

BEYOND INDIVIDUAL SPACE:
THE SYMBOLIC PLACE OF INDIAN WOMEN IN THE LAND OF
DIASPORA IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S *TELL IT TO THE TREES*

SOFIA CAVALCANTI
UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA, ITALY

ABSTRACT

Recent writings by Indian women authors suggest that Indian women who emigrated to the West (mainly the U.S. and Canada) have been claiming their space in the diasporic place, believing that a change of location is a significant opportunity for them to challenge and revise culturally-inscribed roles. In my article, I argue that the dynamics of Indian postcolonialism have crossed national borders, thus forcing women to the margins in the foreign land, too. Since they stand for the national territory, their relationship with space is deeply symbolic, as I will show in my analysis of the novel *Tell It to the Trees* (2011) by the Indo-Canadian writer Anita Rau Badami. Besides studying the women characters' positions in both real and symbolic space, my article focuses on how women accept, resist, or modify men's expectations in terms of identity preservation in a Western environment.

KEYWORDS

diaspora; women's identity; Indian diasporic literature; Indian women's writing; metaphorical space; Anita Rau Badami; Canadian literature

INDIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: WOMEN AS CULTURAL SYMBOLS

During the decades before and after the turn of the twenty-first century, Indian English fiction has occupied a central position within the corpus of contemporary Anglophone literature. Diasporic literature is one of the main facets of recent Indian writing since, as Bill Ashcroft has recently remarked, thinking and talking about globalization, as well as the increasing mobility of people, give a sense of a future world beyond the restrictions of a nation.¹ Commenting on the growing preoccupation of Indian authors with the issue of migration, Fakrul Alam has pointed out that while in the first phase of Indian English fiction most of its writers were located in the Indian subcontinent and wrote about their vision of Indian people's everyday life, in the second phase—which began in the second decade of the new millennium—a considerable number of writers started to deal with the life

1. See Bill Ashcroft, "Re-writing India," in *Writing India Anew: Indian English Fiction 2000–2010*, ed. Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 31.

of diasporic Indians and tackle themes such as alienation, acculturation, and assimilation in the West.² For Indian women writers, who form a majority of the Indian writers who have emigrated to the West, a change of location is an opportunity to break with the past and build a new space, thus challenging and revising women's traditional roles. In fact, even in postcolonial India women have been pushed to live on the margins, despite the national ideals of freedom and self-regulation. Therefore, the rise of a transnational horizon has opened up new possibilities for them to claim their space in the new geographical location. However, does the diaspora actually provide contexts in which previous gender norms can be challenged? Or does it only reproduce and, possibly, even harden existing gender ideologies and relations?

As Sandhya Rao Mehta wrote in her introduction to *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, a volume she edited, the concept of diaspora has mainly been examined according to overarching definitions and theories aiming at linking the experiences of diverse groups, especially male ones, since the choice to move from one physical location to another is primarily seen to be a male decision.³ Associating diaspora with a patriarchal dimension, thus analyzing the mobility of masculine subjects as primary agents of the formation of diaspora, would mean overlooking the specific individual experiences of women, and, consequently, ignoring the fact that the onus of retaining memories of home, reproducing them within the new place, and acting as cultural custodians is typically feminine. Therefore, it is imperative to look at diaspora as a gendered (and not general) phenomenon which needs to be understood through the examination of different contexts, but also from the point of view of gender, which is a central organizing principle of the migrant's life. Discussing the different classifications the concept of diaspora has undergone, Monbinder Kaur has noted that unlike the "old" diaspora, which originated from the colonial experience and was characterized by a break with the homeland, the "new" Indian diaspora, which started out of India's globalization, is based on a connection with the homeland.⁴ As a consequence, even in the new land, women are bound to their roots and original traditions. Moreover, they are supposed to bear the burden of preserving memories of home, reproducing Indianness by recreating it within new contexts, and acting as cultural perpetuators of the homeland culture. As Anne McClintock has argued, talking about the different gender experiences in the diaspora, while men occupy the dimension of time, being future-oriented, linear, projected towards change and progress, women occupy the dimension of space as they are linked to the past, local traditions,

2. See Fakrul Alam, "The Mythos of Return and Recent Indian English Diasporic Fiction," in *Writing India Anew: Indian English Fiction 2000–2010*, ed. Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy, 247.

