

Breaking the Bonds: Women in the Novels of Anita Nair

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Abstract:

The myriad tapestry of Indian literature narrates stories drawn from diverse cultural milieu and varied societal setup. Indian feminism, as a vibrant and progressive movement, finds its voice through the endeavour of writers who examine the multifaceted aspects of womanhood in a complex and intricate society. Evolving feminist initiatives emerge as dynamic threads of empowerment, struggle, and resilience. Anita Nair's literary work resonates with the heartbeats of different facets of a woman's life in which she shows that inherent strength of a woman makes her rise after multiple struggles and enables her to resurrect her life against the dominant overflow of patriarchal tide. With her literary output Nair conjures up a world both ordinary and extraordinary, where the lives of women become a canvas upon which the complexities of gender roles, societal expectations, and personal liberation are painted. The title of this research paper, *Feminist Consciousness: A Study of Select Novels of Anita Nair* encapsulates the essence of both Indian feminism and the narrative at the heart of her three novels: *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Feminist literary analysis, this study examines multifaceted feminist narratives woven into the fabric of the novel. The aim is to study the sociocultural sufferings and the dilemma of Anita Nair's protagonists who find themselves tattered between social conventions and traditions and their inordinate urge to transgress these boundaries and fulfill their desires. In *The Better Man* (2000) Nair talks about quest for identity and self realization and portrays women's aspiration for freedom in marital life through the characters of Paru Kutty, Anjana and Valsala. Akhila the main protagonist in *Ladies Coupe* (2002) gives up the conflicts within her by realizing her potentiality and proceeds towards a contended life. Similarly, in *Mistress* (2003), Nair presents a perplexed married woman named Radha who oscillates between her traditional values and the transferring trends of the modern society. Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) also struggles with the social pressure around her, being abandoned by her husband and by the society at large. The research attempts to bring out how women are subjugated by traditions in a patriarchal society and how they liberate themselves by challenging and transgressing the boundaries.

Keywords: Feminism, society, conflict, liberation, patriarchal, class

Introduction:

Indian English literature has witnessed the evolution of feminist thought and discourse through various waves, paralleling the global feminist movement. First Wave Feminism (Late 19th Century – Early 20th Century): The first wave of feminism in India emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with the broader movement for women's suffrage worldwide. Key figures during this period

included Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, and Kamini Roy, who wrote extensively on issues such as women's education, property rights, and gender equality. Literature from this era often focused on challenging societal norms and advocating for women's rights, laying the groundwork for future feminist movements.

Interwar Period and Beyond (1920s – 1940s): During the interwar period and beyond, Indian women continued to engage with feminist ideas through literature. Prominent writers like Ismat Chughtai, Rashid Jahan, and Kamala Das began to explore themes of female sexuality, domesticity, and patriarchy. Their works, including Chughtai's *Lihaaf* and Jahan's *Adhura Admi*, challenged conservative norms and provided a voice for female sexuality.

Second Wave Feminism (1960s – 1980s): The second wave of feminism, which swept through the Western world in the 1960s and 1970s, also had an impact on Indian English literature. Authors like Shashi Tharoor, Shashi Deshpande, and Arundhati Roy emerged during this period and explored women's issues, identity, and empowerment. Works like Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* addressed gender roles and social injustices.

Post-Emergency Period (1980s – 1990s): The 1980s and 1990s saw a resurgence of feminist writing in India. Writers like Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, and Nayantara Sahgal continued to challenge societal norms. Themes of feminism expanded to include discussions on identity, diaspora, and the intersection of gender with other social factors. Literature from this period often explored the complexities of women's lives in both urban and rural contexts.

Third Wave Feminism (Late 20th Century - Present): Third wave of feminism brought a more intersectional approach to Indian English literature. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Jhumpa Lahiri explored the intersections of gender, race, and culture. Literature began to address the experiences of Indian women living abroad, offering perspectives on identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation. Contemporary authors like Manju Kapur, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Kavita Kane, Arundhati Roy and Arundhati Subramaniam continue to engage with feminist themes in their work, addressing issues such as environmental justice and social inequality. Indian English literature is diverse, reflecting the complexity of Indian society. Feminist voices come from various regions, cultures, and social backgrounds. Challenges remain, including issues of representation and the need for greater inclusivity within feminist discourse. Intersectionality has become a central theme in contemporary feminist literature, addressing the multiple dimensions of identity, including gender, class, caste, religion, and sexuality.

