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English Literature

INDIAN FEMINISM AND ITS CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of feminist literary criticism has profoundly impacted twenty-first-century literary studies. A central and enduring concern within this critical framework has consistently been the cultural construction of gender. Historically, feminism has sought to re-position women's experiences as central, challenging their traditional marginalization in opposition to male-centric narratives. This critical approach systematically evaluates the secondary spaces to which women are often relegated within cultural, economic, and educational spheres, examining how such confinement impedes their capacity for self-realization and creative expression. Fundamentally, the feminist literary movement interrogates the cultural identification of woman as the "other" and man as the dominating "subject". The present paper, titled "Indian Feminism and its Cultural Intersections" undertakes an analysis of how Saroja and her daughter Kamini navigate and cope with the vagaries of gender discrimination they confront across diverse spatial and circumstantial contexts as depicted in Anita Rau Badami's novel *Tamarind Mem*. Their narratives contribute significantly to a nuanced understanding of gendered experiences at the intersection of tradition and global modernity.

Twenty-first-century feminism encompasses a diverse and expansive collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies, primarily motivated by or concerning the multifaceted experiences of women, particularly in their social, political, and economic dimensions. The theoretical horizon of feminism has significantly broadened to incorporate emergent frameworks such as multiracial feminism, which centres on the experiences of "women of color". By exploring the dynamics within multiracial communities, including African Americans and various immigrant populations such as Asian Canadians, British Asians, and Asian Americans, multiracial feminism critically foregrounds the subordination of women within the context of cross-cultural interaction. Despite the increasing recognition these diasporic communities have garnered in their host nations, women within the diaspora frequently experience a persistent state of inequality relative to their European counterparts, encountering subordination and systemic denial at multiple, intersecting levels.

The women's movement in India has undergone a multi-phasic evolution, with each distinct period contributing significantly to the conceptual foundations of Indian feminism. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri aptly observes, "... it is almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas" (xii) in this context. The cultural positioning of Indian women is deeply rooted in, among other factors, mythological narratives. Brahmanical tradition, for instance, often conceptualizes woman as a Goddess, embodying diverse dimensions such as *shakti* (divine feminine power), *prakrti* (nature/primordial matter), and *maya* (illusion/creative power). This potent feminine energy, however, is frequently posited as requiring control. Furthermore, only the benevolent manifestations of goddesses are upheld as exemplars of ideal female behaviour. The concepts of *Sati* (the pure woman) and *pativrata* (the devoted wife) have been deeply culturally indoctrinated into the psyche of Indian women. Narratives extolling figures like Savitri, who miraculously restored her husband to life, and Sita, who steadfastly followed her husband into forest exile, are venerated in households and have been profoundly internalized by women. The institution of marriage, in particular, frames women within such restrictive and traditional behavioural paradigms.

Beyond marital roles, motherhood constitutes another significant aspect that often leads to the effacement of women's selfhood. The idealized image of a mother as a self-sacrificing entity frequently denies women full personhood. In addition to these internal cultural dynamics, Indian

feminism has been substantially influenced by colonial history, the freedom struggle, and the partition of the country. During the colonial period, issues such as *sati*, child marriage, widow remarriage, and polygamy were strategically highlighted, often as part of an imperial discourse aimed at asserting dominance over Indian women. Conversely, the freedom struggle facilitated women's active participation in the political sphere, thereby securing a legitimate public space for their engagement. However, their involvement, while crucial, often remained confined within conventional moral frameworks that valorized sacrifice and self-effacement, preventing a broader subversion of traditional gender roles. Jasbir Jain, in *Writing Women Across Cultures*, articulates the profound impact of Partition on Indian women: "The State performed a patriarchal role in asserting its right to reclaim and rehabilitate women: women themselves by committing suicides in order to prevent rape or abduction followed the tradition of *jauhar* and *sati*" (116). This highlights how women's bodies and choices became sites of both state control and internalized cultural norms during periods of profound societal upheaval.

