



## GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATION AND BELONGING

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**ABSTRACT** The emergence of feminist literary criticism has significantly transformed contemporary literary studies by foregrounding the cultural construction of gender and challenging patriarchal modes of representation. Feminism has consistently sought to reposition women's experiences at the centre of critical inquiry, contesting their historical marginalization within male-dominated narratives. It interrogates the social, cultural, economic, and educational structures that confine women to secondary positions and inhibit their self-realization and creative expression. At its core, feminist criticism examines the cultural construction of woman as the "other" and man as the dominant "subject." Against this theoretical background, the present paper explores the experiences of Saroja and her daughter Kamini in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*. Their lives reveal the multiple forms of gender discrimination encountered by women within both indigenous and diasporic contexts, thereby offering valuable insights into the intersections of gender, culture, identity, and migration.

**KEYWORDS :** Gender, Other, Feminism, Diaspora, Identity

Twenty-first-century feminism encompasses a broad spectrum of social theories, political movements, and ethical perspectives concerned with women's experiences in diverse social, political, and economic contexts. Contemporary feminist discourse has expanded to include frameworks such as multiracial feminism, which focuses on the experiences of "women of color." By examining the realities of African American communities and immigrant groups including Asian Canadians, British Asians, and Asian Americans, multiracial feminism highlights the multiple forms of oppression faced by women within culturally diverse societies. Although diasporic communities have gained increasing visibility in host nations, women within these communities frequently continue to experience social inequality, marginalization, and systemic discrimination at various intersecting levels.

The development of Indian feminism reflects a complex historical trajectory shaped by social reform, colonialism, nationalism, and cultural traditions. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri observes, "... it is almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas" (xii). The cultural positioning of Indian women has been profoundly influenced by mythological and religious narratives. Within Brahmanical traditions, women are frequently associated with divine concepts such as shakti, prakrti, and maya. Although these representations acknowledge feminine power, they simultaneously reinforce the notion that such power must be regulated and controlled. Only the benevolent manifestations of female divinity are celebrated as models of ideal womanhood.

Similarly, cultural ideals such as Sati and pativrata have profoundly shaped social expectations of women. Stories of Savitri, who restored her husband to life, and Sita, who accompanied her husband into exile, continue to function as powerful cultural paradigms. Through these narratives, women are encouraged to internalize ideals of devotion, sacrifice, and obedience. Marriage consequently emerges as a significant institution through which patriarchal values are reproduced and sustained. Motherhood represents another domain in which women's individuality is frequently subordinated. The idealization of the self-sacrificing mother often denies women recognition as autonomous individuals.

The representation of women in Indian English fiction reflects these complex historical and cultural realities. Female characters have been portrayed variously as devoted wives, suffering mothers, seductive temptresses, and embodiments of Shakti, simultaneously nurturing and destructive. Yet such representations often reveal the profound impact of social conditioning. From childhood, women are socialized into accepting norms that encourage self-effacement and dependence. Consequently, women in early Indian English fiction frequently appear as individuals negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity while seeking identity, autonomy, emotional fulfilment, and personal freedom.

These concerns acquire additional complexity within immigrant literature. Female protagonists in diasporic narratives must negotiate not only gendered expectations but also the challenges of cultural

displacement. Immigrant writers portray Indian women as individuals who simultaneously function as daughters, wives, mothers, lovers, and custodians of cultural memory while attempting to adapt to unfamiliar social environments. Their narratives extend beyond conventional discussions of multiculturalism by examining the intersections of memory, migration, identity, and gender. Such texts reveal the active role played by women in redefining cultural boundaries and constructing transnational identities. In doing so, they illuminate the gendered dimensions of migration and belonging.

Anita Rau Badami occupies a significant position within this literary tradition. Recipient of the Marian Engel Award, Badami migrated to Canada in 1991 and completed a Master's degree in English Literature at the University of Calgary in 1995. Her debut novel, *Tamarind Mem* (1996), is situated across India and Canada and explores questions of gender, tradition, migration, and selfhood through the relationship between a mother and daughter. The novel presents three generations of women—Putti, Saroja, and Kamini—whose experiences reveal the changing realities of Indian womanhood across different historical moments.

