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## Transgression of Journey: A Reconstruction of Female Identity in the Novels of Anita Nair

**Dr. Meetu Bhatia Kapur**

Associate Professor  
Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies  
New Delhi  
&

**Dr. Shilpi Gupta**

Assistant Professor  
Inderprastha Engineering College  
Ghaziabad

### **Abstract:**

The emergence of a new generation of Indian Women in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties tend to interrogate the traditions and images of women in terms of femininity, female identities and patriarchal value. This shift of the paradigm has led to a radical change in attitude towards sex, social roles and marital relationships. The role of woman has been redefined which has eventually liberated them from the shackles of the patriarchal society. A different level of understanding and defining the question of women's identity and self-exploration has attained a contemporary level of dimensional approach. Empowerment of their fraternity has become the main issue in today's writings which becomes inversely related to their self-esteem and self-image.

The thrust area of this paper will be on the novels (Lessons in Forgetting, Mistress and Ladies Coupe) of Anita Nair. It will explore the journey of female protagonists from subordination to freedom and empowerment. The woman protagonists would be liberated from the shackles of the patriarchal set up and come to live life on their own terms and conditions.

**Keywords: patriarchal society, identity, self esteem, empowerment.**

### **Introduction:**

The issue of self and society when questioned in the context of female's self image and identity had come to acquire many dimensions and approaches. The rigid patriarchal based tradition and religion made the question of empowerment difficult- the empowerment of knowledge, empowerment of socio- political survival and over and above the power of existence. The fairer sex by default lacked it. She had always been considered to be at the receiving end from the social system and practices. Brought up on the stories of Sita, Urmila and many more of such kinds, the psycho social conditioning of such stories silenced them and their ideologies. Thus, the basic division between male and female remained intact. The process of mental conditioning of promoting male intelligence and rationality became insurmountable barrier in recognizing their own existence and identity. The conventional society somehow still believed in the code described in Manu Smriti where the existence of woman is associated with man and where a woman is governed not by her choice and will but of the man of the house. Draupadi of Mahabharat was considered without any identity. Her existence according to historians was of the fact that she behaved as her husbands' desired. They were Gods to her who had to be appeased by all means. She had to keep her desires away for their wishes and follow them without questioning. This principle of hierarchy became a manifesto for man to cast their right over woman and consider them their possession. The women thus came to be mentally and physically controlled by men, which with the passage of time assumed different ideologies and frameworks.

The arrival of the feminist writing on the scene became voice for the women who were still forced to live in the shadows of the past. These writers came to provide a deep understanding and insight into the existence and survival of women population striving for their evolvement. Their writings challenged the patriarchal set up as it came to question the social set up, norms, re-interpret and re-define it from a feminist stand point. This experiment of critically examining and scrutinizing the social milieu imparted freshness and cultural sensibility to otherwise highly rigid and traditional society. The writings of Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur and many more constructed and liberated women through their writings. Every female writer had some concern to reflect in her writings. Kamala Markandaya reflected East West encounter in different contexts resulting in identity crisis; Ruth Praver Jhabarvala like Jane Austen covered some real day to day problems confronted by lower and middle class people; Nayantara Sehgal treated woman as man's equal and the relationship to be bonded with mutual love, trust and understanding; Shashi Deshpande reinforced the female dilemma in her works; Anita Desai reflected the mental state of her protagonists. These writers legitimized their right to dignity and existence.

The focus of this paper will be on the empowerment of female protagonists in the novels of Anita Nair. Anita Nair emerged as one of the contemporary torchbearer amongst feminist writers who exhibited the issues of the empowerment of women. It became the central concern which conceptually became interconnected with their identity and freedom. A long interrogation of self - through introspection, psychological analysis and stream of consciousness techniques made them bold enough to go against the traditional image in the patriarchal set up. Her female characters struggle to the facts and challenges on both intrapersonal and interpersonal front. There is always a situation of conflict with the self and the society at large. This generally results in the process of the empowerment and rediscovery of self esteem and self identity. The highlighting feature of Anita Nair's work constitutes in her writing technique which is essentially "*female culture*." The female protagonists are placed through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression. This gives them a reason to stay alive and discover their inner dynamism.