3. See Sandhya Rao Mehta, introduction to *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Sandhya Rao Mehta (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 1–2.

4. See Monbinder Kaur, "Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies: Diaspora and Womanhood," in *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Sandhya Rao Mehta, 68.

and the static environment of the household.⁵ Through clothes, food, and traditional customs, women must preserve the family's national identity and are considered as symbols, totems, signifiers of their national group, and cultural custodians. Under these circumstances, women are far from being free to build a new life and a new personal identity. On the contrary, as Kira Koznick has pointed out, within the diaspora they are often responsible for the "cultural-biological reproduction" of their native collectivity.⁶

If we draw a parallel between the creation of the postcolonial Indian nation and the Indian diasporic experience in the West, we will notice that both are based on gendered and familial norms. After the British colonial era, the new nation-state had the opportunity to reclaim its cultural integrity and recover its identity and that was done by using gender as a formative element of the new nation, which was a male-constructed space, ruled by male leaders. Commenting on the gendered configuration of the postcolonial nation, Elleke Bohemer claims that women's role was highly symbolic as they embodied traditional values such as motherhood, home, a nurturing attitude, family, hearth, roots, and birth.⁷ Despite their important ideological value, women's actual status was that of symbols as they stood for the national territory and values, which were re-established and kept safe by the sons of the nation. This ideological construction shows the extent to which gender was the formative medium for the constitution of nationhood and how nationalism overlaps with the gender and patriarchal legacies. In this regard, Bohemer explains that "the nation as a body of people was imagined as a family arrangement in which the leaders had the authority of fathers and, in relation to the maternal national entity, adopted the positions of sons."⁸ Hence, the gender hierarchies in force within the family were applied to the structure of the new nation as they were taken as being given naturally, and therefore unquestionable, and the family was the vehicle for social organization and the primary carrier of gender ideology. We can therefore argue that as independence did not empower mothers, despite privileging them as symbols, diaspora did not empower women despite transcending national boundaries. In the nation-state, as well as in the land of diaspora, the patriarchal presence has remained unchallenged and gender policies have been manipulated to reproduce the principles of the patriarchal family. On the one hand, women experience a metaphorical displacement both in the homeland and in the host country because of the problem that Crenshaw has defined as "intersectionality," that

5. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995), 132–80.

6. Kira Koznick, "Diasporas and Sexuality," in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, ed. Kim Knot and Sean McLoughlin (London: Zed Books, 2010), 125.

7. See Elleke Bohemer, *Stories of Women, Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 37–38.

8. Bohemer, *Stories of Women, Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 46.

is, the intersection of multiple patriarchies that force women to the margins.⁹ On the other hand, as Gopinath has underlined, women in the diaspora must also face a physical displacement as a result of a sudden and radical change of location after their husbands' personal or professional decisions, and this adds to their sense of exile.¹⁰ Therefore, it is useful to investigate the consequences of such displacement for women's identity and how they act and react within this new space. In the next section, I am going to analyze *Tell It to the Trees* (2011), a novel by Indo-Canadian writer Anita Rau Badami,¹¹ looking at the strategies employed by its main characters, women of different ages and backgrounds, who have to deal with their bicultural selves and negotiate their space in the new geographical location.

