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Taking Control: Significant Aspects In The Lives Of Anita Nair's Women And Men

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ABSTRACT

This paper carries a view about the aspects of women and men taking control of their lives which were almost knocked down by the vagaries of socio-cultural and patriarchal society. The quest for self-identity and self-definition among the women and men of Nair, empowered them to come out with a different outlook on society. Her characters' quest to seek the life they desire by having a transitional journey rather than reaching the destination, which is vividly portrayed in the novels of Anita Nair. Nair's protagonists choose to remain self-reliant despite being prey to societal pressures amid chaos and catastrophe, they emerge to be successful and content in the end by sustaining their spirit in the journey of life. Hence, Nair's portrayal of the characters brings to life the contemporary societal nuances and their dynamic interplay which are woven vividly into her characters that set her apart from the other contemporary women writers.

Keywords: quest, taking control, Anita Nair, gender, stereotype, self-identity.

INTRODUCTION

What does a man or woman want? Seeking their physical and emotional self of freedom and space. The path is difficult and quirky to comprehend, and they are differently understood, of why it remains difficult. Especially in the case of women, the obstacles they face in their emancipation remain even more difficult. Yet their quest has not entirely led them to the place they desired or what they wanted. Women were traditionally considered objects to serve and satisfy men and secure their lineage.

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It is clearly evident that women in the medieval times were offered freedom and social status and in certain instances, they were subjected to restrictions that were forcibly followed in every field. It is also known that a few sections of girls in those times were fortunate to have freedom and support, including the freedom of education which is supposed to be every woman's right. Those who use that freedom were encouraged to take up employment, fetched accolades, and identity in the field of theology and philosophy. Many have even embraced a career as a teacher. Many Brahnavadinis like Gargi, Maitreye, Lopamudra, Sikata, and Gosha during the Upanishadic period there were documented as reported by Rawlinson in his *India: A Short Cultural History* way back in 1937 (Rawlinson H.G, 1937). Women's contribution was greatly recognised in most of the Vedic Hymns.

As women transitioned to modern times, the traditional socio-cultural burden and traditional customs and norms concerning women and their role in society continued, characterised by how women lived, experienced, and explore the world around them, along with the expectations and stereotypes that they have to deal with. Most modern writings focus on which rules are most likely to be broken and what situation triggers the urge to cross the line. Most women writers stick to the pattern common for all women writers, and only a few of the modern women writers deviate from the expectations and just go beyond any terms no matter what others may think of them, as they are passionately led by their own spirit of quest. Hence the outcome of such writings highlights breaking codes, portraying the characters to cross the line and at times acting against social norms and violating the rules repeatedly. It is well understood that these women writers intend to repeatedly cross other's expectations, revolting constantly against the conventional position of women in Indian society which tends to be seen among the protagonists of their novels, thus giving the message conveyed through what the writer's motivations and means of exposition are. Anita Nair is one of them. In the four novels of Anita Nair viz. *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014), the protagonists crave personal freedom against discriminating and suffocating social environments and norms, and most of all the need to control and conquer the inner fears of repression and guilt brought about by external forces of life. Obviously, it is not a freelancing quest of the individual but one that also seeks and craves emotional support from within their close relationships. Each character seeks a form, whether it is emotional, spiritual, or exploring to conquer their inner fears through outer quests. Each takes a quest by choice due to chance events that happen in their lives. This paper dwells on Nair's novels throwing light on the significant aspects and taking control of the conflict between the individual and society including the families of the characters.

SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN AND MEN IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA NAIR

Shades of women: transition through the ages

Novelists of the new millennium choose to describe what are perhaps everyday happenings, the burden of monotony, things accepted or taken for granted about a woman's life like her fears, cravings, and her need for fresh and unpolluted societal air to breath. These stories created by the writers provide a sound knowledge of what it means to be or be born a 'woman' in the Indian context. These writers make a number of characters that actually show the consequences of certain decisions they hesitate to make. Writers like Anita Nair have begun to identify women by giving them certain roles that project her characters to be independent in their choices and take control of their lives. The purpose of Nair's writing is to replace the docile, beautiful, goddess-like, domesticated woman, and show what a woman can be, everything that a man is, or cannot be. Nair highlights the 'existential' woman, able to make a choice, live by it, and perform

nearly all-male tasks - responsible, independent, and capable of being able to create her own destiny. In the process, the author shows how a woman takes control of her own life by exerting her will above her circumstantial predilections and emerges consciously being aware of the circumstances caused by patriarchal doctrines and the pressure, not to repeat being slavish.

