



Women and Society: A Study of Themes and Attitudes in the Novels of Anita Nair

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Abstract: Literature has evolved from the different social concerns which focus on the various social factors such as the untouchability, caste system, poverty, oppression of the poor, equal opportunities for all, awakening among women, religious reform movements, awakening among the depressed classes etc. The present paper aims to explore Anita Nair's hidden or untouched themes on various social, religious, political, economical and cultural realities of Indian society. She speaks out multifarious social, marital and psychological attitudes concerned with human beings in a society.

Index Terms – Literature, Women, Freedom, Society, Man-Woman Relationships, Identity, Feminism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Literature in English has come as a pivot of different social concerns which have directly or indirectly affected the Indian society. Most noticeably, in Mulk Raj Anand's novels, there is the operation of the ideology in the background. His *Across the Black Waters*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *Untouchables* are faithful documents of the lives of the downtrodden. He has presented harsher and engaged literature sometimes brutally, with divisions of caste, class and religion. R. K. Narayan also deals with his considerable philosophical bent of mind towards the social issues which effect the life of Indians in the various social circumstances in his novels *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The Dark Room*. Khushwant Singh wrote *A Train to Pakistan*. His next novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* presents an ironic picture of a joint Sikh family, illustrative of different Indian reactions to the freedom movement of the forties. In the first two decades of twentieth century, the Indian English novel was deeply influenced by the epoch-making political, social and ideological ferment.

Besides Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, there are also K. Nagrajan, Bhabhani, Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Shashi, Deshpande, Kamla Markandya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghose etc. who considerably enriched Indian literature with their critical and iconoclast approach on the social issues of Indian society. The first novels of these novelists are quiet effective in revealing the true state of Indian society when it comes to the treatment of women. All these writers were born after Indian Independence and English does not have any colonial associations for them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for language and completely authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally wrote about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best.

Traditionally, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers wrote about the enclosed domestic space, and women's perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers who deal with 'weightier' themes. Additionally, Indian women writers in English are victims of a second prejudice, vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and Shobha De specially exhibits a steady progression in context of the three stages advocated by Elaine Showalter. Their female protagonists display a psychic transformation traversing and evolving gradually but firmly through the respective stages of imitation of tradition, protest and advocacy of rights, and eventually introspection leading to self-discovery which metamorphosizes them into strong, independent, expeditious women willing to encounter the onslaughts of life not merely as a minority group but with the cognizance of being powerful sustaining force for society as a whole.

II FEMININE OUTBURST

The study “Anita Nair’s Women in Ladies *Coupe* As Victims Under Patriarchy” by Dr. Nirmal Sharma focuses on different phases of suffering, the women undergo in the society. The work is an effort to explain how, in life, repression and subjugation do not always come in identifiable forms, but often under the disguise of love, protection and the assurance of security. The novel *Ladies Coupe*, does not deal only with one story. It deals with the lives and experiences of six women which have been welded together by the author into a skillful whole, with Akhila or Akhilendeswari as a magnet in the centre. The story of Akhila reminds the readers about the Indian female situation where she is estimated to spend her time to execute the role of the daughter, sister and breadwinner of the family to gratify their requirements. Anita Nair does not only deal with the problems of women in this novel but tries to show them the path to lead on it. The study has touched all the major aspects of female world in this novel whether it is the case of girl-child, physical humiliation, rape and the dominating role of male in female’s decision. The researcher has discussed all the problems of all the facets of female life and portraits pragmatically how their desires, rights and happiness crush in disguise of duty. Neither the novelist advocates that women will remain subjugated or the victims under patriarch system nor in favour of rejecting the existence of male’s importance in female’s life. But they should react in their own way against the wrong treatment from male side. Anita Nair has not only depicts the realistic picture of women’s condition but also delivers the message in the novel through many characters as Karpagam.

Ms. Poornima Gaur shows in her study, “A World of Their Own: Women at Crossroads in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*”, the journey for self-discovery and realizing one’s worth as individual includes stories of six women who meet in a ladies coupe. The title *Ladies Coupe*, itself is metaphorical to the journey of women from birth to death. It is a compartment reserved exclusively for women, which can be compared to their compact world, where they can share their smiles, their tears, their marital life, lovers and children – the most private and special moments of their lives without any worries of exposure, as all of them are strangers to each other and probably would never ever meet again. But the common stance in all of them is – they all are very strong and are in search of real meaning of life. The charm of the study lies in the vivacious description and the ardor it produces.