ANITA RAU BADAMI'S *TELL IT TO THE TREES*

Tell It to the Trees is a great example of the author's women-centered approach, which is evident in all her literary production. As a diasporic Indian writer, she frequently tackles problems such as violence, adaptation, and the construction of identity in a foreign land. In her works, through her characters, she builds a constant dialogue between her culture of origin (Indian) and the one of adoption (Canadian). In this respect, it is interesting to read what she says about her double identity:

I don't think I could have written a novel if I had not left India; I find that the distance gives me perspective and passion. I was twenty-nine years in India and ten years here, so I have a foot in India and a couple of toes here. I am both doomed and blessed to be suspended between two worlds, always looking back, but with two gorgeous places to inhabit, in my imagination or my heart.¹²

With her writings, Badami created a niche of stories where the main focus is the institution of the family and the lives of immigrants settled in Canada. *Tell It to the Trees* is a psychological novel dominated by suspense and mystery, in which female voices are front and center. It provides significant examples of women belonging to three different generations, who cope with the roles they are supposed to perform in the new land and the consequences they must face if they accept, resist, or modify them. Moreover, it offers

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9. See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–67.
 10. See Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 261–79.
 11. Anita Rau Badami was born in India in 1961 and immigrated to Canada with her husband and son in 1991. Her first novel was *Tamarind Woman* (1996). Her bestselling second novel, *The Hero's Walk* (2001), won the Regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Italy's "Premio Berto" and was named a *Washington Post* Best Book. Her third novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), was longlisted for the IMPAC Award and named as a finalist for the City of Vancouver Book Award.
 12. Kate Taylor, "A Tale of Love and Terror: Anita Rau Badami Interview," *Globe and Mail*, September 5, 2006: 25.

interesting insights into the strategies adopted by the women protagonists, who are not typical traditional heroines, but psychologically rounded female protagonists dealing with suffocating patriarchal values. The snow that covers the landscape where the story takes place is just one of the many symbols included in the book, evoking the oppression many migrant women experience despite a change of location and cultural values.

It is a novel depicting women's condition in the diaspora, where, under an illusory veil of calm, inside ordinary houses, and within apparently ordinary families, they must face a daily fight to meet patriarchal expectations on the one hand, and negotiate a new identity on the other. In this book, set in the years 1979 and 1980 in the little Canadian town of Merrit's Point, Badami tells the story of an Indian family that immigrated to Canada after the grandfather's decision to move from India and settle down "in the middle of nowhere."¹³ Despite the tendency of contemporary Indian women writers described, among others, by Kaur, that is, to present one empowered female protagonist as a role model for women readers,¹⁴ Badami's novel shows five main women characters, each one living her inner conflicts and weaknesses in the Western environment. Knowledge of their positions both in the real and the symbolic space is crucial for understanding their strategies for survival or adaptation in the host country and within the patriarchal family, whose protector, provider, and procreator is Vikram Dharma, a violent and despotic father. The women protagonists are Harini, Vikram's first wife, who decides to change her name to Helen; Varsha, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Vikram and Helen, characterized by a deeply problematic identity; Akka, the grandmother and the first of the family to have moved to Canada with her husband; Suman, Vikram's second wife and a perfect example of a nurturing wife and mother; and Anu, an Indian writer who rejects traditions in order to live a free and unconventional life.

Anu lives in the Dharmas' back-house, which she has rented for a year to finish her new book, while the first wife, her daughter, and the grandmother all live together in the main house. After the first wife's death, Suman, the second wife, takes her place in the house. The main setting of the novel is the space inside or around the family home, which is surrounded by snow, and therefore by silence, for most of the year. In the following section, I am going to look at each woman protagonist in detail and I will explore their specific positions in both the physical and the symbolic space of the story.

13. Anita Rau Badami, *Tell It to the Trees* (2011; Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2012), 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

14. Diasporic novelists such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Kiran Desai introduce female characters who are situated in resistance against traditional cultural norms that try to reduce them to mere sexual objects. See Kaur, "Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies," 75.

THE NOVEL'S WOMEN PROTAGONISTS: DISPLACEMENT, ENTRAPMENT, RESISTANCE

The five women I am going to analyze are all direct or indirect victims of a patriarchal ideology, which dominates the Dharmas. Interestingly, they all act in the name of love for their children, family, and friends, but the outcome of their actions often culminates in great violence.