Equality, freedom, and recognition of both sexes are desirable for equanimity in the functioning of social life. And while writing a novel that is woman-centered and makes it credible to all readers, the ground needs to be near to reality. While believing that women are oppressed by inequality of gender, the author also believes there is salvation not only through economic independence but more through the courage to make and execute the necessary right choice in a demanding situation. In a way, a prostitute is regarded as a vulnerable and oppressed slave, and on the other, a liberated one by way of a successful economic strategy to lead her life. The many voices voiced on different occasions and every decision made is therefore examined in the light of what consequences it will have in leading a further life. It is understood and known that there are few biological differences between men and women, the greater truth of that there is no male or female natural difference in the psyche. As Beauvoir says, “marriage and motherhood are constituted in a patriarchal society to entrap women in embodied immanence” (Tidd, 2004, page 115). Everything is instilled within the mind and it is organized in the mind for ages which have resulted in whatever women are today.

In this postmodern time of value eradication, values and equality of implementation of these values are reiterated and reinforced in the face of moral adversity as enunciated by the Scriptures or the man-made world of social law. In the postmodern times of the 20th and 21st centuries, the deterioration of faith in religious leaders and in the framing of social laws and ritualization of customs has led to a social condition of dissent, distrust, and discontent over values that are seemingly set for the practice in the letter of it rather than in spirit. Hence, mankind in this age of doubt and disharmony began to justify one’s act of violation of codes and norms as an essential part of personal survival. In the process of acquiring autonomy, the other and only option which women are left with is to become like men. It is said that a masculine mindset is at least in a better state of mind or stable mind enjoying better liberty when compared to the female’s male conditioned mind. Women of today feel ripped between professional and family commitments including their sensitive sexual life, obviously leading to an imbalanced life. Women are widely misunderstood in society that they cannot handle freedom in the right sense, which makes them less responsible, and hence, they cannot take up the responsibility and have less experience as compared to men. Anita Nair, as a women writer, witnessed as representative of her time and as told through the conjugal conflicts arising in their characters.

Women writers in India have steadily moved towards projecting sensitive issues with complexity, proclaiming the right to expression, they have skilfully brought out the balance in regard to the traditions of India. The contribution of the Indian women writers is remarkable, highlighting women as bold and sensitive, showcasing women who are rich in substance. The protagonists in the story, transport readers into the world of surprises characterised by the complexities of relationships in the society with confidence. Furthermore, striking a delicate balance between the traditional forces of the Indian patriarchal joint family system and the modern nuclear family system. The women writer raised their voices through their writings, the significance of the existence of women, and their prevailing privileges. Anita Nair, too, has portrayed her protagonists as successful women who are financially secure, leading independent personal and professional lives. Nair has always portrayed modern Indian women to be educated and financially independent yet tied to traditional values and conventions. Nair carefully depicted the diversity within each woman – woman tangled in orthodox society and beliefs of old school philosophy where women are

supposed only to think that marriage is the destiny and husbands are their masters and to oblige their families is her life. Hence the author's primary focus is on a psychological exploration of the inner mind of Indian women. Nair concentrated on psychological insights, and feminine sensibility by penetrating deep into the inner mind of voiceless women, knowing their emotional war in a male-dominated society. Through her work, Nair created ripples in society especially male-dominated by paying way to women as worthy beings, her attention is a woman and her own world, and the struggles of women in the context of modern society. In her novels, the protagonists break social norms and are not confined to the margins, limiting the power of women. She has portrayed women as women of substance who voice many societal issues like gender discrimination, the economic condition of women, husband and wife relationship, sexual exploitation, abuse of women within the marital frame, and most importantly, the quest to regain and revitalize their self-esteem and personal dignity as a woman. Nair's novels make interesting reading because her characters are from this world of unadorned reality. Her themes are uncommonly effective in the unravelling of their quest towards self-discovery, freedom with or without economic independence, integration against alienation, fight against stoic suffering, social oppression, and finally true self-realization. Her mention of the couple's marital status being unhealthy, not leading a pleasurable life hence getting into extramarital affairs, the ground realities of lives, and her unapologetic style of weaving them into a beautiful story, made the author unusual.

