



STRUGGLING EXPERIENCE OF ANITA NAIR'S FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

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Abstract

Anita Nair is one of the most popular novelists of India and she can be compared with Margaret Atwood of Canada. In most of her novels, Nair explores the sensibility, the inner workings of the mind of her characters. The conspicuous influence by Virginia Woolf remains deeply embedded in her novels. "The Times" comments on Anita Nair as she has the ability to shape and refine a piece of her own intense imagination into an independent piece of art. This paper will deal with problems related to gender conflicts and struggles regarding Indian morality on issues pertaining to the social taboo of illegitimacy and divorce that subordinates the female gender. It will attempt to study the conflicts faced by the protagonists in the select texts from a feminist perspective. Further, it will examine the conflicts on the issue of female economic dilemma and the nature of the unpaid worker. It will also concentrate on the discourse of female education with special reference to the mainstream Indian women. Imperialism and the concept of patriarchy are devoted to feminist discourse as it emphasizes a relationship of disparity and prejudice.

Keywords: Anita Nair, Struggle, female protagonists, feelings, perceptions

Anita Nair has dealt with cultural, political and social issues in a good number of their novels, but the focus has always been on the human condition and it has been artistically rendered with a deep sense of compassion for the characters. Indian women in view of their limited freedom and insular mode of life, have shown for ages a marked tendency towards growing introspective which is precluded for a neurotic reaction. This sort of feminine sensibility has a close relation to neurosis at least in the Indian context. Neurosis almost always results from a compulsion to repress one's feelings and desires because they are not in consonance with the accepted norms of society. Women are mercilessly denied opportunities for open expression of their true feelings in the tradition-bound Indian society. In this respect and in many other respects they are at a great disadvantage when compared to men. In spite of their privileged position, the women novelists have gone through conflicts which are not at great variance with those of other Indian women. Conflicts of a qualitatively different nature have always characterized the life of every freedom-conscious woman in India, including the novelists. Anita Nair has therefore naturally created characters that are capable of close and sensitive experience of life as

they are. The novelist higher education has given them a deep insight into the human psyche and a clear critical perspective to re-examine tradition.

They shed their inhibitions in a marvellous fashion and showed surprising frankness, boldness and honesty in the fictional treatment of the working of the human psyche. Even the men novelists have not been so frank. They have instinctively shied away from such matters as sex, while the women have elaborately but artistically treated them. Contrary to what one would expect in view of the oppressive, male-dominated social codes operative in India, feminist considerations do not appear prominently in the novels of these writers. While their foreign counterparts like Margaret Atwood and Lucette Finas have lent invaluable support to the feminist movement by their fictional endeavour, these writers seem to be content to render in fictional terms the human condition, barely discriminating between the sexes. Anita Nair's Protagonists are aware of themselves first as human beings and only then as women or men. One feels that more of great value emerges such fictional endeavour than from the textbook demonstration of the degradation of women at the hands of men and the battle-crimes against male domination which are so characteristic of the feminist writers of West. The feminist approach thus proves to be of little value to the study of these novelists, especially for the study of the neurotic characters. Another important theme that has been occurrence harped upon is the cultural conflicts resulting from a character's exposure to a different culture. Again, the extent of cultural shock depends on the individual's vulnerability and the psychic conflicts he carries in his unconscious. Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* is often chosen to demonstrate what devastation a hostile culture can cause in a sensitive individual. A study of *Wife* shows Dimple is an entirely new light. The already existing neurotic picture in her is precipitated and aggravated by her American life. Her husband does not suffer from any those conflicts because his psyche is structured entirely different. What then ultimately interest us is not so many cultural conflicts peruse but the psychological sufferings of the individual to which the cultural conflicts often contribute.

