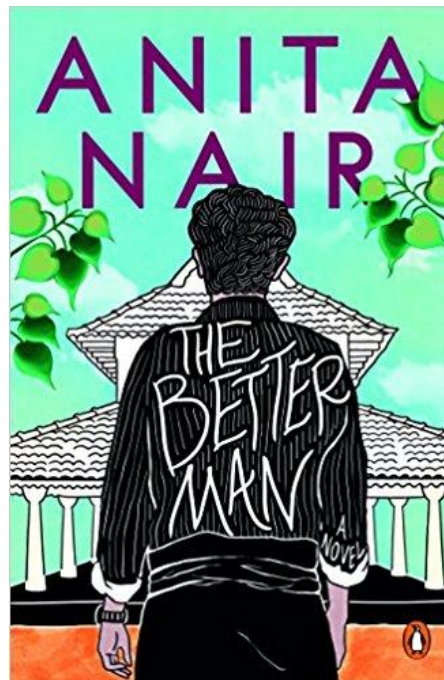


Subversion of Gender-Roles in Select Fiction of Anita Nair

Prof. V. Srinivas

A. Shobha Rani, M.A., M.Phil., PGDTE, B.Ed., APSET, Research Scholar



Introduction

The contribution of women writers in Indian writing in English is significant. If names like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu are associated with impressive poetry, those of Anita Desai, Arundhati Rai, etc. are associated with fiction. In the field of women's writing in English the contribution made by Anita Nair to Indian fiction deserves attentive study.

Anita Nair's Focus

Anita Nair exposes the conditions of men and women with wit and humor in a variety of themes. Her novels and writings deal with the social themes besides crime thrillers, a historical

novel, mythological references and magic realism etc. Anita Nair's fiction suggests an exclusive space for women, a space which helps them deconstruct the mythical identity and a distinct status of their new identity through a subversion of gender roles.

We find in Anita Nair's novels certain interesting processes like subversion of male-female gender roles, the impact of patriarchy as an ideology and its hegemony.

These aspects have been discussed in relation to the thematic organization of the novels in this paper.

Women Empowerment and Subversion of Gender Roles

The theme of women empowerment and subversion of gender roles is unfolded in the novel *The Better Man*, in the stories and characterization of Meenakshi, Anjana, Valsala, Damayanti and Parukutty in different levels of intensity. If this theme is very conspicuous in the story and character of Meenakshi, it is partially manifested in the stories and characters of Anjana, Valsala, Damayanti while in the case of Parukutty's story and character, this theme unfolds itself in a dilute manner.

Meenakshi

Meenakshi is related to Mukundan Nair, the protagonist, as a once-removed cousin. As children they grew together, played together and had initiation to formal education together. She was not only his companion but also his 'soul mate'. When they climb the Pulmoath Mountain together, it was she who was inspired first by the scenic beauty of the landscape from the top of the mountain and said, 'someday I am going to that far', (p. 52) and he too expresses the same wish. Here it is Meenakshi who suggests an ambition to Mukundan. This shows her individuality is shaped better than that of Mukundan. When they come off age and Meenakshi has her first menstruation, their meetings were prohibited. They meet secretly and 'His need to be with her was more than hers.' This shows Mukundan's dependence on her who is equal to him in age as an adolescent. Whenever he tried to occupy her bodily terrains, and tortures her, she doesn't accept him in a docile manner. On the other hand, she shows her resistance violently:

Sometimes she would let him draw his secret vicious pleasure from her pain. Sometimes she would raise her foot and expertly kick him in his ball. Painful enough so he would let her go and light enough to cause no real injury (TBM p. 54)

Gradually she allows him to make love to her in a manner of innocent adolescence. As time passes he forgets her and thinks that she has also forgotten him. Yet when he meets her next he tries to embrace her. But she gently pushes his hands away. This also shows Meenakshi's strength of decision-making and individuality of behaviour. As an adolescent she is attracted towards naxalism. The narrator observes:

Meenakshi had become a Naxalite. Armed with books on revolutions and driven by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin, Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of bourgeois vermin. And her first target of attack was Achuthan Nair—Mukundan's father, her uncle. Feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression. (TBM p. 56)

Naxalite Meenakshi

However, her *naxalism* is not very violent. Young naxalite used to meet on the top of Pulmoath Mountain. Meenakshi's attraction for naxalism is not so much serious as an intention to escape the suffocation and boredom of her life at Kaikurussi. Therefore, the activities of Meenakshi and her naxalite companions are not severe. In other places naxalites were creating havoc by killing policemen in broad day light, by burning grain-laden barrens and by kidnapping rich merchant's sons. Therefore, people are afraid of Meenakshi including Achuthan Nair. For, her naxal violence is just hollow to keep people away from her. Even Achuthan Nair warned his men to keep her in good humour and not to provoke her. This shows how Meenakshi can influence even people like Achuthan Nair, a tyrant, with her courageous behaviour, not indulging in any violent crime. While Mukundan wished that Meenakshi with her naxal companions could have killed his father, of which he is incapable. Meenakshi just threatens Achuthan Nair and does him no harm. This shows her natural courage and human kindness as a mature feminine figure.

That Meenakshi can take bold decisions herself, admire beauty and art is proved when she falls in love with Balan, a handsome, well-built and strong Kathakali dancer two inches taller than her. Once she also confides with Mukundan that her husband Balan will take her along with him on his dance performance tours and finally she will be able to escape the prison of her Kaikurussi life. Here we can see the diametric contrast between the personalities of Mukundan, the protagonist and Meenakshi, his cousin. If he is an utter coward unable and even to get married until his retirement, Meenakshi leads a very active and courageous life, falls in love with Balan, marries him and with an enthusiastic optimism wants to escape the suffocation of her limited life at Kaikurussi and to reach green pastures at large. This is how her aspiration, ‘someday I am going that far’ is materialized.

Suffering under Patriarchy

But destiny like patriarchy has been unkind to Meenakshi. After their marriage, pregnant Meenakshi gives birth to a son and Balan never comes back to Kaikurussi to take Meenakshi away with him. When her relatives and neighboring women at Kaikurussi shower their feigned sympathy over her, she is aware of their inner evil and can curse them for their crocodile tears. However, she can’t hide her spite and curses them silently as follows:

She pretended to listen with great humility while heaping a thousand curses on their heads. May a freak storm drown your hay! May your brother hang from the gallows! May your husband be bitten on his penis by a scorpion when he squats to urinate behind some bush! (p. 58)

Family Responsibility

Meenakshi doesn’t regret her abandoned state and her responsibility to bring up her little son, Mani and support her old widowed mother, as ordinary women do. She works hard, and with the permission of the village Panchayath opens a Balwadi where poor and orphan children are fed with milk and taken care of such that she is able to take care of her own son also. She runs a small petty shop selling bangles, ribbons, buttons, toffees, stationery items, vegetables, small medicines to make both ends meet and she also does business as an insurance policy agent. She also takes care of her husband Balan who is suffering from TB and whom she brought to Kaikurussi. She

takes a courageous decision to leave Kaikurussi for Trissur to work as a matron in a working women's hostel. Her decision to leave Kaikurussi is caused by the treatment she receives from the villagers of Kaikurussi. The way how Mukundan reacts to her decision reveals her character:

Kaikurussi to Trissur

The very idea of Meenakshi going away made him feel uncomfortable. It was like being told that the Pulmoath Mountain was going to be leveled. Some things and some people suggest permanence. (TBM p. 249)

Meenakshi's early enthusiasm for life, her energy, originality of thought, fearlessness, maturity of mind and body, presents her character to the reader as a pleasant relief vis-a-vis the character of Mukundan Nair as a man. She is more dynamic, vivacious and courageous than him. Even at a later stage in life, in spite of her unhappy married life, she never loses her courage and hope. In this respect also her character offers a complete contrast to that of Mukundan Nair, the protagonist of the novel. Her final decision to leave Kaikurussi, her native village, is an antithesis to that of retired Mukundan who has always tried to be away from Kaikurussi, but who returns to the same place in his superannuated life. This is a complete antithesis and subversion of gender roles. Anita Nair has portrayed the character of Meenakshi in a deft manner to underscore the subversion or reversal of stereotypical gender roles.