Ladies Coupe: A woman taking control over her life independently

Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is the study of the quest for the redemption of self-esteem, personal freedom, and the conquering of the male ego as seen through the eyes of Akhilandeswari aka Akhila. In the close ambiance of the *Ladies Coupe* which Akhila shares with the other five women, Akhila gets to know her co-passengers. Their lives, in brief, draw the vignette of women's lives over a cross-section of Indian society: Janaki, first of the co-passengers, a pampered wife and confused mother; Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher married to a self-obsessed and opinionated fitness-conscious husband who seldom recognizes her needs; Prabha Devi, the perfect daughter, and wife, transformed her life knowing the favours of beauty and charm; the fourteen-year-old Sheela, who willingly obliged her grandmother's dying wish thereby showcasing her ability to understand life; and finally, Marikolanthu, who is the epitome of loving innocent womanhood on one ill-fated night loses her innocence under the brutal violating hands of a spoilt rich brat with poor character. All these stories help Akhila to know the unanswered questions and thoughts that run through her fettered self, especially the question "can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete" (Nair A, 2001a, page 16). At the age of 40, Akhila realizes that she has just lived her life for others and decides to be free, physically and mentally, of the bonds of a woman in a man's world. Without any second thought, she asserts to book a ticket to the southern tip of India, to Kanyakumari which symbolically stands for the meeting place of the virgin seas. This one decision of her life is a turning point of her innocence to adventures in discovering herself. "Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (Nair A, 2001b, page 3). Her quest for love and affection through Hari, her partner, brings home the realization that men are selfish, ignoble weaklings and not anything of the macho mask that they assume. She learns to take control of this male ego by becoming all that her name is mythically signified. "The telephone on the table near the bed rings. Akhila walks towards it...Hari's voice is low and cautious; incredulous, too. 'hello', she says. 'This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari'" (Nair A, 2001c, page 276). Hence, the protagonist Akhila finds herself in a liberated state in which her body is not viewed by her through the eyes of patriarchy but rather becomes an instrument to give her the power to be happy. Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* strives to prove at the end of the novel that taking

on a male mantle is also to have a male ego, an ego that has no fear of guilt and is self-righteously arrogant in wishful fulfilment. The liberated woman is the one who liberates herself physically and lives for herself and doesn't think of any conventional ideas.

The Better man: A man with low self-esteem taking control over his life

The Better Man is the study of the inward quest, the protagonist Mukundan is portrayed as a person who is squeezed between the familial bonding of his mother's benevolent love and affection and the adamant egoistic strict father who forces him to see things done to perfection. After retirement, Mukundan faces psychological convulsions as he returns to his village, he feels guilty for not being able to hear his mother's lamentations. Unable to fight the loneliness, he takes the help of Bhasi, who seems to be just a painter but in fact, a learned, well-read person of the world who seeks solace in a simple and humble life. Bhasi to Mukundan becomes a guru who knows to colour the life of Mukundan. Bhasi knows more than just painting, more than medicines, he wishes to get Mukundan out of the clutches of fear and make him know his potential which eventually makes him a "Better Man". At one point in time, Bhasi takes Mukundan to the attic in his house, where Bhasi asks him to get inside an old huge jar. The jar is a metaphorical representation of the womb, inside which Mukundan crouches as a baby in a prenatal position. Explaining to him how long will he avoid taking control of himself and hiding from the realities of social life, Bhasi seeks to exorcise the fear and guilt in Mukundan's mind brought about by his dominant and seemingly loveless father. "When Mukundan stepped out of the urn, his mind was made up" (Nair A, 1999, page 254). A chance encounter with Bhasi, helped Mukundan in taking control over his life.

