



## INDIGENEITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S TAMARIND MEM AND ROHINTON MISTRY'S SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Indigenous knowledge and environmental consciousness have been portrayed and explored in literature by many writers. Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami's approach to indigeneity and environment is an interesting one. Indian ethos and environmental concerns as delineated in their works are, indeed worth-studying. Badami, a contemporary writer of Indian diaspora, places her typical characters in the typical Indian social and cultural set up. Various themes and issues related to indigenous Indian life have been sketched in her debut novel *Tamarind Mem* (1996). The novel subtly hints at the close human relationship with nature and more-than-human world and other environmental issues. Being set up in Bombay (now Mumbai), Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) centres around the urban atmosphere of a typical Indian metropolitan city with the hardships of marginalized people, poverty, rapid urbanisation and its associated degradation and pollution of the environment. Mistry's approach to the then politics, corruption and caste discrimination in India is realistic and often harsh. His depiction of the urban environment which includes extended nature, is noteworthy and invites fresh study. The paper attempts to explore the indigenous and environmental consciousness in *Tamarind Mem* and *Such a Long Journey*. Through close textual analysis the paper, thus, tries to study indigeneity and environmental awareness as presented in these two novels.

**Keywords:** *Indigeneity, environmental consciousness, more-than-human, urbanisation, pollution, extended nature*

#### Introduction

Anita Rau Badami and Rohinton Mistry, two prolific contemporary writers of Indian diaspora, now living in Canada, have portrayed Indian life with lively hue from various perspectives. Having deep and intimate knowledge of Indian people, their social and cultural life, both Badami and Mistry represent their characters in their works, exploring numerous themes and issues. Not only are their works rich in Indian indigenous traditions and issues, but also, they contain and express environmental awareness and concerns in unique ways. Among many themes that are found in Badami's novels, nature and environment feature prominently there. The natural world of flora and fauna, human interaction with nature, devastation of nature by human beings in the name of development, as well as human reverence for nature and natural entities, are reflected in Badami's novels. Badami is not an environmentalist, nor is she a social activist. Yet, a deep interconnection and interdependence among all forms of living and even non-living entities can be found in her works. She does not forget to indicate the rich Indian indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge, which has deep respect for nature and natural objects, and which believes in harmonious living with nature. On the other hand, Rohinton Mistry focuses his attention on the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) with its various problems. Belonging to the minority Parsi community himself, Mistry portrays many of his Parsi characters and their trials and tribulations with deep sensitivity and liveliness. Most of Mistry's characters struggle under different pressures and are torn apart physically as well as mentally. The setting of Mistry's works is typically the urban metropolitan Bombay with all its pollution, overpopulation, unhygienic living conditions, and congested slums. Rapid urbanisation, with all its resultant environmental problems, including physical and mental health, is delineated by Mistry in his novels. Along with the typical Indian issues related to caste, marginalisation, poverty, corruption, problems with old age people, and patriarchal social setup, Mistry shows his deep consciousness and concerns about the environment in his novels. Consequently, Indian ethos and environmental issues occupy a central stage in both Badami's and Mistry's works.

### **Indigeneity and Environmental Consciousness in Badami's *Tamarind Mem***

Anita Rau Badami occupies a unique niche in contemporary Indo-Canadian literature. Born and brought up in India, Badami moved to Canada in 1991. As Badami's father was in a transferable Indian railway job, she had tour throughout different places of India with her family. This gave Badami all the necessary inputs about Indian culture and ways of life. Sitting back at Canada and writing nostalgically about her country of origin, provided her with new insights, too. Indian society with all its varied issues, prominently features in her works. Badami's characters are vividly portrayed with the charming colour of life. Her novels like *Tamarind Mem* (1996), *The Hero's Walk* (2000), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) and *Tell It to the Trees* (2011) are all filled with typical Indian people with their typical lifestyle and attitude to various matters related to caste, gender, generation, environment etc.

