

Conservancy of Tradition and Family Secrets in Anita Rau Badami's *Tell it to the Trees*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the traditional values, culture which the Indian families consider as a prestigious in their life time. Anita's fourth novel Tell it to the trees pictures the Indian family who settled in Canada dealing with trauma, complex relationships, migration issues. The secrets and suspense plays a vital role in the Tell it to Trees. The secrets are shared with the trees, which never reveals to anyone else. The family maintains the secrets, pain, sorrow, disappointments within themselves. In any cause the family members never want to break into pieces and never allow anyone to enter into their family.

Keywords: Tradition, Indian Families, Complex Relationship, Secrets, Migration.

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Anita Rau Badami is a writer of South Asian Diaspora living in Canada with a strong voice of the modern Indian Diaspora. Born in Rourkela, Odisha, India, she migrated to Canada in 1991. Badami's novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. Anita Rau Badami narrates the incident in two countries that is Canada and India as perceived by the characters in the novel. Indian representation family set up, cultural and gender inequality patriarchal set up, tradition; socio- religious rituals etc. are portrayed.

Tell it to the Trees is a story about a dysfunctional family of East Indian immigrants whose burden of secrets spells disaster for them and others. The story centers on the Dharma family, headed by Vikram Dharma who lives in the house that his father, Mr. J.K. Dharma, built years ago in the isolated wilds of Merrit's Point, British Columbia. The novel focused on domestic drama about the impact of family secrets and the cost of preserving and protecting the family name. The story centers around the Dharma family, headed by Vikram Dharma who lives in the house that his father, Mr. J.K. Dharma, built years ago in the isolated wilds of Merrit's Point, British Columbia. Living with him are his mother- Akka, his second wife Suman, Varsha Dharma- 13 year old daughter of Vikram and his first wife Harini, and Hemant- the son of Suman and

Vikram. Female voices are front and centre in *Tell It to the Trees*, as the suspenseful story unfolds from the multiple perspectives of 13-year-old Varsha, her stepmother Suman and Anu, who kept a notebook during her time living with the Dharmas. The actions are recounted in the voices of Varsha, Suman, Hemant, and Anu Krishnan, the tenant. When Varsha was four, her mother Harini left her father and shortly afterwards she dies in an accident. Her father removes all evidence of Harini's existence in their lives, including pictures and all her personal possessions. Thus he sets the stage for the Varsha's strength of mind not to ever lose someone again. Eventually, Varsha's father travels to India and returns with a new wife, thirty year old Suman, who arrives in Canada six months after their marriage in India. She is quiet and not very pretty but she has a good heart and is willing to love Varsha. Suman learns almost immediately that Vikram is jealous, controlling and has a dreadful rage. No matter what she does it is never good enough for Vikram, who demeans and abuses her and the children. She longs for her new husband to "love me into being." Anu rents a cottage on the Dharmas' land, but is not a part of their family. Of Indian descent, she has been raised in the West and embraces contemporary values. As an outsider, she breaks through the Dharma family's boundaries, upsetting the insecure balance of their household, with tragic consequences. Vikram is only seen and heard through the eyes and ears of others. This novel explores many issues including those of arranged marriage, wife and child abuse, immigrants in Canada, and especially identity. *Tell it to the Trees* vividly portrays the increasing isolation of the Dharma family in the Merrit's Point community - an isolation that is matched by Suman's isolation from the rest of this frightening family.

The novel starts with the sad demise of Anu in an extremely cold winter night outside the house. The cause of her death remains a mystery to the common public. Why she came out on that extremely cold night without proper covering and why Varsha and Hemant, who were inside the house, did not help her are the questions that remain unanswered till the end. The novel makes a horror story from one angle. The mysterious facts about Anu's death are known only at the end. The novelist exhibits her talents in maintaining a good suspense at every stage of the story. So, it can be called a suspense thriller also. The writer uses flash back technique to the best advantage. Varsha hates Anu for various reasons which are known gradually when the story unfolds itself. So, she conspires with her brother Hemant, and kills Anu in an indirect manner. On 3rd Feb, 1980 there is a dangerous snow blizzard. At that time Varsha and Hemant are in their home. Anu goes out to smoke a cigarette, not knowing the situation outside. Varsha sees a golden opportunity to eliminate Anu. So, they close the door, switch off the lights and pretend as if they were asleep. Poor Anu keeps on banging the door requesting them to open it, but they conveniently ignore her and Varsha succeeds in extinguishing her. Poor Anu, without proper winter dress, dies in that terrible snow wave. Vikram's house, being in a thrown away area, nobody comes to her rescue. . He is a witness as well as an indirect participation in the furtive murder of Anu. Though he wants to talk to somebody, Varsha prevents him. To make him relieve himself of his psychological crisis, she suggests him a technique. He should talk to the trees as they don't betray secrets while there is every possibility of secrets being revealed by human beings.

Varsha loves herself and her family. She becomes close to her paternal grandmother, Akka, who tells her so many things about their family. Varsha describes the people of her family through the knowledge she gains from her grandmother, and also from her own experiences. Varsha loves her step mother. She hugs her when she gets up from bed, and also when she goes to bed. She also helps her step mother in the household chores. She tries all possible means to make her feel loved.

Akka is a typical Indian housewife who hates being dominated and harassed by her husband, but at the same time wants to protect the image of the family in the eyes of outsiders. She takes revenge on her husband but protects his image. She also does not like her son, who, according to her, is a

demon. Akka succeeds in keeping the image of the family intact by not confiding any of the frailties of her husband in any of her family members including her son or daughter – in-law.

Akka and Vikram tell about the importance of keeping up family prestige. Image and prestige of one's family have been considered very important since times immemorial in India. So, whatever may be the lapses of the family members, the other members keep them within the confines of the house so that the image of the family is kept intact. Varsha's grandmother influences her in such a way that she becomes obsessed with the idea of protecting the image of the family by keeping its secrets from going out at any cost. She feels it to be their moral obligation to shield her family from being exposed. Suman suffers from miscarriage because of Vikram's roughness, and they keep it a family secret. Hemant wants to disclose it. But Varsha threatens him and asks him to "Tell It to the Trees!" Hold on to it, it's a secret. Hold on and tell it to Tree when we get back from school, Okay?

One of the central ideas of the novel is suffering in silence of the wife and the children, who are the victims of domestic violence in the hands of the male head of the family. Varsha is by nature selfish and so is possessive of her brother. It may be for her safety and security in the house wreck by marital disharmony. Varsha hides the passport of Suman so that she cannot leave the family. Suman is trapped by both emotional attachment and by the cunning nature of Varsha. Even Akka helps Suman financially to move from Canada to India, she knows how Vikram insult and assault Suman. But as it said above the maintain the family tradition and culture and to keep the secrets of the family Suman stay back with her children as an ideal Indian wife.

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