
RESEARCH ARTICLE

**ANITA NAIR'S *THE BETTER MAN AND THE LADIES COUPE*:
A CELEBRATION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY OF SELF**

Mrs Y. Supriya¹, M.A, P.G CTE

Asst. Prof of English

Maris Stella College, Vijayawada, India

Dr. M. Suresh Kumar²

Professor

Acharya Nagarjuna University, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

Literature, the chief means of fulfilling the purpose of language by moulding the thoughts and emotions of human beings and giving them the right direction is a torch-bearer to all the progressive movements in human history. It awakens in people the spirit of freedom and creates the forms of expression of the masses. It accepts equality as an unalterable reality and advocates the cause of all those who are downtrodden, oppressed and exploited. When women were denied natural rights and equality with men, when they were brutally exploited by men, when their personality has been sought to be damaged and distorted and when their very status as human beings has been 'condemned' under the overwhelming male-domination, several movements and ideologies around the world have started aiming at equal rights for women. This defence of women had become a literary subgenre by the end of the 16th century and helped theorize the woman's discourse. The rise of novel in the eighteenth century England synchronized

with the rise of individualism filtered in Indian English fiction in 1960s and 1970s. The Indian English novelists' stipulation is wider in perspective and more comprehensive in application in comparison with their western counterparts.

Indian English novelists have created their own model, pattern and concept of 'feminism' that suits to portray the changing images of women in Indian context. The struggle of Indian women for true identity and the truth of Indian society emerged clearly in the novels of Ram Mehta, Gita Mehta, Shama Futehally, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Pravar Jabvala, Santha Ram Rau, Gita Hariharan, Shashi Desh Pande, Kamala Markanddaya, Kamal Das, Anita Desai, Anita Nair and so on. The present paper is an attempt to show how Anita Nair portrays through her female characters in 'The Better Man' and 'The Ladies coupe' the tensions women experience of a basic opposition to their need for freedom from traditional restrictions and their social obligations,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

responsibilities and duties , how patriarchy has still got its hold in domestic life and how women have yet to assert themselves through self-discovery though their lot appears to be improved through education and political rights.

Keywords: Women’s discourse, female psyche, circumscribed status, ingrained prejudices, unalterable reality

Writing has always played a key role in political and social movements and feminism has also become such a movement when several eminent feminists through fine literature promoted the idea of equality. From the earliest days of feminism, women have been putting pen to paper in an effort to dissect the unique female experience and break down long-ingrained prejudices. Women writers have not only documented them but also inspired challenges and changes. Their words raised awareness of the plight of women in the world. If there was no such literature, many women would have simply resigned themselves to being second-class citizens and many men wouldn't have realized what women actually have to deal with as the result of their fate. Their work provided literature for the feminist movement. Women owe a lot to the feminist writers without whom there might be no girl power today.

For most of recorded history, there has been a scant evidence of organized protests against the circumscribed status of women and only isolated voices spoke out against the inferior status of women. It was only when the defence of women had become a literary sub genre that the protests of women were voiced for the first time openly. In the late 14th- and early 15th-century, the first feminist philosopher, an Italian French author, Christine de Pisan, defended women showing the importance of women's past contributions to society in her ‘The Book of the City of Ladies’ and ‘The Treasure of the City of Ladies’. She challenged the prevailing attitudes towards women with a bold call for female education proclaiming women as the intellectual equals of men if they are given equal access to education. Pizande liberated on the debate whether the virtues of men and women differ as both are created in God's image and both have souls capable of embracing God's goodness. She took the position that women were capable of humility, diligence and moral rectitude, and that duly educated, women could become worthy citizens. She argued that women's success depends on their ability to manage and mediate by speaking and writing effectively. Thus Pizan becomes the pioneer of women’s freedom and her works are considered the manifesto of women’s rights. Since then, her mantle was taken up by the emerging feminists whose contribution to feminist literature developed women’s discourse.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the founding feminist philosophers of England in her best known work, the earliest work of feminist philosophy 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', championed educating women. Showing the denial of sufficient education to women as the only reason for their inferior position, she defended that the two sexes have to deserve equal access to fundamental rights. Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and feminist called out the wicked double standards that she grew up with in her works 'The Second Sex' and 'She Came to Stay' showing how women were socialized to "be women". Many girls, upon reading her writing, realized how double-standards tend to be extant even in modern society. Simone de Beauvoir's *The 'Second Sex'*, a pure feminist philosophy helps renew feminist discussion and seeks to dissect the history of women's oppression. She finds the view of men as the reason for women's oppression who look down women as the other self. Virginia Woolf's books, 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'A Room of One's Own' brought a woman's inner life to the forefront and noted that misogyny and militarism tend to go together. Sylvia Plath, the author of 'The Bell Jar' covered in her hard-hitting novels not only feminist social commentary but also mental illness of women and many other topics that were taboo in her time. Angela Carter in her book, 'The Bloody Chamber' focused on

