

## From Obligation to Attachment: Custodial Grandparenting in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*

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DOI:

This paper examines custodial grandparenting in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk* (2000), focusing on the relationship between seven-year-old Nandana and her maternal grandparents after the sudden death of her parents. Drawing on attachment theory, child developmental psychology, and the intergenerational solidarity model, the study analyses how grief, guilt, obligation, and disrupted primary attachments shape the child's responses to alternative caregivers. While Nandana forms an immediate secure attachment with her grandmother, her prolonged resistance to her grandfather reflects unresolved attachment-related trauma linked to earlier familial estrangement. The paper argues that Badami presents custodial grandparenthood as a complex, evolving practice marked by uneven bonding, delayed affectual solidarity, and moral reconciliation, thereby challenging idealised notions of grandparenting.

**Keywords:** Custodial grandparenting, attachment, solidarity, security, loss, grief.

### Introduction

Custodial grandparenting presents distinct challenges, as grandparents are required to assume parental responsibilities for a second time, often under emotionally disruptive circumstances. Bert Hayslip Jr. underscores this difficulty by noting that custodial caregiving usually follows family crises and places considerable psychological strain on older caregivers. As he observes: Indeed, given the context of disruptive family events that precede grandparents' assuming the care of their grandchildren, the negative impact on such middle-aged and older persons is hardly surprising. With regard to parenting, though grandparents are anticipatorily socialized into their roles as such even prior to the birth of their grandchildren, there is often no such preparation regarding the (re)development of parenting skills that may have been latent for some years. (164)

The complexity of custodial grandparenting is further intensified by the need to respond to grandchildren across different stages of development. While caring for young children demands sustained physical and emotional labour, grandparents raising children between six and twelve must address increasing independence, cognitive growth, and emotional awareness. As DeBord notes, children in this age group may experience heightened anxiety as they become more conscious of social relationships and existential realities such as death. In the case of adolescents, custodial grandparents frequently encounter resistance and conflict—responses that reflect the adolescent's emerging autonomy rather than mere defiance. From the grandchildren's perspective, reactions to grandparental authority evolve with age, leading to continual transformations in the grandparent–grandchild relationship. These challenges are further exacerbated when

grandparents assume responsibility for a young child who has recently endured the traumatic loss of her parents. Against this backdrop, the present paper examines the dynamics of custodial grandparenting and child bereavement in Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk* (2000).

### **Setting and Family Structure in *The Hero's Walk***

Set in the fictional coastal town of Toturpuram on the Bay of Bengal, Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk* portrays, through rich domestic detail, the life of an 'ordinary' Indian family engaged in what *Spectator Weekly* describes as "the universal and personal quest to find meaning in the everyday occurrences that define the real heroism in our lives." The narrative centres on Sripathi Rao, a man in his late fifties and the sole provider for his family residing in the Big House on Brahmin Street. Although once offered a promising job in Delhi, Sripathi remains in Toturpuram at the insistence of his widowed mother Ammayya, leading a constrained professional life in which, as Judith Palmer observes in *The Independent*, he "Prufrocks his days away as a copywriter, expecting redundancy every morning, and fretting about the bills" (29 June 2001).

### **Parental Death and the Assumption of Custodial Responsibility**

The monotonous life of the Big House in Toturpuram is abruptly disrupted when Sripathi Rao receives a phone call from Vancouver informing him of the death of his estranged daughter Maya and her husband in a

car accident. The narrative opens with this call from Dr. Sunderraj, a family friend, who further informs Sripathi that since Maya's husband Alan has no close relatives, Sripathi must assume responsibility for their seven-year-old daughter, Nandana. Dr. Sunderraj reminds him of his legal obligation: "The man continued to speak. 'As you are probably aware, Maya appointed you legal guardian and trustee some time ago.' Yes, Sripathi thought numbly, I remember. I signed the papers, but that is all I did" (32–33). This response reveals Sripathi's emotional estrangement from both his daughter and his granddaughter, whom he has never seen in seven years. His wounded pride and lingering resentment initially compel him to reject anything associated with Maya. It is Nirmala who urges him to set aside his "stupid ego" (115) and reminds him of his responsibility: "It is your duty to that innocent baby. She is your grandchild, whatever you feel towards your daughter" (116). True to his belief that he "would never avoid doing duty" (116), Sripathi ultimately signs the legal documents, thereby reaffirming a guardianship he had earlier accepted only as a formality.