Badami's first novel *Tamarind Mem* is the engaging tale of Saroja and Kamini, mother and daughter, who reminiscence about their life's journey in flash back. After her father's death and sister's marriage, Kamini shifts to Canada for higher studies and her mother is touring on the train all alone throughout different places of India. Through the telephonic exchanges and letters between the mother and the daughter, their past comes alive once again. The first half of the novel has Kamini as the chief narrator, while in the second half Saroja narrates her childhood, youth and marriage in front of her few train mates. Most of the narratives in the novel deals with traditional Indian society and its people with their own value system. Typical Indian families are male dominated, where major decisions are taken by men. Women are there to obey and act according to the decision of men. Patriarchal social structure very clearly defines the duties and responsibilities of women. Women are guided by certain rules. They must perform only the domestic works like cooking, cleaning and mothering of children. They should not work outside or go for a job. These are the typical domain of men who will work outside and earn money and then return home for food and rest. Anything associated with brain, reason, logic etc. are the business of males, whereas women are traditionally associated with body, emotion and passion. A woman does not even have the right to decide about her marriage. Male members of the family are to decide when and to whom she would be married off. There are certain patriarchal expectations from and impositions on women as well. A girl child is the least expected thing in such a society. Kamini says, "Chinna said that at Ma's birth the only thing Ajji asked was whether the child was a boy. When the *dai* said no, Ajji sighed, for now she would have to have another one" (Badami 9). If a girl is born in the family, everyone behaves in such a manner that only the wife is responsible for that. What is most surprising here is the fact that not only the males but many females too typically share patriarchal attitude and are involved in subordination of fellow women.

Apart from the various social ills and evils, *Tamarind Mem* delineates the nuanced indigenous Indian life. The picture that comes out of the novel is that of lively and colourful people with their food habits, dress, gossip, behaviour and lifestyle. Interestingly, Badami has used a lot of terms and expressions which are typically Indian and part of the Indian indigenous culture and knowledge system. From the beginning to the end, the novel is saturated with words and phrases like *pallav*, *ayah*, *peon*, *jamedaar*, *pettis*, *paans*, *lehengas*, *pakorras*, *samosas*, *tikkas*, *khusur-phusur*, *khaini*, *sooji-halwah*, *puri* and *aloo-dum*, *dhobi*, *Jana-gana-mana*, *tong-tong* of bells, *maya*, *juttu*, *shikakai*, *arrey baba*, *bechaara*, *badmaash* girl, *hai-Ram*, *baap-re-baap*, *phata-phat*, *bauni* rate, *abey saala*, mother-chooth, *chughal-kore*, *chhee*, *jadoo-mantar*, *pukka-perfect*, *gad-bad*, *bitiya*, *chholey* and *tandoori*, *bhooth*, *thheek-thhak*, *sumangali*, *goonda*, *chhammak-chhammak*, *kula-gothra*, *kumkum*, *chai*, *chudail*, *daayin*, *garam-thaaja*, *chana choor*, *laddoos* etc. All this points towards a native culture and lifestyle that is so familiar to an Indian. Badami's intimate and deep knowledge about indigenous people, place and products shows the uniqueness of this culture. Being the daughter of a railway officer, Badami travelled a lot throughout different places of India and had to shift to various railway colonies. Similar is the case of Kamini and Saroja in the novel, who also travelled and lived in different places due to Viswa's job as a railway officer. Badami has skillfully woven the story of *Tamarind Mem* to explore many of the indigenous themes and issues. Her presentation of Indian culture is interestingly unbiased and neutral. Sometimes, she is in all praise for many things, at other time, she is harshly critical of the many traditions and practices of Indians. As a writer of Indian diaspora, she delineates both the good and bad sides of Indian social and cultural life.