sex, sexuality and the way that people treated women who were open in the matters of sex. Joanna Russ' 'The Female Man' is a utopian satire pointing how ridiculous social standards really are. Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' significantly spurred the women's movement and depicted the roles of women in industrial societies and in particular the full-time homemaker role.

It is pretty obvious that Indian English Literature has its independent status in the realm of world literature. The identity of Indian women established in almost all walks of life has presaged a new consciousness in literature. Feminist writing of Indian English Literature with its phenomenal success as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements gave a glimpse of the unexplored female psyche. Recent Indian fiction gives expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicament from women's perspective. The women of modern era think on different lines and that is what is depicted in the novels of the Indian authors. These novels explored women's subjectivity while moving forward with their strong and sure strides matching the pace of the world. Writing within the spheres of social norms and traditions in Indian society, Indian feminist writers focus on the patriarchal hold and the strength of women to revolt against their subordination. With their feminine perspective they turned to be

RESEARCH ARTICLE

assertive of the qualities of women. In their novels, the silenced voices started speaking for their position in society and women came out successfully of man-made traps which were set in order to curb their individuality in the social world. Feminism focuses to reveal how the female body undergoes various modes of oppression and follows a path where the female becomes an adjunct of the male and how under the dictates of civilization and culture, the female self has to be covered, concealed, neutralized and tamed.

In contemporary Indian writing in English, a major contribution has been made by Indian women writers in fiction . The image of women in Indian fiction has undergone changes in time. From traditional portrayal of enduring self-sacrificing women towards conflicts, female characters in search of identity repeated image of victim status. Indian novelists were aware of these currents and they discussed them along with the exploration and interpretation of a social milieu. Through the women writer's eye, one can see a different world and with her assistance, one can seek to realize the potential of human achievement. Women novelists while focusing on women's issues, they portray how women do not enjoy an equal status with men and how even an educated woman could pursue a career on the condition that she does not neglect her domestic duty. Women novelists created a new world through their

pen and that allowed women to set conditions to exist free from male authority. Women writers in India not only made the readers nod with wisdom and agreement but also their leading ladies jerk the average Indian complacency regarding gender issues. They have handled them with a sense of balance, never disregarding Indian traditions, yet discovering that there is more in the offing. Their attempt is to create awareness that this is the time to proclaim with definite precision. Their simple and life-like characters usually hail from middle class families make the readers deeply involve. Subsequently the novels become quite absorbing and interesting. Indian writers like Kamala Markandaya, Bharathi Mukherji, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahagal, Anitha Nair and many more have played a pioneering role in conveying to the readers a wide range of indigenous issues punctuated by strong feministic outlook. Their novels projected a voice of emerging modern India to draw the attention of the public towards the pressing problems of gender inequality, social evils, exploitation of women etc. Their chief characters are real women who make the readers look at them with wonder.

