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Feminism vs. Humanism in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk***Dr. S. Karthikkumar***Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar (T.N.), India***Abstract**

In this Science and machine-dominated world, literature alone can make man human by injecting the passion into him. Literature is said to be the mirror of life as it reflects the society around it. A true literarian is committed to the society. By reflecting the society, the literary author also guides and instructs the people to be a perfect human. A humanist is that person who is a real lover of human beings, a champion of their rights, a castigator of tyrants, exploiters, and evil doers. Anita Rau Badami is an Indian writer who writes her works from humanitarian point of view. Though there have been serious discussions and deliberations on feminism all around her and though her works also deal with women and their issues, she has also looked at these issues from humanitarian point of view. That is why this paper attempts to explore feminism vs. humanism in her work *The Hero's Walk* and find out how much she has succeeded in balancing between the two.

Key Words: Feminism, humanism, freedom

Anita Rau Badami is one of the contemporary women writers in the vibrant field of Indian literature in English. In Badami, one can find the combination of an artist and a missionary. Though her novels are autobiographical in nature, they are for all. "The names of the characters may be different, their landscapes exotic, but at the heart of every story is the universality of relationships between people and that's why people buy the books," She says.

Though she is not overtly didactic, her novels are valuable works of guidance. In her novels the reader comes across several female characters that one can see in any Indian family. Though she is influenced by feminism, she avoids the extremes of feminism. She is also a humanist. In fact, her feminism is influenced by humanism. Badami, the humanist, offers a solution to women's freedom. Badami in her novels highlights the woman's status in the traditional Indian family. She voices for the equality of women and does not rule out the role of men. Thus, she is more a humanist

than a feminist. Her novels have definitely created a space for the discussion of the issues related to the difficulties of women. She contributes to the development of women's status as her novels have only female protagonists and deal with their peculiar problems. Her second novel, *The Hero's Walk* is an acknowledgement of ordinary and extraordinary acts of heroism in daily life.

The Hero's Walk is about an Indian Brahmin family finding its way within the Hindu tradition at the end of the twentieth century. Particularly Badami discusses woman's domestic survival, as her female protagonist Nirmala survives against her husband's patriarchal rule and her mother-in-law's orthodox Brahmin rules through her optimistic spirit. In a sense, she uses her problems as a key to her success in life. Her success in getting the authority in the family shows woman as a survivor. Badami discusses women's treatment as subordinates to men in the patriarchal society. She criticizes the traditional belief

that a woman should be passive to her husband and that a woman's happiness lies only in her married life. She breaks this belief in Nirmala's life. Badami creates Nirmala as a model of a traditional Indian Brahmin housewife who survives for her family and not for her life. Her happy married life is always shaken by patriarchal power of her husband Sripathi and her orthodox mother-in-law, Ammayya. Among her family members, Nirmala is one descent, long suffering anchor in this vortex of dysfunction. She stoically endures Sripathi's hot-headedness, maintains link within the scorned and shunned daughter Maya, patiently waits for Ammayya to die, and has faith that her son Arun will find his way in the world.

Nirmala accepts her role as a passive wife to obey her husband and her elders in the family till her daughter Maya's death. But the arrival of her orphan granddaughter, Nandana, makes Nirmala a protestant. Badami writes: "I find it touchingly heroic to just see people living from the day they're born until the day they die, so full of hope." Nirmala walks a heroic walk of being completely good. But the patriarchal power of Sripathi wants that her wife should be like a bar of lifebuoy soap --functional but devoid of all imagination. Badami shows Nirmala both as a passive Hindu wife and also as a modern rebel wife. As a good Hindu wife she keeps her husband in a calm and happy mood. She does not tell him about the economic crisis. Her love for husband totally changes into anger when she loses her distanced daughter Maya. Badami carefully weaves the character of Nirmala as a female hero with Indian traditional duties

as a wife. Badami gives importance to the family relationship in her novels. Though her female protagonist Nirmala wants to be free from the clutches of her husband's patriarchal power, she does not want to lose the peace and harmony in the family. Even when she changes into a rebel for her survival, still she maintains a peace at home. Badami shows that Indian woman's responsibility lies in making home. Nirmala makes her home beautiful, bears all responsibilities of her family, and meets the demands of social life, balancing her own workload all the time with domestic duties. But she does not get any recognition from her family members. Even her husband beats her when she expresses her pain of losing her daughter, Maya.