D. Silvia Flavia in her study “The Concept of Patriarchy and Female Defiance in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*” presents an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which a woman is constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize her own strength. She has presented her women struggling side by side because of patriarchy but at the end has given them a gesture of defiance against patriarchy. Her women have been portrayed as intelligent, questioning women who are not contented with the injustice and rebellion against them. Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it emphasizes a relationship of inequality and injustice. Though it seems that the colonial master has vanished from the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. It is obvious that only men feast on the fruits of independence whereas women are still subjected to oppression by the male as the colonial masters did on the colonized. It is obvious that the decolonized man asserted his mastery by his unjust treatment of women. So Anita Nair’s women raise the question of their way of life consolidated by patriarchy, and see it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors.

S. Suganya’s study “Rupturing the Wedding Bond in Anita Nair’s *The Better Man*” tries to explore the issues like rape, male domination and betrayal in marriage in the novels of Anita Nair. Anita Nair’s fiction explores the search of the woman to fulfill herself basically as a human being, independent of her various traditional roles as daughter, wife, mother and so on. Women writers of this century regard marriage as a subtle expression of patriarchal power and the most dominant weapon for female subjugation. With the swing from feudal patriarchy to entrepreneur bourgeois patriarchy, the life of societal relations has tainted and vigorous individuality, self-centeredness and self-government have progressed as the crucial individual factors in the social relations. Woman too though fairly in a constrained way, has begun to rise as an individual and the prime center of impact for her becomes the tradition of marriage which has, so far, comprised the limits of her space. The self considering, suffering and unselfish woman, with her gender characteristic qualities has begun to frustrate the compulsions of supporting patriarchal gender philosophy.

The woman who has moved to the center and become an important individual in the social setup is keen to discover new path for enhancement and logical satisfaction and establish her independence in marriage. This study deals with marriage issues as seen in the work of women writers. The creative women writers re-define the husband-wife relationship in their novels. Anita Nair in her debut novel reveals woman’s capacity to assert her own rights and individuality in marriage and develop into a fully fledged woman of prospective as a human being. Anita Nair strongly agrees with Simone de Beauvoir’s that “that fact that we are human is much more important than our being and women”. Women have been quite suppressed, quite oppressed. Search for self is the predominant theme with many writers especially in the post modern writings.

The study “Radha’s Revenge: Feminist Agency, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Desire in Anita Nair’s *Mistress*” by Debatri Dhar narrates the fascinating tale of a woman’s desire. Unfolding along the fault lines of tradition and modernity in contemporary India, the novel weaves for us a triangle of desire that plays out through Radha’s lack of desire for her businessman husband Shyam and her growing desire for Chris, a travel writer and cello player from America in search of his own stories. Reading *Mistress* as a feminist reworking of myth, the study shows that Nair’s deployment of the Radha-Krishna story from Hindu mythology allows the novel to address key questions surrounding female agency and desire in feminist and postcolonial theory. To this end, the first part of the thesis draws from a range of classical and contemporary texts on the lore of Krishna in order to read *Mistress* as a feminist reclamation of the mythical Radha’s agency through a nuanced reworking of desire. Thereafter, the second part of the thesis goes on to suggest that the notion of desire deployed in *Mistress* can usefully engage postcolonial feminist concerns; the study argues that by dislocating centre-periphery and global-local binaries, and by locating female desire within a hybrid, “third space” of agency, *Mistress* envisions a powerful postcolonial feminist politics of an alternative, open futurity. The study focuses on *sexual* desire but eschews biologically reductive understandings of desire, instead taking into consideration a range of factors, including respect, compassion, mutuality, and pleasure. The research locates female

desire more holistically within women's emotional universe; shaped by hegemonic discourses of culture and the gendered politics of the everyday, this understanding of desire holds within it at once the possibilities of patriarchal collusion and critical-feminist resistance.

III WOMEN AND SOCIETY

It has been observed that in the previous studies, only feminine issues have been explored in the novels of Anita Nair. But, through her characters, she also makes a plea for a better way of life for women. Her novels have Indians as central characters, and she alternates between female-centered and male-centered narrative. Men and women are complementary to each other. Even in this modern era, women are considered not as equal to men but as the weaker class. They undergo suppression in a male dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of the society.

