



TO STUDY THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN ANITA NAIR'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Thus, the female protagonists in *The Better Man* and *Ladies coupe* are oppressed by patriarchy and attempt to subvert it in a number of ways. These illustrations highlight the importance of education and financial security in the lives of women who must contend with the negative aspects of living in the very patriarchal culture depicted in these two novels. Women who are oppressed by men are portrayed by Anita Nair as victims rather than quiet suffers. Even Paru-Kutty from the older generation in *The Better Man* expresses herself when her life is in danger. In the standalone episodes of *Ladies' Coupe*, women fight for their own space and triumph over male dominance and injustice. One widow, Karpagam, is an example of someone who refuses to live in seclusion behind four walls, enjoys hotel cuisine, and applies Kumkum Tilak without concern for the opinions of others. The life of Prabha Devi demonstrates her capacity for acceptance and adaptation. Margaret Shanti also employs her intelligence covertly to control her oppressive husband. Thus, the modern woman is prepared to combat the negative effects of patriarchy. Anita Nair has offered two types of female characters in her portrayal of her female protagonists. There's Radha, who is well conscious of her uniqueness and sense of independence. On the other hand, there are ladies, such as Janaki in *Ladies Coupe*, who prefer to remain in the shadow of their husbands and would be uncomfortable without him. It is thus because women like Janaki are raised to assume the role of a traditional wife, selflessly caring for her husband and children. Women like Janaki are vulnerable to exploitation in patriarchal families. They are mentally dependent on their partner and may feel helpless in his absence. Akhila's mother is an example of this. If her husband abandons her, this psychological need can cripple her.

KEY WORDS: Female, Protagonists, Anita Nair's, Novels, Characters

INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair explores several facets of feminism that stem from her familial life in India. Female feticide is a major issue that involves killing a girl infant before she is born. Smriti, the activist (and JAK's daughter), is victimized by the 'goons' hired by the doctor who practices female foeticide in *Lessons in Forgetting*. Prabha Devi's father is upset when she is born in *Ladies Coupe* since he expected a boy who would be important to his business. The father is lionized by

the mother in Akhila's family. He must eat his favorite dishes first, followed by the women in the family. Because her younger brothers are the 'male' members of the family, Akhila is supposed to seek permission from them before embarking on a journey. Anita Nair delves at the social practices that underpin anti-feminism in Indian households. Feminism entails raising women's knowledge of their own social situations, their role in the family, the secondary treatment they receive, and the violence they encounter in their homes, as well as limits placed on their movements, whether they are married or unmarried. They face discrimination when it comes to deciding whether a boy or a girl should attend school or college. Marikolanthu is denied an education after the tenth grade since her brothers must attend school.

Anita Nair's *The Better Man*: A Brief Introduction

It must be made apparent that Anita Nair has included scenes in her fictional works that outline the narratives of female characters.

Protagonist is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as "ONE of the MAIN characters in a novel or a play." Additionally, women are prominent characters in Anita Nair's book who struggle with their own issues.

Every episode of Anita Nair's fiction features a female protagonist, her experiences, and her struggle against the patriarchal society around her. For instance, throughout the entire narrative of *The Better Man* are vignettes with female protagonists. Anjana's narrative details her hardships and husband's betrayal, as well as how she finds freedom and becomes financially independent. Meenakshi is another female protagonist who, after being deceived by her artist husband, faces life on her own, raises her child while managing a daycare centre, and later also takes care of her ailing spouse. The young wife of an elderly husband, Valsala, makes an effort to leave the unpleasant marriage on her own. When her husband brings in another lady, Paru-Kutty, Mukundan's mother, resists and forces him to live apart. All of these female protagonists take the lead and are at the core of their narratives. In *Ladies Coupe*, there are a number of stories where a woman is the main character. These stories all focus on the life and experiences of the women in the stories, with males playing a minor role. In *Mistress*, the episodes are once again centred on strong female leads like Saadiya, Radha, Angela, and Maya who take the lead and drive the plot forward. Anita Nair's novel *Lessons in Forgetting* features female protagonists who design their own lives after being deceived by their husbands, including Kala and Meera. As a result, Anita Nair's fiction focuses on the struggles and experiences of female protagonists, placing male characters on the periphery of each episode. 41

Awakening of Her Self-hood:

As was already said, Anita Nair presents two different types of female characters in *The Better Man*: those who uphold the marriage vows and stay with their despotic husbands and those who carry out their obligations despite their husbands' adultery.

