

Role of Culture in Victimization of Self an Insight into Anita Rau Badami's *Tell It To The Trees*

¹M. P. Malini Pon Sheela, ²Dr. S. Soumia

¹Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-Time) Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College,

MKU, MADURAI.

Assistant Professor of English

Rani Anna Government College for Women

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²Associate Professor - Department of English,

Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College for Women, Madurai

Abstract: Culture gives identity and a sense of belonging. But culture which is modelled by man, most often tends to ignore the basic rights of women. Violence against woman is strongly embedded in culture that, the abuses manifest upon her gets culturally sanctioned and the issue is considered insignificant and made voiceless. Clinging to culture that ignores her and fails to consider her as a human being, is devastating and in long run would kill her 'Self', as it happens to Suman in *Tell It to the Trees* written by Anita Rau Badami. Cultural practices are norms that are followed for centuries together, but let us be considerate enough to turn back and look at the impact it creates in the 'Other'.

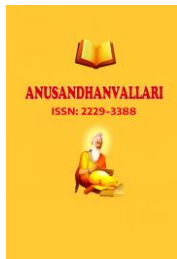
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Full Paper:

As Susan Moller Okin comments, Women's right is very important and needs to be recognised as human rights due to the continuing and increasing influence of both cultural and religious justification for women's inequality and "...many serious inequalities between sexes are still regarded by people as invisible, insignificant, natural or culturally appropriate. (*Hypatia*, 37)

Culture that refers to specific practice, belief and behavioural system of a group is in its manifestation – varied, rich, and unique. "A culture... is essentially a whole way of life" (*TCS*, 47) states Raymond Williams. Each social group has their own set of norms and practices, passed on for generations, which help them stand unified and at the same time to differentiate them from the other. Culture is multifaceted and varies from place to place.

As Ramond Williams observes, social order is experienced, explored, communicated and reproduced through a significant system called Culture. An individual influencing a society and influence of the society on an individual both are reciprocal. The latter plays a significant role in moulding the personality of an individual. Cultural practices of the past are strongly believed and followed, for the betterment of the individual in particular and society at large. But if clinging to culture could bring about adverse effect in the life of an individual, then it has to be seriously analyzed.



Indo-Canadian writer, Anita Rau Badami's latest work of fiction, *Tell It to the Trees*, is a story of an Indian family, who had migrated and settled in Merrit's Point many years ago. It houses three generations of people living together. Though most part of the novel is set in Merrit's Point as it is outwardly set in Canada, the happenings in the novel focus much on the Indian sensibility as the characters living within the house of J.K. Dharma are concealed and protected from any kind of outside exposure or influence.

Globalization has paved way for people to move around the world, and their exposure to various cultural forms and practices has led to hybridity of culture. Influence of varied cultures result in new behavioural and attitudinal change in individuals. Fearing any kind of such change, Vikram tactfully spins a secret iron web and succeeds in knitting an invisible cage around Suman, planning to encase her in everlasting ignorance.

Vikram's first marriage ends up as a failure as Helen walks out of his life, leaving her four year old daughter Varsha to be looked after by him. Very soon, Vikram travels to South India to find a suitable woman, to be his future wife and a mother to his daughter. Vikram succeeds in his hunt for a suitable wife when he finds Suman, he immediately without any further delay chooses Suman as he keenly observes her acts of kindness and firmly believes that she would ideally suit his need. A typical Indian woman, who would without any further question would dance to his tune. "He gauged me correctly. I am staying type the sort who can be made to fit a mould, a sort who will always do what is expected of her" (67).

Suman is a thirty year old graduate and a motherless single child, who has so far been taken care of by her father and aunt, Madhu Kaki. The economic condition of the family has led to the delay in her marriage. She has grown up in a closely knit society, where people are culturally bound and crossing the boundary is considered to be an unpardonable sin.

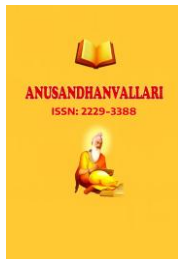
The people in the society and the environment that surrounds play a vital role in shaping up the attitude of any individual. Even from childhood days, Suman is brought up as an ordinary girl with all expected qualities of woman, sown and nurtured within her. She is made to believe that the goal of any woman is to become a good wife.

