

Exploring Social Roles and Gendered Expectations in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*

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Abstract

This article deals with the complex issue of gender relations in Anita Rau Badami's acclaimed novel, The Hero's Walk.

The Indo-Canadian contemporary author received the Regional Commonwealth Writers Prize and Premio Berto in Italy for this novel which first appeared in 2000.

In this article I aim at identifying and decoding the intricacies of the characters' private lives in terms of how social roles and gendered expectations influence social and intimate behaviours.

For this purpose, I will make use of the theoretical instruments offered by social psychology without disregarding the feminist approach of patriarchy and discrimination against women. I will also refer to theories related to parenthood which will help us better grasp the complexity of parent-child relationships.

Keywords

gender relations, social role theory, patriarchy

Published in 2000, Anita Rau Badami's second novel, *The Hero's Walk*, has been very well received on the Canadian literary scene and has brought the author the Commonwealth Prize for fiction. The novel tells the story of an Indian Hindu family set in an imaginary town, Toturpuram. The writer paints a vivid picture of this family above which there is a sense of "disappointment that hangs over [...] like the heat that chokes the Indian town" [3]. The main characters are the members of this family, Sripathi (the husband and father), Nirmala (the wife and mother), Ammayya (the grandmother) and Putti (Sripathi's spinster sister). In this family picture we also see Arun, Sripathi and Nirmala's son, who fails to capture attention, shadowed as he is by his sister Maya.

The narrative develops from the shocking day when the family learns about Maya's death, far away in Canada, where she went to study, fell in love and got married to an American, against her family's wishes. This is the reason why she was never allowed to return to visit her family in India again. The tragedy of her death, which brings in the old house the hybrid granddaughter Nandana, triggers a wave of change in the Rao family's life.

This article will analyze the manner in which one of the main characters of the novel acts his social role and the extent to which exterior events trigger

essential changes in his behavior. I will also point to the conflicts arising when gendered expectations are not met in the context of Indian society, governed as it is by a strong caste system in a patriarchal backdrop.

To serve my analytical purposes I will make use of theories stemming from social psychology without disregarding the postcolonial feminist approach of patriarchy and discrimination against women.

A social role, according to social psychology, is a “set of *expectations* tied to a social position that guide people’s attitudes and behaviour” [2, 114]. These expectations are socially transmitted through education (first in the family, then in schools) and they are also linked to how people’s identities develop. The internalization of social roles determines the appearance of role identities. These identities are unique and they are born when an individual adopts a certain role (for instance the role of *mother*), personalizes it and acts according to it in her interaction with others.

The social role theory forwarded by Alice H. Eagly (and quoted by Rudman and Glick) lays down two main principles according to which gender relations materialize in society: “a gendered division of labor and a gender-based hierarchy (in which men generally have more status and power than women)” [5, 19]. Eagly believes that masculine and feminine identities are constructed in society by taking into account these two main characteristics.

A gender-based social hierarchy in which men are viewed as more influential to the disadvantage in status and rights of women, is the basis of a patriarchal society. In critic Deniz Kandiyoti’s view, classic patriarchy is the social system according to which girls are, to a certain extent, objectified and “given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband’s father [4, 278]. In their new family they are expected to be submissive and answer to the men in that particular family and also to the senior women, such as their mothers-in-law.

This gender-based hierarchy which clearly presupposes a social disadvantage for women, greatly influences men’s lives as well. One should not lose sight of the pressure exerted on men who are expected to behave according to their social roles, too. As we will see in *The Hero’s Walk*, social pressure and gendered expectations do not affect only the female characters, but they also influence the male protagonist’s life and decisions.

The voice predominantly heard in *The Hero’s Walk* is the one of Sripathi, head of the Rao family. This is the first time Anita Rau Badami creates a male protagonist whose viewpoint is central in the book. It is true that all main characters play essential roles in the novel, nevertheless at the end of the book we get a feeling that what we have just read was Sripathi’s story.