The narrative structure alternates between Kamini's perspective in Canada and Saroja's retrospective account in India. Kamini's narrative foregrounds the challenges of bicultural existence, while Saroja's story reflects "different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to ... male domination, and to the final resolution of women's struggle for a non-exploitative society free of class, caste, race and gender bias" (Bhasin & Khan 4). Through these dual narratives, the novel presents contrasting yet interconnected experiences of womanhood shaped by geography, generation, and cultural expectations.

Saroja's life exemplifies the limitations imposed upon women by patriarchal structures. Her ambition to study medicine is denied by her parents, who arrange her marriage to a man significantly older than herself. This forced marriage becomes the source of profound emotional dissatisfaction. Her husband's indifference and frequent absences intensify her sense of loneliness and isolation. When she complains to her parents about her unhappy existence, her father dismisses her concerns, stating: "He is a worthy man, your husband, we did the best we could for you" (204). The response reflects a social order in which women are expected to accept suffering as an inevitable aspect of married life. Saroja's unhappiness is further intensified by the instability created by her husband's occupation as a railway employee. Frequent transfers prevent her from establishing meaningful social relationships and a stable sense of belonging. Reflecting on this experience, she observes:

Before my marriage, the world seems a smooth, round place. ... Nothing is steady after my marriage. I have no friend to talk to. Friendship is like a tree, it needs, time to mature, and we never stay in one place long enough for that! And my husband is a gypsy whom I see for a short while every month. (236)

This passage vividly captures the emotional consequences of displacement within marriage. Unlike voluntary migration, Saroja's

mobility is imposed upon her, resulting in social isolation and psychological dislocation. Her experience demonstrates how patriarchal institutions can restrict women's access to meaningful relationships and personal fulfilment.

Unable to endure prolonged emotional neglect, Saroja develops what may be described as a strategy of verbal resistance. Her sharp tongue and frequent outbursts earn her the nickname "tamarind mem." Although seemingly trivial, this linguistic aggression functions as an important form of protest against the oppressive conditions of her life. Lacking economic independence and social support, language becomes one of the few means through which she can articulate dissatisfaction and assert her individuality. Her sarcastic remarks, expressions of anger, and occasional withdrawal into silence reveal a growing awareness of the inequalities governing her existence.

Initially, Saroja fulfils the conventional role of cultural caretaker, dutifully managing her household and raising her daughters. Yet beneath this conformity lies a persistent desire for emotional recognition and personal freedom. Her brief relationship with Paul da Costa, the "Anglo car mechanic", symbolizes this yearning. Through Paul, Saroja experiences a form of emotional understanding absent from her marriage. The relationship challenges conventional assumptions regarding class, status, and respectability. It is not her socially prestigious husband but an ordinary mechanic who recognizes her emotional needs and treats her as an individual. Saroja's experience resonates strongly with Jasbir Jain's observations regarding women's struggles for autonomy:

The questioning of Indian women writers problematizes the struggle between male ego and female desire for freedom. This freedom cannot be worked out only through education or economic independence; it has to be achieved through the body because it is on the basis of its attractiveness, docility and productivity that traditional models have been constructed. (127)

By seeking emotional fulfilment outside her marriage, she implicitly challenges cultural expectations that define women exclusively through domestic devotion and self-sacrifice. Her anger, silence, and brief romantic involvement collectively constitute attempts to reclaim agency over her body, emotions, and identity.

Nevertheless, Saroja ultimately chooses not to abandon her family for a life with Paul. Her decision reflects the complexity of women's negotiations with patriarchal structures. Resistance does not necessarily culminate in complete rebellion; rather, it often involves subtle strategies of survival, compromise, and self-preservation. Although she remains within the family, she gradually acquires a stronger sense of selfhood.