The protagonists in Kamala Markandaya's novels 'Nectar in a Sieve' and 'A Handful of Rice' covertly showed how modernism brought in by the western influence inspires women to revolt against their traditional environment and seek their

RESEARCH ARTICLE

fulfilment by shaping their careers independently. Nayantara Sahgal shows her preoccupation with the modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Kamala Das' open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt infused her writing with power. She rejected all the certainties offered by orthodox and championed the independence of mind and body. Shashi Deshpande, Geetha Hariharan and Anitha Nair delineated various issues faced by the women in domestic sphere. Shashi Deshpande's 'The Dark Holds No Terror' and "That Long Silence" boldly articulated the disappointments and frustration of women. She seems to grapple with the identity crisis of contemporary women in her works. Anita Desai's early novels, 'Cry the Peacock', 'Voices in the City', 'Bye-Bye Black Bird' etc graphically presented the turbulent psyche of the modern women with a focus on the lives of woman plagued with troubles in male dominated society. She makes each work a haunting exploration of the self of women.

When India exists in different time zones, women in the country have the responsibility of preservation of tradition marching in tune with modernity. The narrative fiction became a canvas for women writers for depicting the hegemonic practices of a gender biased society and also for challenging them. Anita Nair portrayed it in terms of marriage which tends to appear in most of her novels as

suitable marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life and the main responsibility of her parents.

Anita Nair, a prolific writer in English well known for her novels, 'The Better Man' and 'Ladies Coupe' portrayed the problems of Indian society depicting India's onward movement towards modernism by means of protesting cultural laws and conventions as well. The changing perspectives of Indian women are beautifully analysed in her novels. With a good understanding of the psyche of women, Anita Nair has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. The protagonists in her novels are women from real life who established wonderful relationships with their surroundings, their societies, their families, their mental makeup and themselves.

Anita Nair's 'The Better Man' is based on the theme of identity of self of a woman and her discovery of the self. It unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage where they seek respect and security. This novel asserts the individuality of women in order to liberate them from the clutches of man. The portrayal of an educated woman, Anjana and the expectation that is placed on a woman by her family, her (future) husband, and other people, especially women indicate that the moral code that applies to the middleclass women is in no manner

RESEARCH ARTICLE

anticipated from women of lower social status or class.

Anjana as a New Woman breaks the traditional Indian consciousness built under the name of society. She was brought up in a liberal atmosphere of the world of independence and felt satisfied with a profound sense of self-fulfilment before marriage. But her independence was lost in the name of marriage when she turned twenty seven. Her married life never made her happy, On the other hand she endured insults, humiliations and injustices caused by her husband. Even in her early married life, she couldn't impress her husband, Ravindran though she tried a lot. She wanted to give the best to him but he was not interested in her. With her conventional upbringing, Anjana consciously or unintentionally imitated the perfect Indian woman. From her early childhood, she saw the girls trained to stay pleased in their married lives under any circumstances, and thus fit in these ethics in her psyche. Ravindran who is reluctant to talk to Anjana felt irritated and left the place at once whenever Anjana got ready for a casual conversation. Still she was ready to know his likes and dislikes and perform her duties. She was eager to lead a healthy life with him but it became a mere dream for her to achieve. Instead of love and freedom, her marriage resulted in pain, misery and fury. Consequently she hated everything around her even herself. She felt that she became a victim in the name of customs

and practices. She conveniently gave up the fact that every relationship even sexual one will be incomplete without the involvement of emotional relationship. As loneliness and improper communication marked her relationship with her husband, Anjana moved to her parents' home and looked after her mother. Though Anita Nair created Anjana as a typical woman who could strive to protect her marital relationship at any cost, she also became the voice of a modern woman and took a bold step and returned home to live with her parents.