Valsala and Subversion of Gender Roles

The next female character that illustrates subversion of gender roles is Valsala, the wife of Prabhakaran Master, a school teacher. As a young girl Valsala was bubbling with natural passion and perhaps she had dreamt of a Gandharva making love to her. Her mother, when she was a young girl had warned her not to step out in night when the Pala tree blooms in their compound, into a flower:

When the *pala* tree's fragrance fills the night sky, the Gandharvas come prowling, looking for virgins to seduce. Once a Gandharva has spotted you, there is no escape. He'll make you his slave with his soft voice, gentle caresses, and sensual magic.

No mortal man will ever be able to satisfy you then,' her mother had said in an inexplicable voice, as if she were reliving memory. (TBM p. 128/129)

Under Dominant Patriarchy

But later her marriage with Prabhakaran Master completely shattered her hopes because he has never appreciated her beauty, nor has he quenched her thirsty desires. Consider the following passage about her husband, Prabhakaran Master's behavior:

He never looked into her face or tried to fathom her desires. He never felt the curve of her hip or cupped the fullness of her breasts. He never whispered in her ears how beautiful she was or tried to show her with caresses how desirable she was. He couldn't even fill her womb with a child. He was preoccupied with his body, his illnesses, the strain of keeping forty unruly boys under control all day, and staying clear of school politics. Sleep was his only escape, and, curled on his side in a foetal ball, he drifted into a state of blissful non-existence broken only by little snores. (TBM p. 131)

She grows up to her fortieth year in such an uneventful life, finding no outlet for her desires and no Gandharva seeking her company. Consider the narrator's comments:

Valsala was just another housewife enmeshed in her daily chores, the upkeep of the compound, and watching television every evening. There were no surprises in her life.

Valsala had never known an awakening of her senses. Not once in her life had a rare and exotic flower blossomed in her yard, filling the air with its overpowering fragrance. (TBM p. 128)

Sudden Awakening and Finding a *Gandharva*

Suddenly one night the Pala tree at her door step has blossomed. Her passions are enkindled. In those days, a young man, Sridharan happened to become their neighbour. He was twenty-nine years old, but Valsala, eleven years older than him, doesn't mind the difference of the age and considers him as her Gandharva.

All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the scent of the Pala flowers. Strange sensations coursed through her. (TBM p. 129)

The next morning, she has a complete shower bath, decorated herself, goes to the Pala tree and invites the Gandharva, her unknown lover:

She stood there rubbing sandalwood paste into her skin, her bare breasts, and thighs. ‘Come to me, Gandharva,’ she beseeched. ‘Can’t you smell the fragrance of want in me? Look, the Pala has burst into flower. I know you are there somewhere. Seduce me with your soft voice and caress. Make me your lover, your slave,’ she cried into the night. (TBM p. 129)

For a beautiful and passionate girl married at her seventeenth year to an almost impotent valetudinarian, twelve years older than her and who has spent twenty-three years of uneventful, unfulfilled life confined to household routine chores, like Valsala, there is no wonder that in her fortieth year an ordinary, self-centered, businessman like Sridharan appears to be a Gandharva. She is attracted to him and they become illicit lovers. In this way Valsala develops her seemingly immoral love relation with Sridharan in a hurry not to waste her youth further in a dry, mechanical unfulfilled life when she is forty years old.