The first wife, Harini, or Helen, refuses to keep her Indian identity and tries to settle down in the Western environment, as her decision to change her name shows. Such a choice also suggests a crisis of self-image, which, as Stuart Hall has noticed, is very frequent in the displaced.¹⁵ Stuart also pointed out that diasporic identities are not fixed, but “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”¹⁶ Helen rejects the role that patriarchal rules attribute to women by rebelling against her husband's insistence that she stay at home, cooking Indian food, and spending all day doing housework. Her daughter, Varsha, describes her as follows:

It was as if she had sprung out of the earth rootless, with no past, no memory, no history except what she made up. She turned up her nose at Papa, called him a great big bore, she joked about his work as an accountant in a small lumber mill which he always says is very important work. Her sneering drove him mad, he'd lift up his large hands, shout and throw things like a crazy man. (26)

The simile used by the young girl, who compares her mother to a fruit or vegetable that grew without roots, suggests the idea that Helen rejects the burden of the tradition which would inevitably link her to her homeland, thus forcing her to live a life in stasis, stuck in a constant tussle between her past and present. She has made her choice, which is to move on and look at the future, and the change of location represents a great opportunity for her to do so. Her depiction as the most imperfect Indian wife continues through her daughter's eyes: “She was a wretched cook. . . . She'd start boiling something, forget it on the stove because she was busy reading a book or getting dressed to go out, and end up with a burnt pot of food. It drove Papa crazy, but she never changed her ways” (26–27). This woman is not willing to put family duties above anything else, and even though she is part of the Dharma family, she, ironically, subverts the idea of *dharma*, an Indian concept meaning responsibility towards personal duties, which, as Chanda points out, is often narrowly associated with hierarchy and the separation of gender roles.¹⁷ The result is that her husband beats her every day as she does not provide him with the stability of tradition and threatens the preservation of the family's identity. Her position in the story is always outside; she is pushed by an ever-present impulse to go out and move as much as possible. However, we

15. See Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235–36.

16. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 235.

17. Geetanjali Singh Chanda, *Indian Women in the House of Fiction* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008), 269.

also perceive that, according to the Dharmas' standards, the outside is an unnatural place for women and Helen's tragic death in a car accident while she is trying to run away from home is an inevitable consequence of her disrupting the family's natural balance.

The grandmother, Akka, Vikram's mother, moved to Canada unwillingly because of her husband's decision to leave India. Her acceptance of her role as a submissive woman is only an apparent one, as we learn through some clues throughout the book. In fact, years before, she got rid of her husband, a violent and authoritarian man, by locking him out of their house in the middle of a winter night:

He froze to death. Right outside our front door. And me fast asleep inside. Didn't hear the doorbell, didn't hear him knocking away, bang, bang, bang! They found him the next morning, propped up against the front door. Frozen solid, like a statue. God punished him for making my life a misery! (167)

Her gesture has a symbolic meaning, as she avenges herself by forcing her husband (literally) outside, as he did to her, by condemning her to live as an outsider, stuck at home in the solitude of a cold and nearly desert land. She says she did not hear her husband's call for help during the night, just as he did not hear hers during the many years spent in that foreign place. Readers can perceive her unconventional nature, for example, when she blames the gods for women's condition (as the submission of women is justified by religious principles): "It's their fault, those fancy-dress monkeys up there . . . They're blind and deaf all of them" (14). The blindness of the gods in the face of women's sufferings makes her angry, but, paradoxically, she herself is equally blind towards her two daughters-in-law. Despite weakly trying to help them by pushing them to leave the family home, she is too respectful of tradition to be able to depart from it definitely: "Shame is a big deal in our family, we all have an obligation to the Family Name" (29), that is, Dharma, which can be interpreted, in accordance with the symbolic meaning of the name, as an inflexible value system foregrounding communal responsibility over and above individual desires.

When Akka does not reprimand her son for his aggressivity, Helen tells her: "Ask your son to stop. . . . [H]e hits me. And you do nothing. You should be ashamed of yourself" (30). The sense of personal duty is too strong to allow her to see tradition and patriarchal principles as entities that could be subverted, even though readers know that in the past she got her revenge and did not meekly accept her own destiny. Therefore, she is an example of a sneaky and yet at the same time extreme resistance; the only way she found to rebel against her predicament was by killing its perpetrator.