Anjana's entrance to her mother's house was a kind of escape from her loveless marital life. For the first time after four months her husband spoke an extended discussion on his plans to start a new factory on his own. In the course of her married life only that night she felt really happy and self layered the conjugal bond with him. Anjana tried to understand him because all her thoughts as the Indian wife compelled her to carry Indian tradition and culture. Being a selfish man, Ravindran wanted to achieve his goals and ambitions in life. When his business failed, he decided to start a new one. All his concerns were always about himself and very rarely and almost never his thoughts moved around his wife. The novel is a good examination and analysis of their unsuccessful married life and the environment in which such adverse relationship between Anjana and her husband developed. Their incapability to understand each other affected their

RESEARCH ARTICLE

conjugal life adversely. As communication failed and silence grew between them permanently, their marital life became dismal and miserable. But he maintained physical relationship with her whenever he was inclined. There was hardly any conversation between them and hence no companionship and no confidence in her. On watching Ravindran's terrifying behavior while attacking Anjana violently, her father raised a voice against him. In order to save his daughter from her husband, he found a teacher job for Anjana. Soon Anjana enjoyed her job and made many new friends. She also read magazines and books and listened to the transistor radio which she always carried along with her like a baby. She tried to come out of her unsuccessful married life which she considered a disaster. Anjana is thus a symbol of the combination of traditional and conventional and modern ideas.

Anjana's realization brought about a complete transformation over pro-active Anjana as a matured woman. She desperately needed someone to share her agony, to console her, and she thought of Mukundan who returned to the village after his retirement. She expressed her anger against her husband to Mukundan. She felt happy in the company of Mukundan. She filed a divorce suit so that she would formally marry Mukundan. But Mukundan who valued his reputation as a member of the Community Hall Committee rather than his commitment to marry Anjana withdrew from her. But Anjanamoved on to face the

world all by herself. Finally, Anjana broke the traditional Indian consciousness and created the world of her own. Anjana's emergence from her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual, was an assertion of her personal freedom. Mukundan did not ignore her presence or override her thoughts, instead helped her to regain her freedom of herself as an individual, a human being with her own identity. Having experienced his pleasant company, she realized that she had to free herself from her unhappy married life. Anita Nair seemed to be deeply concerned with women's freedom as Anjana wanted to stand on her own wishes and liberty. Anjana went ahead in her life with hope and optimism, positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence, and self-identity. It proved that women could achieve autonomy. Anjana found her voice and established her identity. Anjana, a typical Indian woman strived to do everything to protect her marriage but when it failed, she could take a bold step to settle in life. Anjana treated both her marital life and her individual freedom equally important. When Mukundan rejected Anjana her, she was not disheartened but proved herself as a woman of individuality and identity. Thus Anita Nair through the exploration of female psyche and identity projected Anjana as the mouth piece of a modern Indian woman.

Valsala, another character, wife of the aging schoolmaster is engaged in her household tasks. She is the lonely person in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

her house and there are no surprises in her life. She falls in love with a neighbor who later becomes her lover. She enters into a sexual relationship with her lover as a natural partner to her emotional involvement. She decides to be his mistress. In fact, she knows the fact that every woman being a human being needs love, freedom, equality and sex which will energize her. Accordingly she is willing to tap the new system against the backdrop of traditional concept of Indian womanhood. She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude and puts forth the new issues of woman. As a consequence, Valsala's quest emerges as a battle, the battle of the female psyche. Her realization of her inner self makes her free herself from her husband. It indicates the change in the attitude of Indian woman who suffered the conflict between the traditions, customs and culture and modernity.

Anita Nair's another novel 'Ladies Coupé', also about feminine search for self-identity, strength and independence and female space portrays six women who find themselves together travelling in Ladies Coupe each for her own purpose. They are from varied social set up and family background. Each of them possesses some fine qualities and inner strength which they are unaware of. It is only in the face of certain untoward incidents or circumstances into which they are thrown into that these qualities come to light. Ladies Coupe becomes a comfort zone where each one voices her tale and is thus comforted and

convinced. Each chapter is devoted to one woman's story. Akhila, the protagonist is a forty five year old spinster and is the sole bread winner after her father's death but she being a woman is not designated the status of the real head of the family. On the other hand her siblings take her for granted. Akhila in her attempt to discover her identity and her own life takes a trip to Kanyakumari in train where she meets her fellow passengers and share their stories. By listening to their stories, she was awakened to the fact that she had sacrificed a lot. That night she dreamt about her life. She longs for her individuality. The stories she heard helped her to take the decision. Janaki opined "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her". Sheela, a fourteen year old girl made Akhila understand her quality of looking behind things and realize the life fully even at a young age.