As a result of thought process of the novelist, she makes her character acquire a sense of maturity and conviction which rightly makes them the woman of substance. Anita Nair has been able to create an image of such women who have left behind a trail of new identity and a self definition of life, growth and experience.

Focusing on Meera of *Lessons in Forgetting*, Radha of *Mistress* and Akhila of *Ladies Coupe*, this paper bears a testimony to the above stated facts about Anita Nair's ideology on women empowerment and self identity. What is noteworthy are the names given to her female protagonists. Where Meera is a symbol of unreciprocated love wedded to an image, Radha means one who has an inner desire to be loved and have a companionship. Akhila means a desire to help others with a responsible nature. Each character qualifies the traits of their names.

*Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) is heartfelt and beautifully told story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances which has won rare reviews. The essence of this work was the sensitivity and great artistic craftsmanship with which the story of two ladies- Meera and Smirti is handled. In fact, they both become the change and the mark for the contemporary society. They are easily identifiable characters from upper middle class society. If Meera is Post Graduate in English and married to a business tycoon Giri, then Smirti is an explorer of

Indian culture and tradition. Both depict their fearless spirit with the difference- one after the betrayal and the other before the casualty. Though herself a cookbook writer, Meera continued to live in the shadow of her husband. With two doting children, her children, her mother, grandmother and an old ancestral house Lilac, this had been her world till the time she's deserted by her husband. A perfect looking marriage turned out to be incomplete because of betrayal from the other partner. Left to fend herself and her family, she takes up the job with a cyclone studies expert Professor J.K. Krishnamurthy or Jak, who had recently returned from Florida. Their coming together resulted into many unpredictable inevitabilities and fresh beginnings wait for them where there was an end waiting.

Meera remains in constant comparison with Hera:

“She smiles when her Zeus Giri smiles. She hears his laugh emerge from a group of men. She smiles. The wind is Hera's own. But it is only when Zeus smiles that Hera can puff the sails and winnow the fields or what use is the wind to Hera? Wives are same everywhere....A wife in love. Meera Hera” (5).

Meera decides to take the reign of her household once she realizes the importance of moving ahead in life after being ditched by her husband. A complete makeover becomes symbolic of new life which waits for her:

“Give me a new hairstyle.....I've had this same hairstyle for the last twenty two years. Ever since Giri came into my life and I didn't want to change anything. My hair, my home, my dreams, myself. It's time I become a new woman. Someone I would like to be” (177).

She takes up the job as a secretary to Prof. Jayamkoda Anantharaman Krishnamurthy or Jak as he's called in short. This job gives a second innings to her life- to live her dreams and be true to herself along with financial independence. An introduction to Smriti and Kala Chhithi infuses a new positive dimension to her mangled life.

Smriti, daughter of Jak comes across as a very strong opinioned individual. She comes from United States to stay with her father as she's quite impressed by Indian stories and therefore even joins a small theater group. Portrayed as a carefree spirited person, she knows how to speak her mind loudly. She is well announced for being a reformer at heart, though has body pierced at all possible places, rides a scooter in a short skirt and has flings with the boys. She's driven by her fierce desire to expose the evil of sex selection and female infanticide present in a village of Tamil Nadu's small beach town Minjikapuram:

“They have a mobile scan unit and they tell the pregnant woman the sex of the fetus. But there's more going on. I'm going to find out what's happening there. What are they doing there is just not illegal, but wrong. And somebody has to stop it!” The righteous indignation on her face filled him with the dread” (295). Or:

“I need proof to file my complaint and take it to the newspapers. No one is going to refute the truth then. Not even your dangerous men.”(297).