Evoking Readers’ Sympathy

What is important in the character of Valsala is the sympathy she evokes in the reader. From a strict patriarchal point of view, she is a criminal and yet her crime is motivated by her earnest attempts to find fulfillment in her life as a beautiful and passionate woman. It is in this context that the character of Valsala illustrates a subversion of gender roles. At a time even in modern India, a countable number of husbands have been ill-treating, torturing and killing their wives in the name of more dowries, suspicion of fidelity or covering their own inability, Valsala being a woman plays the role of a wicked husband killing his wife to cover his greed and inefficiency. In other words Valsala behaves like a man and her character in the novel illustrates a

subversion of gender roles. May be, most of us will not approve of Valsala's behavior, but the truth remains that her life is an example of reversal of stereotypical roles.

Anjana, Divorce and Hard Choice

The next important female character in the novel in relation to reversal or subversion of gender roles is that of Anjana. Anjana is married to Ravindran in her twenty seventh-year when she had lost her hope for marriage. Their marriage proves to be a misfit or mismatch and they seek separation through divorce. It is at this stage of Anjana's life that Mukundan meets her. They become acquaintances, and then friends, and their friendship leads to love. They decide to marry. In the meantime, Mukundan is more concerned with his public image and popularity as a member of the Community Hall committee than his love for Anjana, tries to postpone their marriage and to appease her, he gives her the gift of a golden necklace. Anjana realizes his priorities in life and expresses her indignation as follows:

When you told me that you were a weak and unreliable person, I told myself that I was fortunate that the man I loved was someone mature enough to know his own limitations. Someone who wasn't afraid to admit it. I was wrong,' she said, pulling her clothes on. 'You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it. What a great trick that is! To admit to your frailty so no one will condemn you later on. You disgust me. Please leave,' she said quietly. 'If the committee members hear of your visits, they might throw you out of that precious committee of yours. We don't want that to happen, do we? After all, this is the culmination of your life's dreams. (TBM p.323)

Anjana's behavior when she bluntly rejects Mukundan's love and his golden gift verges on reversal of role, in her effort to assert her self-respect and individual dignity as a woman in spite of her disadvantaged social life as an abandoned wife and a prospective divorcee. In her character the reader finds an element of reversal of gender role though not as intensified as in the case of the

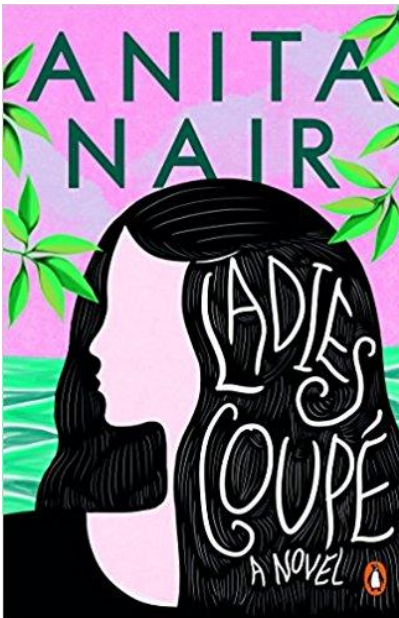
character of Meenakshi in a virtuous manner and in the character of Valsala in a wicked or negative manner.

Parukutty another case

Parukutty is the last female character in the novel from the point of view of reversal of gender roles. She remained a faithful, loyal and unquestioning wife to her tyrannical and feudal husband Achuthan Nair until she breathed her last. But when her ego and self-respect as his legal wife is jeopardized, she asserts herself in a strong manner. This happens only twice in her life. When her husband wants to bring his concubine Ammini into their house, Parukutty resists him with all her dignity and indignation such that Achuthan Nair changes his decision. Similarly she challenges his decision successfully for a second time when he tries to store the harvested paddy from his own land in their house. Parukutty bluntly says that he can't do it since she knows that he gives this paddy to Ammini. She finally declares that paddy harvested from the field which is in her name only can be stored in their house.

On these two occasions Parukutty's behaviour, like Anjana's, is on the verge of reversal of gender roles, but not in a complete way. Parukutty succeeds in affirming her role as legitimate wife in her life. In this respect her bold confirmation as a wife is not only surprising but also admirable. Any other ordinary traditional wife, would have behaved as Parukutty does.

