
ECO-GENDERED PERSPECTIVES: NATURE, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT:

Recent advancements in literary studies highlight the significance of ecocriticism, green theory, and gender perspectives as frameworks for understanding the complex interplay between culture, power, and the environment. This essay focuses on two of Anita Rau Badami's seminal works, *Tell It to the Trees* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Although Badami is celebrated for her nuanced explorations of history, migration, and familial bonds, her fiction simultaneously demonstrates a profound ecological and gendered conscience.

This study investigates how remote locations, specific flora, and natural landscapes serve as active forces that influence moral dilemmas, cultural identities, and emotional experiences rather than merely serving as static narrative settings. The interdependence of human existence and the environment is reinforced by nature acting as a "mute spectator" to human trauma, relocation, and violence. By applying an ecofeminist lens, the paper highlights the similarities between environmental exploitation and the patriarchal marginalization of women. The endurance, silence, and perseverance exhibited by female protagonists reflect the ways patriarchal frameworks govern both women's bodies and natural spaces. Ecological displacement is shown to exacerbate feelings of alienation and vulnerability in diasporic environments, linking environmental loss with gendered distress. Ultimately, the paper illustrates how Badami's novels challenge anthropocentrism by positioning land and nature as archives of memory and suffering. By emphasizing the relationship between gender, environment, and narrative representation, this ecocritical and gender-oriented reading adds to current discussions on new developments in language, literature, and culture.

KEYWORDS:

Ecocriticism, Power and Patriarchy, Identity and Diaspora,
Ecofeminism, Eco-Gendered Perspectives.

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Introduction

The early twenty-first century has seen a radical shift in the field of literary criticism, shifting its focus to interrelated disciplinary fields that connect human beings with nature. During this transition, gender studies and ecocriticism emerged as an important framework for encoding the hierarchy that defines modern life (Garrard, 2012; Slovic, 2010). Ecocriticism, at its heart, investigates the portrayal of the environment in literature while critically analyzing and breaking down the assumption that human beings are superior and nature is subordinate, which can be used merely as a resource for consumption (Buell, 2005). Thus, making the environment the priority and removing humans from the center of moral and ecological consideration. Simultaneously, ecofeminism expands on this assessment by correlating the deterioration of the environment and the institutional misogyny that systematically prejudices against women within social, legal, and cultural institutions (Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993).

Anita Rau Badami, a renowned South Asian-Canadian author, offers a fruitful area of investigation. However, her work falls under the categories of diaspora or historical fiction. This genre focuses on the migration of people to foreign countries, their longing to come back home, and during this phase, they adapt to the blending of two different cultures, commonly known as a hybrid culture. A further inspection reveals a gendered lens perspective. In *Tell It to the Trees* (2011) and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), Badami focuses on the interplay between identity and place. The environment is a living agent for her characters; it is a catalyst for their trauma, a manifestation of their solitude, and a testimony

to their fortitude. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) suggest, postcolonial writing involves a “re–placement” of the individual wherein a character re–places and re–maps in a foreign landscape. For Badami’s female protagonists, this re–placement is twice as perilous, as they brave the frigid temperatures, which are the rugged, untamed wilderness of the Canadian continent, wherein they wrestle with the male–dominated hierarchy that is a product of their imported cultural norms.

Eco–criticism and Green Thought in Badami’s Fiction

In *Tell It to the Trees*, the backdrop of the southern interior valley of the Merritt Valley in British Columbia is distinguished by a suffocating, frozen, isolated winter scene. The environment here acts as a compelling momentum (Buell, 2005). The “trees” of the title are not just organisms or any life forms, but nature’s archivists that hold, or conceal information about life and history. The protagonist, Anu, shows up in a family where the freezing, harsh, and piercing cold and colossal woods echo the iciness, detachment, and loneliness of the Dharma household.

Badami uses the term “green thought” to depict that the human mind and body are like parallel universes, and it cannot separate itself from its physical surroundings. The harsh weather and thick jungle influence human action, affirming the autonomy of non–human entities (Bennett, 2010). When Akka endures in this landscape, she not only possesses a robust, embodied toughness but also overcomes the environment. However, the tree serves as a silent sentinel to the domestic assault behind closed doors. The uncaring, cold nature of the environment paints a bleak picture: while nature is merciless, it is not malicious. This goes along with Garrard’s (2012) assertion that environmental literary criticism must focus on ecofeminist ethics, patriarchal land dispossession ethics, gendered environmental injustice, or androcentric ecocides.

In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, the landscape transitions from the Punjab’s green heart to the city–nature harmony of

Vancouver. Here, the emphasis is on ecosystem, species, and human relocation. The ‘nightbird’ of the title symbolizes a connection to the past and the calm before the storm. The characters—Bibi-ji, Leela, and Nimmo—struggle with their trauma against the backdrop of their evolving surroundings. The political violence of the 1984 anti-Sikh brutality and the 1985 Air India disaster are connected to a social fragmentation and ecological detachment (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010). For these individuals, the displacement from their native place signifies an identity crisis. The emotional, social, and physical bonds we have with certain places—which progress from basic spatial awareness to a deep “sense of place”—are at the core of human existence. This rootedness implies that our identity, health, and memories are not merely abstract ideas but rather are lived in and influenced by the places we live, work, and call home (Heise, 2008).