The representation of women within the corpus of Indian English fiction is demonstrably multifaceted. Traditional portrayals encompass a spectrum ranging from the archetypal chaste, suffering wife to the seductive *femme fatale*, and even the embodiment of the primal, dualistic force of *Shakti*—both protective and destructive. Nonetheless, the pervasive indoctrination of societal norms and taboos from early childhood often led to the internalization and perpetuation of an inherent sense of inferiority and an imperative for self-effacement. In Indian English fiction from the first half of the twentieth century, female characters are frequently depicted as subjects of subjugation, grappling with the competing forces of tradition and modernity in their pursuit of identity, autonomy, fulfillment, and romantic connection, both within and beyond marital constructs.

Within the domain of immigrant literature, female protagonists are consistently portrayed as contending with the challenges and opportunities presented by their host nations. Immigrant authors meticulously fictionalize the multifaceted experiences of Indian women as they navigate their roles as individuals, spouses, lovers, mothers, and custodians of culture and tradition, all while confronting the imperative of integration within an alien cultural landscape. Furthermore, these authors transcend a mere focus on multiculturalism by exploring novel dimensions of gender, achieved through the intricate juxtaposition of cultural memories and lived experiences within the broader narrative

canvas of their works. This analytical approach not only highlights the complexities of transnational identity formation, but also underscores the active role of diasporic women in shaping and redefining cultural boundaries. Their narratives thus contribute significantly to a nuanced understanding of gendered experiences at the intersection of tradition and global modernity.

Anita Rau Badami, an acclaimed author and recipient of the prestigious Marian Engel Award, relocated to Canada in 1991, subsequently earning a Master's degree in English literature from the University of Calgary in 1995. Her debut novel, *Tamarind Mem*, published in 1996, is geographically situated across India and Canada. This text meticulously interrogates matters of gender and tradition through the lens of the robust and often unbreakable mother-daughter relationship. The author skillfully introduces three distinct generations of women, Kamini, her mother Saroja, and her grandmother Putti, onto her narrative canvas, thereby illustrating how temporal shifts and evolving sensibilities profoundly impact the lives of Indian women across different eras. The novel thus offers a nuanced examination of how socio-cultural transformations are experienced and negotiated within a familial lineage.

Kamini's narrative voice inaugurates the textual discourse, emanating from Canada and articulating the bicultural tensions she experiences within that host nation. Conversely, Saroja's narrative voice predominates the subsequent section, meticulously chronicling "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). This dual narrative structure thus juxtaposes the daughter's Canadian perspective with the mother's retrospective account, delivered to a cohort of women within a railway carriage in India. Having been widowed for several years, the mother is no longer characterized by discontent but rather by a newfound mobility and self-possession. Indeed, these two central figures, alongside a broader array of female characters, collectively illuminate the multifaceted vicissitudes of Indian womanhood across varying generational and geographical contexts.

Saroja's aspiration to pursue a medical career is thwarted by her parents, who compel her into an arranged marriage with a man twice her age and fundamentally dissimilar in disposition and sensibility. Consequently, gender discrimination becomes a pervasive reality across all facets of her familial existence, including the upbringing of children. Her husband's pronounced indifference exacerbates Saroja's marital disillusionment. When Saroja articulates her grievances regarding her meaningless and dreary existence to her parents, her father's response is dismissive: "He is a worthy man, your husband, we did the best we could for you" (204). This exchange highlights how, within a patriarchal framework, culpability is frequently assigned to women. Saroja poignantly recounts the profound difficulty she experiences in adapting to new locations with each transfer of her husband, a railway employee:

