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Frozen Inhabitants and Living Habitat in Anita Rau Badami's *Tell it to the Trees*

Anjum Khan M

Ecological unit and civilization make up the world communally. However, it is discernible that in recent times, the bionetwork has been reduced to a mere backdrop. Apparently, the Human society is the foreground and the ecological unit comprises the background. Nonetheless, this interplay is, in every respect, in terms of egotistical interest of man, and no matter what, the mutual correlation between the 'two' is incontrovertible. The inter-reliant association between human society and natural world is present ubiquitously, despite the fact that, it is not noticed and realize by every individual. In fact, B. S. Korde asserts, "Human being is, as we all know, ultimately, not only a part and parcel of, but also a product of, nature or landscape" (109). It is indispensable to acknowledge this alliance and make every one appreciate and become conscious of this congenial affinity.

According to Hubert Zaph, "Literature is considered here as a potential medium of consciousness change and an increased ecological sensibility which, however indirectly, can help to contribute to a change of political and social practice" (51). Literary text is capable of breeding imperative consciousness and ideas when hybridized with other disciplines. Greg Garrard in his *Ecocriticism*

refers to one of the Glotfelty's criterion question which identifies ecocritical reading, "What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics"? (3). Product of one such cross-fertilization is ecopsychology which explores human psyche in relation to the environment. Occasionally, the human state of mind is best revealed against the backdrop of their natural milieu.

Peter Barry in his second edition of *Beginning Theory* makes an ecocritical interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The fall of the House of Usher* where he focuses the juxtaposition of human psychology and environment. There are many writers who delineate 'man and nature' explicitly and there are a few who let the readers to understand the subtext. Anita Rau Badami's *Tell it to the Trees* is one such literary text which besides a narrative provide an important aspect of nature. It gives an impression of a psycho-thriller to the readers at reading level, however, at interpretation level; it ascertains a most probable bond between the individuals and their surroundings. The fictional characters represent the 'frozen lives' and the imaginary setting of Merrit's Point embody the 'living habitat.'

The fiction world of Anita Rau Badami resembles a 'pitsa Panel Painting' delineating widespread pastoral and with minimum of human presence. It is a portrait of a bleak, heavily snowy town, nestled amidst vastness and altitudes. The fictional lives silhouetted against this backdrop are frozen and inanimate, inhaling the drabness and breathing out disenchantment. Mrs. Cooper is a mere shadow passing in the memories of Varsha and Suman who disappears after

her guest role. Chanchal and Gopal seem to merely hint that Dharmas have friends and fellows strugglers sharing the same predicament to in Merrit's Point. The spotlight is on the occupants of Dharma family house as they form the core cast of the tragedy unfurling in the Tell it to the Trees.

Helen Dharma's life is at a standstill despite her little daughter Varsha and her husband. Her existence is harshly frozen and perilously stiff that it breaks free at last. She lives despondently, rummaging around for warmth and defrosting. Likewise, Akka is another victim of fate which dooms her to uninterrupted captivity. She is lying down in a morgue, rather than living a house due to her infirmity and self-exile. There is Vikram who is tied up to a safety harness by means of house, family and a job. He appears to have been gutted out of his compassion and tenderness. He is power-driven and calculative, a mere breadwinner supplying his family the livelihood. His happiness is perfunctory and momentary which is effortlessly swapped by wrath and distrust.

Varsha Dharma is anomalous by the standard of humanity and is psychologically ill. She is infested with distrust, desertion, and fear that she does not think twice before taking some one's life. She is bitterly cold and wild like her environment. She is uncertain of life and even pain gives her reassurance of her existing, "I stared at her, not sure what I was supposed to do. She was clinging to the bookshelf. I pulled at a long strand of hair. It felt good, the slight tingle of pain in my scalp reminding me I am still here, I am not dead or disappeared" (42). She seeks solace among trees and is in an unhealthy way possessive of Suman and Hemant. There is barely

any flicker of warmth left inside her and is desperate to cling on to others resembling a parasite. The ending lines of the novel, an epigrammatic soliloquy by Varsha leaves the reader horrified, "I am cunning as the snow. I am sharp as the winter wind. I am strong as Tree. I can find a way" (126). Suman Dharma endures the repercussions of a marriage for convenience. Narrative part delving into her recollections of past corroborates that her life before marriage in India was more alive than her marital life in Canada. She survives the hostility of her husband in addition to the antagonism of geographical unfamiliarity. Her life is lackluster and unhelpful. She seeks an outlet and searches for life amidst nature:

After Akka damaged her back, I tried to take care of the garden for a while. But it became too much for me to guard against the marauding squirrels and birds, the deer and the raccoons. Now the forest that we held at bay with spade and loppers has crept back to reclaim what it had lost, a green silence in summer and in winter a dormant world under its cover of snow. I used to sing to myself to defeat the silence, I chattered endlessly to Akka, my only companion during the day, and to Varsha after she returned from school. But such is the power of this place that it drove my own voice out of me. (62)