Gender Perspectives and Ecofeminist Concerns

Ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the environment is based on the ‘logic of domination.’ It refers to an oppressive, hierarchical framework that rationalizes the subordination of one group by another based on perceived inherent superiority. It is used to justify the logic of treating women as “other” and subservient, which is used to justify viewing nature as mere raw material for extraction (Shiva, 1988). With great artistry, Badami’s novels delineate this parallel. In *Tell It to the Trees*, Vikram, as the patriarch, maintains absolute dominion over his household in a way that showcases the “mastery of nature” as described by Val Plumwood (1993). Women are expected to be productive and silent, just like the land.

In Badami’s fiction, the female body frequently serves as a site of contestation, constantly competing with ideologies and personal struggles. Against the backdrop of the remote settings in her novels, women’s bodies are frequently scrutinized through the same surveying and fencing that patriarchal societies apply to

natural resources. The patriarchal mapping and the enclosure of nature highlight the boundaries that exclude others. The character Suman in *Tell It to the Trees* embodies the ecofeminist ideal. Her silence is her primary survival mechanism, mirroring the mute nature that surrounds her. However, this silence does not mean a lack of agency, but a form of perseverance. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is a performative; in Badami's world, this performance is characterized by resilience in the face of both environmental and domestic hostility.

Moreover, ecological displacement intensifies the fragile circumstances and vulnerability of the female diaspora. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, the stark contrast between the familiar ecology of India and the cold, grey nature of Canada creates a gendered distress. While the male characters in the novel often seek to conquer the new land through labor and politics, the females are left to manage the emotional ecology within the walls of the house. This home environment, which is often isolated from the broader society, becomes a microcosm of the wider patriarchal homeland. The deep sense of alienation felt by Leela, who feels she belongs neither to the land she left, which is in India, nor the land she inhabits, which is Canada, highlights how identity crises are compounded by unfamiliar surroundings (Brah, 1996; Mishra, 2007).

The Archive of Memory: Land as Witness

Badami's most significant contribution to modern literature is her treatment of land as an archive of memory and history. Both novels showcase nature as a silent reservoir of memories, whereas human beings tend to forget. In *Tell It to the Trees*, the forest is the proof of the family's darkest secret—the death of the first wife. When a body is buried in the earth, it creates an ontological link between the soil and the human corpse. The soil is no longer just mere earth; it is a witness to a crime.

This concept mirrors what Rob Nixon (2011) calls “slow

violence”—a violence that is defined as a delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, which occurs gradually and out of sight. Both domestic abuse and environmental degradation are different forms of slow violence. By positioning land and nature as keepers of suffering, Badami challenges the anthropocentric view that human history is separate from the earth. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, the recurring echoes of the nightbird across continents suggest that the trauma of the Punjab continues to travel with the characters, which are deeply embedded in their sensory experiences of the new world. This link between humans, nature, and memory reflects current literary trends in contemporary literature that emphasize global environmental ethics (Heise, 2008; Slovic, 2010).

Emerging Trends in Language, Literature, and Culture

Reflecting on emerging trends in contemporary literature, Badami’s eco-gendered narratives emphasize the interconnectedness between nature, humans, and culture (Heise, 2008). By rooting in personal memory and trauma in ecological landscapes, Badami’s fiction challenges human-centered and nation-centric frameworks (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010). By treating land as a repository of memory, the author aligns with contemporary writers who give priority to environmental ethics and social justice (Slovic, 2010; Nixon, 2011).

In the context of Indian English literature, Badami moves beyond the purely metropolitan concerns of early postcolonial writers. Instead, she focuses on the remote—the isolated valley, the small town, the immigrant neighborhood. Her work explores another side of India, wherein the setting becomes a character. This emphasis on the peripheral highlights a growing interest in Green Postcolonialism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010). It recognizes that the subaltern status is not just the marginalized human, but also the exploited environment. By giving the agency to the trees or the nightbird, Badami involves herself in a literary movement that

focuses on the shift from de-centering the human and acknowledging the vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper showcases that Anita Rau Badami's novels offer an analysis of literature for focusing on the gender and eco-criticism perspectives in contemporary literature. Badami critiques patriarchal and anthropocentric systems of power by linking several women's lived experiences with ecological spaces that are marked by silence, suffering, and endurance (Plumwood, 1993; Garrard, 2012). The study highlights the relevance of eco-gendered perspectives to current interdisciplinary discussions on emerging trends in culture, literature, and language, especially in an era of ecological uncertainty and cultural shifts. Badami's novels suggest that the liberation of nature and women are deeply interlinked, as both are subject to the patriarchal structures of dominance fueled by the same capacity for silent, powerful resilience.

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