

Research Article

## Reimagining Womanhood in the Select Novels of Anita Nair

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**Abstract:** The article explores the feminist undercurrents in Anita Nair's fiction, focusing primarily on her seminal novels *Ladies Coupé* (2005), *Mistress* (2005), and *The Better Man* (2015). A distinguished contemporary Indian author, Nair constructs nuanced female characters who navigate, resist, and ultimately dismantle patriarchal structures. The study employs Sylvia Walby's patriarchy theory alongside feminist literary criticism to interrogate gendered power dynamics and systemic inequalities. The principal aim is to examine how Nair's protagonists reconfigure womanhood through acts of resistance, self-assertion, and redefinition of personal identity. Through Akhila's introspective voyage in *Ladies Coupé*, Radha's subversion of conjugal expectations in *Mistress*, and Valsala's reclamation of bodily autonomy in *The Better Man*, Nair posits female subjectivity as a site of both struggle and transformation. The study also contextualises Nair's work within the broader socio-historical trajectory of Indian women's reformist struggles, which intersect with caste, class, and religion. The objective is to elucidate how Nair's fictional narratives serve as powerful critiques of patriarchy and offer literary blueprints for feminist emancipation. Her protagonists, embodying both endurance and rebellion, symbolise the emergence of a "New Woman" in Indian English literature—self-aware, resolute, and liberated.

**Keywords:** feminist literature; patriarchy; women empowerment

## Introduction

This scholarly inquiry endeavours to delineate the predicament of women and their evolving societal roles, primarily through the lens of Anita Nair's literary corpus. Her oeuvre offers an incisive and contemplative perspective, inviting a profound engagement with the socio-cultural mechanisms that curtail female autonomy. The narratives under scrutiny chronicle the tribulations of women ensnared in a milieu that systematically inhibits their agency. Nair's female protagonists disrupt entrenched patriarchal paradigms, asserting distinct subjectivities and aspiring toward self-reliance and personal fulfilment. In *Ladies Coupé*, Nair castigates orthodox pedagogical frameworks for perpetuating androcentric ideologies among both sexes. Her didacticism unveils domestic realities while interrogating the variegated stages of womanhood. *Mistress* delineates the metamorphosis of conjugal dynamics, whereas *The Better Man* underscores the ramifications of systemic subjugation and extols the imperative of individual emancipation. Nair posits that education acquires transformative potency only when it catalyzes cognitive reformation, augments empowerment, and engenders female liberation. She advocates recalibrating gender relations towards egalitarianism.

## Structural Patriarchy and the Codification of Gender Inequality

Society conditions individual comportment, performance, and perception. Gender-based discrimination, therefore, constitutes an egregious moral infraction. Within patriarchal households, authority is overwhelmingly vested in the patriarch. Sylvia Walby conceptualises patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby, 1990). Women, thus, endure subservience that is compounded by racial, social, and cultural oppressions—manifested in marginalisation, humiliation, sexual objectification, surveillance, and violence.

Historically, women have been rendered voiceless by male-dominated structures that valorise domination and control. Repressive societal systems engender internalised acceptance, normalising gendered oppression. The instruments of female control differ across civilisations, shaped by contextual variables such as caste, class, religion, geography, and ethnicity. Patriarchal culture romanticises motherhood, thereby curtailing autonomy and relegating women to the role of caregivers. Elitist ideologies conflate gender roles with biological determinism, legitimising social and economic disparities between the sexes. As with race and class, gender must be critically examined to elucidate systemic asymmetries. Feminist intellectuals have rigorously interrogated this oppression, positing that sexism mirrors the structures of classist and racist ideologies. Patriarchy is delineated by three cardinal tenets: male dominance, female subordination, and androcentrism.

## Indian Socio-Historical Context and Women's Reformist Struggles

Indian socio-religious thought bifurcated into two ideological currents—one championing gender parity, the other relegating women to subservience. Religious texts codified inequalities, with epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata reflecting the

degradation of women's status during the post-Vedic period. Manusmriti decreed female political impotence, and women's participation in public life diminished dramatically. Through draconian customs—child marriage, polygamy, and widow ostracism—the Brahminical order undermined female agency. Caste hierarchies intensified gender disparities, confining Hindu women to domestic spaces and Muslim women behind the veil. Their disenfranchisement was nearly absolute.

As Bhide Patil observes, the intervention of Christian missionaries in nineteenth-century India, particularly Maharashtra, catalysed social reform. Luminaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Phule emerged as champions of women's rights—the reformative momentum bifurcated women's history into pre- and post-independence trajectories. Despite postcolonial attempts—such as the Hindu Code Bill and the emergence of women's organisations—patriarchy remained resilient. Education became the fulcrum of transformation, facilitating economic independence and cultural redefinition. The “New Woman” in Indian English literature emerged as a defiant symbol of modernity and self-articulation.

