

## Feminist Perspective in the Selected Novels of Anita Nair:

### *Ladies Coupé and Mistress*

P. Bala Muthu Marieswari, M.A., M.Phil.

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#### Abstract

Post-colonial feminist literature has always carried the heavy burden of dealing with layers of misinterpretation of traditions and religions. At the center of this dilemma is the role of woman and her dependence, economically and socially. The more traditional a postcolonial society is, the more problematic the question of women's emancipation is. Therefore, the more passionate its women novelists like Anita Nair raise what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of woman in contemporary post-colonial India.

Among the novels of Anita Nair, *Ladies coupé* and *Mistress* are chosen for this paper. Through these novels Anita Nair has signalled the arrival of a sensitive writer who could perceive deeper mysteries in people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful journey of discovery. These novels have a talent for probing the insular world. In these pages I shall attempt an appreciation of Anita Nair's powers for the delineation of the deeper layers of the woman's personality

**Keywords:** Sensitive writer, Feminist literature, Women's emancipation,

#### Introduction

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passionate its women novelists like Anita Nair raise what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of woman in contemporary post-colonial India.

### ***Ladies Coupé***

Anita Nair's second novel ***Ladies Coupé*** has turned out to be a great success. It is the story of a women's search for strength and independence and is about women's conditions in a male dominated society, narrated with great insight, solidarity and humour.

Nair's India suffers from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. Of course, patriarchy, in its different forms, has tried in many ways to repress, debase and humiliate women especially through the images represented in cultural and traditional forms.

***Ladies Coupé*** deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. The novel raises the question whether the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to culture resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs.

### **Reconstruction of Female Identity**

In ***Ladies Coupé***, the Brahmin heroine, Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is a 45-year-old spinster, daughter, sister and the only provider of her family after the death of her father. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, she decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman.

In ***Ladies Coupé***, Anita Nair hints at two aspects- the reconstruction of female identity beyond the male- dominated society of India and secondly the assertion of female dignity and female desires to realize full individuality. The novel presents a voice proclaiming the voyage of

self-consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the reaffirmation of female identity against male domination.

### **Chance Encounter of Six Women**

Ladies Coupé is a compartment on a train that is reserved exclusively for women. This compartment is usually safe, quiet, and is preferred by women who travel alone. *Ladies Coupé* offers a narrative concerning the chance encounter of six Indian women belonging to different backgrounds and vocations in a train journey. Anita Nair brings together women of different ages, experience and social strata together.

*Ladies Coupé* is a novel in parts in which the lives and experience of six women are welded together by the novelist, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to the story of one woman. But the stories clearly demonstrate the link between the stories in terms of Indian woman's journey in life under patriarchy: Janaki, the old woman whose relationship with her husband is friendly love; Margaret, the chemistry teacher, who succeeds in disciplining her narcissistic husband and principal; Prabha Devi, the rich submissive wife who loves swimming, because it metaphorically gives her a sense of achievement; Sheela, the fourteen year old whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for her own future liberation; and Marikolunthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class-exploitation, is the culmination of all other stories.

### **From a State of Passivity and Absence into a State of Active Presence**

By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves them from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story of women rediscovering their bodies.

### **Akhila**

Akhila is placed in a situation of unfamiliarity and dislocation, precisely because her struggle for identity has to come out more clearly. To achieve this, Nair creates a space where disparate identities meet, clash and grapple with each other in situations or relations of

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domination and subordination. Akhila undertakes this journey as a form of escape, a desire to go away alone, a sense of excitement of being able to do something all by herself, not having to take permission, of taking an independent decision. Akhila's story is a story of desire, of memory and of loss.

Akhila realises that she has wasted life all these sixteen years as she juggled with her career and family. In fact she is the only unmarried person in her office where twenty-four people work. The deprivations of her life impinge strongly on her psyche. Marriage, motherhood and child-rearing, she recognises as holding out possibilities. It gives a reason to live, she thinks. She becomes aware of the fact that she has been living life "without dreams". Akhila didn't want a husband. She didn't want to be a mere extension again. Akhila's childhood friend Karpagam, a feminist tells her that she can live alone in the world after the death of her husband and encourages Akhila telling her she would not feel lonely.

