



**Centralizing the Margins: Examining the Politics of Age and Sexuality in**

**Anita Rau Badami's *Ajji's Miracle***

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**Abstract**

The proposed paper intends to examine the issues of sexual and gerontological marginalization in Anita Rau Badami's short story *Ajji's Miracle* published in *The Harper Collins Book of New Indian Fiction* (2005). Gerontological studies have long outlined the dynamics of age-based power relations in society, the loss of personal and social autonomy in old age and the idea of cultural devaluation attached to ageing. For women, the combined effect of ageing and later-life widowhood can spin cultural, social and psychological consequences that often lead to a devastating impact on their lives and identities. Within the social sphere at large and the

domestic sphere in particularity, there are found to exist these days stereotyped cultural roles for the aged, designed to curb their individuality while at the same time seeking to distance them from the mainstream. Badami's Ajjī's Miracle offers a subversive reading of such subalternation and outlines a power politics that successfully topples the hierarchy of youth and sexuality in society. The paper shall attempt to locate the voices emerging from the margins in bringing out the strategies of resistance adopted by the old woman Ajjī to reinstate herself and her granddaughter Tara within social importance and respectability.

**Keywords:** Gerontological, centre, margins, resistance.

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“...History denied or distorted takes on a power that poisons and eventually becomes the cancer at the heart of personal, family and group survival.”

**-Lois Matt-Fassbinder**

Marginalization and subalternation refer to such a systematic process of historical and social exclusion whereby individuals and groups are relegated to the periphery of practices and discourses that are subsumed as the centre or the mainstream. As a political tactic, marginalization has as its aim the structuring and maintenance of power relations of dominance and control that allow the prevalence of the cultural ideology of the hegemonic social group. Within the discourses of postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism, the issues of marginalization and exclusion have been of primary concern, opening up to our understanding the means, methods and consequences of such subalterning practices and training us in the possibilities and performances of exclusionist policies in every walk of life. Anita Rau Badami's

short story *Ajji's Miracle*, published in *The Harper Collins Book of New Indian Fiction (2005)*, edited by Khushwant Singh, read in this light, offers an interesting study on exclusionary practices based on age and sexuality in the domestic and by implication, the social sphere and attempts to present an active interventionist politics of subversion, challenging the existing power quo. Badami's story portrays a small Tamil household with the husband Kitta, the wife Rukku, the daughter Tara and a son, nuclear in its structure save for the grandmother Ajji who, in her old and widowed state, is dependent on her son's family both for a home and for emotional support and security. The head of the household as a mother and mother-in-law during her husband's lifetime, Ajji now finds her survival within the family severely jeopardized as Kitta's pay cheque passes into his wife's hands, transferring all her power to Rukku who literally pushes Ajji to the margins of her own home by usurping her old place and relegating her to a cramped, unventilated corner of the house. Rendered neglected and unwanted, Ajji's sole companion in the family is her granddaughter Tara who, shunned by her mother for being a girl child and receding further in her affections and consciousness after the birth of the son, makes her feel alive and important by her constant presence and attention. The plot of the story revolves around how the old woman, Ajji chances upon an innovative way to subvert this power equation and recover her authority as head within the household and how in doing this, she not only establishes the hegemony of age over youth but also manages, though inadvertently, to grant marriageability to the physically flawed Tara.

A somewhat literary kin to the *saas-bahu* soaps that seem to have inundated Indian television in the last decade, the story underlines the power coups that are a part and parcel of domestic reality in joint families throughout the country. Social gerontologists point out that the disintegration of the joint family system constitutes one of the chief factors for the devaluation of

the elderly in India today. Whereas they once functioned as heads of families, venerated for their age and wisdom, today they tend to be regarded as burdens borne grudgingly and painfully, steeped in financial and chiefly emotional insecurity. In case of women, the problems of old age are aggravated by the miseries brought upon by widowhood. With low marriageable ages and increased life expectancy, women are increasingly outliving their spouses with the result that widowhood is more often than not, a certainty, bringing in its wake economic deprivation as well as a devaluation in their status. Since women in Indian society are primarily viewed in terms of their roles as wives and mothers, they suffer a social and cultural devaluation with advancing age and widowhood as these events mark an end to their contribution as producers and reproducers. Besides when parental care giving or nurturance gives way to parental dependency in old age, it is the woman's, the erstwhile care giver's lot to suffer more, caught within the mother-in-law-daughter-in-law syndrome. In case of Ajji too, the facts are very much the same. Left to the care of her son in widowhood, Ajji's very identity as empowered wife and mother seem to have been lost. "Ajji cursed her own dead husband for leaving her in the shadow of her son's cowardly frame, for leaving her to tolerate Rukku's tyrannies." (113) Inhibited and circumscribed in terms of even physical space, her position within the family is "like a pile of old clothes" (111) and even her meals have to be tactfully managed from Rukku:

