

Nostalgia towards Indian rudiments in Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*

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Abstract

Anita Rau Badami is an Indian – Canadian writer. She has written four novels so far. They are as follows: (i) *Tamarind Mem*, (ii) *The Hero's Walk*, (iii) *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and (iv) *Tell it to the Trees*. Her first novel *Tamarind Mem* is a semi-autobiographical work. Badami was educated at the University of Madras, as a result her first novel *Tamarind Mem* evinces mainly the Indian rudiments. This novel is divided into two parts: the one is narrated by the daughter and the other is by the mother. The title of the novel also resembles the Tamizh food ingredient which is used in Tamilnadu in day to day's life. *Tamarind Mem* contains the story of a mother and a daughter. Tamarind is an Indian sour fruit and the title implicates the sour tongue of mother Saroja. Due to her failed ambition in life, Saroja hates everyone and enjoys travelling in the Indian trains. Her husband's Indian railway pass is enjoyed by Saroja after his death.

Badami in her novel *Tamarind Mem* at the very outset explains to the readers about the Indian myth of the tamarind tree. The tamarind tree produces edible fruit which is sour in taste and used extensively in Indian cuisines. The tree also carries a myth about it. The passage is quoted below for reference:

Tamarindusindica:

Tamar – i – Hind, or Date of India. Folklore has it that the tamarind tree is the home of spirits that do not let anything under the tree survive. Accordingly, travelers are advised not to sleep in its shade. The tamarind tree is never used for auspicious ceremonies, as its fruit being sour, it is believed that the ceremony will turn sour and thus become fruitless and lose all meaning. (TM 1)

The novel *Tamarind Mem* is named after the sour tasting tamarind fruit which indirectly informs about the character of the protagonist Saroja, the tamarind woman. Her tongue is so sharp that people nicknamed her Tamarind Mem.

Badami in the novel *Tamarind Mem* refers to the red flowers of 'gulmohar tree' which enhances the beauty of the house. Kamini one of the characters in the novel lives in Canada, when she thinks of her mother and her house in India she immediately remembers the gulmohar tree: "The nicest thing about Ma's flat was the gulmohar tree that scattered its flaming red flowers all over her balcony" (TM 40).

In the same novel the readers are informed about two more trees which are exclusively of Indian origin namely the jamoon tree and lychee tree. Jamoon tree is native to India. It is very tall and its fruits are purple in colour. It is found all over India. These fruits are a good source of iron and cures heart and liver disorders. In India, the seeds of jamoon fruit are widely used to control diabetes. In Badami's *Tamarind Mem* Saroja warns her daughter Kamini not to climb the jamoon tree because of its height.

In the novel *Tamarind Mem*, Kamini is informed by her mother that she is going on a trip to Guwahati using her railway pass. As soon as Kamini reads the name of the city as Guwahati, she remembers her encounter with a panther on a Lychee tree

in her childhood days in Guwahati railway colony. The narration continues as follows: “Once in Guwahati, a panther had prowled through the lychee trees in the back garden, cracking the still night air with its sawing, rough growls” (TM 135).

Neem tree is regarded as Indian Lilac. This is a native species to India. The leaves, flowers, and the seeds contain medicinal qualities. The neem flowers are used in India especially during the Yugadhi festival. It is evident in Badami’s *Tamarind Mem*: “Even the neem tree in the front yard with none of the knots, gnarls or hollows that give a tree character, obligingly blooms in March to provide the buds and flowers needed to make bitter-sweet bevu-bella for the Yugadhi feast” (TM 156). The neem leaves and flowers are used in India in the day to day life.

Badami also mentions the goodness of neem trees through the character Kamini in the novel *Tamarind Mem*: “Her breath, leafy with the smell of the neem twigs she used to brush her teeth, feathered my face, her hands gentle on my head” (TM 45). In South India, the neem twigs are used to brush the teeth still by the aged people in villages. It is also a practice in Tamilnadu that the paste of neem leaves is used as medicine for chicken pox as Kamini explains: “When I did get a violent attack of chicken-pox, Ma applied cool *neem paste* over my inflamed, itching body, muttering all the time ...” (TM 93).

Badami in her *Tamarind Mem* has narrated the significance of this bridge. It is said that Lakshmana, Lord Ram’s brother had crossed over this place with jute ropes and so this bridge is known not only for its ropes, iron suspension and unique built but for prayers and miracles. The words are quoted for reference:

That bridge is hundreds of years old, it is said, made of rope and wood and prayers. It swings thin as a dream over the River Ganga thundering down a rocky gorge, and on the underside of the bridge is a city of bees. You can hear their buzzing over the sound of rushing water, and you have to walk across the Lakshman-jhoola without shaking it even a bit, for then the queen bee wakes up from her sleep and send her armies after you. (TM 4)

In Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* Kamini was informed by her mother that she was going to visit Varanasi, one of the holiest cities in India. Her mother exclaimed in her letter to Kamini that, “I am now in Varanasi, the holiest of holy cities I suppose if my heart collapses on me, I will depart a blessed soul, and some stranger will set my ashes afloat in the River Ganga” (TM 142). This is a prevalent culture of old aged people in India, in which they used to visit the holy places as redemption from their sin.

Badami hails from a South Indian Brahmin family. In the novel *Tamarind Mem* she mentions about the traditional Indian food like puri with aloo sabzi, lemon rice, curd rice and laddoos. In her words, “At one time or another, every family in our colony makes a pilgrimage to that tree armed with baskets of puri and aloo sabzi, lemon rice and curd rice, laddoos and banana cake” (TM 18).