In Anita Nair's cosmos we come across episodes, which narrate the predicaments of a female protagonist struggling in the stifling patriarchal set up. ***The Better Man*** is essentially a male-oriented novel wherein the male protagonist Mukundan is regenerated by his dominant father from his psychological state however the novel also portrays the stories of female protagonists interwoven in the whole narration. Their life is very much a part of the social and cultural ethos of the village in Kerala, where everyone knows everyone else, and personal lives are, one way or other, affected by the social milieu. The impact of patriarchal notions is felt rather strongly in the village and small townships than in the city. The life of women in Kaikurusi is naturally controlled by the patriarch in the family. There are mainly two types of women portrayed in this novel, those honoring their wedding bond, fulfilling their role of a wife, a mother; and those trying to flout the wedding bond that has become oppressive for them. Female characters in Anita Nair's *The Better Man* are happy or unhappy depending on the marital circumstances. Pramod K. Nayar asserts about the implications of marriage on women:

Marriage, suggest numerous writers, does not guarantee the safety of home or a clear identity for the women. Many women writers in India, for instance emphasize that marriage might indeed be detrimental

to the woman's identity. Marriage makes unreasonable demands on the woman, and offers little in turn. In the Hindu context, notions of chastity, service to the husband and motherhood work toward an erasure of the woman's needs, desires and even identity. She subsumes her identity under that of the family's. (131)

Women in the novel are part of a village or township community. They are subject to the moral dictum of patriarchal society which is stringent in a small locality. Valsala, who is tied down to an old husband, has to suppress her natural feelings, which find a way out in the company of Sridharan. She could not protest against a marriage with an old man. Parents of girls hardly think of the life of their daughter after the marriage. Valsala's marriage with Prabhakaran is tragic because there is hardly any pleasure in it for her. Moral taboos compel her to seek pleasure outside the bond of marriage. Her parents are equally responsible for the tragedy of her life. The marital life of Anjana shows that marriage in a girl's life is a gamble. It is difficult to predict how it will turn out. On the face of it, Ravindran appeared to offer independent household to Anjana. But in marital life it is not enough. In the Indian tradition, marriage is described as two bullocks yoked to one cart. But in the case of Anjana, she is the one who is yoked, while Ravindran feels free to roam and come back when he liked. Anjana took eight long years to get out of violent and uncertain marital life. Women are the worst sufferers if there is tragedy in the married life. Mandakini's husband dies in an accident. Widowhood in the Indian community can turn out to be very unhappy. A widow is looked upon as a bad omen. Mandakini is lucky to get Bhasi to rescue her from the widowhood. Mukundans's mother had to languish and suffer unhappy existence with her unfaithful husband living across the house with another woman. Meenakshi remains faithful to her husband but has to suffer social criticism, especially from women, in spite of her fidelity and independently bringing up her son. In general the women portrayed in the novel give us a realistic picture of a patriarchal society in which women suffer tyranny of the dominant male in the family. It is interesting to see how women folk also show false sympathy and draw pleasure as they talk about the suffering women like Mandakini. For most women, as described in this novel, marriage is the destiny and their happiness in the marital status entirely depends on their husband, his whims and fancies, as we can see from the example of Ravindran. Anita Nair has revealed in her novel, the mind-set of depressed women living in the four walls of their house. Anjana, being educated, escapes this mental state, but Parukutty comes to a tragic end. Among these female characters only Anjana and Meenakshi have been able to preserve their autonomy, because they are educated and self-dependent. S.Suganya (2013) says: Anjana's positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence and self-identity help her to go ahead in her life--- she proves that women can achieve autonomy. It is true as A. Sasi Kala (2013) also says that, "The male prejudiced outlook usually disregards the passions and aspirations of women-folk and labels them as unnatural. Women are trained to gratify the needs and demands of the males. When she demands (the same), she is treated as a wicked woman." This appears to happen in the case of Anjana as well as Valsala. But Anjana ends her unhappiness by divorcing and remarrying, and Valsala resorts to clandestine relationship with Sridharan, ultimately being a party to a criminal conspiracy. The women in *The Better Man* represent a new womanhood in a sense that they try to fight back and seek answer to their own problems. Even Paru-Kutty of older generation takes a stand against her domineering husband. Mukundan's mother, Paru-Kutty is presented as dependent woman, and her life is the representative example of the life of women in the middle class families where women have to carry the burden of tradition in which women mutely suffered the tyranny and unfaithfulness of the husband. Paru-Kutty is a passive sufferer. She feels insecure in her husband's house, but she cannot escape this