The teenager Varsha, the daughter of Vikram and his first wife, is one of the main speaking voices of the novel, since many scenes are told from her point of view. She is the most problematic character in the novel because she lives through deep identity conflicts as a consequence of her double life: that of a normal adolescent girl who is growing up in a Canadian town, attending a local school and living according to Western customs, and that of a girl

belonging to a very traditional Indian family, closed to the rest of the world and based on the protection of identity, secrets to be kept, and family honor to be saved.

Her life in between confuses her, thus making her a disturbed child, obsessed with keeping secrets and with the struggle to keep her stepmother Suman at home. Her liminal position makes her feel unsure but also anxious to have a tight grip on her life and on the life of those who are dear to her. This explains her obsession with possession and delimited space. She wants full ownership of the people she loves and does not accept anything that might threaten that idea of unity: "I hugged [my brother] hard. Hemant is my half-brother, Suman's son, but entirely mine" (6–7). The fact that Hemant is her half-brother makes her feel even more vulnerable; despite her being the other half, they are not the same thing, an inseparable whole, but there will always be a space between them which anybody could enter, for example Hemant's natural mother. This explains Varsha's obsession with regard to Suman, as well as her fear of being abandoned: "She would never do such a thing: she *loves* me. She is *mine*" (12, italics in the original). If Varsha manages to control her, she will also be able to maintain control over her brother and ensure the unity of the family. In this respect, the same anxiety emerges when she talks about her family and the life within it; she struggles to trace clear and impenetrable boundaries separating the family from the rest of the world: "[My brother] needed to be taught how to keep secrets. Family secrets. *Our* family, *our* secrets. Nobody else had to know" (57, italics in the original).

Varsha has internalized her cultural duties so much that she thinks the violence her father uses within the household is necessary: "He loves us, wants only what is good for us. That's why he has to punish us when we're naughty. For our own good" (57). Her belief that men know what is best for their family is deeply ingrained in India's religious and cultural value system, in which a woman must revere her father and serve her husband as a devotee serves a god. As Suma Chitnis explains, such devotion to men is institutionalized by the Hindu concept of *pativrata*, the devoted wife, further romanticized through legends, folklore, and folksongs, highlighting women's immolation for their man's sake.¹⁸ Varsha justifies her father's attitude as if he, himself, were a victim of the duty he has to perform as a man: "Poor Papa, it's not his fault that he has to be hard with me sometimes" (59). His role as protector of the family honor makes him a sort of martyr carrying the burden of a disobedient family which needs to be constantly called to order. As Varsha observes: "He is careful about that, Papa, always concerned about other people's opinion, always worried about our family name" (35). Because of such an obsession with the idea of an impenetrable space between the inside and outside of the family, the girl fears that their back-house tenant, the Indian writer, will convince her stepmother to leave home. Pushed by

18. See Suma Chitnis, "Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions," in *Feminism in India*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London: Zed Books, 2005), 19–20.

jealousy, the teenager's disturbed personality emerges powerfully when one night she decides to lock the writer outside the front door of the house in the middle of a snowstorm, in exactly the same way as her grandmother did to her grandfather, killing him. She literally forces the woman outside the family borders, which is, in her opinion, what should happen to those who try to challenge that system.

The Indian writer Anu, temporarily transferred to Canada to find inspiration for her new book, is an independent woman, separated from her husband and with no children. She rents the Dharmas' back-house when the second wife, Suman, has already arrived from India, and they establish a good relationship. The second wife envies her independence and the fact that she is someone who decides for herself, rejecting the stereotype of the passive and submissive Indian woman: "I envied the woman her control over her life, her money, her future" (99). She has the power of making decisions, spending money, and living a life whose future depends on herself only, which is unthinkable from the second wife's perspective. Anu's lifestyle stems from her upbringing in the West; she does not feel the burden of the traditional religious beliefs and images transmitted as the only possible models to follow. Unlike Suman, Anu can wear what she pleases: "She was smartly dressed in a summery shirt and tight jeans and had an air of confident strength about her" (102). She refuses to accept the traditional role imposed on women by Indian values, and tries to help Suman react against such traditions, suggesting some solutions to escape from violence, such as addressing a lawyer, leaving her husband, and going to live in another place. However, any challenge to the balance of tradition comes at a price. Her death outside in the snow can be read as a punishment inflicted for her attempt to resist and modify a natural system. If you try to rebel and get out of it, you will be treated as an outsider and, therefore, you will perish.