Akhila has suddenly decided to take her life in her hands. At the age of 45, having achieved near anonymity working as a clerk in the Income Tax Department, she is suddenly filled with an idea of revolt. She decides to bolt, to take a long train journey to Kanyakumari. Akhila tries to search for her own identity and happiness. Akhila walks out of the family as a rebel and her response is rejection - the rejection of social standards, value and the traditional life pattern.

### **Is Marriage Imperative? Akhila and Her Companions in the Coupé**

Akhila and her fellow travellers argue that marriage is not imperative. Their independence helps them to get over a dominated existence in the hands of men in society, because each of them has a spinster older sister, once the breadwinner and the cash-cow to the family.

The first partner is Janaki, a pampered wife and confused mother who got married at the age of eighteen and had led forty years of comfortable married life. When Akhila sees Janaki and her husband she gets the idea, "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone". (LC 39) She reverses to the victim position two and is tormented by the question "Whither goest thou?" (LC 39) Akhila is very perplexed about whether she is going in the right direction. With Janaki's

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revelation, Akhila begins to make a search of her own 'self' and her memories take her to her childhood experiences to reconstruct the life of her mother.

Akhila's second companion is Margaret. Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher. She compares people to chemicals. She is married to the principal of the school she teaches in. Hers is a love marriage. When Margaret gets pregnant, her husband coaxes her into aborting the child, thus triggering the friction in their relationship. She has gained control over her husband by making him lose shape. Her suppression turns into rebellion and it subsequently gives birth to revenge. She begins to question her feelings for Ebenezer Paulraj who appears to be a "bully" and "tyrant".

Margaret's story makes Akhila think about her own relationship with Hari whom she had met on the daily train to work. She broke off her relationship with him because he was younger to her. Akhila realizes that she lost Hari and his companionship only out of the panic of social sanctity. In the process of the reconstruction of female identity, the rational and conventional vision is essential. Modern women admit healthy sexual needs and seek a suitable outlet for them. In feminine psyche, the sexual desire and intense desire for love are two distinctive variables and they should not be treated as identical.

Man-woman relationship should not be hampered. It is part of the evolution in Nature. Akhila views marriage as an oppressive structure which takes away her self-identity and what she longs for is self-generative identity. The struggle of Akhila, Karpagam and her daughter is from the periphery moving towards the centre. They crave for identity for which they need not depend on any entity or factor other than their own being. This they cherish because it makes them happy. At the periphery they have no identity.

Akhila's next companion is Prabha Devi. She has led her life in comfort and luxury as a daughter and daughter-in-law. Her visit to New York makes her conscious of her own beauty, her own dreams and her freedom. Akhila is impressed by the confidence and renewed interest of Prabha Devi to construct her own life. Akhila gets a better perception of life from Prabha Devi's confession. She learns that one's freedom is in one's own hands and not in the hands of others.

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Sheela is a fourteen year old girl who is of a different generation to Janaki's, but she possesses a mental maturity that quite surpasses her age. She describes the death of her maternal grandmother due to cancer. The matriarch turns mad, eats all the food left in the house and speaks her mind. She accepts her grandmother's death with an air of a person who has seen it all and done it all.

Marikolunthu is subjugated to the pinnacle of victimization. She is raped and becomes the mother of an illegal son. She represents the lower class of Indian society and is thwarted by a series of disappointments. Her life is very pathetic and miserable. She transforms into a mature lady by accepting her son, Muthu. Marikolunthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasant woman upon whom male oppression is continually forced and allowed to go on, unquestioned by all.

### **A Metaphor**

By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves them from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story, of women discovering themselves. The coupé becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by false binaries. Hence the conscious action taken by Akhila at the end of the novel, an action that aims at overcoming the contradictions that are characteristic of the traditional world and its essential determinant, that is alienation.

Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they cannot escape from. She portrays women as not only totally cut off from familial, social ties but women, who even while remaining within those orbits, protest against injustice and humiliation in the novel *Ladies Coupe`*.

### **Marital Rape as the Focus of *Mistress***

In *Mistress* Nair has brought to the fore the issue of marital rape, which is often not discussed in public and which does not necessarily amount to violence under the law, because it is the husband who is the perpetrator. Women have been living in pain and silence for ages as

victims of male dominance and sexual violence. Anita Nair portrays how women are oppressed and dominated by men through the novel *Mistress*.

