voice internationally. Badami discovered India through the windows of passenger trains. "The book is a sincere fiction, written astutely and perceptively, looking back in time to analyze the relationships in a complex family. At its core lies the eternal conflict between mother and daughter." (Banerjee 40-41). To sum up, this novel is told from two different perspectives, the eldest daughter's point of view and the mother's point of view. The daughter tells the story in the first half of the book and the mother finishes it in the

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second half. The mother is a lot more interesting as she has an affair, bitter like tamarind, and travels alone. Thus, Badami also plays around with the conflict that occurs when two cultures collide, when traditional values clash with modernity. She has a good eye for minute details, the gift of capturing memories in their entirety and translating them into fiction, *Tamarind Mem*. The characters in the novel use their memories to reach a final consensus of searching for their identity in relation to their separate but intertwined world.

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