When her novels are studied in the light of the culture or feminist themes the critical focus generally happens to be at the macro level. Such critical pursuit runs the risk of becoming a study of characters as cultural stereotypes or as abstractions of ideals or ideas. It further tends to distortion the finer contours of the individual characters and thus overlooks the real achievement of the novelist because the novelist has here depicted generalizations in terms of specific. It is the particular individual who is the object of attention in every one of these novels. Cultural and feminist studies proceed from an idea and go on to hunt for evidence in the individual's reaction to prove a contention and tend to be reductionist in the process. Among the emerging writers, the story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression. Anita Nair's protagonists are females from the Pure Indian who are in conflict with various issues related to the male-dominated society. Individual psychology thus shaped by individuals within a social construct mould and shapes the individual's ideology that further reflects on the society in order to maintain an organised social set-up. Each individual is, therefore, bred, shaped and moulded by the social psychology that one is born into. The Indian women encompass a majority of the male population is shaped and moulded by the acceptable set of scruples that is reflected in the individuals belonging to the Indian women society. Though Patriarchy is a common concept in every woman's life, Anita Nair depicts carefully the diversity within each woman, as she did not want to put the lives of women to one ideal. Thus, the middle class that encapsulates a majority of the intellectual Indian population, working in varied fields, living the life of „acceptable bourgeois standards“, with a „great deal of leisure“ represent the mainstream of the Indian class structure, and is the centre of attraction for writers and theorists. Although the middle-class women experience more freedom, yet they are still under the dictate of male authority in the socio-economic aspects, and this element is the focus of study of the select texts.

Anita Nair is the most gifted writer to reckon with. Her maiden novel. „The Better Man“ has placed her among the most self-conscious Indian novelists and her second novel, „Ladies Coupe“ is in some ways even better than her first, though it is impossible to draw a parallel between the two since they are largely different. In „Ladies Coupe“ Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies a relationship of inequality. Anita Nair is primarily a novelist of moods, of persistent states of mind or psyche. Most of her extend the narrative of inner states existence. Which do not lend themselves to a coherent plotting or systematic structuring? The diffused nature of her novels is consistent with her concern to depict the psychic state of protagonists are generally sensitive females; withdraw into a

sequestered world of their own. Anita Nair writes sensitively, and occasionally, morbidly on the dilemma of this closed and sequestered world. Anita Nair encounters the male-centric morality and ethics in Indian society; maintenance of polite social front and the quiet withdrawal at a time when one needs freedom. The social psychology imbibed by individuals living in a society is the reason. Anita Nair seems to suggest traditional middle male-centric Indian society when an unwanted issue arises in a certain condition. The novelist also seems to suggest that under trying circumstances, every individual need space for adjustments and recovery. She feels that their absence is, in fact, reassuring as she will not have to face crude parental remarks. Since the social notion on unwed mothers and divorcees play an important role in the social set-up, Nair is uncertain about her future, but she is certain of her determination to keep her baby and to make it her very own.

Nair's protagonist, therefore, goes beyond the boundary of madness and compromise. Although the novel partly reflects the life of each and every Indian woman, it conveys the social notion on the issue of the unwed mother and her child. Nair gives insight into the ways on how women often have to abandon their career and take the subordinate role as a housekeeper. Akhila is a 45 years old unmarried woman, who takes several roles of a daughter, sister, aunt and the breadwinner of the family. As her father dies suddenly, she takes the burden of the whole family on her young shoulders. Akhila follows the age-old traditional and social norms by submerging herself to domesticity in order to curb her vile mood at her workplace. Akhila's submission to the social norms earns the name of being the breadwinner and the male as the financial provider. Akhila thereby aligns herself to the middle-class morality as a daughter and sister. Simultaneously, Nair gives the incident of the female who is willing to free herself from the traditional understanding of being a female. As Indra Devi says, "Anita Nair probably hints at the family's easy acceptance of her as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods" (220). When Akhila sees a man in the railway station surrounded by a whole family of uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents, she finds a parallel between him and her. As Narsi her brother became the first graduate and start a teaching job and Narayan another brother joined the boiler factory as an operator, "Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?" (77). Though she was the wage earner of the family, she was not considered as the head of the family and her desires and needs were slightest concerned. Since Narsi was a man he did not ask for anybody's permission to get married but "decided" to get married.