The mother of Mukundan, Paru-Kutty, spent her entire life in constant fear of her abusive and tyrannical husband, Achutan Nair. Paru-Kutty adamantly desired to accompany Achutan Nair when he had to travel to Burma. But because she was expecting, she frequently felt exhausted and puked. According to her husband, Nair (2000):

I can't be saddled with an invalid for whom

I'll have to be responsible every minute of the day (68).

Paru-Kutty tried to beg him as she was in tears. However, her spouse refused to travel to another country with this burden. When Mukundan was four years old, he had his first look at his father. Four years later, his father unannouncedly returned. Even Paru-Kutty was unaware of his presence. This demonstrates that Achutan Nair did not care if he had a son or a daughter and barely spoke to his pregnant wife while she was living abroad. He did not speak kindly of his wife even after they had been apart for four years. He glared at her and chastised her for Mukundan's timidity as if it were only her responsibility to raise him. Achutan Nair frequently used his wife as a target for his rage. He acted in an autocratic manner, and she was the victim. She makes an effort to protect her son from his father's wrath as well. She attempts to comfort Mukundan whenever he arouses his father's wrath by saying (Nair, 2000):

He is not angry with you. He just wants you to grow up to be like his, strong and capable. When you have a son of your own, you too will find that you want him to be like you (17).

The fear of Paru-husband Kutty's is real. He is not a devoted spouse or father; rather, he rules the kingdom like a despot. The very definition of patriarchy is Achutan Nair.

Meenakshi: Her Self-hood and Sense of Responsibility:

Meenakshi was a buddy of Mukundan's since his youth. Together, when he was still a young lad wearing khaki shorts and Meenakshi was dressed in a skirt and a worn-out pink top, they ascended Pulmoath Mountain. At that time, she was Mukundan's soul mate and partner. They played together, went to school together, and were not allowed to hang out when they were older. Meenakshi became into a Naxalite activist after Mukundan left to work as a lower division clerk in an explosives factory in Trichi. She incited labourers, set haystacks on fire, and attacked system representatives like Achutan Nair. Balan is a lovely young man and a Kathak dancer, and

Meenakshi fell in love with him. She married him, but he left on tour and said he would return to get her. But he never returned. He travelled to Europe to perform before returning to work as a dance instructor without ever getting in touch with Meenakshi. He fathered a child for her. She stayed to take care of her mother and raise her child. She was a childcare provider who eventually opened a store selling items including eggs, bangles, ribbons, embroidery thread, and notepads. When he was bedridden and afflicted with spinal tuberculosis, her husband Balan had begged her for forgiveness. His employers left him behind since he was unable to teach or dance. He had aged into a feeble, lonely, and decaying old man. Meenakshi responded in a recognisable way when Mukundan suggested that her spouse would simply be a burden to her and that she had the option of rejecting him. Instead of saying "no," she chose to respond "yes." Mukundan said Meenakshi was a person of character. She was defiant, as evidenced by her straight back and raised head. If she was brokenhearted, she hid it. Her spouse was getting a massage at the Ayurvedic Center. Mukundan had anticipated Meenakshi to be a woman with "no strings attached" when she visited his home. When she knocked on the door, he pretended to be reading. He anticipated that she would be simple to approach and capture in his arms. But Meenakshi stated, "I haven't met the targets for this year," in a very matter-of-fact manner. I was hoping you could assist me (Nair, 2000, 66). This business conversation caught Mukundan off guard, and he was unable to contain his shock. Meenakshi had the intelligence to discern his emotions. She told him straight up, (Nair, 2000)

---but I have been faithful to my husband, and I'mnot going to change that, not even for you (66).