### **A Journey to Self-realization**

*Mistress* is set on the banks of river Nila which instils in one's heart, the beauty of art, wonder of creativity, depth of love and passion and the pain of infidelity. Like the river the plot is a journey to self-realisation. *Mistress* revolves around the life of Radha, Shyam and their morbid marriage against the backdrop of the narratives of Radha's uncle Koman, the Kathakali dancer and teacher, who lives only for his art.

### **Eco Feminism**

In Eco feminist terms, Shyam sees nature or woman as a resource for the benefit of man. Both nature and women represent the generative powers of fertility and birth. But it exists as a reflection of nature through the reproductive and productive work of giving birth to children, feeding them and ensuring their healthy growth. Eco feminism argues that Western colonialism and science have damaged this relationship of nature and natural resources. Nature is no longer revered and respected. Shyam runs a resort. He knows that Radha is feminine, but he views her as a passive resource, a decorative asset in addition to being a material asset. He objectifies her by classifying her mentally as "soiled goods", and yet she retains considerable value for him in terms of the wealth she owns.

### **Husbands Love - A Sham**

Increasingly Radha is aware that her husband's love is only a sham and her marriage is meaningless. A young travel writer from the west, Christopher Stewart, arrives with a cello and a tape recorder to include Koman's life in his book. He spends a lot of time with Koman and his beautiful unhappy niece, Radha. Radha is compulsively drawn by the personality of Chris. Shyam becomes a helpless observer as Radha embraces Chris in a passion he cannot comprehend.

### **Drawn into Extra-Marital Relationship**

Radha is drawn into a sexual relationship with Chris. It is a form of protest against cultural norms that deny a woman any expression of her sexuality. It voices feminists' continuing

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concern with giving women control over their bodies, providing them with the power and the knowledge to enjoy their sexuality and to have children if and when they wish, in short, the power to be able to say, “Our bodies are our own”. So he forces himself upon her, claiming it as his right and unmindful of her right to refuse, while Radha’s mind condemns it as rape. From this instance Nair discusses the act of marital rape through the character of Shyam, in the context of sexual violence within marriage.

### **Rape - A Male Aggression**

Feminists link rape to male aggression, patriarchy and the construction of masculinity in our societies. It is not about biology or a momentary loss of control, but is a tool of dominance and submission. In the case of Radha and Shyam, the institution of marriage becomes the platform upon which the game of sexuality and power are played out. Radha’s resistance is not without tension or fear. She ‘masquerades’ for a while as the dutiful wife in order to give herself time for hard decisions: “Fear makes one do things one would never do otherwise. Fear lets you compromise. Fear will even let you seduce your husband so that he thinks he imagined your transgressions, your betrayal, and that you still are his”. (*Mistress* 253)

### **Release from the Roles of Wife and Mistress**

Finally she rejects both Shyam and Chris and in doing so, releases herself from the roles of wife and mistress. In her decision to break away from both men in her life, but keep her urban baby, she gives her baby a maternal identity through the maternal care only, by rendering it “fatherless”. Radha, who had been mistress to two men (Chris and Shyam) and wife to one, moves towards becoming “mistress” of her own self.

### **A Passionate Story of Life**

In *Mistress*, Anita Nair focuses on the issue of domestic sexual violence. Anita Nair’s works reflect a wide range of interests making her a multifaceted writer of the present generation. *Mistress* is an intensive novel full of deep, mysterious, complex emotions that are very true to life. The story of each character unravels slowly and in the end culminates in a passionate story of life. All of the characters in the novel have a passion in life and in some way or other it decides the course of their lives, and it becomes a demanding mistress. In *Mistress*, she makes the closed

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realms of Kathakali performers come alive; she paints a poignant picture of the segregated, cloistered Muslim village.

## To Conclude

These two novels, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress* bring into focus the issue of self-realization. In addition, *Mistress* focuses on domestic sexual violence. Though Anita Nair is not a feminist, her stories delve deep into the expectations of married Indian women and the choices they make within the relationships. They are entangled in their suffering and rebellion born of that pain, and convey a message of hope, through the change that is out there and can become possible through one's courage and initiative.

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P. Bala Muthu Marieswari  
Assistant Professor in English  
Sri Ramasamy Naidu Memorial Arts and Science College  
Sattur-626203  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[balaleo9101988@gmail.com](mailto:balaleo9101988@gmail.com)