### **Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*: A Feminist Voyage of Self-Liberation**

The French word *coupé* denotes a confined space—aptly symbolising Akhila's constrained existence within the expectations of her family and society. Most of Anita Nair's narratives examine women enduring psychological trauma and familial suppression. Societal and domestic expectations similarly bind the other five women in *Ladies Coupé*. The train coupe becomes a microcosmic representation of the Indian woman's life. Akhila's family expects her to remain unmarried and subservient, despite her role as the primary breadwinner. Her mother, a traditionally submissive figure, embodies the belief that a woman must always defer to male authority. This generational transmission of patriarchal values propels Akhila into an identity crisis. She yearns for autonomy but is encumbered by familial duties. Reaching her breaking point, she chooses to board a train in pursuit of self-discovery, declaring: “She felt her lips stretching into a smile... will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognize” (Nair, 2005). The journey becomes a metaphor for Akhila's transformation—a symbolic passage from suppression to awakening. She begins to question if womanhood must be defined by dependency on a man. Through intimate conversations with fellow passengers like Janaki—who confesses to having lived only in the service of male figures—Akhila gains clarity. Their confessions form a tapestry of resilience, disillusionment, and awakening. *Ladies Coupé* is a chronicle of becoming—a powerful literary meditation on emancipation through shared female experience.

### **Feminine Subjugation and the Burden of Patriarchy in *Ladies' Coupé***

Literature has long mirrored society, encapsulating its ethos, mores, and quotidian realities. Countless literary texts reveal the paradoxical existence of the Indian woman, particularly her vacillation between tradition and modernity. The initial literary endeavours of Indian women writers often rendered the feminine experience in a conventional and idealised manner; however, over time, the portrayal has acquired verisimilitude, emphasising themes of alienation, despondency, and internal conflict.

These texts frequently depict women ensnared within the interstice of two contrasting worlds.

Anita Nair, a contemporary Indian litterateur of the twenty-first century, deftly interrogates the condition of women subjugated beneath the yoke of patriarchal dominance. Her narratives expose the insidious mechanisms through which dominant socio-cultural norms efface women's personhood and circumscribe their agency. In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Nair declared that patriarchy manifests in both overt and covert forms and affirmed that this pervasive system constitutes the crux of her literary inquiry (Pepper, 2013).

Her seminal work *Ladies Coupé* chronicles a woman's journey of introspection and individuation. The narrative becomes a site for female self-articulation in contemporary India. It charts the trajectory of Akhila (Akhilandeswari), a spinster constrained by familial obligations and societal expectations. Through her interactions with five other women—Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolanthu—Nair constructs a palimpsest of female experience. The term "coupé", borrowed from French, symbolises spatial confinement, mirroring Akhila's psychological and existential entrapment within domesticity. Each woman's narrative delineates distinct stages of womanhood. The confined setting of the railway coupé metaphorically parallels the claustrophobia of a life governed by patriarchal mores. Akhila, despite being the sole breadwinner, is denied personal agency and must defer to familial consent. Her lived experience epitomises the paradox faced by Indian women: financial responsibility devoid of decision-making authority. She ultimately severs these bindings by embarking upon a physical and metaphorical journey toward emancipation.

### **Intersecting Oppressions and Acts of Resistance in Female Narratives**

The stories shared within *Ladies Coupé* serve as a mosaic of gendered oppression and emerging resistance. Janaki embodies the archetype of docile femininity—submissive, dependent, and internalising patriarchy. In contrast, Margaret Shanti, despite her intellectual prowess, is psychologically diminished by a narcissistic husband. Her subtle act of rebellion—feeding him oily food to undermine his vanity—evinces a quiet, intellectual subversion. Prabha Devi's narrative offers a commentary on the inherited constraints of girlhood and womanhood. Her act of learning to swim symbolises a radical reclamation of agency, underscoring the metaphor of liberation through self-discovery. Marikolanthu's account, perhaps the most poignant, exposes the layered violences experienced by marginalised women. As a Dalit and an unwed mother, she endures caste-based sexual violence and societal vilification, reflecting intersectional injustices embedded in India's patriarchal social fabric.

According to D. Silvia Flavia (Langyan, 2021), Nair's female characters exemplify an epistemological rupture in patriarchal narratives. They are inquisitive, intelligent, and rebellious. The interrelation of colonialism and patriarchy underscores the structural continuities of domination. Postcolonial patriarchy reproduces colonial paradigms, wherein decolonised men perpetuate oppression by subordinating women.