And both Narayan and Narsi had their weddings in the same hall, on the same day and at the same time. The traditional and moral notion that binds Nair on the issue of marriage is reflected in the select texts and therefore her protagonists the Indian traditional notion on marriage. Nair further points out the male weakness to sexually tempt the female in workplaces and it directly projects the male infidelity within the marriage bond. Though marriage is honoured by Indian society, the novelist indicates that infidelity does not bar the males within the social order. Akhila waited for Amma or her brothers to say something about her marriage but they never asked, "What about you? You've been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a husband, children, a home of your own?" (77). Though Akhila had done her duties, all that of a head of a family to her brothers and sister, she was not recognized as the real head, just because she was a woman. Amma expected her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, "Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first" (150). When Akhila argued that she was their elder sister and why she should ask their permission Amma simply says, "You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" (150). Akhila's encounter with her school friend awakened her spirit to think of life to live her own. But even then, there grew the patriarchal domination. When Akhila boldly told the Padma about her decision to live alone, she without reluctance says, "Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?" (204). When Akhila says for her defiance, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent" (204), Padma ridiculed at her telling, "They are the men of the family" (204). Everyone including the Padma, Narsi and Narayan were strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure and hence were unable to bear the thought of a woman living alone.

The Indian social taboo seems to restrict only the female gender while the disgrace and the taboo attached to illegitimacy and divorce do not seem to bind the male gender, as it binds the female

gender. It is clear from the passage that illegitimacy and divorce are gendered specific as per the Indian social notion on taboo. Anita Nair illustrates through her male characters. Gender conflict that arises due to patriarchal ideology on the issue of inheritance is illustrated in *Ladies Coupe*. Since women face further problems regarding inheritance, for an employer in India to discriminate against a woman on the grounds of her being married, it is not illegal for instance in respect of maternity leave - to discriminate against her on the grounds that she is not married. As we read the story of Margaret Shanthi, it is obvious how women are dominated by man-power. Men like Ebenezer Paulraj are like the colonizers who are unable to see and praise the worth of the women, who are like the colonized. She married Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice and at the immediate willingness of her family. She was a Chemistry teacher, not an ordinary teacher but the one who had been a gold medalist. Initially, Margaret did not understand the deep-rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her extreme love for him had made her blind. Though at times she felt the pain of it she convinced herself saying, "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" (109).

Ebe is just a male chauvinist when he takes the influence to ask Margaret to abort the baby off, the first baby off, when she conveyed him the good news with all happiness. Not only in that, but he continued to thrust upon his sovereignty over her in deciding her higher studies, career and even simple things like choice of food and her hairdressing for he says, "What's the point of working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob" (105). She was so patient and gulped in all insults thrown by him on her but later woke up to the fact and planned her own strategy to prove her strength.

As her husband was becoming more and more selfish, dominant and deceitful, Margaret was mechanically compelled to teach him a lesson. She was taken to the height of irritation as he started throwing insults on her in front of his favourite Coterie. When he said to the Coterie "When I think of Chemistry, what comes to mind is the odour of rotten eggs" (130), the anger in her fizzed for she believed how he had turned the evening into another moment of achievement for himself. She thought, all that was good and noble about my life that he had destroyed, the baby that died even before it had a soul, ... there was nothing left for me to dream of and the words rose to the surface again: I HATE HIM. I HATE HIM. What am I going to do? (131). She chose flattery as the weapon to bring down Ebe's self-esteem. She privileged and flattered and fed him with fatty nourishment since dawn till night, till fat found its home on him, and turned him into a fat man, a quiet man and an easy man who sought her for food and sex and every way she knew. As Dr.T. VaraLakshmi says, By making him fat she erodes his self-esteem and feels he is an easy man to live with now, in and out of health institute. Margaret gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe's self-esteem. She succeeds in achieving her emotional fulfilment keeping the family ties intact, though some justifications contain a modicum of sense (69). The character of Margaret shows that the woman could conquer the dominant man.

