

Research Article

Anita Rau Badami's Tamarind Mem – Unveiling of the Diverse Outlooks of Women in India through the Nostalgias of a Mother and a Daughter

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Abstract

The present article explores the changing potentials of women in India through the characters in Tamarind Mem by Anita Rau Badami. Badami slots the novel into two fragments: the first part narrated by Kamini, the daughter of Saroja, and the second by Saroja herself. Through the main protagonists, Saroja and Kamini, Badami envisions the psychological gap between the two generations; and presents how the society subdues the inner conflicts they live in. Saroja camouflaged herself as a traditional wife and stood as the epitome of an ideal woman who encourages her children towards accomplishing their aspirations. After Dadda's death, Kamini and Roopa, her children immigrated to Canada. Kamini lives an independent life but is imprisoned in her memories, whereas Roopa marries and leads her own life. Saroja, who is always immersed in memories, plans to travel and visit places freely. The novel seeks to disclose the misunderstanding that generally occurs between the older and the younger generations.

Keywords: *changing possibilities, psychological gap, inner conflicts, misunderstanding*

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Introduction

Anita Rau Badami, an Indian expatriate writer, sketches the panorama of Indian family life with the nostalgic aroma of the motherland. Her writings narrate the intricacies in the domestic life of the Indian villages with palpable details and bring out the cultural gap and other complexities that arise when an Indian moves to the West for a better living. Her graduate thesis and the first novel, *Tamarind Mem* is a small family saga that sensitively gives glimpses of the conflicts of generations, mother-daughter exasperations, misinterpretations and immigration.

About the author

Anita Rau Badami is one of the contemporary writers in Modern Indian Diasporic writing, born in Rourkela, Odisha, India; emigrated to Canada in 1991. With a robust voice of Modern Indian Diaspora, Badami has engraved a unique position among the group of Indo-Canadian writers who are highly educated and professional in nature. The writers of this category keep moving to India for their fictional content. Badami said in an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, "*I find that the distance gives me perspective and passion. I was twenty-nine years in India and ten years here, so I have a foot in India and a couple of toes here. I am both doomed and blessed, to be suspended between two worlds, always looking back, but with two gorgeous places to inhabit, in my imagination or my heart.*"

Tamarind Mem

Tamarind mem unearths the story entwined around two generations of women. Due to her hostile attitude, Saroja, nicknamed Tamarind Woman, is chosen because of her loveless married life and her thwarted dream to become a doctor. Whereas Kamini, her daughter, a go-getter, has moved to Canada to continue her higher studies. Kamini receives a postcard in which her mother states that she has sold their home and is traveling through India. During her long journeys, Saroja shares her heartbreaking story with her fellow passengers. As we learn about their past, from childhood through adulthood, we are keen to observe the grief, love, envy, and joy that has filled their lives. "*Tamarind Mem is a delectable book filled with pungent sights and sounds and poignant memories. It proves, yet again, that each person in a family experience that microcosm differently. Only by synthesizing these disparate views do we grasp the full flavour of events.*" – Quill & Quire

The story, *Tamarind Mem*, is closely associated with the author's personal life in many aspects. The central part of the childhood of the author is confined to the railway colonies of post-colonial India. Just as Badami grew up surrounded by the stories her family told her: "**The book is constructed around numerous tales**". (Rustonji-Kerns 117).

Many of the autobiographical elements have been given colour and fictionalized in the materialization of *Tamarind Mem* — in another sense, the transformation of her childhood memories into a fictional form. However, Badami claims that "*this story is not an autobiography; she simply began writing this novel through memories of her past and moved into a fictional story.*" (Kozminuk 1996) The story revolves around the railway colonies of

India as the father in the story is a railway mechanical engineer, and transfers are a part of his job.

Badami depicts the feelings of Indian women at the grass-root level. *Tamarind Mem* picturizes the reminiscences of a mother and a daughter who live in diverse cultural contexts. The story is set in India way back to fifty years. Badami opens the novel with the nostalgic monologues of her protagonist, Kamini, who always longs to return to India. From the silence of her basement apartment, she calls her mother every Sunday, but she is afraid to share her feelings with her as she may question her decision to choose a foreign land. *"Well, who asked you to go?" "Did somebody tie your hands behind your back and say, 'Go-go to that Calgary North Pole place?" So instead, I said, "Ma, there are mountains in the distance, all covered with snow" (2).*

In essence, the story revolves around the feelings of two women from different generations. Badami's roots in India have allowed her to understand the conservative family setup of the Indian villages, which is often reflected in her novels. To symbolise Indianness, a woman must surrender her desires and stick to the traditional and cultural norms that exist in society. In the article, "The Challenge of Women's History," Gerda Lerner remarks: *It is important to understand that 'woman's culture' is not and should not be seen as a subculture. It is hardly possible for the majority to live in a subculture... Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose); they transform this restraint into complementarily (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its superiority) and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality –as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture.* (Lerner 52)

As a writer, on the one hand, Badami tries to raise her voice to change the narrow outlook towards women; on the other hand, she tries to balance the opportunities and obstacles of the orthodox family setup and the conflicts that arise between East and West. Saroja's mother affirms that *"A woman's happiness lies in marriage"* (159). Saroja pleaded to convince them in many ways, but they remained dogmatic because of their staunch creeds. But as a mother, Saroja wanted her daughters to be self-reliant by all means as rightly said: *"you have to be one step ahead of the rest of the world,"* she declares, *"better than the best. Don't let anybody be ahead of you"* (119) Badami has succeeded in portraying with a touch of realism, the pining emotions of the Indian woman who follows the custom. The two women characters, Saroja, the mother, and Kamini, the daughter, have diverse points of view about their past and their experiences.