At twelve o' clock she would summon her younger grandchild, a boy of six, and say, 'Go and tell your mother that you can hear Ajji's stomach grumbling'...She was too scared to approach Rukku herself. Who knew, if she was in a bad mood, she might make Ajji wait till two o' clock for her lunch. (112)

The strategic warfare between Ajji and Rukku is constant. While the latter behaves like the model daughter-in-law in front of her husband, respectful and deferent, behind his back, she

exults in the power and position that she has usurped from her mother-in-law, putting it to use in psychologically debilitating her further in her physical and emotional weakness. Aiji, old as she might be, still retains enough of her mental agility using it to launch clandestine attacks on Rukku: “Rukku’s favourite sari would develop a sudden tear, one of her slippers might disappear, the screw of her gold earring would get lost, forcing her to spend for a replacement.” (113)

Her greatest revenge, however, lay in making subtle complains to her neighbours about her miseries, spurring them to sympathetically offer her their consolations and their culinary specialities, thus hitting two birds with one stone – revealing her daughter-in-law’s behaviour to all and quelling her craving for good food. It was through such means that Aiji managed to eke out a survival within her own family, finding a companion and emotional ally in Tara and occasionally placating Rukku by offering her some piece of her jewellery to put on. It is Aiji’s jewellery now that comprises her only asset in the world and is responsible for granting her whatever little stake that she has in the household: “She thanked her good sense often for having held on to her gold chains and rings and diamond earrings and nose-studs, her bangles and armbands....without which Aiji might not have been able to maintain her precarious position in this household.” (112)

By promising this jewellery alternately to Tara and to Rukku, Aiji tries her best to obtain the security of home and family in her advancing age, failing abysmally, however, in both regards.

The turning point in Aiji’s fate and her family affairs comes with her noticing a physical abnormality in her granddaughter. Tara, now turned sixteen, seems to have an uneven breast development and no amount of massaging with oil or herbal ointment promises to bring about any stimulation in the growth of her left breast. Failing in all her efforts and private remedies,

Ajji decides to communicate the problem to Rukku and though together they make visits to all the temples, mosques and churches of the city, their efforts stand in vain. When after about a month, the problem is confessed to Kitta and a visit to the doctor is undertaken, the cost of the surgery that the doctor suggests seems so much to the parents that they remain in a state of indecision. Rukku writes to her cousin in America for assistance but the request is politely turned down. Anxious about the fate of Tara, Ajji decides to undertake a fast for her well-being, quite sure that within a week, her son would decide on an operation. But unwilling to churn out the money, Rukku and Kitta keep trying to ward off a definite solution, relying instead on the potency of religious rituals—Ajji's fast and the breaking of coconuts at various temples. The fast, however, begins to take its toll on Ajji, weakening her further and though she would like to give it up, Rukku insists on it for Tara's sake. It is this fast, however, that ends up becoming Ajji's passport to power. Compelled to keep up its performance, Ajji decides to play up its religious importance. She announces visits of the gods in her dreams instructing her to include certain food items in her fast. Whereas Rukku had intended its continuance as a torture for Ajji, she is dumbstruck by the turn in affairs for now, the neighbours, struck with the reality of such a vital penance being carried on in their locality, are eager to get involved with it in any way possible. They bring jugfuls of lime juice for Ajji, sweet delicacies, fruits and are anxious to serve her in every conceivable way. The reason for her penance having gone around, people were drawn to the spectacle of a girl with only one breast and coming to see Tara, they often ended up touching Ajji's feet. The equation within the family had been turned upside now and the religious fast that had transformed Ajji into a figure of central importance in the neighbourhood and even the city, no doubt turned her into the matriarch within her household. She found herself easily ordering

Rukku about the house, making loud proclamations and demands that, now with a religious sanction, could not be denied.

It is significant to note that Ajji's passing into power is brought about in the story by the same institution of religion that is often used by the youth to justify the exclusion of the elderly from mainstream life. The concept of the Vanaprastha ashram in ancient Indian culture advocates the solitary living of the aged in forests in a state of meditation and penance in the course of preparing oneself for death and the final exit from life. In contemporary India, the youth within many families expect their elderly to segregate themselves thus from daily living and where even joint living is practiced, the aged are supposed to cocoon themselves within religiosity – the reading of holy books, of counting beads in prayer and making pilgrimages to holy places if health conditions permit. The ideal image of the elderly in India is one of passivity, non-interference and disinterest in worldly affairs, a state which involvement in institutionalized religion seems to guarantee. Thus, Ajji must put on a show of reading her holy books till noon even if her stomach is churning with hunger and the weak woman must carry on her fast for the sake of Tara since, as the elderly, it is almost her moral duty to do so. Ajji's taking over of such social assumptions and her exploitation of them to consolidate her own weakening position within the family becomes therefore an interesting attempt at the subversion of the power relation. Whereas, so far it was youth that was privileged within the age-youth binary, Ajji transforms her age into an asset, using the religious role allotted to her in its fullest to generate and expand her power. The margin thus transforms itself into the centre and Rukku stands glaring at the periphery of her domestic world, awaiting the end of this reign. It is also noteworthy that Ajji though aged is not yet senescent, a condition associated with the loss of mental vitality in old age. Full of life and appetite for food and excitement, Ajji appears livelier