Flouting the Wedding Bond: The Case of Valsala:

Others perceive Valsala as an elusive woman who is wed to the elderly Prabhakaran. Mukundan was the first to notice her eyes (Nair, 2000)

A dense black, remote and devoid of any emotion. A sort of one-sided glass, blurred, inviolable and unreachable, behind which she hid, unwilling to let anyone glimpse the real her. --the voice of a woman who had no more dreams, no more expectations from life. Each syllable bore the hollowness of emptiness, a blankness thatmatched her opaque eyes--- (126-127).

However, she is incredibly attractive. According to p. 126, she is "a lusciously fat woman with a blooming complexion and a head of jet-black curly hair." Male attention was invited by Valsala. But she is in a miserable marriage to a weak and sad older guy. It is clear that she hardly ever finds enjoyment in her marriage. Her feminine emotions all seemed to have died.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*:

Patriarchal predominance in the Indian family structure distinguishes the feminist perspective in the fiction. Women are colonised in patriarchy, which results in an unfair link between inequality and injustice. With the end of colonialism came India's freedom, yet women are still under colonial rule today. Indian tradition has portrayed women as the model of patience and silent suffering in its mythology and holy writings. She has endured desertion, oppression, and humiliation because she is only allowed to perform home duties. Her situation looks to have improved in the modern world thanks to political rights and education, yet patriarchy still permeates women's personal lives. They haven't yet had to fight to stand up for themselves via independence and self-awareness. The story's narrator, Akhila, is looking for courage, independence, and a way out of the obligations that have been placed on her since her father's passing. She is looking for strength and independence but is unable to find them because she is mired in her daily activities. She wants to look for solutions to the problems her life has brought to light. She is, however, one of the many women who must strive to find their self-hood and identity. The author, Anita Nair, adopts the literary technique Chaucer employed in his *Canterbury Tales*. The author employs the metaphor of fellow passengers in a ladies coupe to bring together women from various familial backgrounds and tell their stories.

Akhila: Groping For Identity:

Being the oldest child in Pattabhi Iyer's household, Akhileswari or Akhila is responsible for looking after her family, which also includes her younger sister, two brothers, and widowed mother. She becomes an adult too soon as a result of the sorrow of her father's unintentional passing, and she accepts a position as a clerk in the Income Tax Office. She must provide for her younger sister's marriage, her younger brother's education, and their establishment in their new lives. To take care of everyone's needs, Akhila must assume a variety of roles, including those of a daughter, sister, aunt, and family leader. Nobody enquires about her wants. The fact that her oldest child must also be married escapes the attention of even her mother. While she provides for her family, the other family members neglect her needs. She adopts the monikers "Ammadi" for the mother, "akka" for the brother and sister, and "madam" at work. Akhila-Akhilandeswari, a girl who must get married, has her own needs and a future, but no one cares about her as an individual. Woman provides for the family's needs, but because of the patriarchal structure, she cannot be the head of the household or hold the position of authority. Even a younger brother, a man, fills that centre role if there is no father. She is the responsible daughter who must provide

for the necessities of the family at the expense of her own needs, future, and desires. Even her mother doesn't speak out about Akhila's union. No one talks about her marriage although her brother and younger sister both got married. She has a 45-year-old age. She removes her rose-colored glasses and dons a pair of metal-framed glasses. She dons saris made of starched cotton. According to the author, Akhila is (Nair, 2001):

Forty- five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect (2).

Akhila's Achievement of Autonomy:

Anita Nair, the author, presents the subject of whether a woman can be solitary and happy or if she needs a guy to feel whole throughout the entire book through the perspective of her main character, Akhila. The women she encounters as she moves through the ladies' section of the train provide a variety of responses. Through her life story, Janaki, the oldest member of the couple, demonstrates the importance of a husband in a woman's life. She serves as an example of a woman who is cared for first by her husband and later by her son. A woman does not deserve freedom because she is cared for by her father, husband, and son when her husband passes away, according to the Manu Smriti dictum "na stri Swatantryan arhati" (a woman does not deserve freedom). According to Janaki (Nair, 2001),

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 (22).