This resolve to find the proof to the truth led to her “punishment” for her “faults”. She becomes a victim to gender violence leaving her completely in a vegetative and comatose state. She is easily identifiable with the existing society pattern on sexual violence- the topic which has become the main concern of the times. The narrative structure gives a thought to

generic idea of dressing being responsible for sexual attacks on girls and where sex determination is in the interest of business.

A challenge to patriarchal society and opting individual desire over societal expectation is Kala Chiti . She was aunt of Jak and takes care of him and Smriti. All through her life she had tried to keep the men in her life happy- her father and her husband. Both of them loved her because of her long black hair though she used to be weighed down by its weight and pain in the nape. Then Vaidehi, she is tormented by her husband when she dared to get her hair cut without his permission:

“ Ambi had chosen to punish me. I had to be taught a lesson. For six months, he did not speak to me. Not even a smile.....I was never more lonely than I was then. My father was ashamed of me. And I was the reason.”(205)

Even after seven years of marriage, she was childless. This gave her husband a reason to remarry. Vaidehi knew that Ambi would do as he pleases. There was no room to protest. That is then she decided not only to leave him but her father's house also, never grow her hair again and became Kala since then. She is the character in the novel who is much ahead of time. She had asserted herself to walk out of the marriage not more than a mirage. Through these characters, Nair has epitomized the realities of the lives of the Indian women and registered a vociferous protest against the chauvinistic patriarchal society. A comparative study between urban life and rural life generates the same results-i.e. oppression of the female mentally or physically and both these situations reveal the same outcome-i.e. fight from the chains of slavery to breathe the air of freedom.

Human spirit is celebrated in this novel. Meera, Smriti, Kala Chiti all stand out in their integrity and strength. In fact, Smriti in her comatose state generates a message of positivity and hope.

The journey of soul searching is depicted in the novel *Mistress* (2005). Set against the backdrop of Kerala, Anita Nair once again goes on a journey of introspection and soul searching. Kathakali becomes the key and the soul searching journey. The entire novel rests on nine different forms of emotions and which sets the stage for her work. Using this as a focal point, the narration moves on. This novel becomes a combination of mythology and contemporary living. The centre female character Radha's marriage does not confirm her security and identity. Governed by the framework of the established norms of the society, she regulates her existence to the conventional feminine aesthetics of continuing a deformed relationship with her husband. A search starts outside the marriage when life and the relationship became mundane and an obligation to live with. She is drawn to Chris- a traveller writer who has come to Kerala to write story on Koman, Radha's uncle and a famous Kathakali dancer. Shyam, her husband- who runs the hotel, is in love with Radha who in turn looks down on him:

“Both Radha and her uncle prefer to believe that I know little or nothing of mythology, or anything which appeals to the unconscious. That is their realm and they guard it fiercely.... As far as they are concerned, I'm a businessman. I don't belong in their world and they prefer that I don't try and trespass.”(117).

He thus tries to run his wife's life like he runs his business. He is quite possessive for her. From recording her menstrual cycle dates to dictating the chores to be done in free time, he expects Radha to confirm to his dictated norms:

“You are my wife and you have a place in society. When I ask you to show some interest in what I do, I mean just that. Display interest and not hobnob with my employees or share meals with them.”(72)

Or :

“Why you don’t ever dress like this when we go for dinner at the Club? Then all you wear are your khadi kurtas. I hate them; they remind me of those activists’ women burning with vitriol and a cause. Women should wear silk, jewellery and flowers in their hair” (117).

She comes across to him not more than a materialistic asset who has to be owned and possessed jealously. All such issues and many more sent Radha in to the arms of Chris. Whether it is having a pre marital affair, undergoing an abortion or an extra marital affair, Radha dared to violate the stereotype patriarchal society. That is why at the end, she refuses to be a wife and a mistress. She decides to give her unborn child a fatherless identity and be a mistress of self.