The story is narrated in the first-person's point of view. Badami divides the story into two parts. The novel starts with the daughter's perceptions and gradually shifts to the mother. The changing possibilities of women in India are illustrated through the lives of the mother and the daughter. Saroja, the mother, is forced to marry at a young age against her interest to pursue a medical degree. At the same time, the daughter gets an opportunity to travel overseas to follow her heart's desires. As a vehicle for explaining the two women's different perceptions of the same past, Badami introduces the shakiness of memory and the elusive nature of the mind. Kamini describes her sufferings of isolation in Canada as she feels distressed and detached

from her family. **"I was buried alive in my burrow dying slowly from cold."** (111). There is a conflict of generations and emotional separation of Kamini from her mother, who does not understand Kamini's pangs of isolation. Most of the time, there are long silences during the conversation, **"I waited for her to interpret the silences between words, to sense my loneliness, to say, "Why don't you just come back home, I need you, I am getting old."** (15)

They often communicate through postcards. Kamini leads a luxurious life in Canada but yearns for her motherland. Her perception of the past is different from her mother due to cultural restrictions. As a result of ethnic conflicts between the east and West, either they adapt or assimilate to a new culture or keep their own. Badami portrays both these characters so that they never come face-to-face but interact through storytelling.

Kamini's mother fails to comprehend the silent longings of her daughter, Kamini's mind reverts to the past, and she begins to long for her beloved Dadda and quite naturally the past. Badami connects this theme with the mother and the daughter's relationship and their contrasting recollections of the past. The ever-pervasive misunderstanding between the two generations is stunningly presented through the relationship between the mother and the daughter, which is evident in the book's title.

Badami tries to explore the conflicts between modernized concepts and conservative values. She portrays two strong women at odds with each other. **"Both women face difficult decisions that modernising females must face in all generations."** (Curtis 23) In part one, Kamini, a graduate student in Calgary, recollects her childhood. As a child, Kamini often blames her mother for being angry with her and sympathizes with her gentle and loving father. At that time, Kamini is not able to understand why her mother's face turns so furious whenever her Dadda appears in the house. **"Ma was a two-headed pushmi-pullyu from Dr. Dolittle's zoo, or the Ramleela drama woman with a good mask on her face and a bad mask on the back of her head, changing her from Seetha to Soorpanakhi in a single turn"** (48-49). She understands in her childhood that it must not have been an easy marriage for her mother. Her mother can never have any "lasting friendships" because of her father's frequent transfers or is never admitted into her father's "private world of journeys."

She tries to understand her mother's discontentment as a tamarind kind of attitude - **"With my tamarind tongue, never yielding a moment, I use my grandmother's strategy of words to ward off the pain of rejection."** (216).

The responsibilities and duties are demeaning, so she becomes hostile and disagreeable most of the time. **"I will not beg for affection that is due to me, his wife."** (216). Her mother's anger-filled behaviour is still fresh in her memory. Though her father is described as **"... a man who has no feelings to spare for a wife. A dried-out lemon peel whose energies have already been squeezed out caring for a sick mother, worrying about his sisters, inheriting his dead father's unfinished duties. It ate up his youth..."** (216), he tries to fill the isolation of the children by telling them many stories and bringing them close to him. He seems to be gentle and caring to Kamini and her sister, Roopa. Hence, Kamini cannot comprehend the anger of her mother towards him during her childhood. Moreover, Dadda consistently remains silent. **"... Ma did all the talking and Dadda locked himself into a tight box of silence.... 'Can't you**

say something?' cried Ma, enraged by his relentless quiet, which was more deadly than angry words could ever be" (39).

However, Badami skillfully depicts how Kamini begins to understand the reason for her mother's past unhappiness. Kamini acknowledges that her father is not as innocent as her childhood adoration has seen him:

Perhaps Dadda was to blame for the person Ma had become. He shut her into rooms from which there was not even a chink of an escape. He himself had left again and again, and every time he came back, he needed to be readmitted into lives altered daily during his absence (147).