As the narrative unfolds, we watch him go through a number of different situations that trigger moments of assessing his own actions and trying to understand how his life had reached the crisis it was facing. The pivotal event in the book is the news of daughter Maya's death in an accident together with her husband:

A roaring wave of shock crashed over Sripathi. He hardly registered the rest of the man's words. Maya and her husband had died the day before. But why didn't anyone tell us earlier? Why, what could you have done? he argued with the voice that grew louder and louder in his head. You didn't talk to her for nine years, cut her off as if she were a diseased limb and now suddenly comes this concern? Sripathi could hear his heart pounding urgently inside his chest. His breath was indecently loud in his ears. [1, 32]

From this moment onward we witness Sripathi entering a cycle of pain stemming from the tragedy itself and his own sense of guilt for having forsaken his daughter for so long. This feeling of guilt is exacerbated once his wife Nirmala openly accuses him of being responsible for their daughter's death. When learning about Maya's accident, Nirmala starts hitting him in despair, forgetting all Hindu traditional rules of behaviour which state that women should obey and respect their husbands.

Maya's death is the starting point of the wave of changes that come over the Rao family. If the old house sheltering them had an effigy just above the entrance, it would most likely read *duty*. This word has been carved in Sripathi's psyche since he was a boy. His sense of correctness in what social norms are concerned is clearly triggered in him very early in his childhood. His own father, a man of importance in their community, had abandoned his family and had started a new life with his mistress. A series of social humiliations affected Sripathi and his mother, Ammayya, a thing which obviously damaged his view of his future and purposes in life.

Never would he allow this to happen to himself again, Sripathi had sworn bitterly. *Never* would he fail in his duty to his family or subject them to such shame. He did not want either his father's fame or stature because the higher one was, the greater the fall. No, he would be only an ordinary man, but one with good standing in the eyes of the world. He would be a simple man, respected for nothing other than his qualities as a father and a husband. He, unlike his father, would always remain dutiful to the mother who had brought him into this world, to the woman he married, to the children he had—first and above everything else. This the young boy vowed to himself. [1, 61]

Yet, in Sripathi's mind this sense of duty he had put in the service of his family was to be the unwritten law governing their lives. To the socially assigned role of respectful son of Ammayya and protecting husband and father for Nirmala, Maya and Arun, Sripathi comes up with additional features: avoid standing out and be as common as possible in society, be respected for who he is as a person without allegiance to his father's name.

As I was hinting at the beginning of this article, it is not only women who should be taken into account when discussing gendered expectations. The Indian imaginary town, Toturpuram, which is the backdrop of the novel, is typical for a highly traditional society, where the Indian caste system is still respected and the unwritten rules of patriarchy are upheld. Sripathi feels pressure from this social system as well, especially because the roles of master of the house, husband and father, come with an obligatory responsibility for the wellbeing of all the family members. When his daughter Maya defies him and disobeys his order to come back to India and get married to someone Sripathi had chosen for her, his whole system of values is disrupted and Maya's decision is seen as betrayal and a reason for the whole family's humiliation: "Dishonour was what she had given them in return for the independence they had granted her" [1, 113]. Whenever she had tried to get in contact with him along the years, he had refused as "hurt, pride and anger intervened and silenced him" [1, 95].

Maya's demise constitutes a dead end for Sripathi. He is denied the chance to re-establish a relationship with his daughter:

He had forced himself to forget his daughter's betrayal, for that was how he regarded her marriage, the life she had chosen for herself. It was true that it was he who had told her never to come home, who had refused to reply to her letters or her phone calls, but by dying she had stolen from him the opportunity to forgive and be forgiven. [1, 137]

Yet, his granddaughter, Nandana, had survived and had no other relatives to take care of her. The arrival of the little girl into the family could also represent an opportunity to raise another girl and, in the words of one of his friends, a "chance to redeem" himself [1, 125-6].

But redemption can't be achieved as easily as his friend might have thought. Besides his grief for the terrible loss suffered, Sripathi's sense of guilt for Maya's death becomes more and more present in his mind, with every day he sees the fruit of his daughter's forbidden love: "How can I face my grandchild when I am responsible for her mother's death? Sripathi asked himself. The more he thought about his actions eight years ago, the more convinced he was that his anger had somehow brought about Maya's demise" [1, 245].

