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**Symbolism in Anita Rau Badami's *Tell It to the Trees*****S. Shabana**

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**Abstract**

Anita Rau Badami, a well-known Indian diasporic woman writer, has an expertise in apt usage of symbols in her narratives. In her novels, everyday objects, natural elements, and cultural motifs have become containers for deeper emotional, psychological, and thematic expression. Her novel *Tell It to the Trees* (2011) is rich with symbolic imagery that reflects the inner lives of her characters and the complex realities of diasporic experience. Symbolism plays a central role, with elements such as trees, snow, and locked rooms serving as metaphors for surveillance, emotional suppression, and buried truths. The novel reveals the complex interplay of fear, loyalty, silence, and resistance within a diasporic family struggling with unresolved trauma and cultural dislocation. Symbolism forms the backbone of the novel's emotional and thematic architecture. It deepens the emotional impact of her themes and enhances the issues of belonging, silence, and transformation. The recurring symbolic elements serve as connective tissue between the inner and outer worlds of Badami's characters. The present study highlights how her symbolic language acts as a bridge between personal narrative and broader socio-cultural details.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, imagery, diasporic experience, trauma, transformation**Introduction**

Sean Glatch, in the article "Symbolism in Literature: What Symbolism Is, and How to Use It in Your Writing," opines that symbolism describes the use of concrete images to convey abstract ideas. It describes the use of representational imagery, in which a writer uses a picture that has a deeper, nonliteral meaning to explain difficult concepts. He further says that sometimes, a symbol is the stepping stone for an extended metaphor. A symbol is not a metaphor. Symbolism compares two seemingly unrelated things, while metaphor uses a related image to convey a relevant notion. Finally, he says that symbol is an image where figurative meaning is much deeper than its literal one. It is an item that has been given great value despite frequently being regular and unremarkable.

The novel *Tell It to the Trees* is set in the coldest northern edge of British Columbia and discusses the life of J.K. Dharma's traditional Indian family settled in Canada. The novelist has extensively explored the elements of nature like snow, the wilderness, and the trees with the human characters. The narrative is about an Indian family that live in a house that is safely hidden by Canada's snow and who meticulously follow the Indian set of domestic laws.

M.P. Malini Pon Sheela in *Befriending Nature* in Anita Rau Badami's *Tell it to the Trees* says, Badami in her novel gives a human attribute to nature, fearing that she may be cut off from her loved ones, Varsha makes friends with nature and uses the bitter cold as a weapon to murder her adversary, Anu. For Varsha, nature continues to be a friend and confidante, while for the victims, nature is a monster.

Vikram and Helen's daughter, Varsha's, character and attitude are being influenced by the people around her including nature. Vikram's domineering behavior causes Helen to leave him, leaving Varsha by his side. Akka, the mother of Vikram, acknowledges the rude attitude of her son and worries stating how he had got the bad gene of his father J.K. Dharma. Varsha becomes a victim to this conflict, which later plays a prominent role in the character formation of the child. The fear of separation gets strongly embedded in the mind of Varsha that it makes her cling to the relations that she gets in the later part of her life.

Vikram returns to India to find a suitable woman to play the role of a mother to his child and succeeds in finding a quiet and amiable pair, Suman. She lived a peaceful life with her father and gets packed off with Vikram, a stranger, to an unfamiliar land of wilderness. She is unaware that she will be kept silent and imprisoned inside J.K. Dharma's home's snow-covered walls., which symbolises lifelessness and static.

The Dharma family home in the isolated setting, becomes a powerful symbol of their isolation, both from the wider community and from each other. The secrets and emotional distance that decay inside the family are reflected in the physical remoteness. The house built by J.K. Dharma also symbolizes the weight of the past and the foundations upon which the family's present dysfunctions are built. Being devoid of crowded human existence, the children lack human companionship to socialize. They imbue things like snow and trees with human characteristics.

The snow symbolizes the smothering effect of unspoken trauma and the deadly silence that comes from suppressed truths. As noted by in a review by Quill and Quire, the novel 'steps lightly along the familiar path laid down by the previous books, telling the story of an Indian family dealing with trauma, intrigue and complex relationships'.

Hemant is so close to the snow that he is able to smell the arrival of blizzard and gives warning to others. "There's a blizzard coming. I can smell it." "Yes, it's coming from over there" (p. 227). The nature of snow is to conceal. It can temporarily hide and silence the truth for a certain period, but one day when the snow melts the rotten truth is likely to show up. But by that time the truth would become soggy and insignificant.

Anu Krishnan, a story writer and the tenant of Dharma household, on moving closer to Suman and Akka, begins to understand the truth, covered up within the walls of Vikram's house. Varsha and Hemant make secret visits into the house of Anu and finds a notebook, that contains the story of the Dharmas. By reading it they realized that J.K. Dharma's death is caused by Akka. Varsha too plays the same trick with Anu to kill her. The only witness to this gruesome act was little Hemant. Thus, Anu's book and Journals symbolize the hidden truths.

Snow is used as a weapon by both Akka and Varsha to get rid of their enemies. Confessing to God is a practice in all religions. But in a strange land, devoid of temples, Akka insists children to go and let out their secrets to tree, which is given all human attributes. Thus, the children befriend a well grown conifer tree, to which they share all their secrets. This suggests that the natural world can be a silent repository for the family's hidden pain and trauma. This act becomes a metaphor for the characters' inability to voice their fears and sufferings openly, highlighting the oppressive silence that shrouds their lives. The harsh winter climate further amplifies the novel's exploration of isolation and entrapment.

Sofia Cavalcanti, a Research Scholar in 'Beyond Individual Space' observes that the women in the novel are consigned to symbolic spaces where their voices are marginalized, noting that 'their relationship with space is deeply symbolic'. This spatial symbolism examines the broader theme of entrapment within both the physical environment and the rigid confines of patriarchal expectations.

In contrast to the bleakness of Suman's surroundings and her unhappy marriage, her vibrant sarees and flavourful cooking symbolize her resilience, her connection to Indian heritage, and her attempts to bring warmth and life into the cold domestic atmosphere. However, even these symbols of her individuality are often muted or suppressed by Vikram's controlling nature.

For outsiders, who settle in Canada, the climate turns to be a monster as they come with expectations. The climate itself threatens Anu when she lands at Merritt's point, and when Suman lands, everything seems to be bizarre. But for children, the climate is never a hitch, who had been born and brought up there. They are very much used to the climate and objects of nature and nothing seems to be weird. They feel comfortable and never want to run away from there, whereas the bleak cold there, is cursed and feared as a monster by the adults. The children do not estrange nature that surrounds them, instead it is looked up as a confidant and they casually befriend the objects of nature.

At the end of the novel, the powerful words of Varsha show that she is not alone. She feels that she is a part of nature and has been guided by it. As a warrior, she is ready to overcome the obstacles that come her way with nature by her side. She says:

"There is nobody else left for me. To keep Hem with me. I *will* find a way.

I am cunning as the snow.

I am sharp as the winter wind.

I am strong as tree.

I can find a way.

I am Varsha Dharma...

This is *my* house, this is *my* family" (p. 255).

Through these natural symbols, Badami intricately weaves a narrative that delves into the devastating impact of domestic abuse and the suffocating nature of enforced silence. The trees and snow are not mere backdrops but active elements that reflect and intensify the

internal struggles of the characters, emphasizing the profound connection between environment and emotional state.

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