Although this responsibility is initially undertaken out of obligation, Sripathi's response gradually exceeds mere legal compliance. Despite his precarious financial position as a struggling copywriter in a rapidly changing advertising industry, he makes considerable efforts to establish a connection with his granddaughter. He travels to Canada, stays in Vancouver for several weeks to familiarise himself with a child for whom he is virtually a stranger, and bears the legal and

financial strain of securing formal custody. As Moore and Rosenthal note in “Laws, Policies and Programmes,” such procedures are inherently difficult: “In the USA, if grandparents are seeking legal custody, guardianship or adoption they must go to the court” (134). The assumption of custodial responsibility is further complicated by Sripathi’s unresolved grief and guilt over years of estrangement from his daughter: “Slowly the guilt grew in him like a balloon. I, Sripathi Rao, mediocre, trivial purveyor of words...am placidly alive, while my daughter...He could not complete the thought” (41). His experience exemplifies the compounded challenges faced by custodial grandparents who must simultaneously cope with bereavement and unanticipated caregiving responsibilities. As Carole B. Cox observes, “A lack of preparation for the role coupled with scarce resources to meet the new demands and responsibilities compound their difficulties in adjustment. Often they find themselves attempting to adjust to the new situation while confronting the grief associated with the loss of their child” (9).

## **Nandana’s Trauma: Attachment, Denial, and Separation Distress**

What aggravates the difficulty of Sripathi Rao and his wife when Nandana comes to their home is that even if they are deeply bereaved at the loss of their child, they cannot share or even express their grief to their granddaughter as she is too young to either comprehend or conceptualize what death is. When Nandana’s parents died, she had been there in Dr. Sunderraj and his wife Kiran’s

home as Nandana’s parents had decided to keep their daughter with them while they were out of Vancouver to attend a wedding ceremony. Dr. Sunderraj and Kiran’s daughter Anjali has been one of the favourite friends of Nandana and hence Nandana’s parents thought that she would be more comfortable staying with them than with anyone else. When Nandana’s parents remain absent for a longer period, that absence inevitably appears to be a traumatic experience for Nandana. The childish explanations that she concocts to understand the long absence of her parents, makes her infer that it is a means of punishment on the part of her parents for her supposed childish mischievousness.

Since parents happen to be the primary care-givers to a child, a child naturally takes his/her parents to be the primary attachment figures with whom he/she wants to maintain or achieve proximity as is postulated by ‘attachment behavioural system.’ The primary care-givers who provide most of the childcare, support and protection especially during moments of threats and distress are taken to be the ‘safe haven’ by the children through whom they want to explore the world. Nandana shares a ‘secure’ attachment style with her parents where she always craves for the proximity to her parents for having the sense of ‘felt security,’ emotional support and protection. The bond of attachment with her parents is so strong that she can scarcely think of relying on others. Thus, Nandana’s intense attachment with her parents prevents her from submitting to the contention of Dr. Sunderraj and his wife. Hence she concludes spontaneously: “Aunty and uncle were lying

to her. She knew that for sure” (48). That her parents are her only ‘attachment figures’ becomes strikingly evident in the fact that the moment Nandana is confronted with the threats of their prolonged absence or their supposed loss, she at once starts showing the traits of ‘separation distress’ and continuously longs for her parents. Mikulincer and Shaver record Robertson and Bowlby’s (1952) observation regarding the reaction of the children following the separation of their primary attachment figures: “...infants and young children who are separated from primary caregivers for extended period pass through predictable series of states: protest, despair and detachment” (16). With her steadfast belief that Dr. Sunderraj and his wife are telling false stories, Nandana prefers to keep mum which can be taken to be an expression of her ‘protest’ resisting the separation from her parents. However, this sudden silence on the part of Nandana is interpreted by Dr. Sunderraj and his wife as a traumatic shock in response to the fatal news heard by her. Nandana’s silence persists when she meets her grandfather for the first time and even when she visits her grandparents’ house in Torturpuram. Like that of Dr. Sunderraj and his wife, Nandana’s silence is taken by her grandparents and other members of their family as a shocking response of a child under the trauma of grief and bereavement. To Nandana, initially, the conceptualization of her parents’ death is a far-fetched idea; ‘parental death’ as a concept has little to traumatize her in comparison to ‘parental absence.’ According to Jean Piaget (2008), one of the founding theoreticians of child