The second wife, Suman, was taken from India and brought to Canada by Vikram after his first wife's death as a gift for his daughter: "A present for you,' Papa said pulling her into the house" (32). The image of the man "pulling" his new wife into the house suggests an objectification of the poor woman, who will be pulled throughout the novel by the other characters as well: her mother-in-law tries to convince her to leave with her young son, her stepdaughter demands constant attention and wants her to behave as a perfect nurturing mother, and her only friend, Anu, convinces her to report the domestic violence she experiences daily. For most of the novel, she appears as a passive character who depends upon other people's wishes. She behaves like a perfect Indian wife and mother, as we understand from the words of her stepdaughter, Varsha: "Papa brought her for me all the way from India. I am grateful to her for giving me my brother and for keeping the house clean and for cooking yummy food" (12).

As is evident, she performs her traditional role perfectly by reproducing India both biologically and culturally in the foreign land. She is aware of that and she admits: "He chose me because I am good-natured, easygoing,

the perfect substitute for a wild dead wife, a patient nursemaid for his aged mother, a caring mother for his child” (67). She fulfills her duties of symbolic representation of India by cooking Indian food and wearing saris even in the very low winter temperatures. These two elements are ever-present reminders of the homeland. On the one hand, the sari is a strong marker of identity, but on the other it is also the signifier of tradition. Suman’s role as a personification of Indian culture is represented by the clothes she is forced to wear, which suggests a life in stasis, being stuck between the homeland and the host country, while actually belonging to neither of them. As Shashikala Muthumal Assella reminds us, food is a symbol of affiliation to a mother culture and a motherland, but also “the point of connection between the outside world and the inside world of our bodies,”¹⁹ and that is why it becomes, to use Rüdiger Kunow’s term, a “cultural sustenance” in the diaspora.²⁰ Indeed, for Suman, Indian food progressively changes meaning from a symbol of oppression (as she must cook her husband’s favorite Indian dishes in order to please him) to a symbol of emotional development and private expression, when she starts to cook for the Indian writer living in the back-house. During their encounters, justified by an exchange of food, Suman becomes aware of her own condition and progressively establishes her own female individuality. The writer understands that Suman needs those visits as they become a means of self-expression but also subtle ways of disobeying the family rules, as the verb “sneaking” suggests: “It’s become a habit with her, sneaking to my place with samples of her cooking. I’ve stopped protesting against such generosity. I understand that food is an excuse to talk. She’s lonely with nobody other than the old lady for company” (126). Making tea, cooking rice, or chopping vegetables creates a moment of engagement for both of them. It could be argued that through the bonding experience of the preparation and consumption of food, the two women create their own space for communication and exchange based on unspoken emotions and unvoiced thoughts.

Silence dominates Suman’s life as she spends the greatest part of her days alone, cooking in the kitchen. The silence that covers the surroundings of the house has invaded her soul, too, as she closed herself off from the rest of the world, unable to speak out her sorrow and anger: “I used to sing to myself to defeat silence. . . . [S]uch is the power of this place that it drove my own voice out of me” (120–21).

19. Shashikala Muthumal Assella, “Kitchen Politics and the Search for an Identity: *The Mango Season*,” in *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Sandhya Rao Mehta, 120.

20. Rüdiger Kunow, “Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation and the Indian Diaspora in the United States,” in *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*, ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003), 157. According to Kunow, food in the diaspora transcends its function of satiating physical hunger, thus acquiring spiritual and emotional connotations.