Badami portrays how the previous generation has strong faith in their values, religion, and community. In contrast, the current generation who adopts the new culture tends to be very different from them. Hence, there is a clash between tradition and modernity. In the past, the parents wanted their daughters to get married instead of pursuing higher education. As a result, Saroja was married to a man who did not show love and affection for her. Saroja does not wish her daughters to be victims of cultural restrictions like her own self. *"At least one child of mine should get a chance to achieve all that I wanted. It is your duty to keep your mother's head high."* (121). Badami reveals women's modesty in using power because the Indian culture and motherhood are considered essential for an Indian woman. As a woman, Saroja gained the empathy she dreamt of from a dark-complexioned young Anglo-Indian motor mechanic - Paul da Costa. Still, Saroja ignores him and maintains her unhappy married life in the interest of her daughter's future.

I want to reach out and touch his warm skin, watch his clear smile. But words like duty and loyalty clamour in my ears. I think of Roopa and Kamini, their soft skins smelling of milk, their heads so vulnerable. They hold me with their helplessness, and they twine about me as tenacious as bougainvillea. (229)

Saroja gives everything to her daughters, whatever she missed in her life. Without permission, her younger daughter Roopa's marriage never made her angry or disappointed, but she protects her daughter from her relatives' scorns with her sharp tongue: *"My girls know how to pick their fruit"* (148). So, she let her daughters make their own choice and live with freedom. Kamini finally understands the social restrictions her mother has faced. She even recognizes that her mother encourages her to realize her dreams come true. *"Those days, things were different," Ma snapped. "My parents did not give me the encouragement I am giving you."* (122)

In the second part of the novel, Saroja, the widowed mother, shares a markedly different view of her past as a mother, wife, and daughter on a train tour across the country. She recollects her past. Saroja expresses how Indian culture has been vastly different in past years. Though intelligent and self-motivated, being the eldest daughter, she cannot fulfill her dreams and has been forced to marry a fifteen-year-old man.

A woman can read and study all she pleases; her works mean nothing after all. So why you are wasting your youth and our money? Get married". She says "a woman without a husband is like sand without the river. No man to protect you and every evil wind will blow over your body. Listen to your mother. (158).

She narrates this tragic past to the woman next to her in the train compartment. She tours the places in India, availing her railway pass as she is a widow of a railway engineer. Family responsibilities maroon her past. Saroja hates her husband's transfers because she has to pack and move from one station to another. Despite the differences, her husband remained silent in his room without uttering any words against her wife's sharp words. Whenever Dadda comes home with a transfer order, Saroja says that he has to do something about it: *"Why do you have to keep getting transferred? Can't you say your wife is sick, you are allergic to new places, something, and stay here?"* (35). But nothing seems to work out. As a result of his transfer, Saroja can neither relate to the new place nor link back to the last one. Because of frequent transfers, Kamini and Roopa have to change their schools. But Dadda could not understand why Saroja has been so stubborn in sending Kamini and Roopa to the nuns' school. He argues, *"What is wrong with a Central School education?"* (36), and that makes Saroja very furious and she breaks out:

You want them to learn a different language everywhere we move? Bengali in this place, Assamese there, Gujarati somewhere else? Poor things, as it is they are confused with first language, second language, third language and all. You want them to go crazy or what? (37)

Kamini is the one who witnesses the way her mother talks to her father. She does not know why her mother is always angry with everyone, especially Dadda. *"Her fight with Dadda had begun long before I was born, so I could not understand it at all"* (42).

On top of that, her husband never entertained her in his private world of journey

Before the children are born, neither is she allowed to call her husband by his name nor does he call her by name, just "Ay." Despite being educated, her husband behaves like a conservative and makes her married life feel uninteresting and unloving. She feels as if she lives in an "immense silence." She describes: *"I have held my tongue but the silence filling the house drives me insane. There is so much quiet that I can hear the spiders crawling across the ceiling, their spinnerets whirring"* (204).

Badami shows how the past cultural restrictions of that time in India affect women's personal lives and aspirations. She portrays Saroja as a frustrated woman trapped in the cultural expectations of the times. *"Why did my parents have to get me married to this old man? I could have finished my studies, found a job and supported myself. Of course, Appa objects to the women in his family working."* (187) Only after her husband's death and her daughters' maturity Saroja can leave her traditional role and travel as she pleases.

Badami also shows men's reputation as chauvinistic in India. *"Why do you fight with him?" she asks. 'Cry a little, beg, wheedle. How does it hurt you? Appa feels that he has the power*

to refuse and you get what you want. All men are like that. Why you have to say this and that and make everybody angry?" (188) They expect their wives to behave in a certain way – being at home, having several children, looking after the house, cooking proper meals, and being a "good wife." Yet, the women must also try to be the epitome of everything Western. Thus, Indian women must try to fulfill two conflicting roles: a traditional wife and mother and a modern woman.

Through Saroja and Kamini, Badami showcase the isolation and estrangement felt by Indian women of two generations. But Badami does not leave the story in ambiguity or hopelessness. Even the "*Tamarind Mem*" realizes the route to contentment. At the same time, the ordeal suggests that the mothers' psychological and physical trauma paves the way for future generations of Indian women like Kamini to forge their own memories and determine their destinies. "*Lyrical, compassionate, and wise, Tamarin Mem is a powerful novel about family, memory, and the traditions that tear us apart and bring us together.*" (Rustonji Kerns 122)

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