Traditional Indian people believe in rituals and myth. Viswa narrates before Kamini, Lakshman-jhoola bridge that is "hundreds of years old, it is said, made of rope and wood and prayers" (Badami 4). They believe in "the ghosts and goblins" (5). Saroja could not marry Bheema, a patriotic boy of her own choice, as he belonged to a different caste and their horoscopes did not match, too. Myths surrounding peaks and ranges, River Ganga and Bhageerathi, Shiva and Parvathi are all woven with the life of an Indian. Viswa tells these tales and myths to his daughter Kamini. To the Indians, Ganga is not simply a river, but "a creature of moods" (42) that needs to be appeased with flowers and song before building a bridge across it. Otherwise, it takes revenge and then needs to be appeased with "grand pooja" (43) and ceremonial offerings. Like Roopa, Kamini's sister, many Indians have deep faith in the monkey god Hanuman and keeps his figure at home. Indian myth is full of reverence for the flora and fauna. Forest plays a vital role there. Kamini recollects the Dandakaranya forest in the Araku Valley section, "the same forest in the Ramayana where Sita was kidnapped by the demon Ravana. And we got fresh honey from the tribals in the forest" (3). And when her father returned from his line-duty tour in the deep Dandakaranya forest with a "jar of translucent honey", he states, "[t]his is the honey Rama and Sita and Lakshmana ate" (222). Indigenous Indian knowledge system is interspersed with myth and folklores that are there from time immemorial. Sometimes, the border between reality and myth gets blurred and a rich cultural heritage comes out of it, a culture that is very different from the Western one.

Pollution, toxicity and other environmental hazards are increasing day by day. Throughout the novel Badami has hinted at various kinds of environmental pollution. Again and again, extreme heat in the Indian cities and towns is mentioned in the text. Air

pollution caused by coal dust, dusty roads, water and river pollution are referred to in the novel. And in most of the cases human are responsible for polluting and devastating the environment. Through *Tamarind Mem*, Badami has subtly pointed out various types of environmental problems and crisis. While environmental pollution and climate change are burning global problem, Badami has highlighted the problem from the Indian point of view.

Apart from the direct environmental pollution, *Tamarind Mem* depicts how people are trying to conquer, subjugate and exploit nature and wilderness in the name of construction and progress. Viswa's frequent trips to the deep forest to build new railway lines camouflage man's interference into the natural world. While scientific and technological developments are very much needed, natural world with its flora and fauna should also exist as larger part of the ecosystem. On the one hand, we have references to tiger hunting and disturbances of wild animals like elephants due to loud noise of trains. On the other, we have the beautiful coexistence of human and nature. "Humans have engaged with nature in varied and often contradictory ways throughout history. However, it is only in modern times that humans have reshaped and degraded nature so dramatically as to make the state and fate of the earth a matter of moral (and political) concern" (Guha, Introduction xix). Traditional Indians believe in living in harmony with nature. The simple villagers did not allow to destroy the cobra castle and ants' nest for the sake of building railway lines. They believe in the myth of Vasuki. "Nobody in their right senses destroys the home of a cobra" (Badami 43), think the villagers who live in coexistence with other-than-human entities. The villagers thus possess the indigenous wisdom of protection and preservation, the motto of 'live and let live'. The value of this type of practical ecological knowledge and traditional practices points towards the eco-consciousness of indigenous people.