and more mentally agile than either Rukku or Tara and yet, she is compelled by the social and cultural expectations of old age to lead a circumscribed life. The general cultural association of the physiological process of ageing with psychological senescence is a growing concern of social gerontology. It has been repeatedly pointed out by gerontologists that chronological age may have nothing to do with the individual's response to the process of biological 'ageing' and is in no way identical to it. While chronological age implies a continuity of temporal growth and might assist in making certain predictions regarding an individual's anatomical, social, physiological and psychological characteristics, ageing is a natural phenomenon with profound personal implications for each individual. However, much of the individual response to the process of ageing is shaped and influenced by the general cultural conflation of power, virility and privilege with youth. Ageing is culturally viewed as an undesirable process the effects of which need to be distanced and abated through a host of solutions – cosmetics, yoga, medicines, fashion and what not. Consistent images of the elderly as grumpy, sour, helpless and disengaged from life, present in our social and cultural consciousness are responsible for the stigmatization of old age as a miserable and unpleasant phase of life. No wonder then that the elderly in our country consider themselves powerless as a group, have a very low self-esteem and are relegated to the social, political, and economic margins of our everyday world. Ajji's questioning of youth hegemony and her efforts at reclaiming the centre of her own household, seen in this light, become an attempt at cultural subversion to seize denied power.

Besides the issue of age, the story also grapples to some extent with the issue of sexuality. Female sexuality, usually seen by a patriarchal culture as an instrument of female oppression, is looked upon by Ajji in the story as a means of attaining power vis-à-vis the sexes. In describing how Rukku attained power over her husband by enchanting him with her physical



charms, intoxicating him so much that he easily handed over all the authority within the household to her, Aiji reclaims female sexuality from its marginalized space within the bedroom and makes it the prime source of domestic power and control. "...she had simpered and smiled and worn those tight little blouses...she had wrapped her husband's eyes with ribbons of desire, until Kitta was so drunk on her body juices that he willingly turned over every penny that he earned to her." (113)

Not only this, the story also comments on female sexuality in a subtler manner. Rendered almost unmarriageable owing to the absence of a breast, it is Aiji's penance that imbues Tara with social importance: "Now with Aiji's growing fame the family prestige had gone up several notches. They were getting offers for the girl's hand. To be connected by marriage to a divinely inspired grandmother was considered an advantage" (125).

The importance of the breast to sexuality is thus offset by the religious power that passes on to Tara from her grandmother and though the offers for marriage come from older men, Tara is nevertheless granted marriageability. The transformation of this physical and even sexual defect into an advantage may, in psychoanalytic terms, be looked upon as the flawed Tara's transformation into the Phallic Mother for the lacking breast now transforms the possessed one into a substitute penis through which Tara's power and position are now to be enhanced. Again, it must be noted that Tara means more to Aiji than a granddaughter. Regretful of the fact that she had mothered a son who had neglected her in favour of his wife, "shift(ing) from one pair of breasts to another" (p. 113), she had rejoiced in the birth of a daughter from Rukku's womb, centering her life around her care and attention. Her empowerment of Tara for marriage through her religious fame, though inadvertent, may be looked upon as her unconscious revenge against the male gender that fails to distinguish between the nurturing and sexual functions of the

woman, both functions symbolized by the breast. The rendering of the lacking breast acceptable within patriarchy through its discounting in matrimony can be regarded as a triumph of female sexuality for it shifts the value scale from extrinsic to intrinsic, from sexual to personal and from commodification to humanization. *Ajji's Miracle* thus, in its valorization of age and female sexuality effectively dismantles the hegemonic cultural structures of youth and patriarchy and this act of subversion is rightly cast in the religious term 'miracle' for it leaves the manoeuvres of power unexplained, focusing instead on the effect. Besides, the use of the word 'miracle' in the title also provides the story with its much needed closure in the sense that it guarantees an element of permanence in the change that has occurred and patiently though Rukku may wait for things to reverse, we know that the change in the power equation is chemical and complete.

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