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## Anita Rau Badami's Novels: An Excerpt

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### Abstract

This paper provides a reading of Anita Rau Badami's novels *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* The interpretive frame constructs a theory of affect to explore the human experience of beauty through a reading of Badami's texts. This work's approach to beauty is derived largely from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* and from musings on beauty by Simone Weil. Following Weil, I understand beauty as the ascription of value or worth to various things, actions, or ideas, and I position beauty as an undergirding affective experience that is always present in the human encounter of the world. This paper examines how Badami's novels depict the ways in which a Weilian sense of beauty leads characters to develop affectual attachments to various ideologies and discourses represented in the diasporic landscape of the texts. Through a critical consideration of the depicted effects of such attachments on Badami's characters' lives, this study also locates potential instances of what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism. I contend that the novels often portray instances of cruel optimism to critique traditional practices and perspectives while ever working towards building their own pronouncement of what constitutes a more genuine, higher sense of the beautiful.

**Keywords** - Anita Rau Badami's novels, South Asian Diaspora, Lauren Berlant's idea

Anita Rau Badami is a Canadian author of South Asian heritage. Her collected works now stand at four novels: *Tamarind Mem* (1996), *The Hero's Walk* (2000), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), and *Tell it to the Trees* (2011). Badami weaves numerous thematic threads throughout her novels, which yoke them together into a distinctive oeuvre. One such common aspect is that her novels feature characters who, each in their own way, search for purpose, worth, and stability amidst impinging tensions that stem ostensibly from a confluence of various cultural sensibilities. The other shared feature is some significant narrative reference to travel between the Indian subcontinent and Canada, which seems an open autobiographical allusion to Badami's own experience as a member of the South Asian diaspora—Badami immigrated to Canada in 1991. While we might be tempted to mark these sensibilities as simply South Asian

and Canadian, Badami's creative vision expresses far more nuanced subtleties. The apparent East-West ideological binary of her novels is dappled with an assortment of socio-cultural discourses that we might observe as traditional, progressive, religious, secular, trans/nationalist, environmental, and capitalist—if only to name a few. Her characters' encounters with the discourses and practices of their environs form much of the base action of her novels. In essence, her novels stage an implicit comparative exploration of a myriad of socio-cultural discourses by illustrating, through their respective narratives, the potential effects of these discourses on human life.

In this paper, researcher wants to turn attention towards this human encounter with socio-cultural discourse and practice—a critical endeavour that may be conducted productively through a consideration of the affective or emotional basis of such encounters. The aim is to craft a reading of a selection of Badami's novels in a way that explores how her characters relate to notions of personal and cultural value. This reading further explicates how these depicted conceptions of value influence Badami's characters' lives and the ways that they relate to their surrounding sociality and environs. The underlying contention is that the human encounter with the world is always necessarily structured by a discourse of an aesthetics of value and beauty, which is to say that, ultimately, the ideas or things that individuals deem or feel to be most worthwhile or beautiful have a determining impact on how those individuals relate to each other and to the world at large. Beauty moves and inspires us, and yet at times seizes us when we stand gaping in awe of its presence—we become hard-pressed and perhaps a bit terrified to let go of what we find beautiful. We may approach beauty in persons, paintings, sculptures, songs, poems and novels—yet we also approach the beautiful in other less conventional modes as in beautiful ideas, perspectives, beliefs, or beautiful ways of being and courses of action. My concern is with these often unacknowledged and less conventional modes of beauty and how individuals go about deciding or feeling which ways of living and being in the world are more beautiful, more valuable, or more desirable than others. The human encounter with and pursuit of the beautiful is an affectual phenomenon that is at the heart of how individuals define themselves and make their way through the world. With whatever degree of mindfulness, as human beings, we are impelled to make judgments about the best ways to live—researcher propounds that, at their base, these judgments are really aesthetic valuations that are fundamentally informed by affect. The attempt to critically attend to subjective ideas of value and beauty is therefore indispensable to any

understanding of what it means to be human. This is to say that to better understand individuals, even ones presented in fiction, one would do well to consider deeply their connection to and ideas of the beautiful.