Human-nature coexistence and concerns for environmental degradation and ecological imbalance are reflected in many ways in *Tamarind Mem*. Both Kamini and Saroja love to be surrounded by plants and trees. While sitting in Calgary, Kamini is deeply engrossed with flower plants and orchids. Saroja's lonely and frustrated life is thoroughly shadowed by flower trees, animals and insects. Throughout the novel, human interactions and connections with nature are focused again and again. Saroja spent her childhood and youth in the village which was covered with plants and trees of various types, like coconut trees, mango, lime and guava trees, vegetables flowers in the garden. Her mother was very much practical about the vegetable, fruit and flower plants in her garden and their usage. This is "[t]he practical knowledge and wisdom of India's ecosystem people" (Gadgil and Guha 142). Saroja shares a close association and kinship with bougainvillea and gulmohur tree. In the railway colony at Ratnapura, the bougainvillea flower tree acted as a healing friend to her. "A gulmohur tree dapples the corner of the front balcony with its shade" close to Saroja's new apartment and she spends her idle hours in the balcony to "catch sight of the tiniest changes, hear every whisper" (Badami 253). This flower tree is a constant companion to Saroja who is now old as well as lonely. At the same time different types of birds, animals and insects fill the environment. Apart from the aesthetic pleasure enjoyed by Saroja, she is deeply sensitive to even "the grey, fluffy birds – called the seven sisters... quarrelling over worms" (253). All this delicately points towards human-nature coexistence and indigenous biodiversity – rich with numerous plant and animal species.

### **Indigeneity and Environmental Concerns in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey***

Rohinton Mistry, too, is a writer of Indian diaspora, now living in Canada. He was born and brought up in a Parsi community in Bombay (now Mumbai). He emigrated to Canada in 1975. He has written a few short stories and three major novels like *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002). All the three novels were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Mistry received many prestigious awards and recognition including Governor General's Award, Commonwealth Writers Prize, Neustadt International Prize for Literature etc. All of his works are full of typical Indian people, various sides of indigenous culture and society and deep concerns for the environment.

His novels basically deal with the social ills and evils prevalent in the Indian society. As a prolific writer of Indian diaspora, born and brought up in India, Mistry has intimate knowledge about India and Indian people. His novels delicately portray issues related to poverty, caste, gender, marginalization, politics etc. While dealing with the contemporary burning social and political issues, Mistry has indirectly enriched and broadened the sphere of Indian knowledge – a sphere that is varied and diversified. What is interesting here, is that his novels are not only concerned with the rich heritage of indigenous Indian culture, but also the social ills prevailing in Indian society. Almost all the works of Mistry are set in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) with its own typical life and environment. Along with indigenous themes and issues, the novels show remarkable concerns for environmental pollution and degradation.

*Such a Long Journey* centres around the life of Gustad Noble, the hard-working bank clerk residing at the Khodabad Building, his wife Dilnavaz, and his three children Sohrab, who has got chance to study at the Indian Institute of Technology but refuses to go, Darius, who is in love with the neighbour's daughter and Roshan, who frequently falls ill. On the one hand, the novel deals with the struggling life of Gustad and his family. On the other, the novel also portrays India's political turmoil under the leadership of Indira Gandhi in the 1970s. However, Mistry does not confine himself within the private world of Gustad's family and political environment only. Rather, he explores various themes that are typically Indian. Apart from the typical social issues in India, *Such a Long Journey* subtly delineates indigeneity and environmental consciousness of the ordinary Indians.

The novel at once places the readers in the middle of a familiar Indian environment with all its social, cultural and political features. The scarcity of water in the city, various activities of the Congress government under the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra, fragrant *basmati* rice, *Reader's Digests*, *Filmfare*, words like *dubbawalla*, *goaswalla*, *arre*, *chaalo chaalo*, *yaar*, *bhaiya*, *chumcha*, *Bay-sharam*, *Saali*, *maader chod*, *chootia*, *Theek hai*, *jaadu-mantar*, *chutney*, medicinal *subjo*, *choolavati*, *boni*, *paan*, *Chor Bazaar*, *buberchees*, *masala* etc. place the novel right in the heart of India.