Mistress: A disappointed wife and a confused mistress taking control over her life

Mistress is the quest across generations in time, space, and memories. A journey of self-realization, it is set on the banks of river Nila and carries within it both joy and sorrow; a heart, the love for art, creativity, passion, and the grieving pain of loss and infidelity. The story's main plot revolves around Radha, her husband Shayam, her uncle Koman and Chris who has come to India to find his father. Shyam's entire attention in life is on making money and keeping his hotel business afloat which cripples the relationship between Radha and Shayam. For him, Radha is one of the material assets that belong to him. His influence was initially on her by accompanying him to workplaces and involving in business, soon she realized that she is disconnected herself from the strenuous work, which she does not deserve. "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" (Nair A, 2005, page 426). Later when she is on her quest for herself, found happiness she is compulsively drawn by the personality and lively nature of Chris, a young travel writer from the west, she embraces Chris with the passion of a woman seeking her final haven but realizes how shallow this relationship too became. She felt she got all that she deserves and soon she realizes that her relationship with Chris evaporated. She rejects both her husband and lover and so she distances herself from the role of a parched wife and mistress to two men, at the end Radha decides to become the mistress of her own self. She realizes that being a mistress is not very different from that of a wife, nothing offered her enough space. Radha's transformation post-her traumatic experience caused by her husband and lover enabled her to take control over her life and shaped her into a self-made, independent woman.

Idris- The keeper of light: A dejected traveller taking control over his life

Idris: The Keeper of the Light again is the story of a Somali trader on an incredibly long journey "seeking the measure of earth and man"; that is, his journey is both an inner quest for knowledge and understanding

as much as an outer quest for precious merchandise; it is both spiritual and material, both sacred and profane. He is a type of person who does not want to anchor his life to any permanent place, hence he introduces himself as “I am Idris Mayamoon Samataar Guleed. Previously Dikhil. Now an eternal traveler seeking the measures of the earth and man” (Nair A, 2014a, page 49). Idris is a one-eyed traveller, on an eternal quest to know what his destiny is and to redeem his son Kandavar, who comes to Malabar, Kerala to attend the Zamorin’s Mamangam celebrations in the 17th century. His quest for control is augmented by his quest for comfort in his son, who does not yet know him as his father. Idris’s travel in India is a quest in time and across space, all the characters aching to connect to their inner being as much as come to terms with the outer is the crux of the story. “It’s not good for a grown man to sit around doing nothing...the mind does nothing but wanders down unnecessary unwanted paths...” (Nair A, 2014b, page 289). Idris presents the search of a father for the welfare of his son; the journey of the human mind through the intricacies of life during the seventeenth century in search of riches as much as salvation of self. Idris accidentally meets his nine-year-old son Kandavar, who is the result of his nocturnal tryst with Kuttimalu, the wife of the Nambudri. Nair shows how Idris takes control of the orthodox Nambudries into allowing him to take Kandavar, a boy of nine, on a voyage to divert the boy’s liking of becoming a chaver of the suicide mission, as he is entrusted the responsibility of keeping the boy engaged. Idris takes the boy through different moulds of life and makes him aware of the ways of survival. The journey teaches them the perspective of drawing ethereal joy from the sky and stars which they believe is the power of destiny.

CONCLUSION

Nair’s novels show how various characters controls freedom with dignity, exclusively in terms of women’s freedom of self-expression. The male and female characters in her novels try to wrestle with their interpersonal problems, with or without success, and at times may also end in peace. Nair’s main characters in the four novels skillfully control themselves over external forces, as in the Ladies Coupe, Akhila was able to take back and manage her life which was hitherto controlled by others, as compared to Radha in Mistress, who too was able to take control of her life when found herself at the crossroads. Whereas, in The Better Man, Mukundan, on the verge of psychological breakdown, with Bhasi’s intervention, was able to become a better man. On the other hand, Idris’s, being an eternal traveller, wherein his many adventures shaped the man he has become, who constantly learned from his experiences and hardships, though his journey had dark shades, and in the light of his choices, emerged victoriously in the end through many hurdles. In the end, readers come to realise the author’s focus on emotional fulfilment, leaving them on a perpetual Quest.

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