Both Margaret and Prabha Devi, who are married women, attempt to achieve their freedom while still adhering to the patriarchal system. Only Marikolanthu proves to be a genuinely resilient mother, ultimately deciding to live for her son Muthu.

Akhila learns how women must fight for their place in a family life that is dominated by men from each of the personalities she meets. Their story teaches her that she must challenge patriarchal ideas, carve out her own space, and embrace her uniqueness. In order to highlight the emotional and practical issues women experience in a strongly patriarchal culture where they are not even allowed to consider pursuing an independent life, Anita Nair developed an universe of women in the Ladies Coupe. All of the women gathered around Padma, including Akhila's mother and sister, Padma, believe it is impossible for a woman to exist without a father, a brother, or a spouse. However, every woman Akhila encounters in the ladies' room reveals how

women struggle against male authority and seek liberation in unique ways. Even a teen can do it. Sheela thoughtfully clothes her dead body in her grandmother's favourite style because she understands and appreciates her grandmother's unique, feminine sensibilities. The family's male members dislike it, but they are unable to change it. Akhila, on the other hand, learns self-assertion from her school buddy Karpagam, who offers her a fresh perspective and teaches her how to be independent and how to let go of the burden of responsibility she has been given as well as the expectations of the selfish family members. The notion that Akhila lacks a unique identity most disturbs her. She is solely recognised as someone's aunt, sister, or daughter. She is unable to fulfil her desires out of concern for how it may affect the other family members. It's interesting to see how Padma, who depends significantly on Akhila, criticises and supports her older sister by informing the people next door that Akhila doesn't do any housework. According to Nair (2001),

Why, my seven year old Madhavi is better housekeeper than she is. I have to do everything for my sister, Cook for her. Iron her clothes even sew on the missing buttons on her blouse (163).

Akhila is useless at home, and Padma cares for her, Padma tries to demonstrate. The neighbours are informed by Padma that Akhila is not even a devout Hindu (Nair, 2001).

She won't light the lamp in the Puja room or go to the temple or observe any of the rituals we Brahmins do. When she has her periods, she continues to water the plants and if I object, she bites my head off (164).

In conclusion, we can argue that both *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* show the lives and experiences of women against the backdrop of a social structure that is overwhelmingly male-oriented. Although *The Better Man* is a book for men, it contains a number of important female characters whose struggles are skillfully depicted by the author. As previously mentioned, Achutan Nair's open betrayal and infidelity to his wife has left Mukundan's mother the victim. He still holds a good position in the community, and no one makes any mention of his immoral behaviour. She receives no assistance from the neighbourhood or her own grown son. Society seems to be completely unaware of the unfairness that women must endure. According to Sally J. Scholz (2010), patriarchy is when:

The domestic sphere or private life was commonly understood as a sort of mini-kingdom. (Certainly there are many colloquial expressions that unfold this understanding: A man's home is his castle" and the sanctity of the home).

Even in contemporary law enforcement, police have long been reluctant to intervene in familial disputes of any kind. The home is a protected space and the various branches of the state, it was presumed, ought to stay out (148).

After being abandoned by her husband, a Kathakali artist, Meenakshi, the devoted and loving wife, sticks by him and looks after him when he returns in a poor condition. Only Valsala, the young wife of old Prabhakaran, descends to a horrible crime by aiding and abetting her husband's death. No one can blame her for having a sexual relationship with Sridharan because she had been wronged, but she cannot be excused for her illegal behaviour or her avaricious desire to inherit her husband's assets. She is vindictive, crafty, and callous. She can be compared to Meenakshi, who raises her son while being faithful to her husband and managing a shop and a daycare centre.

Analogously, Anjana stays faithful to her husband, but when he deserts her, she is left with little choice but to file for divorce. As a result, Anjana and Meenakshi are the victims of male chauvinism, sexism, and dishonesty.