Anita Nair plays the role of a social critic, as no writer can isolate herself or himself from society, the violence, the system, the injustice around her. The novels by such women writers cannot destroy repressive social structures; but by raising questions, suggesting re-assessment and re-thinking, they can help in formulating a consciousness which can ultimately bring about a constructive and healthy change in society. Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupé* through the intimate conversation among the women of the *Ladies Coupé* portrays a fairly large part of society of all socio-economic levels and age groups. Steeped in the lanes and atmosphere of the city of Bangalore, the novel *Cut Like Wound* introduces to the reader a host of unforgettable characters and their psychological states in the society. The novel, *Lessons in Forgetting* is a heartwarming story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances. She talks about writing in urban India, the role of a corporate wife as explored in this book. She focuses on the marginal section of society. Her characters revolt against the social set up of society. She manipulates and negotiates for propagating the middle class values. During the course of this journey a subtle cultural transformation has been captured. In Anita Nair's second novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila is the protagonist. She is a forty five year old spinster. She, after the death of her father, is appointed as an income tax clerk. She belongs to a conservative Tamil Brahmin family. Now she takes up the burden of the entire family on her young shoulders and plays the roles of a daughter, sister, aunt and the bread runner. After some time, she decides to get a one way train ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari. On way to Kanyakumari, she meets five other women, listens to their stories in the compartment and tells her too. With the help of the description of six women, the novelist highlights how patriarchy affects the course of a woman's life. Our social and cultural values keep them within the enclosure of traditional social set up. They face injustice and inequality in all walks of life. On the one hand, discussions are carried out about women empowerment; while on the other hand, the novel puts a question mark on the existing education system and social set up of contemporary India.

Anita Nair starts her journey of social reformation right from the family. She presents that how family is caught up from the various social implications where the social growth of a human being is bound by his own family. In fact, she has successfully portrayed the conservative behaviour of the family of the Tamil Brahmins. She violates the various socio-moral injunctions in her novel *Ladies Coupe* which questions the status of women in a tradition-bound social order that sees women exclusively in the role of an obedient daughter, a docile wife and a breeder of children. She takes the reader into the heart of women's life in contemporary India, revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships with husbands, mothers, friends, employees and children. She shows the tragic predicament of Indian woman in a patriarchal social order where female foeticide has grown heavily. She undergoes arduous journey in her life. When born in a family she belongs to her father, after marriage she is supposed to belong to her husband and in old age, she depends on the grown up male child. She is always a dependent. Robert Fraser has pointed out, "Indian woman's identity is one that is usually connected to and defined by the social and cultural norms of a practicable structure"(44). She has been fettered physically as well as psychologically by the conventions and limitations supported by the culture, rooted in the mind of the individual and the memory of the society and surprised by the patriarchal temperament.

In Anita Nair's novels, there are the discords or disappointments in marital relationship which impel a clear introspection in the protagonists. Her characters do not disregard the importance of marriage as a social institution and seek solutions to their marital problems with marriage. They seek a balanced, practical approach to their problems. They have the courage born of their being honest to themselves after an objective appraisal of their situation. They do not blame the others or their husbands for their troubles, but blame also themselves. Their desire to seek solutions to their problems leads to their temporary withdrawal from their families, followed by an objective appraisal of the whole problem. They are traditional at times in their approach as they strive to seek identity and self-realization upholding social conventions and institutions. They are women who are individuals with awareness of their rights and duties; they have legitimate passions and expect an independent, autonomous existence. Their circumstances lead to their becoming mentally mature and they finally consider marital relationship as worthy of preservation. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife.

Anita Nair goes to the level of a social thinker to the social reformer. She exposes the various social crimes, such as stalking, acid-throwing, honour killing, raping, gang rapes, female foeticide, killing women for money or goods. She highlights the culture of social standard and male dominance. She views that when the poor and oppressed women are born they are unwanted, when they have to be married they are a financial burden, when they have girl babies they are wronging the family, when they go out of their homes, they are being provocative – and so it goes on. Women are still regarded as a man's possession, they have to be controlled. Men are frightened that they may lose that control. Nair further shows the caste based traditional social system in her novel *Idris*. Her highly classified characters suffer due to the rigid caste laws in the society. In fact, through her novels, she tries to fight from the constraints of caste based traditional social system.

IV CONCLUSION

Anita Nair's writings grasp a widespread plea that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. Her major concern emerges from her own environment, from her immediate world, holding up mirror to the India based lives. She critically examines the various social taboos like marriage taboos, education taboos, rites and rituals, class and caste taboos. She articulates human emotions, the fears and feelings experienced by humans. Her concern about the problems of oppressed and their quest for identity makes one consider her novels as humane and social texts. Her writing is known for courageous and sensitive handling of significant and intractable themes affecting the lives of the oppressed in the class trodden society.

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