psychology, the cognitive development of the children aged between two to five years can be termed as “pre-operational thinking”—a stage when the children, if they come across any experience of death, can scarcely understand the irreversibility or finality of death. However, the children aged between six to twelve years, Piaget contends, belong to that stage of cognitive development which is categorized as “concrete operational thinking”—at this stage the children begin to develop an understanding of the irrevocability of death. Janice L. Krupnick in the chapter entitled “Bereavement During Childhood and Adolescence” argues that though there is no doubt that all young children react to loss, there is substantial controversy regarding when children attain the developmental prerequisites for complete mourning and about the likelihood of achieving a healthy outcome if bereavement occurs prior to this time (101). One finds that Nandana who is seven years old and hence supposed to develop “concrete operational thinking” shows the traits of “pre-operational thinking” as she fails to take into account the concept of irrevocability of death. She exercises the “defence mechanism” of “denial” when Dr Sunderraj and his wife tell her that her grandfather will come to take her to India:

You will be going to India with him. You’ll meet your grandma, your uncle, lots of nice people”

To India? No way. How would her parents find her when they came home? (48)

**Resistance to the Grandfather:** Disrupted Attachment and Emotional Memory

Though Nandana shares an intense attachment with her parents and has clearly conceptualized mental representations of her primary attachment figures i.e., her parents, unlike Krupnick's contention, Nandana cannot accept her parents' death, let alone 'mourning' their loss. Robe and Strachan in their article "Emotional and Legal Issues When a Child's Parent Dies" comment: "...we can help children cope with parental loss by providing continuity with other attachment figures, understanding their cognitive and emotional development and helping them face the inevitable..." (17).

Moreover, disruption in the primary attachment of a child may create serious difficulties for him/her in the acceptance of other attachment figures as is suggested by Mahler's theory of attachment. Conway and Stricker in their essay "An Integrative Assessment Model as a Means of Intervention with the Grandparent Caregiver", refer to Mahler's observation in this regard:

...Mahler's theory of existence of a symbiotic relationship between the child and mother, their impending separation, and eventual individuation, supports the child's instinctual need of the mother for survival (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). For this reason, disruptions in the maternal attachment to the child have the potential for problems in attachment to future attachment figures. (47)

Although Sripathi Rao is overtly sarcastic when his wife suggests that by getting the opportunity of performing the role of grandparenting, he has got "...an opportunity to forgive and forget" (115), deep inside him Sripathi Rao perhaps knows that it

is an opportunity not merely 'to forgive' but 'to be forgiven' as well.

That he wants to see in his granddaughter a reflection of his own daughter so that he may atone for his qualms of conscience by raising her is evinced in the author's comment: "All the way from Madras...to Vancouver, he had imagined another little Maya whom he could easily love again, who would help him wipe out his guilt and anger" (148). If "normative solidarity" as proposed by Bengtson and his colleagues implies the degree of filial obligation felt towards family members, one finds that Sripathi Rao tries to transform his sense of formal obligation into one of filial obligation towards his granddaughter. Before submitting Nandana entirely to her grandfather, Dr. Sunderraj and his wife Kiran want to ensure that Nandana and her grandfather develop some attachment through personal interaction, contact and caring. "Associational solidarity" in the intergenerational solidarity model of Bengtson and colleagues, relates to the frequency of contact and shared activities between generations. The more is the frequency of contact, the more intense is the solidarity between generations. Katharina Mahne and Oliver Huxhold in their article "Social Contact between Grandparents and Older Grandchildren: A Three Generation Perspective" cogently argue: "The frequency of contact has been labeled a 'manifest' form of intergenerational solidarity within families. How often grandparents and grandchildren are in contact with each other provides a solid behavioural outcome of this relationship" (228). Therefore, it is only through increased