The youngest of the six is Sheela, fourteen years' old who talks of her maternal grandmother, in whom one could see the manifestations of femininity. Anita Nair has not only brought out the need to assert the individuality of the female selfhood but also finely brought out the issue of female child abuse through the character portrayal of Sheela. As Jude's Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, "Sheela's retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men" (122). Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar as, "One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time" (66). So, Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her, but developed confidence to protect herself from it in future for it is said, "Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home" (66). Even Sheela's friend Hasina and her mother were able to understand the man's attempt to touch her unnecessarily but they were helpless. When once Naazar knotted the bows in her sleeves, "She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother's eyes" (66). Thereafter Sheela took the right decision that "She would never go to Hasina's house again" (66) as a means of her self-protection.

Thus, Sheela was strong in her defiance against a man's abuse on her physique. Within Sheela's story, Anita Nair has brought in an incident, where a girl named Celine became a victim to a man's instinct. Celine became pregnant because of her friend's father and her family moved to a place where

no one would know about her abortion. But it is said, “the friend’s father went to a faraway town where he would find plenty of young girls to ruin everyone said” (65). Through this incident, Nair has brought out the unjust treatment of women by men. Even while playing games as a child, a girl is destined to choose to play cooking or babysitting games as it is said, “A kitchen was set up for her to play house and mother games. Sometimes Prabha Devi’s mother joined in her daughter’s games, pretending to be an adult child while her daughter tried hard to be a child-adult” (170). Basically, a woman is never liked to come out with opinions. Prabha Devi’s mother finds great pleasure in the company of her daughter than in her four sons put together. But she conceals it within her for “she had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell, to be shunned,” (170). She swallows this thought as she has done all her life.

Though Prabha Devi’s childhood had been this way, in future she grooms herself as a woman who can measure up her life with a difference. She doesn’t want to define herself within a more mechanical and monotonous life of a homely wife and a mother. She is not satisfied with this life and craves for something more. Moreover, she feels guilty for her files upon her husband’s friend Pramod and tries to come out of it. Prabha Devi’s weakness does not escape Anita Nair, yet she displays very real respect for her as she has done with every other woman. And Prabha Devi achieves the self - actualization by learning swimming on her own out of great desire. As T. Varalakshmi says, “She triumphs over her innate timidity and gains peak experience of supreme content bringing tremendous happiness to her husband as well” (69). Marikolanthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry women on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, “It’s not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself... there is too much at risk” (215). To ensure her mother’s fear, her childhood innocence is destroyed when Murugesan attempts physical brutality on her. Marikolanthu never wants to tie up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty – one she lives alone and wrestles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to rely upon her brothers nor wants a penny from Sujata or her husband but decides to make her living off her own, working as a servant maid in a house. She defines her as an independent woman. Her strong aversion for the physical brutality attempted on her, evokes a strong aversion for her son Muthu. But in the end, she feels ashamed for having rejected him and even using him. As Indra Devi observes, “In the end, she decided to “measure happiness” as Muthu’s mother.

Anita Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring awareness to the society of women’s demands and their need for self-expression. Karpagam is portrayed as a strong woman striving for self-definition in a patriarchal social organization. She is a widow but unlike other widows, she wears kumkum and colourful clothes. She is a courageous woman who breaks the shackles of patriarchy when she says, I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men (202). Listening to the lives of various women in the coupe Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari as an empowered woman to rediscover her “self”. The more she wants to get rid of her life she had lived for others, she desires more of her life, that is more of Hari and executes her decision to get reunited connected him over the phone. Finally, she succeeds in her defiance against patriarchy. She subverts the repressive forces of patriarchal ideas that have chained her not letting to discover her “self”. Thus, in the novel, *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair has presented 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. So, Anita Nair’s women raise the question of their way of life consolidated by patriarchy, and see it not only as of the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors.

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