We have a typical representation of Margaret Shanti and Ebenezer Paulraj's lives in Ladies Coupe. Ebenzer carefully obstructs Margaret's career. She desired to pursue a Ph.D., but Ebenzer forced her into becoming a teacher. She receives insults from other teachers. She gets made fun of despite the fact that her topic, chemistry, is incredibly interesting. She has no one to complain to. She even hears from her mother (Nair, 2001):

--- it is woman's responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have so many preoccupations that they might not have time or the inclination to keep the wheel of marriage oiled (112).

Margaret, who works as a teacher, is independent of him financially. But because of the moral and social restrictions placed on women generally in patriarchal society, she is hindered socially. By making Paulraj incapable of acting as a dictator, Margaret tries to break free from the patriarchal oppression. Prabha Devi's example demonstrates how she too gradually succeeds in expressing her own needs and desires. In Ladies coupe, the author offers a range of examples of women who, in one way or another, are able to secure their freedom in a society that is patriarchal. A poor, rural household makes up Marikolanthu's family. Due to the death of her father, the mother is forced to work as a cook in a landlord's home. Murugesan victimised Marikolanthu, as we saw above, leaving her an unmarried mother. Her case is the most extreme of all because, as a single mother, she is now fully responsible for raising her son on her alone, without the help of any other men.

Akhila comes to the conclusion that she cannot base her life's path on the tales of the various women in the Ladies' Coupe. She believed that she could learn from their issues. But after hearing what they had to say, she understood that "she was doing it all wrong." She was treating other people's lives as how-to manuals that could provide her with precise instructions on what to do next. The theme of Akhila's narrative is her yearning for independence and her own space. She sets out on a quest in an effort to discover who she is. Her journey in the ladies' coupe is meant to assist her in finding a means of coming to terms with who she is. Akhila takes a train trip to discover who she is. She first has many worries and is apprehensive of where this voyage would take her, but after meeting the women, she discovers that each woman has a problem and that she must solve her own problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Anita Nair's works are primarily about the experiences of female heroines who face painful events in their families. She has projected in her fiction the subjugation of women in India's predominantly patriarchal family life, female infanticide, prostitution, lesbianism, and rape. Her literature focuses on the ethos of middle-class Indian living. The men and women in her literature are influenced by modernity, but they are unable to separate themselves from old ways of living and social norms. Anita Nair, who comes from a middle-class household, is able to deal with this difficulty, which is especially prevalent in female characters.

Women in the metropolitan middle class feel themselves trapped in a male-dominated world. As a result of social norms and traditional beliefs associated with ideal womanhood, they are allocated a secondary position in the family. Even if she is an earning part of the family, a woman is forced to hold a secondary status in a family life, primarily in India. It is not her femininity, but the age-old social tradition and male dominance of education that contribute to women's enslavement in their personal lives and in society in general.

Anita Nair does not profess to be a feminist, yet all of her works are primarily focused with depicting the lives and struggles of her female heroines from a feminist perspective. Though Mukundan, the man, appears to be the key character in her *The Better Man*, there are episodes about female characters like Parru-Kutti, Meenakshi, and Anjana, who are the heroes of their own stories and strive for self-hood. Anita Nair's feminist concerns can be noticed in the portrayal of her female characters. They are not only aware of their uniqueness, but also effectively express it in the lives depicted by the author in her literature. Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher in *Ladies Coupe*, for example, displays her independence by taming her husband, who tries to obstruct her and emotionally dominates her. Similarly, Marikolanthu in this story confronts injustice at the hands of her parents, who refuse to spend money on her education since the boys in the household must be given priority. The landlord then victimizes her and sexually exploits her since she belongs to the lowest social strata.

Anita Nair demonstrates, using Akhila as an example, how anti-feminist actions and attitudes are firmly embedded in the psyche of both men and women. Akhila's mother would feed her husband first, followed by the rest of the family. As shown in the last section, Akhila is the earning member of the family, but she is not the decision maker. Her brothers, despite being younger and more dependent on her, are meant to make decisions regarding her, give her permission to go out, and so on. Akhila develops as a postmodern lady, refusing to marry but exemplifying her radical femininity by marrying young man Hari.

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