frequency of contact that the grandfather and the granddaughter could have had the opportunity to forge intense associational solidarity. Nandana's grandfather has neither seen his granddaughter, nor has he ever talked to her before. Because of this reason, Dr. Sunderraj's wife is found to ensure contact between Sripathi Rao and Nandana in many ways. Sunderraj's wife suggests that prior to Nandana's journey to India, Sripathi Rao should pack everything from Nandana's room while Nandana should help his grandfather pack those things. But Nandana is steadfastly opposed to her grandfather: "No way would Nandana allow the Old Man to touch her things" (138). Again, when Kiran suggests that Nandana's grandfather will read the folk tales from the comic books to Nandana, she shows her discomfort which can be explained as her reaction of 'protest' and 'despair' following the separation of her primary attachment figures. Echoing the argument of Mahler's theory, Mikulincer and Shaver too observe: "When a primary attachment figure proves not be physically or emotionally present in times of need... the attachment system functioning is disrupted and the set goal is not attained. In such cases the individual does not feel comfort, relief or felt security" (19).

While this may be a reason for Nandana's reluctance to accept her grandfather, the more pronounced reason for Nandana's persistent aversion against her grandfather is that he represents to her a figure who "made her mother cry" (71). However, Sripathi Rao from the very beginning when he first meets his granddaughter, starts to treat her with affection. He very affectionately tries to

empathize with the bereavement of a seven-year-old child who has been grappling with the shock of parental loss: "His daughter's daughter. An orphan. What an ugly word that was. A child bereaved of parents" (143). Nandana is desperately reluctant to leave Vancouver – her only familiar place where she has been raised so lovingly by her parents. Thus, when all their rooms are being vacated prior to her journey to India, she cannot help breaking down into tears. Governed by grandfatherly affection, Rao reaches out to pat the child so as to soothe her pain but the child instinctively moves away from him. While Sripathi Rao could have got hurt at such manifestation of aversion by her granddaughter, he tries to rationalize her behaviour patiently.

During his stay in Vancouver though Sripathi Rao tries to interact with his granddaughter several times, each time he is confronted with the same refusal and rejection on her part: "...the child continued to regard Sripathi with suspicion, even hostility, and he gave up any attempts to make conversation with her. For the entirety of his stay, there was nothing between them but a deepening silence" (145). The steadfast avoidance and aversion of Nandana towards her grandfather persists when they reach airport, as she "continued to be taciturn and silent" (146). She refuses to either hold his hand or accept a chocolate offered by him. Giarrusso, Silverstein and Feng in their article "Psychological Costs and Benefits of Raising Grandchildren" observe "Higher levels of normative solidarity was negatively associated with the perception of caregiving for

grandchildren as less stressful” (84). Sripathi Rao intends to overcome all the stresses of raising his grandchild through sincere love and affection that he thinks is due for the child. If “affectual solidarity” implies the emotional bond and closeness found between family members, the sense of “normative solidarity” in Sripathi Rao for his granddaughter is supposed to lead to “affectual solidarity” with her through “associational solidarity.” But Nandana’s consistent avoidance of her grandfather omits any possibility of affectual solidarity between them.

### **The Grandmother as Secure Attachment Figure**

One finds that Nandana’s maternal grandmother, Nirmala, is anxiously concerned about her granddaughter from the moment Sripathi Rao first gets the news of the death of his daughter and her husband. After she recovers from the immediate shock, she asks Sripathi about her granddaughter: “The child is okay? Where is she? -what will happen to her?” Nirmala cried.” (38). There are two contradictory views that are held regarding the role fulfillment in relation to grandparenting. While one view is that grandparenting entails stress and hence is associated with ‘role overload,’ the other view holds that grandparenting is essentially rewarding which helps grandparents experience ‘role satisfaction.’ Nirmala is the one endorsing the later view. It is only for her husband’s obstinacy that she has been deprived of meeting both her daughter and granddaughter. Her pent-up rage against her husband and her resentment towards her fate are therefore

unleashed sarcastically when Sripathi Rao informs her that he would bring the child from Vancouver to Toturpuram:

“What will you do about Nandana? What did that man say? Where is the child? Poor thing, how she must be feeling...”