In *Tamarind Mem* the character Kamini makes a mention of the traditional Indian dress namely the sari: “I could see the peacock eyes on Ma’s sari border...” (TM 47). Usually in India different varieties of sari can be found. Again in the same novel a garment shop in India is illustrated as follows: “In it, row upon row, hung brilliantly hued *saris* and *salwarkameez* sets, each with its matching petticoat, blouse or dupatta” (TM 91).

The ceremonies like wedding, naming ceremony, etc. also include wearing traditional attire especially for the bride and the bridegroom. In South India, especially in Tamilnadu, it is a tradition to wear the Canjeevaram silk sari on the

wedding occasion. Badami in her novel *Tamarind Mem* narrates about the traditional Benaras silk sari which the protagonist Saroja kept in memory of her wedding and because of its marvelous look Saroja's daughter Kamini also prefers to have a silk sari on her wedding. To quote from the text,

“When you get married”, said Ma, “I will fill these boxes with joy; my blessings will perfume each of them”. She touched her wedding sari, a Benaras tissue of red and gold. “For you I will buy only Canjeevaram. A tissue is beautiful when it is new, but in a few years it is a pile of powder. Look look how it crumbles and breaks!” “But Ma, I want a wedding sari just like this”, I begged; in love with the frail, whispery fabric like a butterfly's wing. (TM 46)

Badami in her novel *Tamarind Mem* discusses the traditional Tamizhbehaviour of looking horoscope (jatakam) as an essential before marriage, through the character Kamini. Kamini's parents believed in this customary practice before arranging for her wedding and she describes the moments as follows: “Oh no no! He was of a different caste. Besides, their horoscopes didn't match at all, and then my father threw him out of the house for causing such gad-bad” (TM 10). Usually the matching of the zodiac signs for a bride and a bridegroom is done in the same religion and within the same caste.

Badami narrates the value of traditional Indian marriage in her novel *Tamarind Mem*. Saroja, the protagonist of the novel *Tamarind Mem* narrates about her own marriage to her daughters Kamini and Roopa. Saroja exclaims that,

I married this man in the presence of agni, varuna, vayu fire, water and wind. To be certain, I am awed by the rituals that have bound us together: my sari pallav knotted to the end of his shawl, his fingers inserting rings on my toes, filling the part in my hair with blood-red kumkum. (TM 182)

Badami in the novel *Tamarind Mem* explains the naming ceremony in Tamilnadu through the character Ajji. For the occasion the house is decorated with mango-leaf garlands. Mango-leaf garlands are a customary part of Indian festival decoration. The words from the text are as follows:

My great-grandmother, Putti, marked the arrival of her first grandchild by inviting the entire town for the naming ceremony. She had every doorway decorated with mango-leaf garlands of beaten silver, and she even bought a cradle carved by the cradle-makers of Ranganathapuram. She gave silk saris to all the female relatives who came, smiling from ear to ear (TM 13)

Kamini the protagonist of the novel *Tamarind Mem* has compared her mother Saroja to the mythical character Savitri for her bravery in bringing life to her dead husband Satyavan. In her words,

Ma hated admitting defeat, even to death. She would have liked to have been a Savithri, dragging her husband back to life from the death of god yama's arms using the sheer cunning of words. When I was younger, Ma had read me the story of Savithri and Satyavan over and over again, her long, smooth index finger with its glittering vanki ring pointing at the pictures. Here was the happy couple sitting languidly under a mahua tree; there was Satyavan, face a picture of agony, clutching his chest; here came Yama on his buffalo to drag the body away. And finally, a triumphant Savithri, her arms outstretched, receiving her husband's life back from the god of death. (TM 142)

Again, in the same novel, Kamini fondly remembers another Indian myth called 'Trishanku' myth. Trishanku was an Indian King for whom a special heaven in the middle between the original heaven and earth was created by Vishwamitra. Linda Ayah refers to this myth while Kamini's father was admitted in the hospital:

I preferred to believe Linda Ayah, who said the cotton was to keep Dadda's spirit in his heart. Remove the cotton and the spirit would stream out leaving Dadda in limbo, a Trishanku suspended between swarga and earth. The spirit needed to be released with proper rituals, cleansed in the heat of a sandalwood pyre so that it would ascend into the air. (TM 143)

Kamini in *Tamarind Mem* also remembers the myth of Harichandra. According to Vishnu Purana, Harichandra was also an Indian King and the son of Trishanku. He belonged to the Treta Yuga. He was an honest and noble king. In the novel Kamini's mother referred to the mythological king who sold his wife and sacrificed his son for the sake of his principles.

Thus the novel explicates many traditional Indian circumstances which are all really emotive to explore. Though Badami is an Indian-Canadian writer she has beautifully portrayed the Indian aspects in a perfect manner. The traditional myth of Tamarind tree, Satyavan-Savitri, LakshmanJhula Bridge, Thrishanku and Harichandra are narrated in a comprehensible way. The tradition of South Indian Tamizh cuisine, traditional attire, traditional ceremonies with mango leaf garlands are also elucidated to the readers. From the above mentioned instances it is proved that the novel *Tamarind Mem* by Anita Rau Badami possess the Indian culture as its background. This novel also proves that Badami is from an Indian family. It also shows a responsive attitude towards regional writing and nostalgia as the author is settled somewhere far away from India. This novel explicates her longing for her birthplace also the home country from the host country.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Badami, Anita Rau. *Tamarind Mem*. Canada: Knopf, 1996. Print.

Abbreviation Used:

Tamarind Mem – TM