Even the songs that Madhu Kaki sang that lull me to sleep when I was an infant were about how a prince would come and carry me away from my father's home if I was a good girl and shut my eyes tight... and when I was older women on our street would pull my nose and say ayyo, this is growing too long who will marry her... if I went out in sun like an ignorant cat, my skin would grow too dark for matrimony... it drove me mad. (42)

It is entrusted into the mind of girls even as infants to believe that she is born to serve man. She is tuned to accept that her aim in life should be nothing other than getting married to a man and taking care of his family. Though Suman also has dreams to achieve in her life, she is reiterated to believe that woman is to serve and satisfy others. To think and to decide independently is considered contemptuous.

Often people living in clusters, cultivate herd mentality, they stop to think independently instead stand with a group and support collective decisions. Suman recalls her days with Chandra Raman, her cousin who had been with her through her childhood days and had taken care of Suman when she lost her mother. But when Chandra was cast out of the society for the crime of choosing her life partner of her own choice, Suman does not even dare to wave back fearing the reaction of the society.

I was part of a tight-knit, contained universe where everybody lived within an unwritten code of conduct the knowledge of which came to us with our mother's milk, was dinned in to our skulls at every opportunity by our elders, inhaled from the virtuous, dusty air we breathed.(44)



The need to follow unwritten codes of conduct prevails due to fear of being disowned and cast away from the society. It gets deep rooted in the mind of Suman even from her early childhood days. This fear gradually leads to loss of one's own individuality. The same idea gets reinforced when she happens to go to Agra with her friend Lalli at the age of seventeen. She stays with her family, where people live together in clusters and preparation are done to celebrate Karva Chauth:

The women were soft spoken and drifted around with their sari pallus draped over their heads.... Their continuous state of quiet busyness became frantic in the evening when the men returned home and had to be pampered with tea and juice and snacks and inquires after their day or their health. (38)

Suman grows up witnessing the role of woman every where she goes. She understands that it is these kinds of duties that are expected of a woman. The society in the name of culture sows such seeds of accepted womanhood deep in to the psyche of any girl child. She is exposed to too much of such acts of womanhood around her, until finally she gets moulded up and learns to accept the system as such without any further thought. It is an unwritten code of conduct, digressing which would lead to expulsion from the society. The so called code of conduct framed on male models subjugates women, whereas approves of men to be all powerful and supreme. As Susan Moller Okin points out, a woman is confined to her home by her husband; often she is beat for disobedience or mishap and this physical violence is never recognized in many parts of the world as a violation of basic human rights, most of the time these acts of violence is considered quite normal to an extent that such physical violence against women is accepted to be a culturally approved behaviour of both husbands and parents.

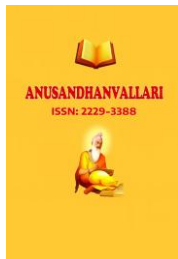
Women subjugation is not a recent phenomenon; it has been an accepted norm that has been followed and passed on for many generations through scriptures and mythical stories in the disguise of religious practices.

It is forbidden for them to stare up at the silver C of light – I have no idea who forbade them, or why. No doubt some ancient seer, one of those bad tempered, long-bearded old fogeys whose potent curses turned their wives in to stone, their daughters in to heaps of ashes or trees or birds for small transgressions – no doubt it was they who decided that a woman was not to look straight at the silly moon. (40)

It is a male framed society and culturally, dominance of men and their supremacy over women is acknowledged and accepted to an extent that men fail to realize that, by doing so, they are curbing the growth and freedom of women, who are also born to rule the world. Similarly, women being so far so much used to the supremacy of men, fail to realize that they are also sensible humans and have their own emotions, feelings and desires. Suman is no exception to this and when Vikram always takes an upper hand controlling and bossing over all the while, "His family tip-toe around him like a bunch of mice (127). Suman acts docile because she had been taught to be so.