life. She is a typical example of women subjugated and helpless in their family on account of their lack of education and means of earning livelihood. She is a typical example of Indian women in their married life, pinned down to the house and the hearth, totally dependent on their husband, suffering insults and indignities and even brutality. She represents Indian women who are the worst sufferers of patriarchy on account of their illiteracy and economic dependence. She is also partly responsible for her sufferings. She does not protest against her husband's unjust actions. She cannot defend even her son. Only when Achutan Nair brings in Ammini, she puts down her foot and opposes sharing house with her. As pointed out above when Achutan Nair proposes to bring Ammini home. Paru-Kutty opposes it. She tells him point blank that she would not allow him to flaunt his mistress in her face and she herself means little to him. She also tells him that if he brings Ammini in her house. From a fearful timid wife she changes into a bold and defiant wife, who opposes her husband's tyranny. Paru-Kutty asserts herself by razing to the ground the almond tree planted by her husband. She invites Devayani, her cousin, and Devayani's husband to her house in defiance of Achutan Nair, as he does not at all like them, and takes revenge on him. Meenakshi is not crushed when her husband forsakes her, and Anjana becomes self-dependent taking up a job. This is new womanhood finding answer to the problems and depending on their own. All these female characters are at the center of their stories and show initiative of action.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair, the writer, poses a question through her protagonist, Akhila, whether a woman can stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete? There are different answers provided by the women she meets in her journey through the ladies coupe on the train. Janaki, the eldest woman in the coupe, through the account of her life, illustrates the necessity of man, the husband, in a woman's life. She is an example of a woman who is looked after by her husband and then, after him, by her son. This is what Janaki says: "I am a woman who has always been looked after first there were my father and my brother, then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile" (Nair 22). Margaret and Prabha Devi, both married women, try to win their freedom remaining within the patriarchal set-up. It is only Marikolanthu who emerges as a really strong woman, who decides finally to live for her son, Muthu. From each of these characters Akhila meets, she learns how women have to struggle to win their space within their family life dominated by the male beings. She learns from their account that she must fight the patriarchal notions and find her own space, assert her individuality. Anita Nair has created a world of women in the *Ladies Coupe* to reveal the emotional and practical problems faced by women in a heavily patriarchal society in which women cannot even think of leading an independent life. Akhila's mother, her sister Padma and the ladies who gather around Padma, all think it impossible for a woman to live without a father, a brother or a husband. But, all the women Akhila meets in the coupe reveal how women chafe against the male-dominance and try to win freedom in their own way. Even a teenager Sheela realizes and respects her grandmother's personal womanly feelings, and she carefully dresses her dead body, the way her grandmother would have liked. The male members of the family resent it but cannot undo it. Akhila, however, learns self-assertion from her school friend, Karpagam, who gives new point of view to Akhila, telling her how to be independent and how to throw away the yoke of responsibility she has been saddled with, and the expectations of the selfish members of the family. Akhila is most disturbed by the realization that she has no identity of her own. She is known only as someone's daughter or sister or an aunt. She cannot do what she wishes to do for fear of how it will affect the others in the family. Under the patriarchal system, women's lives are ruled by their narrow-minded husbands. Only the lucky ones find a husband who allows them freedom of their