The 'Edgar Allan Poe-like' opening of the novel reverberates frosty and tomblike note foreshadowing foreboding. It is an overture composed of binary symphonies which are explicit oxymoron – life and death. The scene unfurls a frozen corpse; floating and melting snow and a pair of ravens cawing and pecking. Symbolically, the

frozen dead body of Anu Krishnan represents the frozen human lives in Merrit's Point and the animated snow suggests the pulsating environment:

Sunday morning. Snow floats down like glitter dust from a flat winter sky, covering everything except Tree-dark against the overwhelming whiteness. The searchers have found her. Finally. She might have lain there, another anonymous mound, until spring, by which time she would have become a part of the softening earth as the snow melted in the slow warmth of the sun, if one of the search party had not noticed a pair of ravens cawing and pecking at something not too far from the house. (8)

At this juncture, death is a trope encompassing the lives of Dharma family. There are more than three casualties and among them two are death by nature. J. K. Dharma and Anu Krishnan die of lethal cold which is a natural feature of winter in Merrit's Point. Moreover, there is the death of Helen who dies in a car accident which looms as the antecedent to the impending calamity. The death of Suman's unborn baby in her womb as a consequence of physical brutality supplements gloom. In due course, Akka's literal and anticipated demise at the end of the narration amplify the wails of misfortune. These deaths entail the life ebbing away from fictional individuals. In addition to the frozen corpse of Anu Krishnan, there is mention of another frozen corpse. It is the dead body of J. K. Dharma, originator of Dharma family in Merrit's point. This frozen death keeps lurking through out the narrative like a sinister sign. There is an implication that Bhagirati, fondly known as Akka, is responsible for

this first frozen death in Dharma family house. She is very weary of her husband's despotism that she becomes her own liberator, "And your grandfather Mr. J.K. Dharma, small man with a big ego, froze into a pillar of ice right outside our front door when he was forty-seven years old. He forgot his keys, came home really late, really drunk one winter night, couldn't wake me and turned into an ice sculpture." (12)

Robert P. Morzec in his book, *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature: From Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* cites Edward W. Said, "Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation" (113). Merrit's point is the protagonist making a ubiquitous presence in the novel, *Tell it to the Trees*. Besides serving a literary backdrop, it also constitutes the foreground of the novel. It is the cutting edge where lives begun and culminate for a few. For some, it is a dwelling; for some, a refuge; for some, a prison; for some, an opportunity; for some, an ally and for some, it is a Muse. It is pounding with more life and co-existing with human lives. Further, unlike its inhabitants who rely on it, it is self-reliant and independent.

Badami renders a comprehensive depiction of Merrit's Point through the mental silhouettes of its dwellers. Each one perceives it differently; nonetheless, the ultimate impression is the same. Varsha sees it as any other typical English speaking countryside where children take English names. To her, Merrit's Point is no different as she is born in the same place, "It's in the middle of nowhere and is full of gossips and bores and kids with snotty names like Celia and Mason." Varsha's grandmother, Akka sees it as a confinement or some last resort. She is in Merrit's Point due to her conjugal pledge

and considers it as her forbidding destiny. According to her, it is a place, somewhere far behind and out-of-the-way, “He was dead before I was born and Akka says she has no idea why he moved all the way up here into this back of beyond.” (13)

Suman’s observation render a foretaste for hostile environment and wintry snow, “I came to Merrit’s Point nine years ago at the end of March, a time when the ground is knee-deep in snow, and your breath hangs like a ghost before your face. I had flown from Madras to Vancouver” (27). She obtains her passage from India to Merrit’s Point in Canada by means of her matrimony. Similar to Akka, she is bound to the place by ties of sacred threads of marriage.

Anita Rau Badami does not invest much space to the detailed description of the landscape like Thomas Hardy; nevertheless, she is triumphant in putting across an all-inclusive vista. Merrit’s Point is a small bucolic town in Canada. It is fictional; however, the name might have been inspired from Merrit, a city in the Nicola Valley of the south-central Interior of British Columbia, Canada. Geographically, it is situated at the confluence of the Nicola and Coldwater rivers. Badami employs Anu Krishnan as the commentator on Merrit’s point and her observation as a vacationer is constructive:

Drove through the mountains for a few hours loving the fresh air blowing through my partially open window. A sign informed me that I was approaching Merrit’s Point, and within a few minutes the town centre appeared, heralded by a brief line of lamp-posts bedecked with flower baskets. I drove

past a few small shops, a grocery store, a café, a church— and then it was finished—before I knew it I was on the highway again. I pressed down on the accelerator, pushing my rattling old car to greater feats of strength and daring, hurtled past darkly wooded patches loud with the chirr-chirring of cicadas and emerged into blinding sunlight. To the right of me the road hugged cliffs composed of scarred rock the colour of sunsets; to the left were fields of undulating green. In the distance the mountains—lavender and blue shading into gloomy purple and navy, smoke and carbon. Imperious, watchful. The jagged peaks still topped with snow. (51)

Anu's eloquent sketch of Merrit's Point does not fail to encompass the specific neighborhood details of Dharma house as well, "A giant lake shimmered up suddenly, dark green with silver flecks where the sun caught on ripples. I passed a shuttered house, surrounded by weeds, a long stretch of broken-down fencing, and then I was at a gate with an incongruously ornate mailbox painted an iridescent green" (51). Reflexively, this observation of the house supplies the confine personality of the occupants, in conjunction with the physical facet.