Badami shows every walk that a woman walks in her life, as a daughter to her father, as a wife to her husband, and as a mother to her children. As a mother, Nirmala should create a next generation without suffering. But her unfortunate passiveness makes her daughter Maya suffers. After Nandana's arrival, Nirmala becomes a caring grandmother for her daughter's child. She heroically goes on, providing day-to-day sustenance to Nandana and to the rest of the family. Badami depicts the daily heroism of a Hindu wife in a traditional Brahmin family. She struggles for emancipation not only for her but also for her next generation. Nirmala's tolerance, in spite of all her protests and arguments, plays the role of a perfect loving passive wife and a good mother, a caring grandmother to Nandana, and a pathfinder for her sister-in-law Putti. Nirmala slowly wins over Sripathi's solid, impenetrable anger, unwilling to force a

confrontation of any kind. Badami shows how Nirmala's revolt succeeds without disturbing peace and harmony of the family. Badami represents Nirmala as a woman who fulfills the societal expectations as a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother. Nirmala's resilience and adaptability finally make her a survivor (when her daughter dies), and a pragmatist (when she initiates the marriage between Putti and Gopala and crosses caste boundaries). Her daughter makes her a survivor and her granddaughter makes her a protestor. Her habit of obedience, of respect for one's elders, of subservience, runs strong in her blood. These are women's characteristics which are insisted by the makers of the society. She never analyses the rules taught to them. Nirmala creates a kind of courage to question the patriarchal power of Sripathi and the orthodox Brahmin rules of Ammayya. Her radical change makes a kind of fear among her family members. For Sripathi, Nirmala is the one person in the house that he could always take for granted; always depend on for her simple wisdom and goodness and he has always been grateful for her stolid practicality, her ability to carry on with the business of daily living without breaking down. But Sripathi does not want to lose his grip on Nirmala. He tries to dominate her but her radical change does not allow him to do so. Badami shows Nirmala's courage to break down the caste discrimination of Sripathi; she makes friendship with the low caste neighbor family. She asserts: "...Then I will go, I am fed up with always listening to your nonsense. This is not right, that is not okay, what will people say? You have

ruined my life because of all this nonsense..." (294).

Nirmala never cares about Ammayya's rigidly backward ideas. Badami predicts Nirmala as a Brahmin woman who changes herself to the modern life. Nirmala gains power to break the caste discrimination wall, which was built by the old generation orthodox Brahmin people to enter into the humanistic modern world. Even she wants to make the relationship strong between Brahmin and low caste. So she accepts the marriage of her sister-in-law Putti with the low caste Gopala. She does not wait for the nod of Sripathi and Ammayya. She makes an on-the-spot decision, determined that Putti, should not have to repeat the pattern of Maya's life. Her plan is to get rather support than permission from her husband. Now Badami shows Nirmala a fully changed modern woman who never bothers about Sripathi's anger.

A woman, in general, leads life as a candle, gives her life to light other's life. Nirmala uses her loss in her life to bring light in the life of the spinster Putti. Badami reveals Nirmala as an optimistic modern woman who respects only human values and not the narrow-minded values like caste system and male chauvinism. Through Nirmala, Badami brings another point of view that women are better than the men in leading life. Nirmala's optimistic qualities are unreachable for the orthodox Sripathi.

Badami makes Nirmala lead three kinds of life in her survival i.e., sacrificial life, optimistic life, and a modern life. She crosses the caste boundaries without caring the powerless curse of Ammayya. Nirmala survives in every moment of her life and

gets success in her walk. Badami depicts Nirmala as a model of modern woman. "I didn't want to make her the stereotypical boring, submissive Indian woman because most women I know aren't that way." (Interview). As a humanist, Badami gives importance to family relationship. She never destroys the family bond by the rebel of Nirmala. She makes her family united. Her success in a family is a general victory of a modern woman. Badami through Nirmala gives a way to a modern woman that every woman needs to develop her talent and learns to improve her unique qualities. A woman needs a special-sufficiency, which can come only with the consolidation of female power. Badami's focus on female protagonists is one of the consequences of putting more emphasis on female heroism in literature, was the differentiation between the conventional, more passive woman within a novel, whereas a female hero as in Badami's novels implies the concept of an active female protagonist who is not exclusively subordinate to a male hero.

Badami in her novels always gives importance to woman in every sphere of life. As she is a modern feminist, she voices for equal rights to women. She also warns the male chauvinists by revealing the unique qualities of woman which make her powerful. She pictures both the modern woman and a traditional woman in her novels. She discusses it in an impartial manner. She shows the life of Nirmala as a modern woman who wants to break the clutches of the orthodox beliefs and also shows the life of Ammayya as an orthodox Brahmin woman who tries to stand on the shores of old traditional Brahmin life. In general, Badami's *The Hero's Walk* is discussing the caste politics which is the real enemy of humanism in the modern world. Even the location of the novel, the fictional south Indian town of Toturpuram, helps the readers to understand the background of the novel. Thus Anita Rau Badami is more a humanist than a feminist. Her feminism is characterized by humanism. It treats women as equal to men and does not exclude men from the sphere of life.

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