career. Margaret Shanti's career was ruined by her chauvinistic husband. As Margaret's story unravels, it's clear how women are overpowered by men. Margaret shares details of her marriage to Elbenzer Paulraj. She makes her stance very clear to Akhila that a woman needs a man but not to make her feel complete. Margaret Shanti the chemistry teacher identifies each individual with a chemical from the chemistry lab. She classified herself as water-the universal solvent-also a solvent that could dissolve and destroy. Ebe, her husband is the principal of the school she teaches in. Although they had a love marriage but now she hates her husband. He is always critical of her and after the initial euphoria of marriage wears-off, she becomes disillusioned. She had to abort her first pregnancy as her husband did not want her to go ahead with it. This led to feeling of guilt and emptiness in her. Margaret feels her husband is actually-an egoist, narcissist, bullying sex pervert. She decides to take revenge in her own way i.e. through his fondness for delicious food. She becomes an accomplished cook and feeds him with gourmet dishes to an extent that soon his body bulges with layers of fat. As an obese man, it becomes way less painful to live with him as it has blunted his 'razor edge'.

Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* explores marital relationships in the high-middle-class family along with the problem of parenthood in the context of family life in the corporate world. Educated women in India try to assert their individuality, though they are constrained in their family life by the conventional patriarchal culture. They are also contained in their quest for freedom when there are children in the family, since they think that children are their responsibility. Meera, in this novel, is a well-educated housewife, married to a corporate husband and has two children, a daughter and a son. Meera is the writer of cook book and guides for corporate wives. She is also a typical Indian middle class wife, who is happy to be dependent on her husband. Women in India feel proud that they are well protected by their husbands without realizing that they are making themselves helpless. Meera has merged her identity with her husband's, however after her marriage when he deserts her, her life ceases to have a direction. She had never tried to realize her potential. In the words of Ajanta Partha Sarthy: "The soft and cozy shell of matrimony which most Indian women snugly fit can break any day and leave the couple exposed to horror and trauma" (127). Meera's sufferings and the failure of her marriage result from the patriarchal social norms in which the husband claims rights not only over her being but on her property as well. A woman, in a patriarchal set-up, must be loyal to her husband and obey him in every respect. Anita Nair, in her fiction, illustrates in creating female characters like Meera, how most women think that an ideal wife should be happy with the protection provided by the husband to her and her children. These women are shocked when they come face to face with reality. Social justice is denied to Meera, when she refuses to give away her own ancestral property, and house for sale. Her husband Giri deserts her for another woman and another family and she speaks out: "wit not spew venom or make known my rage. I will not lower my dignity or shame myself. I can live with these shadows as long as it is me he comes to comes from to" (39).

A woman gets social recognition when she is able to be self supportive and self dependent - both economically and emotionally. Meera starts earning and she shoulders her responsibilities like Akhilandeswari in *Ladies Coupe*. She rebels against the traditional roles framed by patriarchy through sexual autonomy. *Ladies Coupe* is a novel that basically deals with female sensibilities but as Getta Doctor very strongly feels Nair's novel in no way shows women as "battered, bartered and abandoned on the shores of low self worth" (2). Like Akhila's brief encounter with Hari, Meera also indulges in an affair with a man half her age. Nair contends social taboos through the powerful lines of Kala Chiti in *Lessons in Forgetting*: "If you force me to, I'll leave home. I will be a whore but I won't be

a wife. Not Ambi's wife" (206). Nair conveys how the double standards in the society regarding sexual infidelity are repulsive for these strong women and they resort to show their opposition in their own way.

Conclusion:

This research endeavor has explored a myriad of themes that unveil the multifaceted nature of feminist narratives in Nair's works. It gives an insight on the oppression of women in wake of sociological agencies of race, milieu and moment. These forces confine women in terms of culture, tradition and moral conduct. In her novels, Nair obviously projects her women characters in the social context, as they move from tradition to transgression by liberating themselves sexually and hence, these women make an attempt to come out of the grip of patriarchal oppression in the society. Through the vividly drawn characters, it is clear that Nair's writings emphasize that feminism is a diverse and evolving movement, and that the pursuit of gender equality and empowerment is a universal and timeless endeavor.

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