I find myself wishing perversely that I had been shouted at and beaten because that way at least I would have learned how to dodge and run, I would have turned as tough as a slipper as that has travelled on mean roads. I might even have learned to hit back. (92)

To be compliant and to conceal the happenings within the four walls of the house is considered to be the magic terms to retain peace within the house and pride of the family outside. Throughout the novel, we find too much of importance given to secrets and family pride. "If someone asks, don't say anything.... You fell down that's all... it would ruin our reputation for being the ideal Indian family" (187). Vikram abuses his wife and children both physically and emotionally but they are taught never to let out the family secrets. "Nobody knows what happens inside our house. It's like hanging out your dirty underwear in Public Square Mama says" (201). This attitude of the housemates again goes in favour of men and it gives them a sort of courage to do



anything within the walls of their house as they are very much sure that it would be concealed and would never be leaked out.

Women are taught never to walk out of the system called marriage. “Marriage is not about getting together, my Appa had said the day before my wedding. It is about staying together” (89). Suman is expected to tolerate, adjust, and stick on. “I could not fly back to India I had no ticket. Besides, it would be shameful thing to do. People would talk. It would hurt my father” (87). She is designed and modelled to always live for the well being of others and in the process, she forgets to live a life of her own choice.

Vikram makes the best use of this. He tactfully sees to it that Suman is within his hold and line of control. He keeps her fully engaged as he knows for sure that sitting idle would give her a chance to introspect. She is not allowed to be expressive even to her father in India. The letters she writes are scrutinized. She is made to act like a puppet in his hands. She is not given any kind of economic independence. She is deprived of money, all her moves are watched upon. She is not given even the independence and comfort of choosing her own attire. She is not allowed to wear anything other than sari even during the cruellest winter. The repression she undergoes causes her physical, mental and emotional agony. She is left helpless in a faraway land covered with snow.

Vikram is good at that sort of subtle humiliation. His violence is more hurtful because nobody can see it. His attacks, they go for the root of your being, kills your self-respect, your idea of who you are, takes away your sense of balance. That’s why we are always falling, we have no sense of balance in this house. Vikram calls me a fool and I’ve become one. I hate how early I’ve given in. (218-19)

Woman is designed to think that she is insignificant and always dependent. She had already fallen in to the cultural mould and had lived so far to suit the thoughts of others. She is taught to live a selfless life, but that should not turn out to be a life where she loses her ‘Self’. It is Anu who finally comes to her rescue. She sniffs through the happenings of J.K. Dharma’s house and lends a helping hand to Suman. She makes Suman to understand that things are moving beyond her control. Suman introspects, gathers courage and finally decides to walk out. “It’s time now to find the lost self that scrawny *I* that fell in to a mirror that moonlit night. It’s time to drag myself out of the mirror in which I’ve trapped myself, time to let myself go” (244).

Culturally and constantly man plays the role of a ‘topdog’ and woman is expected just to accept it. She is taught to be submissive and dependent while the other is oppressive and dominant. Ironically, the suppression that is imposed upon her is never considered unfair. Violence against woman is embedded in culture and she is made to believe that this is how the system works. As Johan Galtung rightly points out, Cultural violence in a long run gets legitimised and later becomes an acknowledged and acceptable practice in the society without any hitch. A violent act in the beginning is considered red/wrong then the red in it gradually gets replaced acceptable and then becomes right. Another way is making the act of violence look reality opaque, so we fail to see the violent act of fact, or the act of violence becomes insignificant and goes unnoticed without even being noticed as an act of violence or in humanism.

Suman never tries to retaliate or fight back, because most of the women she had seen so far had not done that, and the ones who have done that had either been looked upon indifferently or expelled from the society. Ignorance, economic dependence, fear of expulsion and lack of confidence gradually kills the *I* in her. As Johan Galtung rightly states, a violent structure is so hurting that it leaves permanent scars of pain not only on one’s physical body but also on the mind and the inner spirit.

Clinging to culture and fear of digression from the path, that Woman thinks has been assigned to her, makes her docile and inactive. She fails to realize that she is maimed and victimized. Even towards the end, after Akka and Anu insist Suman to leave the place, she decides to walk out, not for her own wellbeing but out



of fear that her son would get spoilt if she continues to stay there. Woman, who always takes up the role of a caretaker showering selfless love is carelessly handled and considered so insignificant. The subjugation manifest so vehemently upon women goes unnoticed and voiceless, very often fail even to be understood that ‘She’ too has a ‘Self’.

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