Even the minor characters like Saadiya , Lalitha and Maya lent a revolutionary thought process to the existing patriarchal norms. Saadiya, a Muslim had defied her community to come to stay with Sethu , a Hindu She soon came to realize the constraint of religion in their relationship. After an altercation with Sethu, she decided to leave him and her baby behind .Since the conservative patriarchal society would not have taken her back into the community, she drowned herself and thus became the mistress of self. This was her way of showing her resentment against patriarchal society. The story of Lalitha adds yet another dimension to the plot of the novel. When proposed for marriage by Koman, she replied:

“Do you think I sleep with other men...I don’t. I haven’t in a long time. It is best we remain this way. Besides, this way, there is no room for gossip. Can you imagine what would happen if you married me? The scandal! Your family would sever all ties with you.”(416).

Maya, true to her name became a partner to Koman:

“A partner who was my equal and revelled in the love affair. That was all she would allow it to be. An affair of the heart and the body and no more. Now when I’m with her, I understand what she meant so many years ago. I’m comfortable with Maya and she with me. I know Shaantam when I’m with Maya.” (421)

Towards the end, Shaantam- one of the nine rasa of life, offers detachment, freedom. An absence of desire. A coming to terms with life. When all is done, that is what is aspired - Shaantam.

Every novel of Anita Nair is a fine narration of women’s world where relationships play a pivotal role. Joy, grief, togetherness all woven against the backdrop of the complex man woman relationship. In fact the spirit of womanhood is celebrated through them. Each novel is a journey of self discovery and re interpretation. Ladies Coupe (2001) is a work in this direction. Like her other novels, even the name of this novel is very suggestive. Ladies Coupe is a separate travelling compartment in trains. It offers them privacy and security. In this novel also, Ladies Coupe offers space to the ladies travelling in it. The narration about their struggle for existence and individuality redefines their inner strength and takes them on an inner journey. This novel in particular deals with man woman relationships, marriage, divorce and various social, cultural and psychological issues. It is an amalgamation of various stories of different women in different age groups and belonging to different strata of society.

It questions the single living of the woman. Can she live alone in the society or a companionship is essential for her survival and makes her feel complete?

Akhila, a forty five years old spinster is the sole bread winner of the family after her father's death. She is completely lost in the jungle of duties of being a good daughter, a sister, an aunt and who had throttled her desire and wishes to gratify the wishes of the people around her. This was till the time she decided to go on a journey alone- a journey which would lead her to rediscover herself through the stories of other five ladies travelling in the same compartment. She had come to live the identity of others which was nothing more than Chandra's daughter, Naryana's Akka, Priya's aunt, Murthy's sis-in-law. She lived a life designed for them and by them; she had never been allowed to live her own life. Life was completely taken out of her control and her living was into nothingness. An Anglo- Indian colleague Katherine Weber helped her in learning the art of peeling eggs which was also the art of peeling off the unaccepted social norms and standards. She is in fact the one to help her to rediscover herself. It is on the persistence of Kathernie that Akhila decided to go on a journey alone. Since the novel evolves and progresses with the stories of the other females in the compartment, the first is Janaki-an old woman, who shares a friendly love with her husband; has a sense of contentment and satisfaction till the time her son challenges her self esteem and identity:

“You are spoilt.....you want everything done your way and if it doesn't then you know how to sulk....when have you thought of anyone but yourself?”(Pg 36)

She realizes the need to assert self-identity and freedom to live one's own life. That a woman needs to be strong and independent is told further by Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher. Though married Ebb out of her own choice, soon realizes the perverse nature of her husband who also happens to be the Principal of the same school where she teaches. She soon came under the dominance of male chauvinism. From being a bright, bubbly individual, she is reduced to mere heap of a mute spectator where the sole decision making authority is Ebb - whether it is her pursuing B.Ed instead of Ph.D or keeping the hair short, his narcissism is on the rise. To pamper and flatter him becomes her ultimate resort to avenge for her self esteem. Her way of taking revenge is to feed oily food, make him a fat, dull person and deprive him of his pleasure of running: “Running claimed he helped him to focus and concentrate. Running was what made him the man he was.” (pg 122).

