

ANITA NAIR AS A POST- MODERN INDIAN WOMAN NOVELIST

A. Phaniraja Kumar

Research Scholar,
Rayalaseema University,
Kurnool, AP. India

Janardhanreddy K.

Asst. Prof. of English
CBIT-Proddatur, Kadapa,
A.P, India

ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is one of the finest women writers of modern India. Her novels have taken on an easy space, giving enough silage to an engaging reader, yet not being inscrutable “Books should not seem an effort,” she says. All the five novels ‘The Better Man’, ‘Ladies Coupe’, ‘Mistress’, ‘Lessons in Forgetting’ and ‘Cut Like Wound’ have a typical regional ambience of Kerala except the two novels. The last two novels have ‘Bangalore’ as a locale. They deal with radical changes in attitude towards Sex, Social roles and marital relationships.

Keywords: Coupe, delineates ancestral, dilapidated, feminine, hardened, indifference, inquisitiveness, patriarchal, post-modern, psycho-thriller, subjectivity and thwack.

The emergence of a new generation of Indian Women in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties who tend to interrogate the tradition and images of women in terms of femininity and female identities and patriarchal value, led to a radical change in attitude towards sex, social roles and marital relationships. This concept makes many Indian woman novelists to explore female subjectivity. Among these post-modern Indian woman novelists, Anitha Nair is one of the finest writers who demarcate her typical regional ambience of Kerala with its wide variety of people of all classes. She wrote five Novels so far. Basing on the trajectory of female identify, let us examine each novel of Anitha Nair.

Anita Nair’s ‘*The Better Man*’ (2000) debut Novel is set in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the state of Kerala. The protagonist of the novel, Mukundan, an elderly bachelor and a retired government employee, returns to his village from where he had fled when he was eighteen, abandoning his suffering mother. Back in his ancestral house, he is haunted by a sense

of failure for having abandoned his mother, for not measuring up father Achuthan who has a mistress. Mukundan discovers that what should have been his rightful place in the village had been usurped by an upstart, Power House Ramakrishna. In the first few weeks of his return home, he befriends Bhasi, or One-screw-loose-Bhasi as he is known, who is a house painter and a practitioner of a system of medicine he has evolved by combining several kinds of healing processes. Despite Bhasi's compassion for him, Mukundan betrays him when he seeks his intervention in fighting against Power House Ramakrishna's attempt to build a community hall in the village on Bhasi's piece of land. When Bhasi refuses to sell his land, Power House Ramakrishna threatens to throw him out of the village. Mukundan sets out to save Bhasi's land but is completely won over by Power House Ramakrishnan who makes Mukundan a member of the community hall committee and makes him feel important. Mukundan also withdraws himself from Anjana, a married woman and a school teacher with whom he is in love.

Anjana is the niece of Mukundan's friend K. M. Nair who remains unmarried till she is twenty seven. Just when she considers herself as "one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, sunken cheeks and vacant eyes" (223), her marriage with thirty five years old Ravindran is fixed. After marriage, Anjana is shocked at her husband's indifference. "She wishes there was some way she could discover his likes and dislikes. All what she wanted to do was to please him" (227). Even after three months he remains "a man who used her body when impulse took him. There was little conversation between them and hardly companionship" (228). She desperately needs someone to share her agony, to console her, and she thinks of Mukundan. She expresses her anger against Ravindran to Mukundan: "Just because we are man and wife in the eyes of law, he thinks he can treat me as he pleases. As far as he is concerned, "I am merely a servant who doubles as a whore" (243). She feels happy in the company of Mukundan: "I feel married when I am with you" (244). She files a divorce suit so that she would formally marry Mukundan. But Mukundan, who values his reputation as a member of the community hall committee rather than his commitment to marry Anjana, withdraws from her. "You are a coward" (323), Anjana tells him and moves on to face the world all by herself.