In particular, this paper offers a reading of Badami's *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by positioning these novels as effective case studies for thinking through potential encounters with contending modes of being that might be considered beautiful. Both novels present their casts with an array of situations where their central characters must attempt to navigate and adjust to the ideological and discursive frameworks of each novel's respective settings to arrive at new ways of living in the world. These novels lend themselves ideally to my purpose because each narrative illustrates a different outcome, or concluding mood, resulting from a process of individuals who feel their way through a milieu of unsettled and conflating discourses: *The Hero's Walk* ends on a lighter note, whereas *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* offers a bleaker final vision. These narratives, I will ultimately suggest, can be read in ways that advocate for a standard of what ought to constitute the highest beauty in terms of human values—that is, for values that are more conducive to cultivating affirmative and respectful dispositions for life and congenial human social relations. With the intent of exploring what in particular might lend or impart a quality of beauty to differing perspectives or ways of being in the world, I will bring the ideals and values that Badami's characters dedicate themselves to or live by to examine how her novels engage with beauty and illustrate its influence on human life.

Badami's novels represent potential encounters with beauty. I draw upon theories of affect. In their preface to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg comment that “affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*...affect is found...in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances” (1). As such, I argue that Badami's novels, since they centre on characters who live amidst and pass *in-between* disparate ways of being and seeing, are an ideal site to examine the representation of affect. In her fictional representations of this passing in-between, we can observe the ways in which sentiments towards feelings of beauty, or senses of what is ideal, attract and move Badami's characters through her narratives. How individuals navigate discursive and ideological systems, how they move about the world, and even the ways in which individuals are interpolated as subjects, each with particular and

sometimes changing dispositions and tastes, I suggest, can be understood through their affectual appraisals of their surrounding social systems. The heart of my endeavour is to illustrate how Badami's novels, with their portrayal of the human experience of living in a world of eliding cultural sensibilities, can contribute and speak meaningfully to such aesthetic valuation and the affectual and worldly consequences of such valuations.

In much the same vein as Sara Ahmed's recent work with applied affect theory in both *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and *The Promise of Happiness*, I examine Badami's *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by employing a specific question as a unifying interest, namely, *what do conceptions of the beautiful do?* I trace Badami's characters' various, contending conceptions of beauty and value—be they recognized as traditionally South Asian, foreign, western, conservative, progressive or other—to show how these ideas can, at times, engender great agony, yet at other times, bring reflective solace and pleasure. I elucidate both the effectual and affectual consequences of the ideals of her character's habitual modalities of thought and action largely in light of Elaine Scarry's 1999 treatise *On Beauty and Being Just* where Scarry provides a case for how the human propensity to encounter the beautiful can assist in the creation of just and fair social relations. I complement and temper this reading with Lauren Berlant's idea of cruel optimism. Berlant defines cruel optimism as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (21). This study correspondingly observes and comments on instances of cruel optimism represented in Badami's texts as in cases when her characters hold on to or commit themselves to values and beliefs that are effectively outmoded and inhibit their thriving in the present. Both Scarry and Berlant's work is relevant because in Badami's novels we find characters dedicating themselves to principles, ideas, and ways of being that they appraise as more valuable than others—and in this sense they can be understood to offer a robust meditation on an aesthetics of value and beauty.

The subsequent balance of this initial chapter establishes and develops my overarching theoretical context by drawing on Scarry's work to reflect on and index beauty as an experiential encounter. I then situate this encounter within past thinking on affect before moving on to think through other various felt implications that arrive with the experience of beauty since ideology itself as a phenomenal-theoretical concept forms the inherent essential backdrop upon and within which all our seeing and being, including our affective, aesthetic evaluations, must necessarily

occur. Researcher close this paper by turning attention to human action and ask whether any kind of aesthetic standard of beauty can be applied to how we live our lives and allude to how an effective way of reading Badami's novels speaks to these issues.

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