A significant transformation occurs after her daughters become independent. No longer constrained by maternal responsibilities, Saroja begins to resist attempts by Kamini and Roopa to regulate her behaviour. She embarks upon a journey of self-discovery, travelling not because of her husband's transfers but out of personal choice. These journeys symbolize a profound shift in her understanding of freedom. Mobility, once imposed upon her, becomes an expression of autonomy and self-determination.

Saroja's life thus traces a remarkable trajectory. She evolves from a middle-class Brahmin girl whose aspirations are denied, to a railway "mehsahib" trapped within an unsatisfactory marriage, and finally to an independent woman who places her faith in her own resilience. Her story illustrates that empowerment is not a sudden achievement but a gradual process involving self-awareness, resistance, and personal transformation. Through Saroja, Badami demonstrates that even within restrictive social structures, women can create spaces for agency and self-definition.

Parallel to Saroja's story is the narrative of Kamini, whose experiences illuminate the gendered dimensions of migration and diasporic identity. Kamini moves to Canada to pursue doctoral studies in Chemical Engineering, a decision motivated by both intellectual ambition and a desire to escape the constraints of her native culture. In Canada, however, she encounters a different set of challenges associated with displacement and cultural alienation.

Kamini experiences what may be described as a condition of "unhomeliness." Physically located in Canada yet emotionally connected to India, she inhabits an in-between space that complicates

her sense of identity and belonging. Her memories of home coexist with the realities of an unfamiliar environment characterized by social isolation and harsh climatic conditions. The resulting tension produces feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional fragmentation.

For Kamini, Canada represents both opportunity and escape. It provides access to higher education and professional advancement while simultaneously offering distance from the patriarchal structures that shaped her mother's life. Having witnessed Saroja's suffering, Kamini develops a deep scepticism toward marriage and conventional gender roles. She associates domesticity with female subordination and therefore seeks an alternative mode of existence based on independence and self-reliance.

Despite experiencing nostalgia and loneliness, Kamini resists returning to India. Her migration constitutes a deliberate act of resistance against the limitations imposed by her native cultural environment. Unlike many immigrant narratives that emphasize assimilation, Kamini's story foregrounds the complexities of negotiating multiple cultural affiliations. She recognizes that complete belonging remains elusive, yet she remains committed to constructing an autonomous identity beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations.

The experiences of Saroja and Kamini reveal two distinct yet interconnected forms of female resistance. Saroja challenges oppression from within traditional Indian society, gradually redefining herself despite the limitations imposed by marriage and motherhood. Kamini, by contrast, seeks freedom through geographical displacement and educational achievement. While their strategies differ, both women strive to transcend the structures that attempt to regulate their lives.

Their narratives also illustrate the evolving nature of Indian feminism across generations. Saroja's struggle emerges within a context where resistance is often indirect, emotional, and constrained by social expectations. Kamini belongs to a later generation that possesses greater access to education, mobility, and alternative life choices. Yet neither woman achieves liberation without conflict. Both must confront loneliness, uncertainty, and the emotional costs of challenging established norms.

Ultimately, Tamarind Mem presents womanhood as a dynamic process of negotiation rather than a fixed identity. Through the intertwined lives of Saroja and Kamini, Anita Rau Badami examines the complex intersections of gender, culture, migration, and selfhood. The novel demonstrates that patriarchal oppression operates across both indigenous and diasporic contexts, albeit in different forms. At the same time, it affirms women's capacity for resilience, adaptation, and self-transformation.

By portraying two generations of women who challenge social expectations in distinct ways, Badami offers a nuanced exploration of Indian feminism and its cultural intersections. Saroja and Kamini embody different responses to oppression, yet both seek autonomy, dignity, and self-realization. Their journeys reveal that freedom is neither absolute nor easily attained; rather, it emerges through continuous acts of resistance, negotiation, and self-definition. In this sense, Tamarind Mem contributes significantly to feminist and diasporic literary discourse by illuminating the diverse ways in which women navigate the competing demands of tradition, modernity, and cultural belonging.

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