Unable to shed tears for his daughter, daily facing his wife's reproachful glances and the silence of little Nandana (who had stopped talking when being

uprooted from home and planted in a strange world with people she did not know), Sripathi is making efforts to keep face:

Nirmala rocked herself on the bed, looking dry-eyed into the darkness as if she could see Maya there. Sripathi sat silently beside her. I have not turned to stone, he wanted to say. I am full of tears, but if I let go I will not be able to carry on walking this hard path to the end of my life. Control is everything now. [1, 173]

It takes him a long time to understand that in order to recover his life and livelihood, he needs to let go of the past and forgive himself: “This grief that wrapped itself around him was like the sea. The longer he stood beside it staring at the limitless horizon of it, the deeper he sank. It refused to let him feel anything for the child that Maya had left behind, refused to let him love anyone again.” [1, 262].

With the end of the novel comes relief for Sripathi’s soul as well. After a chain of events during which the granddaughter Nandana goes missing and is finally found, culminating with a terrible rain flood that forces everybody out of the old house, Sripathi finds the courage to open the letters Maya had sent home:

He took out a stack of aerograms and envelopes thick with letters from Maya. He opened one of them carefully. She began, “My dear Appu, Mamma, Arun...”. Always in descending order, according to age. He looked at the neat, slanting writing, and finally the tears spilled forth unchecked. [1, 357]

This episode of mental and spiritual liberation opens Sripathi toward little Nandana and hope is present at the end of the novel.

Sripathi’s turmoil all through the narrative, his insights into what his life has become, are a source of understanding for the reader. He is evidently trapped by the impositions attached to his social roles: as a *father* he should be firm with his children for their own good; as a *husband* he should protect his wife, and rejoice in her love, respect and submission; as a *son* he should always show his mother respect and protect her until the end of her life; as a *copywriter* he should do everything in his power to keep his job and have an income to support his family. His love for his daughter (who had betrayed him) seems to always be in contradiction with his role as father. It is this affective bond that makes his life miserable when the social markers of his role as father in a traditional family forbid him to forgive her. Maya’s sudden death shakes the Rao family and Sripathi is forced to make peace between his categorical rules of conduct and his feelings, kept bottled inside, behind his tearless eyes.

This analysis has started from the premise that in *The Hero’s Walk* Anita Rau Badami’s characters’ social roles, which shape their role identities, influence the protagonists’ behaviours to a large extent. Another point of interest is

represented by the conflicts arising when gendered expectations are not met in the context of traditional patriarchal Indian society. In the book these are mainly psychological struggles which push characters to cross the boundaries set by gendered and social expectations.

The writer generously offers the reader insights into how Sripathi Rao deals with the loss of his daughter, Maya, thus facilitating a better understanding of the extent to which external social expectations have shaped his decisions. Out of an exacerbated sense of duty, Sripathi refuses to forgive his daughter for marrying outside her race and against his decision, and this verdict will haunt him intensely after the news of Maya's death. His redemption comes with a slow process of self-recovery and forgiveness. In order to understand Sripathi, we must see him in connection with the social roles he had been assigned and which trapped him in a web of duty, responsibilities and unhappiness.

What is impressive in Anita Rau Badami's descriptions of this character's inner mutations is that she makes every major step he takes in the direction of self-fulfillment appear like a natural approach of human development, with all the difficulties such a process implies.

Using Nirmal Trivedi's words, by reshaping and crossing the borders set by social impositions, "[...] Badami invests herself fully into the lives the Rao household and delivers something much more than a prize-winning novel. She presents us with a case for reflection into the varied domestic sphere from which we all emerge" [6].

One of the lessons one might learn from the events depicted in this book is that, in the end, the incompatibility between what society, tradition and religion dictate and the core of one's personality will always cause psychological tension which one must first understand then accept and, finally, try to neutralise by creating a balance between external and internal social markers.

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