Ladies Coupe–Akhila



If we reverse the roles of the female characters with male characters, the validity of this assumption will be confirmed in second novel of Anita Nair's, *Ladies Coupe*. For instance, Akhila though she is a daughter takes the responsibility of a family after her father's demise which is the duty of a son she sacrifices her own youth and life, remains a lifelong spinster to bring up her siblings and looks after them till they are settled. Look at the narrator's observation, in this context:

'To Amma, Akhila had become the head of the household. Someone who would chart and steer the course of the family's destiny to safe shores.' (LC p. 76)

In this way Akhila's family responsibilities have not allowed her to think of herself or her own life. The following passage describes how her life changed into a mechanical routine:

The next few years went by without much incident. Their lives were led with military precision. That was the only way Akhila knew how to preserve order and keep her family from floating away from its moorings. Dawns diminished to dusk and Sundays dwindled to be the day when she washed, starched, dried and ironed the six cotton saris that comprised her entire office-going wardrobe. (LC p. 76)

Narayan, her first younger brother, finished his polytechnic and joined the tank factory as a machinist; Narsi, her second younger brother, the first post-graduate in the family and decided to marry his college principal's daughter who is also a Brahmin but as it was not a good practice for younger brother to be married before his elder brother's marriage, Narayan's marriage was also arranged and the two marriages were performed on the same date and time, in the same wedding hall. Then Padma, her younger sister, had come to maturity and her marriage was also performed when she was twenty-two. Akhila had made all arrangements, arranged money and other ornaments not only for Padma's marriage but also for the marriages of Narayan and Narsi. It is ironical that none of them had ever thought of Akhila's marriage. Even her mother who objected her younger son Narsi to be married before Narayan, his elder brother did not give a single moment's thought to Akhila or her marriage, though she is the eldest of her children. Akhila was hopeful that her mother, if not her brothers would remember about Akhila being a woman and needed to be married. Akhila has been aware of all these things and yet she forgives them and unknowingly sacrifices her personal life and happiness to protect her family.

In her daily travel by the local train to her office at Ambattur, she happens to meet a young man, Hari, by name, who is much younger to her, of Narayan's age; a love affair develops between them. She goes with Hari to Mahabalipuram and spends a couple of days with him to make love without the notice of her mother. When Hari proposes to marry her but Akhila is afraid of social scandal. Time passes by and now Akhila is forty-five. She decides to take a holiday by undertaking a journey to Kanyakumari. By now her mother passed away and her siblings are settled in life. She is a free woman now. She starts and gets off at Kanyakumari and lodges in a posh hotel.

Every morning and evening, she goes out for a walk. Sometimes people stare at her. They are not used to the sight of a single woman all by herself. A foreigner they can understand, but an Indian woman... .. she can read their looks. It doesn't matter. She doesn't care anymore.

... Elderly spinster. Older sister. Once the breadwinner of the family. Still the cash cow. (LC p. 270)

In her evening walks on the sea shore, she comes into contact with a young man, Vinod, who is attracted to her. She calls him into her room and makes love. When he wants to marry her, she gently avoids him. She feels quite independent:

Akhila has no more fears. Why then should she walk with a downcast head?

She throws her head back and voices her triumph. (LC p. 275)

After three days she returns to Bangalore where she has bought a flat and where her sister Padma is also living along with her family presently. Padma and her brother Narsi try to exploit Akhila, persuade her to be with Padma in her flat while Narayan is sympathetic towards her. Akhila is mature enough not to succumb to their exploitative maneuvers. She wants to call Hari, her former lover, and there is a response of which she is not sure. She takes the response in her own stride.

In the case of Akhila, she takes the initiation to satiate her physical needs like a man and does not shackle herself in the chains of family bonds. Her story and life is a striking example of woman's empowerment and subversion of gender roles.

Margaret Shanti

In *Ladies Coupe`* the next character Margaret Shanti succeeds in gathering the scattered pieces of empowerment into an impregnable whole by taking a highly sophisticated revenge on her egoistic and tyrannical husband who is tamed, when he becomes fat with her overfeeding. Margaret takes a due advantage of Paulraj's defect of gluttony.