This made him need Margaret more than before for every small task and thus made him the man she wanted to live with once again. She is able to reaffirm and control her life once again. The youngest of all the females in the coupe, she comes across as a very mature and a sensitive child for her age. She is well able to comprehend her grandmother's feelings and this gives her an edge over her mother in terms of understanding her grandmother. For instance every night before Ammumma went to bed, she would stand before the mirror and splash her face and neck with calamine lotion and so when in her death, Sheela made sure that her widowed grandmother looks like a bride:

“She carefully brushed the brittle hair on her head, braided it into a plate and fixed a shinning rubber band.....and adorned her with the costume jewellery. ....she knew Ammumma would have been pleased” (pg 74).

A similarity can be well judged between Sheela, Akhila and Karpagam. While Akhila like Sheela had refused to let her mother be robbed of her dignity when her father passed away:

“I’ll not let you shave your head or exchange your pretty madisars for a saffron sari. Just because appa is no more, you don’t have to turn yourself into a hideous monster” (pg76).

Karpagam, who became a widow, had continued to wear sindoor and a manglam sutra.

“The way I look is natural for a woman to look feminine. It has nothing to do whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyways? Some men who could not bear the thought that after their death, their wives would continue to look attractive to other men” (pg 213).

The story of transgression is further carried on by Prabha Devi- one of the female passengers in the coupe. She was born into a rich family:

“where the father considered girl a nuisance and mother found her the successor of her recipes and where 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” ( pg170).

She was tutored to be a perfect wife who would:

“Wait for Jagdeesh to come home, for the babies to be born, for their first steps, for their first words... waiting for something to happen in her life” (Pg 184).

The feeling of having left herself far behind in the bargain to be a good homemaker, she turns her into a haughty and flirtatious woman. Soon the importance of being a dutiful wife and a living mother in the society draws her back to her nest and to her family. She had learnt the lesson well to strike a fine balance in what she wanted to be and what she is expected to be:

“She would camouflage this body, lock away the gay spirited woman.....this is who I ought to be, this is the way to be happy.”(pg 184).The story of Marikkolanthu was the most heart rendering and typical patriarchal society based. A victim of man’s lust, an unwed mother to Muthu and a victim of poverty, rape, lesbianism and physical torture had come to terms with the conditions of life and had become a helper in a missionary hospital. Her sole aim was to be independent and a life support to her son:

“I wasn’t going to wag wars or rule kingdoms. All I wanted was the measure of happiness. All I wanted was to be Muthu’s mother. For so long now I’d been content.....I wanted to be real thing.”(pg268).

Akhila had actually come to love herself towards the end when she:

“Lets him love her with the windows and the balcony door flung open to the night and the lights on.”(pg 274).

Ten avatars of Akhilandeswari as Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bharivi, Chinnamasta, Dhumathi, Bangla, Matangi and Kamla(pg 274-275) finally defines the freedom and strength of all the female characters of *Ladies Coupe*.

Thus, amidst an odyssey of remembrances by fellow female passengers, Akhila seemed to have found an answer to herself; the walls around her seem to be breaking and the simple answer to the question “ Can a woman live single ?” seemed to have found an answer.

Karpagam words well sum up the entire work:

“I live alone. I have for many years now. My daughter who is just twenty three does it well. We are strong. We are if we want to be. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first.”(Pg 213).

No doubt, each work of Anita Nair has proved to be a rich learning experience. Each aspect of womanhood is talked with graciousness and sensitivity generating the message of womanhood. The choices and preferences of women in the patriarchal society are well talked and crafted artistically in all the above mentioned works. She has been able to celebrate the spirit of womanhood and uplift their sovereignty and integrity. The constant struggle for self assertion and identity is paid off with the discovery of inner strength and the courage to evolve and construct a new image of womanhood.

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