In the second novel, *Ladies Coupe* (2001) she narrates the stories of six women who are travelling together in a ladies coupe of a train. Mainly it depicts a woman's search for strength and independence. Akhilandeshwari, Akhila for short, forty five and single, an income tax clerk, has been brought up in a conservative family of Tamil Brahmins. Her mother tells her that "there is no such thing as equal marriage. It is best to accept that wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on the man's role. Or the Gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage" (14). Akhila bears the burden of her family after her father's death. Her brothers and sisters grow up and get married and they hardly think about Akhila's needs and aspirations. She has never been able to live a life of her own or possess an identity of her own: "She was always an extension of someone else's identity: Chandra's daughter, Narayana's Akka (elder sister), Priya's aunt, Murthy's sister-in-law..... Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being" (201-202). She gets herself a one-way ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, all alone for the first time in her life and determined to escape all that her conservative family has bound her to. In the intimate atmosphere of the ladies coupe which she shares with five other women, Akhila gets to know

her fellow travellers who meet for the first time in their lives and share their life's experiences. Even though they differ in age, educational backgrounds and cultural upbringing, their stories have a common thread: the tragic predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal social order.

Janaki, the oldest of the six women in the coupe, grows up in the traditional mode of being groomed into an obedient daughter, a loyal wife and a doting Mother. She has been looked after all her life by men. "First there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat us like princess" (22-23). She lives a happy and contented life until, late in life, when her sense of identity and self-esteem is jeopardised in her son's house, she realizes that a woman needs to be strong and independent. She recognizes the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother and the need to assert self-identity and freedom to live one's own life. On the other hand, Sheela, a fourteen years old and the youngest among them, is a rebel who defies traditional ideas about women by symbolically making her dying widowed grandmother look like a bride.

Margaret Shanti, another woman in the ladies coupe, is a successful Chemistry teacher, embroiled in an unhappy marriage with Ebe who represents male chauvinism at its worst. He is insensitive, self-absorbed and indifferent towards his wife. Margaret would like to divorce him, but does not dare to do so because she is afraid of society. Her way of taking revenge is to feed oily food to be and make him a fat and dull person.

Prabha Devi is an accomplished woman "whose embroidery was done with stitches so fine that you could barely see them," whose "ideas were light and soft," and who "walked with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant, womanly" (170). After her marriage with Jagdeesh, who owns a jewellery shop, she acts as a traditional wife, waiting "for Jagdeesh to come home, for the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph....Waiting for something to happen while her life she wished past in a blur of insignificant days" (172). For a brief period, she turns into a haughty and flirtatious woman, but reverts back to her family with a difference in attitude. Using a swim suit and indulging in swimming gives her a sense of freedom and identity as wife and mother.

Marikolunthu, thirty one years old and an unwed mother, is a victim of man's lust, her poverty forcing her to do things that violate traditional socio-moral injunctions. She has experienced poverty, rape, lesbianism and physical torture.

Ladies Coupe questions the status of women in a tradition-bound social order that sees women exclusively in the role of an obedient daughter, a docile wife and a breeder of children. Women in postcolonial India boldly defy such delimiting roles and assert self-dignity and personal freedom. They are to pen to basic physical and emotional needs and act un-inhabitingly to satisfy them, the train journey in fact symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make them conscious of their self-esteem and dignity. It is a journey towards self-discovery. In other words, it deals with the journey of 'self-discovery' and 'resurrection of self'. Akhila travels with the question that has been haunting all her adult life. She meets 5 women character in the Novel and travels with the same question. This wonderful atmosphere, delicious, warm novel takes the reader into the heart of women's life in contemporary India, revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships with husbands, mothers, friends, employees and children.