Nair's characters resist such internal colonisation, confronting systemic injustices both in private and public spheres. Akhila's eventual decision to reunite with her younger paramour, Hari, signifies her reassertion of agency. No longer fettered by societal censure, she acknowledges the necessity of companionship and emotional reciprocity on her own terms. Through the tales of her fellow passengers, she is reborn—not as someone's daughter or employee—but as the mistress of her destiny.

### **Redefining Womanhood and Autonomy in *Mistress* and *The Better Man***

In *Mistress*, Nair delves into complex conjugal dynamics, interlacing the narrative with the aesthetic and performative traditions of Kathakali. Radha, the protagonist, feels emotionally imprisoned within her marriage to Shyam, a man who cannot provide either affection or autonomy. Her subsequent relationship with Chris, a foreign journalist, is not merely an affair but a reclamation of identity. Shyam, emblematic of patriarchal entitlement, objectifies Radha—treating her not as a partner, but as a prized possession. Her radical decision to eschew both men allows her to reconfigure motherhood outside patriarchal legitimacy: her child will bear only her identity. Nair's *The Better Man* further explores the intricate entanglements of gender and marriage. Anjana, once a self-assured woman, is gradually eroded by her husband Ravindran's financial instability and emotional brutality. Rebuffed by her in-laws and physically assaulted, she finds sanctuary in her vocation. With paternal support, she liberates herself from matrimonial servitude and reclaims her dignity. Her character arc traces a metamorphosis from victimhood to resolute selfhood.

Valsala, trapped in a sterile marriage with Prabhakaran, reclaims her vitality through an affair with her neighbour Sridharan. Rejecting societal prescriptions, she affirms her bodily autonomy and asserts the legitimacy of female desire. "I want to know ecstasy," she proclaims, repudiating the moral policing of female sexuality. Her assertion that she does not wish to be "pushed into old age before it is time" underlines her refusal to be extinguished by convention. Valsala's defiance, like that of other Nair heroines, dismantles the binaries of virtue and vice, domesticity and transgression. Through her narratives, Nair interrogates the architecture of Indian patriarchy, exposes the quotidian violences that underpin it, and envisions a feminist subjectivity that is defiant, nuanced, and unrepentant.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the global literary canon, women have frequently been delineated as archetypes of passive endurance, often confined within the strictures of patriarchal orthodoxies. The systemic subjugation of women remains a pervasive feature of male-dominated cultures, wherein their existential purpose is ostensibly fulfilled through matrimonial servitude. Societal norms have historically imposed an oppressive silence upon women, proscribing the articulation of their thoughts and rendering their intellectual agency null. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak incisively articulates this predicament, positing that marginalised subjects are not only silenced by imperialist regimes but are equally effaced by the passive complicity of bystanders who witness global injustices yet remain inert. As she poignantly observes in *In Other Worlds*, "the



figure of the woman moving as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and clan member to clan and family member structures patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity" (Spivak, 220). Such pronouncements underscore the entrenched social mechanisms that systematically erode female autonomy across temporal and cultural boundaries. The sociocultural suppression of women is not merely a vestige of antiquity; it remains insidiously dynamic, adapting itself to contemporary structures while retaining its deleterious core. Anita Nair's select fictional narratives astutely capture this existential malaise. Her female protagonists inhabit circumscribed worlds that negate their fundamental rights to freedom and self-definition. Yet, within these constraints, they exhibit remarkable fortitude and embark upon introspective and external journeys towards liberation.

Characters such as Anjana and Radha extricate themselves from patriarchal entanglements, repudiating relationships that have diminished their self-worth, and instead, embark on paths of self-appreciation and individuation. Valsala attains an awakened inner consciousness, while Akhila reclaims her personal sovereignty, breaking free from familial entrapments. Nair does not merely portray women as victims; she foregrounds their resilience, agency, and tenacity in the face of social orthodoxy. Her literary oeuvre oscillates between depicting women's subversive resistance and their silent endurance. Education, in Nair's vision, emerges as a cardinal instrument of empowerment—catalysing self-awareness and catalysing transformative change. Her narratives delineate a trajectory wherein women transition from subjects of patriarchal subordination to autonomous agents forging new ontological identities. The contemporary woman, as envisioned by Nair, is neither a disavowal of tradition nor a wholesale embracer of modernity; instead, she is an exquisite amalgamation of inherited values and progressive ideals. Yet, the path to such emancipation remains fraught. When women are marginalised, alienated, and imprisoned—psychologically, socially, or institutionally—their subjectivity is systematically dismantled. It is a process both insidious and exacting. Only through conscious recognition, critical interrogation, and an unwavering commitment to dismantling these oppressive structures can we envision a society in which equity is not aspirational but actualised. The literary representations of women in Nair's fiction serve as both testimony and blueprint for such a transformation.

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