Reflecting on the physical paralysis she experiences, she says: “[H]ere I am, stuck in a world full of borders and boundaries, unable to travel because I can’t show proof of my identity to the people” (121). Again, she feels that the main obstacles to her own freedom are to be found in the new world she is inhabiting, where she feels a deep sense of alienation, which Edward Said defines as “metaphorical exile,” that is, a state of mind that women, as well as men, experience in the host country, where they construe themselves as outsiders.²¹ From this perspective, Suman’s feeling of being exiled is not due to a state of actual exile, but to the sense of displacement caused by the patriarchal ideologies which entrap her existence. She feels deprived of her own identity and the radical change of location gives her an added burden to carry because of her fear of an unknown host country. The result is that she ends up alienating herself further and further. Her feeling of being trapped is conveyed very well by the impulsive reaction of Suman when her stepdaughter, Varsha, brings home a Russian doll. Suman tells the anecdote in the first person:

“Look Mama!” [Varsha] said. She pulled one doll away to reveal another and another and another until she got to the last one, when a tiny black beetle emerged and scuttled across the table, released from captivity after god only knows how long. I screamed and knocked the pile of dolls away. That beetle was me, caught inside the house, inside the town, within the circling mountains. There is no escape for me from this place. (122)

As the quotation suggests, Suman experiences a condition of both physical and psychological paralysis, which she feels unable to overcome. Indeed, her condition of stasis is due to several intermingled factors, which a woman cannot challenge alone, especially if she is not allowed to leave her household.

However, her house, and particularly the kitchen, turns from a place of entrapment into a place of resistance. There she finds the strength to confess the violence she undergoes daily to her friend, the writer. The kitchen is inevitably the place where Suman spends most of her time and therefore it is “her own territory” (215), where she can make the rules and develop strategies of resistance to cope with her daily plight. The micro-activities she performs within this space are, in fact, what Nandana Dutta calls “micro politics at work.”²² According to this view, the moments of ordinariness taking place inside the spaces traditionally inhabited by women offer opportunities for the recovery of a sense of self. Hence, the small objects used by women in their ordinary lives become tools of self-expression and symbols of their communal engagement. Michel de Certeau denotes the familial practices that constitute the daily lives of characters as “ways of operating,”²³ that is, tactics and strategies that serve as a certain therapy, in resistance and for empowerment. While performing

21. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 52.

22. Nandana Dutta, “Indian English Women’s Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday,” in *Writing India Anew: Indian English Fiction 2000–2010*, ed. Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy, 148.

23. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (1984; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 30.

her little daily tasks, she is actually gaining her own sense of self and those which are apparently insignificant moments of pause are actually, in Dutta's words, "propellants forward."²⁴ Suman is the protagonist of a deep psychological change. At the beginning of the novel, she appears as full of fears, weak, and insecure: "I stayed for many muddled reasons: fear of the unknown world mostly, lack of money, and because I feared the shame of returning, of dishonoring my father if I left my marriage" (89). She is terribly afraid of breaking the rules openly and challenging the values she has always been told to respect: "This is my weakness, I know that now. I am a follower of rules. I do not have the courage to break from them. I cannot bring myself to fight back against the things I know are wrong or to stand up for things that are right" (46). After a slow, almost imperceptible process, which took place within the household, she grows into a much more confident woman, aware of the possibilities that exist for her and sure about the future she intends to build: "I have to get out, I owe it to my child. And to myself. It will be difficult, but I will manage. I have made up my mind, and that is a start" (253). Unlike the other women in the story, she has learnt to behave by fighting on her own territory and trying to bring about a change from the inside. Her home has become the primary battlefield upon which she could achieve a sense of identity as well as a form of empowerment. She chooses the path of compromise, which is a very typical Indian trait, as Suma Chitnis points out: "In the West there is a compulsion to a logical resolution of conflict to confrontation and categorical choice. In contrast, the Indian culture places a greater value of compromise on the capacity to live with contradictions and to balance conflicting alternatives."²⁵ The change that Suman envisages is not a revolutionary disruption of traditional norms, but a resistance from within a space ruled by patriarchal ideals through a smooth transition. Readers will never know whether she will manage to win her struggle because Badami leaves the end of the novel open. However, such a choice could be read as the author's desire to raise questions and foreground possibilities. She does not want to provide a universal solution to reach personal happiness and self-assertion, but she suggests a different type of thinking based on a critical evaluation of reality.