The third passenger Margaret Shanti was brilliant as a student and wanted to pursue her higher education up to Ph.D. But on the persuasion of her parents, she has married Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of a Christian missionary S.R.P. Trust School. After marriage she gradually realizes that her husband treats her no better than a pretty doll in the house.

He is unbearably egotistic and stickler for superficial discipline. He bloats in self-praise and flatters himself of being a man of integration with a public image. Discovering his artificiality in his value system and his biological attitude towards his students, colleagues, school management

and general public and his vanity of physical fitness, Margaret Shanti decides to teach him a lesson. Her plan of action in this regard was as follows:

That night my hate propelled me along. Oil of vitriol destroys water. It dehydrates all traces of water from any other compound. But that night I was Aqua Regia. Royal water. All acid and hate. Capable of dissolving even gold, as alchemists knew. Capable of dissolving shame and remorse and keeping my hate for him intact. (LC p. 125)

Note that Margaret's thoughts are orchestrated by chemical terminology as she is an expert chemist. She cooks very delicious items of food and taking advantage of his uncontrolled gluttony, over-feeds him such that he becomes fat, dull, and inactive in a short period of time. This leads to her upper hand in the management of domestic affairs and office matters. The theme of her quest for revenge ends in her victory as a woman and offers her a final sense of satisfaction.

Subversion of Male-Female Roles: Mistress

This significant theme subversion of male-female roles, a recurrent one in almost all social novels of Anita Nair is observed in her third novel *Mistress*. In *Mistress* we find Radha, a female character display individual empowerment and freedom, the prerogatives of man in the Indian cultural context and thus illustrate the theme of subversion of gender roles in the novel, behaving more like a man than a woman. In the very first meeting with Chris at the railway station it is Radha who initiates to shake hands with Chris while he tries to fold his hands as if to indicate Namaste. This small incident is an example of subversion of gender roles wherein Radha behaves like a man while Chris behaves awkwardly as a stranger as well as a woman.

... the young woman stepped forward. 'Hello, you must be Christopher Stewart,' she said. 'I am Radha. Welcome.'

Her hand stretched towards him even as Chris folded his hands in a Namaste as his guidebook had suggested he do when greeting women in India.(M. 2)

Radha, Angela and Maya

Another example of this theme is Radha who confesses about her pre-marital sex on her wedding night to Shyam, her legal husband. In this respect we find similar tendencies in Angela and Maya. Instead of a man taking a woman lover abroad for companionship, Angela, a woman takes Koman along with her to London.

In a similar fashion, instead of Koman, the man going and meeting Maya, the woman, Maya takes the initiative to visit Koman often. It is Koman who requests Maya to co-habit with him while Maya refuses and decides to go to Madras. Here also we find reversal of gender roles since Maya behaves like a man and Koman does so like a woman.

So is the case with Lalitha. Koman takes the initiative and requests her to marry him but Lalitha refuses for the fear of social stigma. This is another instance of subversion of gender roles. Consider the narration by Koman:

I proposed marriage to Lalitha. ‘Why?’ she asked... .. ‘You in your house and I in mine. Besides, this way there is no room for gossip. ... ‘ ...‘No, Koman. I prefer it this way. I also know that this way you will never tire of me,’ she said. (M p. 416)

In this way the male-like behavior of Radha, Angela, and Maya is illustrative of the theme of subversion of gender roles in different degrees of intensity, thereby dramatizing female empowerment.

Abbreviations used

TBM: The Better Man

LC: Ladies Coupe`

M: Mistress

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Prof. V Srinivas
Dean of Arts
Kakatiya University
Warangal
Andhra Pradesh
India



A. Shobha Rani, M.A., M.Phil., PGDTE, B.Ed., APSET, Research Scholar
Telangana University
Nizamabad503322
Telangana
India
shobhasampath@yahoo.com