Through Sheela, Anita Nair brought out the need to assert the individuality of women. Next story teller is Margaret Shanti, a Chemistry teacher speaks about male domination and how she took revenge for that. She achieved emotional fulfillment while keeping the family ties intact. The next was Prabha Devi from a rich family who was a victim of gender discrimination felt emptiness in her life and decided to bring back excitement in her life. Prabha Devi achieved her desire by learning to swim without anybody's knowledge and help which brought back her self-confidence. Markolanthu, the most

RESEARCH ARTICLE

pathetic woman of the six is a symbol of the humble and miserable peasantry woman on whom male suppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. She surpassed her emotional hindrance caused by her bitter experience with a ray of hope and vigour. Marikolanthu became an unwed mother to a boy fathered by Murukeshan. At first she did not accept the child but later accepted and started living on her own, without bothering about the society. These stories and her desire to assert her individuality reminds Akhila of her former love with Hari, who was younger than her. Anita Nair's portrayal of the character of Karapagam was to bring awareness to the society of women's demands and their need for self-expression. As a widow, she strives for self-definition in this patriarchal social organization. She was afraid to face the society. The stories and her friend, Karapagam, who defied the rules and traditions of society made Akhila realize the need for self-expression. She decides to start a life of her own. Thus her trip towards self-discovery ends when she finds her choice and her identity. Thus the novel 'Ladies coupe' is an expression of a woman's desire to break the norms and traditions in order to establish her own identity. The novel ends with Akhila's new life which dawns to the new horizon of women.

Anita Nair's novels as torch bearers of women's onward march from submission and oppression towards self-definition, self-expression and individuality give right

direction to women in their quest for identity. They foreshadow the tremendous changes that would come in women's attitude in the course of time. Her women characters represent the wish of women to assert their position and identity either in family or in society. Their novel way of thinking and bold steps to disentangle from the clutches of patriarchy and age old social customs and traditions leads to self-realization which results in a celebration of identity of self. They serve as a beacon to women to assert themselves in all walks of life and make a mark of their own. Though they violate the norms of Indian society and the reputation of a typical Indian woman especially after marriage, they help women to get liberation from patriarchy and know their potential and explore their self. The phenomenal success and progress women achieved and enjoyed today was undoubtedly the impact left by the novels and the characters like this based on radical views. This is how literature leads people towards social and cultural movements.

References:

- Famous Feminist Writers of the 20th Century | Viv
- <https://viva.media/famous-feminist-writers-of-the-20th-century>
- Chapter II. FEMINISM IN

INDIAN LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

- chapter - ii feminism and indianenglish fiction : an ... - Shodhganga

- shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/10603/133606/7/07_chapter%202.pdf

- A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE NOVEL OF ANITA NAIR - JETIR

- Revealing the Self: Indian Femininity in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

www.epitomejournals.com/VolumeArticles/FullTextPDF/165_Research_Paper.pdf

- Reconstructing the Self in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé - Language in India

www.languageinindia.com/feb2016/madhumitacoupe.pdf by M Pati - Related articles

- Quest for identity : a feministic approach of female characters in anita ...

- www.ijelr.in/3.2.16B/474-477%20S.%20MANJULA.pdf

- Anita Nair: Ladies Coupe - Feminine search for strength ...

- www.academia.edu/.../Anita_Nair_Ladies_Coupe_Feminine_search_for_strength_indep...

- A Trip towards Self-discovery in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe - Asia Pacific

- apjor.com/downloads/2808201725.pdf