Before my marriage, the world seems a smooth, round place. . . . We live in one little town from birth to marriage or death and thereafter. . . . You know everybody as if they belong to your own family. . . . Your happiness lights up the whole 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 excerpt vividly illustrates the dislocative impact of marital mobility on her social and psychological well-being, underscoring the profound instability inherent in her

domestic life. Unable to endure her protracted suffering, Saroja develops a "caustic verbalization" as a mechanism to vent her frustrations, thereby earning her the epithet "tamarind mem." Her nascent feminism is discernible in those segments of the novel where she weaponizes her tongue, a singular instrument that imbues her with the fortitude necessary to navigate life with her two daughters and an emotionally detached husband. While initially assuming the role of a cultural caretaker, Saroja's attempts to emancipate herself from the strictures of male domination are manifested through her angry outbursts and the subsequent, deliberate retreat into silence. She literally retreats into a state of profound withdrawal and emotional detachment after the initial catharsis of her acerbic pronouncements. Furthermore, her brief romantic entanglement with Paul da Costa, the "Anglo car mechanic", signals her desperate inclination towards unconventionality. Through this liaison, she apprehends that it is not her ostensibly high-status railway officer husband, but rather a car mechanic, who genuinely comprehends and brings her contentment. In this context, Jasbir Jain's observations regarding Indian women writers are particularly pertinent:

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. Women have been worshipped through these virtues and discarded when they have failed in them. Thus any need for personal space, for working out new definitions of freedom, for loosening the hold of tradition without destroying it has to begin with the body and by redefining the values placed on womanhood. (127)

Saroja's actions, therefore, can be interpreted as a form of somatic and psychological resistance, challenging the prescribed virtues of docility and productivity. Her linguistic aggression and subsequent silence represent a subversion of expected female comportment, asserting a nascent autonomy. The affair, while brief, further underscores her quest for personal validation and emotional fulfillment beyond the confines of a dissatisfying marriage, highlighting a profound yearning for self-definition that extends beyond conventional societal roles.

Despite her personal inclinations, Saroja ultimately refrains from dissolving her familial unit for a life with Paul. However, once her daughters achieve independence, Saroja makes a decisive break from the constraints of her domestic life, actively resisting Kamini's and Roopa's attempts to exert control over her. Saroja subsequently embarks on a journey of self-discovery, characterized by a deliberate pilgrimage. Whereas her previous travels were dictated by her husband's professional transfers, her current wanderings are volitional, driven by an intrinsic desire for personal exploration. Saroja's narrative thus traces the evolution of a middle-class Brahmin girl into a railway "mehsahib", a dedicated mother, and ultimately, a resilient, independent woman who reposes profound faith in her own inner fortitude. This trajectory underscores a significant shift from prescribed roles to self-determined agency, highlighting her capacity for profound personal transformation.

The novel additionally delineates the trajectory of an Indian immigrant woman who actively contends with salient gender issues and the inherent bicultural pull of her new environment. Kamini's relocation to Canada is precipitated by her pursuit of doctoral research in Chemical Engineering. Within this host nation, she profoundly experiences the phenomenon of "unhomeliness". Kamini's narrative subsequently recounts her recollections of her native land, simultaneously revealing her considerable struggles in

adapting to both the pervasive social isolation and the inhospitable climatic conditions of her new environment. This dual challenge underscores the complex psychological and environmental stressors inherent in her diasporic experience.

Kamini's embrace of Canada is predicated on its dual offering: access to advanced higher education and an alternative to the perceived strictures of her repressive native culture. Having witnessed the pervasive subordination and suffering endured by her mother, Saroja, within a patriarchal societal framework, Kamini develops a profound aversion to the institution of marriage. Despite experiencing nostalgia and profound loneliness, she steadfastly resists the impulse to repatriate. Her departure from the homeland thus constitutes a deliberate act of revolt and resistance, enabling her to achieve independence from an oppressive indigenous cultural context. Both Saroja and Kamini, though employing distinct strategies, actively contend against forms of oppression. While Kamini acknowledges the inherent tension of being bifurcated between her native and adopted spaces, recognizing that "belonging" presents a significant challenge, she resolutely abhors the prospect of being confined by a male-dominated native culture. Conversely, Saroja systematically dismantles the societal strictures that bind her to cultural expectations, ultimately transforming into an independent, peripatetic figure. This divergence underscores the varied manifestations of female agency within diasporic narratives, illustrating how individuals negotiate cultural demands to forge autonomous existences. Their journeys collectively affirm that emancipation, while often painful, can be achieved through both overt defiance and subtle, personal redefinitions of freedom.

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