In the third novel, *Mistress* (2005), the Plot revolves round the Kathakali dancer Koman, his niece Radha and a travel writer, Christopher Stewart who comes to India to write about

Koman. The locale of the novel is the banks of the river Nila in Kerala, where the prestigious dance form, Kathakali, thrives. Koman, a famous Kathakali artist, and her niece Radha receive Chris at the railway station. From their first meeting, both Radha and her uncle are deeply impressed by this young man with his cello and his inquisitiveness about the dance form. Radha is not quite happy with her husband Shyam, and is drawn towards Chris. “I look at him. With every moment the thought hinges itself deeper into my mind: what an attractive man”(8) Radha feels that for her husband, she is merely “a much cherished possession” and what he really wants is a mistress” (54), When Shyam protests against her involvement with his business, she retorts, “you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights.”(73) She is nevertheless guilt-ridden: “I lie here in my bed in my husband’s arms and think of another man. What kind of woman am I?”(59). In the face of several confrontations with Shyam and the anguish of being, denied freedom, she longs for the intimate company of Chris. “I see myself in his arms. I am the cello. It is me he is caressing. It is I who am responding.”(115) Radha knows that “the world would think it is wrong. There is no justification for adultery, I will be told. But I love him. He is fire in my blood: (207). Chris and Radha continue to enjoy physical and emotional intimacy until one day Chris relationship based on deception “I don’t want to be involved in this deception. It makes me feel sordid and responsible”(252). As the novel ends, Radha is in a dilemma when she thinks of returning to Shyam for support: “It is fear that makes me seek him, not regard for him..... I cannot continue to play wife merely because it frees me of worries: (426).

Anita Nair’s fourth novel *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) contain two inter-twined narratives of loss. One strand of the narrative concerns Meera who has been deserted by her husband, Giri, and lives in the old dilapidated Lilac House in Bangalore with her ageing mother and grandmother and a young son. She frequently interacts with her friend Vinnie who runs a boutique, drives her own car and manages the dual life of being a wife and a mistress. Meera is infatuated with Sonia, much younger than her, and eventually submits to “the call of the flesh” when Soman undresses and caresses her. The other strand of the narrative relates to Professor J. A. Krishnamoorthy, a cyclone study expert settled in the USA, who had to face cyclone like the turmoil in his life too hardened by the fact that his father left him and his mother, when he was just a child to embrace a life of spirituality, he always sneered at his mother for waiting for his father to come back someday. His own marriage fails, and his elder daughter, Smrithi, decides to come to India to pursue further studies. Then one day he gets a call from India, and returns to India to find his daughter severely affected by a mysterious accident during a trip to a seaside town with her boyfriend. She is now reduced to a vegetable existence, immobile in bed, incapable of doing or saying anything. Left to fend for herself, Meera takes up a job as an assistant to Jack, who seeks to investigate the mysterious circumstances which led to his nineteen year old daughter lying in a comatose condition. He meets several people who were close to Smrithi. They give different versions of what they felt about her. But nothing comes out of his strenuous attempts to unravel the mystery of Smrithi’s misery. This novel celebrates the human spirit and shows how you can be victorious even in life’s worst cyclone. All you need is just a cajoling support, few kind words and a determination not to let yourself give up. Life may not always be as colourful as you dream of but all you need a just a tinge of white hope to paint on a dark canvas. Through this novel Anitha Nair elaborates the problems of domestic life and discusses the different phases in the life of a woman. From parenthood, friendship, and marriage the novelist conveys the message of forgiveness required in each relationship. This novel was

made into a film, directed by Unni Vijayan, as its theme was immediate and the narrative was linear. It deals with issues such as stereotyping of women and gender violence.

The latest novel of Anitha Nair, *Cut like Wound* (2012) is a detective novel at its most confounding. Reading it is like sucking on a stick of sour punk: it makes you gasp and wonder. This is the first psycho-thriller of the novelist.

It is the first day of Ramazan. At Shivajinagar in Bangalore, a young male prostitute 'Bhuvana' is found murdered. A blunt instrument thwacks into his skull and a string coated with ground glass leaves 'cut like a wound,' around his throat. He is burnt alive, his body dumped outside town. The murders are going on. As bodies begin to pile up one after the other, it becomes clear that a serial killer is on the prowl. The novel structures over a period of a little over a month, beginning with that dramatic first evening of Ramazan, and ending with St. Mary's Feast. Between the two celebrations, Anita Nair introduces us to a police detective Gowda who is commonplace, human, a man one can relate to. He is investigating the case. He discovers a pattern in the killings which no one does.