“I am her legal guardian”, Sripathi said. “The child will come to us....”

“She is coming here? I will see my grandchild? Ah, what wickedness is this, that I have to lose my own child to see my grandchild?” Nirmala started to weep again. (57)

Unlike Sripathi Rao who is initially indifferent to his granddaughter, Nirmala proves to be affectionate towards her granddaughter from the very beginning and takes immense pleasure and pride in being a grandmother. Moore and Rosenthal insightfully observe in the chapter entitled “Becoming a Grandparent: Transitions and Bonding”: “Whether it is due to a ‘drive’, investment or some other mechanism, it is clear from ‘first reaction’ studies and reports that some grandparents bond immediately while for others, close attachment form through contact and caring, usually during infancy and childhood...” (17). One finds that it is not merely Nirmala who gets attached to her granddaughter immediately but her granddaughter as well who feels an immediate bond of attachment when she first meets her. Nandana’s spontaneous inclination towards her grandmother becomes manifest in her endearing address to her as “Mamma Lady.” Nandana’s immediate predilection for her grandmother may be due to the fact that she knows her to be a person who unlike her grandfather loved her mother very much and had not upset her in any way. It is her

grandmother's very touch that makes Nandana feel her love, care and affection. Nandana's grandmother empathizes with the shock and bereavement that the little child has undergone just as her grandfather has done but the difference is that while Sripathi Rao does not express his emotions, Nirmala expresses her emotion through her words and gestures. In experiencing grandparenting as a rewarding exercise, Nirmala seems to substantiate Giarrusso, Silverstein and Feng's observation: "Grandparents who had stronger feelings of family obligation reported experiencing significantly less stress than grandparents who had weaker feelings of family obligation" (84).

Nirmala realizes that if she places the photographs of the child's parents in her room, it will soothe the child emotionally. Nirmala emerges as the primary "care giver" of her granddaughter catering not only to her psychological well-being and comfort but ensuring that the child gets proper physical care as well. She is seen to be sensitive even to the cultural clash and difference that the child has been confronting since her arrival in their house. While showing warmth of love and care to Nandana, Nirmala also tries to perform the "mentoring work" in teaching and instructing her granddaughter about the values of being empathetic, of being sensitive enough not to waste food and the like (214). Sripathi Rao finds to his utter surprise that though the child had shown aversion to him, she shows no trace of avoiding her grandmother. Leng Leng Thang and Kalyani K.Mehta in their essay titled "Grandparents how do I view thee?" observe that most of the grandchildren ranging from children to adolescents feel they were

emotionally closest to their maternal grandmother than any of their grandparents. Silverstein and Marengo in their study entitled "How Americans Enact the Grandparent Role across the Family Life Course" too have found grandmothers to be more involved in any kind of interaction with grandchildren. Several other studies endorse the same view stated above. It is the involvement and contact of the grandmothers with their grandchildren through regular care-giving that intensifies the bond of attachment and 'affectual solidarity' with them. Thang and Mehta in the essay "Grandparents how I view thee?" point to another reason behind the close proximity between the grandmothers and grandchildren: Grandmothers are closer to their grandchildren also because compared to older men, older women are perceived to be playing more 'emotional-expressive' roles, emphasizing more on interpersonal dynamics and the quality of ties in the family while older men to emphasize more on task-oriented involvements outside the family. (381)

Mikulincer and Shaver argue,

"...formation of a secure relationship with a primary caregiver...depends on the caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness to the increasingly attached person's proximity bids and this responsiveness causes the person to feel more confident and safe" (18).