The exploration of the women characters of the novel has highlighted the fact that those who have chosen to place themselves openly outside the system of tradition and patriarchy, embodied by the family home, have been tragically locked out of the life cycle. Either as victims, like the first wife Helen and the writer Anu, or as perpetrators, like the grandmother Akka and the young girl Varsha, they have inevitably paid the consequences of their inability to find a compromise with the rules imposed from the outside. The result was an existence trapped within unhappiness, rage, and a desire for revenge. The final epiphany of Suman, on the contrary, leads me to believe that her patience is not to be interpreted as a passive attitude, but as a tactic to exist and resist from the inside.

24. Dutta, "Indian English Women's Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday," 148.

25. Chitnis, "Feminism," 24.

RECOVERY AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH NEGOTIATION

The close reading of the novel showed that gender was the structural basis of the new nation in the colonial period, but is a formative element of identity in the diasporic land as well. Women embody India and are expected to represent the umbilical cord that links the motherland with the land of the diaspora in order to ensure the preservation of identity in a Western environment. However, among all the women in the novel, the second wife provides the most optimistic example, as she is the only one who can hope for a change. This is possible because, as readers can understand throughout the story, an abrupt challenge often leads to tragic consequences. Therefore, she started to develop strategies of resistance and negotiation in the space where she was forced to stay, but also where she felt most comfortable: in the household. She understood that this was the only possible battleground for her, which helped her to adopt a new cross-cultural identity. As Homi Bhabha has argued, “resistance is not an oppositional act of political intention nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture. . . . It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses,”²⁶ thus suggesting that resistance is not only a rupture or an opposition, but also negotiation. According to Dutta, this is a strategy of many Indian women writers who choose the domestic space as the setting of their stories, thus producing “a narrative of the ordinariness and insignificance” that becomes “the vehicle of empowerment for a new generation of women.”²⁷ As Elleke Bohemer argues, Indian women writers “assert the importance of location and locale: rooms, stores, verandas, villages, where women’s lives unfold.”²⁸ Dutta also underlines the varying uses of the everyday by Indian women authors as a means of mapping personal and cultural space.²⁹ Foregrounding the minutiae of life, the small spaces where women’s lives unfold, means considering them as strategies for coping with the daily challenges women face. In their ability to negotiate small things, women manage to achieve *anagnorisis*, a sudden recognition of their predicament, and the family often acts, in Dutta’s words, as a “backdrop or provides occasions for resistances, animosities, support and escape in a variety of ways.”³⁰ Such an aesthetic of the everyday is typical of contemporary Anglophone Indian women’s novels, where the everyday is not merely the background of the story, but the structural framework of the narrative, what shapes women’s identities and allows them to achieve recovery and empowerment. Therefore, inside familiar places, women such as Suman can hope to build their own spaces for resistance and the formation of identity.

26. Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 152.

27. Dutta, “Indian English Women’s Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday,” 150.

28. Bohemer, *Stories of Women, Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 189.

29. See Dutta, “Indian English Women’s Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday,” 147.

30. Dutta, “Indian English Women’s Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday,” 146–47.

However, it may be worthwhile to problematize the narrative punishment that women such as the first wife and the Indian writer undergo because of their attempt to challenge the rules. Their tragic destinies do not leave women much hope in terms of change *vis-à-vis* tradition, which is represented as a deeply rooted presence which it is impossible to eradicate. We could ask whether the right ways of challenging the patriarchal values are those suggested by Badami in her novel or whether it may be more constructive to insist on an open struggle that allows women to free themselves from fears and oppression and to defend their personal dignity.

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ADDRESS

Sofia Cavalcanti
Department of Interpreting and Translation
Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators
University of Bologna (Forlì campus)
Corso della Repubblica 136
47121 Forlì (FC)
Italy
sofia.cavalcanti2@unibo.it

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