Inspector Borli Gowda is middle-aged and "soft in the middle, blurred at the edges". A good cop who is on everyone's bad side of being good, he has shunted from one small station to the next. He deals with cases of no consequence. He is often at odds with though around him- His wife, Mamtha, a doctor with whom he has a long-distance relationship; their son Roshan, a medical student who lives with Mamtha in Hassan; the irritating ACP Vidya Prasad; Gowda's new junior, SI Santosh, informers; suspects; and sundry relatives. Nair weaves a fast paced, engrossing tale of suspense as Gowda and Santosh investigate. More corpses turn up, as do clues, sometimes serendipitions.

Once I've created a character, I step into their shoes; says Nair who admires to an element of wish fulfilment in her identification with Gowda. He can do all the things. He rides a bullet and can get piss drunk." She is probably the most interesting character I have created, I cannot let him go", says Anitha Nair who worked on '*Cut Like Wound*' for two years.

Gowda is getting his teeth into the case but personal dilemmas arise; Urmila, the ex-flame Gowda has not seen in 27 years, suddenly returns and brings in her wake an emotional upheaval. Finally, Gowda discovered the killer who was nothing but a shady corrupt Corporator Ravi Kumar who lives in a mansion as grand as the Mysore palace. Bhuvana has connections with this wealthy corporate. Ravi Kumar has his finger in several illegal pies and inhabits a strange world. He lives in the mansion with his full of co-eunuchs. Nair adept describes the lives and challenges of transvestites through Akka, a eunuch who once sad the Corporator's life. The only clue Gowda and Santosh have been the modus operandi and a solitary pearl earning that they found on one of the victims. They have to use all their investigative skills and intuition to solve the case, while fighting bureaucratic bosses along with clever criminals.

Cut Like Wound is not just a story of another cop on the trail of another serial killer. It is more a story that explores the mind of a killer, even tempts the reader to sympathize. The plotting is tight, the setting is familiar to Indian readers and the characters are riveting. All the characters in the novel are composites of people. Anita Nair knows characterisation and writing style are impressive. The climax is good. The reader will be sure of the murderer from the middle the story, but suddenly realizes that it is not that person. It is a brutal psychological thriller unlike any in Indian fiction. The title of the novel came from the doctor-brother of Anita Nair when she described a wound-it is cut like wound (C.L.W). It is a police jargon. Anita Nair liked the sound of it and decided it should be the title of the novel. This novel reminds us of

Elizabeth George's crime books. Complex crimes are beautifully interwoven snippets of local life.

Anita Nair's novels have taken on an easy space, giving enough fodder to one engaging reader. Now Anita Nair is gearing up for her most ambitious work- a two part historical novel set in 17th century Kerala and the rest of South India. It was woven around the MAMANGAM, the Zamorins and young warrior. The idea came to her from a folk ballad of Kerala, "Pulluvan Pattu". She has been at this novel for the last five years", she says.

Thus Anita Nair is a fine post-modern Indian English novelist who uses all types of techniques of novel-writing. She is a popular Indian English writer and successful author of short stories and poetry also. Her stories are intense and replete with cultural detail. Her short poems are in narrative mode, giving a local habitation and a name to passing thoughts.

Work Cited

Anita Nair, 'The Better Man', Penguin Books, New Delhi 2000.

Anita Nair, 'Ladies Coupe', Penguin Books, New Delhi 2001.

Anita Nair, 'Mistress', Penguin Books, New Delhi 2005.

Anita Nair, 'Lessons in Forgetting' Penguin Books, New Delhi 2010.

Anita Nair, 'Cut like Wound' Penguin Books, Harper Collins, New Delhi 2012.