*Such a Long Journey* begins with a very familiar picture of early morning of an Indian metropolitan city. Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel, was listening to the chirping of sparrows and cawing of crows in the “compound’s solitary tree” (Mistry 1). Within the compound in the city of Bombay, the tree is playing a vital environmental role. But in this pleasing atmosphere, the matter of concern is the fact that the trees which provide shelter to birds and insects are rapidly decreasing in number as pointed out by the term ‘solitary’. The solitary neem tree of the Khodabad Building helps different people with different needs:

For children in Khodadad Building, cuttings from its soothing branches had stroked the itchy rashes and papules of measles and chicken-pox. For Gustad, neem leaves (pulped into a dark green drink by Dilnavaz with her mortar and pestle) had kept his bowel from knotting up during his twelve helpless weeks. For servants, hawkers, beggars passing through, neem twigs served as toothbrush and toothpaste rolled into one. Year after year, the tree gave unstintingly of itself to whoever wanted. (Mistry 36)

Indeed, in Indigenous Indian culture neem occupies a unique place not only for curing diseases and usage as herbal product, but also its role in purifying the environment. Besides, neem and turmeric are widely used in India as pesticide and antiseptic (Gadgil and Rao 98). Herbal treatment is part of indigenous knowledge and Darius, Gustad’s second son is treated with certain herbs. Even herbs and bark do miracle in bone-setting. This type of herbal treatment does not only point towards Indian rich heritage of indigenous natural healing, but also to the benefit, the poor people get from it:

Madhiwalla never charged a paisa for his treatment, nor did he reveal the names of the trees and herbs, in order to keep the unscrupulous from commercially exploiting his knowledge at the expense of the ailing poor. The rich were welcome to make donations. His secrecy was applauded by all, but it was also a source of concern: Madhiwalla was an old man, what would happen when he was no more, if his knowledge died with him? It was believed, however, that he was secretly training a successor who would emerge and heal when the need became evident. (Mistry 154)

Pollution, garbage and unhygienic living conditions are some of the main problems of a city like Bombay. The way the Pest control Department of the municipal ward office offered twenty-five paise for every rat presented to it and the way rats are killed by drowning and then are thrown on a heap for disposal, are matter of environmental concerns. Killing of animals and throwing their carcasses here and there, pollute the environment too (163). People use the wall of the Khodabad compound as a public latrine which was full of mosquitoes and flies. Open urination, stink and mosquitoes are part and parcel of a city like Bombay. Indeed, mosquitoes and flies are a constant nuisance in the city (92, 110). Gustad was “maddened by the clouds of mosquitoes that came, without fail, after sunset” (95). In a city like Bombay, “there had been a surge of construction activity everywhere in the city” and rapid construction and tall structures “blotted out the setting sun” (95). Urbanisation with its various harmful consequences, is a matter of great environmental concern. Like the darkness under the lamp, there are the slums with their unhygienic living conditions. During the monsoon, they get flooded making the whole area polluted. But this is the reality of today in the cities. And nature includes natural world as well as human society and built structures: “To write about ecology is to write about society, and not simply in the weak sense that our ideas of ecology are social constructions (Morton 17).

Mistry has subtly depicted his consciousness and concerns for the environment. Darius’ fascination with pets like various colourful fish, finches, sparrows, squirrel, lovebirds, Nepali parrot etc. and their eventual death raise question about having innocent little pets in cages. Sohrab’s catching and killing of butterflies and moths for mounting them in the display case, as an eighth standard school boy, are harmful for the ecosystem. Endangered bird species like bats, vultures, sparrows, crows etc. which play vital role in ecological balance, are referred to in *Such a Long Journey*.

Indigeneity, Indian ethos and environmental consciousness expressed through Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* and *Such a Long Journey* are, indeed, unique. India has a long and distinctive tradition of cultural and intellectual legacy. From ancient times, India has been a place of knowledge, wisdom and intelligence at various spheres of life. Indigenous Indian knowledge is thus an amalgamation of myriad strata of human activities. *Tamarind Mem* and *Such a Long Journey* communicate Indianness and indigeneity wonderfully. Within this framework, human-more-than-human relationship, pollution, devastation of nature and natural resources and other environmental concerns have been skillfully portrayed by the two novelists, which call for more sensitization and awareness about the environment and ecosystem.

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