The nature makes its presence certain the whole time through muffled sounds and inconspicuous gestures. Anu records, "The earth sprawled warm and inviting as a lover beneath the sun. Somewhere an insect made a piercing call, like the high-pitched whine of telephone wires in my brother's backyard in summer. A bee made straight for my face. . . ." (51). Anu is able to sense, experience and live her surroundings unlike others who live in it, however, entombed

and frozen. She listens to the tranquility and marvel at the infinite span, "The silence . . . astonishing. I can hear my own breath even in the middle of the morning. Tonight I stood outside and stared up at the vastness of the night sky with stars . . . reach out and pluck them like jewelled fruit" (58). She deems nature as her inspirational Muse for writing.

Badami renders an environmental simulation instrumentalising fictional expertise in a very engaging and prolific manner. It is a legendary actuality that the frozen water bodies pose fatal jeopardy in Canada. There are critical accidents which transpire due to walking or driving into frozen water. Settlements like Merrit's point are relatively susceptible to such mishaps and consequently, casualties because of very less human population. Further, even pedestrians tread on with consternation similar to Hemant, "I couldn't see where the road ended and the frozen lake began. The mountains had vanished in the snow. I counted steps in my head" (100)

Winter is a seasonal phenomena and most natural feature. In the West, it is associated with festivity; however, it is also placidly belligerent time of year. Merrit's point endures good deal of wintry terrorization as Varsha remarks, "Oh yes, in this place winter is always lurking around the corner, a wicked creature roaming these lonely spaces, waiting to pounce on your bones, freeze your blood." This wintry aspect of Merrit's point's is the liveliest ecological dynamic. Anu is also unsettled by it, ". . . appreciate nature in all its naked glory, but lately, especially after that last snowstorm, it's starting to get to me. If I fell, how long before I am found lying in the snow"? (120)

The inhabitants and the habitat live inside one another, both in dread and comfort. Anita Rau Badami ascribes the attribute of conflict and defiance to the nature. Every so often, it appears that winter has passed on its cold qualities to the inhabitants and viceversa. Mountains stand ominously in the wake of Merrit's Point. Above all, pristine white snow calls forth dark menacing clouds of bereavement. Anu prophecies, "... mountains clambering over each other to peer down at it from all sides will someday slide down and obliterate it, or that winter one year in the near future will never leave and we will be conquered by snow at last." (59)

Correspondingly, there is a congenial relationship between the nature and humans as well. The humans locate sanctuary in the embrace of nature, in particular, Hemant and Varsha with their confidant trees. They are unable to find some one to talk to, and in order to vent out their suppressed emotions speak to the trees. Suman is bemused and speculates their whispering to the tree, "Later still, looking out of the kitchen window, I saw them both at the far end of the backyard, their faces pressed against the tree, spilling out their hearts to it. I wonder what they were whispering to it" (119). Equally, even a miniature and customary act of nature amuse them, "Hemant discovers "Hem stuck out his tongue and caught a plump bud as it dropped from the sky, held out his palm and watched flakes bloom into tears. He was already forgetting the morning drama." (98).

There is myriad nature consciousness even beyond the physical setting of Merrit's Point. There are names which connote natural cycles, flowers, and nature itself. This paradigm of relating personal

state with nature is subtly interlaced with the narrative through out the novel. One such example for names of persons identifying natural quintessence is 'Suman', meaning 'blossom.' She reminisces her meeting with Vikram and his going into raptures over her, "On one of those occasions he smiled, a rare occurrence, and told me that I looked like a blossom in my pale orange cotton sari. Nobody had ever likened me to a blossom even though that is what my name means" (37). Symbolically, the persons carrying such names also seem to resemble or possess the natural qualities ascribed to their names. Suman is not as beautiful as a flower; however, she is tender and vulnerable to the external forces. Likewise, Varsha is all-embracing and capable of bringing delight to some and obliteration to others. She is able to fill empty vessels on one hand, and on the other, flood basin as well. She is a free spirit, acting on her free will.

There are other names of persons with similar allusions to elements of Earth and natural cycle. The name, 'Varsha' means 'rain' or 'monsoon.' Further, Suman validates the name of her son, Hemant which means 'winter.' She clarifies, "I named him Hemant for winter, the season in which he was born. It was to be his talisman against that season and all its attendant demons, a vaccine, like that administered for polio, injected into his body to trigger immunity against the illness called winter that afflicts this land every year." (48)

The pathetic fallacies and anthropomorphisms applied to the habitat corroborates it that is far from being 'flat lined.' However, allegorically, the inhabitants emerge as trapped, comatose, and frozen to the spot. This lifeless crew on an alive vessel seems to

cruising along and covering the distance between life and death. Tout ensemble, this traveled distance divulge an insightful undertone which avows that every so often, if observed closely, a place does not merely exist but lives as much as the people who live in.

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