Nandana and her grandmother are therefore found to share a 'secure' attachment. However, towards her grandfather Nandana continues to manifest the traits of 'disorganized' attachment. 'Disorganized' attachment implies that situation when the attachment system is supposed to be flooded either by fear or anger due to some "unresolved



attachment-related traumas” (Mikulincer & Shaver 24) on the part of the attachment figure. However, Nandana completely denies any kind of ‘attachment’ to her grandfather and hence Sripathi Rao appears as a ‘stranger’ to her. Sripathi Rao has manifested both a dismissive and avoidant attitude to his daughter after the breach has taken place between them. Because of Nandana’s knowledge of the ‘dismissive-avoidant’ attitude of her grandfather to her mother, perhaps there had been some fear and fury embedded in her mind that she would have to confront the same “attachment-related traumas” with her grandfather that her mother experienced. It must be mentioned that Sripathi Rao could have been emotionally close to his granddaughter like that of Nirmala, had he been ‘allowed’ by the child to nurture her. Hurt by Nandana’s rejection, Sripathi Rao makes “...no attempt to approach her either” (159), though he carries out all the duties and continues to be as affectionate as he had been hitherto. When Nandana disappears twice, once in her attempt to go to Vancouver all alone, and secondly by hiding herself in the cupboard, Sripathi Rao feels as anxious as that of Nandana’s grandmother.

## **Crisis and Transformation: Emergence of Attachment with the Grandfather**

When Nandana disappears for the third time as Nirmala does not find her at her school-gate at the scheduled time, she gets restless and searches her in almost all the possible places. As anxiety takes toll on her nerves, she feels for the first time that the child needs to be admonished as well because the child perhaps

has taken her for granted and hence fails to fathom her anxiety. Her anxiety stems from her intense love and affection that always demand her granddaughter’s protection and safety. During the third time, Nandana does not disappear out of her own volition as has been the case in the previous two instances; rather she is taken by Mrs. Poorna, one of the neighbours of Sripathi and Nirmala, in her apartment. A slightly deranged woman, Mrs. Poorna sees in the little girl a reflection of her own dead child and hence comes to consider Nandana to be her own lost daughter in her state of insanity. She is therefore desperate not to allow Nandana get out of her apartment in the fear of losing her child again. Virtually incarcerated in the apartment, Nandana is desperate to be emancipated from that “crazy” lady i.e., Mrs. Poorna. In that state of threat, distress and devastation Nandana frantically calls for help from both her grandmother and grandfather: “Ajji...So she shouted again. “Ajji!” It occurred to her that Sripathi often sat on his balcony right across the wall. Now she called for him too, the word strange in her mouth, “Ajja”! (300)

Nandana reverts to the same company for security and protection—the company of her grandfather—which she has so long desperately resisted. It is that terrible predicament of being forcibly confined by Mrs. Poorna which proves instrumental for Nandana to find a newly-realized ‘affectual solidarity’ with her grandfather and to accept him as one of the ‘attachment figures’. When her grandparents take her to the Big House, she promises to herself that “she would talk to everybody in the house, even to her Ajja” (300).

From then onwards Nandana starts to share an intense attachment with her grandfather, with Nandana showing concern for her grandfather's well-being, interacting with him spontaneously and making granddaughterly demands to him.

## Conclusion

Raising a child poses complex challenges for custodial grandparents, particularly because a child's emotional responses and coping mechanisms differ significantly from those of adults. When a child has experienced the traumatic loss of primary attachment figures, grandparents who assume caregiving responsibilities must negotiate a delicate balance: they must address the child's unresolved grief while simultaneously positioning themselves as alternative attachment figures. The child's willingness to form such attachments is often shaped by the prior relationship between the grandparents and the deceased parents; where this relationship is marked by conflict or rejection, the child may resist emotional bonding altogether. Consequently, custodial grandparent–grandchild relationships cannot be understood through simplistic binaries of affection or neglect. Instead, they reveal a spectrum of emotional responses shaped by trauma, memory, and intergenerational tensions, sometimes extending even to resentment or spite. This complexity challenges monolithic theoretical models of grandparenthood and underscores the plurality and ambivalence inherent in custodial caregiving arrangements.

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