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AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA NAIR

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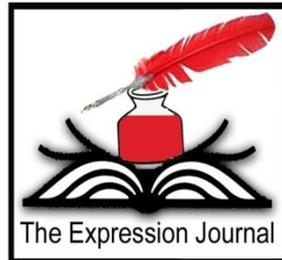
Abstract

Diaspora in literature often focuses on the cultural and traditional aspects of the native country of the migrants in a nostalgic way. The usual problems explored in migrant literatures are identity crisis, discrimination and racism. At present, the Diasporic Literature witnesses its importance in the literary field. Some Indian writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and others have vividly dealt with these diasporic aspects through their literary works. Diaspora literature also deals with emigrant susceptibility. It mainly highlights the issues like cultural dilemma, quest for identity, multiculturalism and struggle of human existence. Anita Nair is a prominent writer whose novels present the spiritual anxiety, despair and a sense of loss of womanhood. Her writings focus mainly on the issues and the challenges against the concepts of culture and identity of women in the Indian background. Generally, her characters attempt to break away from the traditional, religious and social codes to recuperate identity. Her first novel, *The Better Man* is a great example for how the caste system in politics operates in the rural village like Kaikurrussi. In her second novel *Ladies Coupe*, she picturises gender-gap and the need of women's freedom which ranges from old generation to new generation. She vividly describes the beautiful landscape of Kerala and its traditional dance Kathakali in the third novel *Mistress*. The novelist narrates the search for meaning in art and life. This paper attempts to analyse how the major characters of these novels long for self-identity and freedom in the patriarchal society.

Keywords

Cultural Dilemma, Quest for Identity, Multiculturalism, Self-Identity, Freedom, Discrimination, Identity-Crisis, Racism.

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Anita Nair is an eminent Indian novelist whose stories show an impressive depth in her discussion on the dispute between the self-actualization and family errands of the persons. Most of her novels reflect Indian culture through female characters. She describes the cultural, social and economic aspects which mark the mode of modern society and it becomes a social document of the twenty-first century. Karl Marx in his preface said:

‘In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness’.

Anita Nair’s first novel *The Better Manis* about the people of a rural village called Kaikurussi. Mukundan, a retired Government officer, is the central character of the novel. Bhasi, a house painter, is another significant character belongs to the backward class who has completed his Post-graduate in English language and literature. Mukundan is very close to Bhasi. On one occasion, the village heads planned to build a community hall. They searched for a suitable land for it. After a thorough search, they identified a piece of land which is owned by Bhasi. They

approached him to acquire his land. But Bhasi was not ready to offer that land for that purpose. But they, including Mukundan, enforced him to give it. As Mukundan was with their side, Bhasi struggled a lot to protect his land.

Nair, through the above incident, highlighted how a group of people were suppressed mercilessly and denied of enjoying their privilege or equality in the patriarchal society. They gave him maximum trouble in order to get his land to build Community Hall. To his surprise, he was isolated and tortured though he was very close to them earlier. So, he was confused of their indifferent treatment. At last, he lost the land and started wandering here and there aimlessly. Later, his friend Mukundan realised Bhasi's pathetic condition and to bring him to normalcy, he offered him his own piece of land.

At the same time, another character namely, Power House Ramakrishnan, who also belongs to the backward community like Bhasi. But surprisingly, he was accepted by all because of his wealth which he gained through winning a lottery ticket. And then, with his wealth, he started new businesses, made investments and enjoyed huge profits. Ultimately, he became the chair person (Head) of the village. So, the sudden change in his attitude and growth in life reflects his inner psychology that he is "a social climber, a status seeker, a snob and opportunist" (P 206). It was also noted by everyone that his affluence was a base which aided him to reach the present social status within a short period. In addition, he became the nucleus of the society and was respected by everyone in the society. Though he belonged to the backward class, all respected him because of his wealthy condition. Therefore, his character and social status endorsed the sayings that "Money makes a man perfect" and "Money makes many things".

In the village, no one helped Bhasi and he was abandoned because of fear on Power House Ramakrishnan. Also, he was the chair person in the Community Hall and he only had the desire to build the Power House Ramakrishnan Community Hall. So, what is explained here is that money plays a major role and not the sameness of community. Because Bhasi and Ramakrishnan belong to the same community. But economy plays a vital role everywhere. That is why, Power House Ramakrishnan became a powerful man in society. So in this context, even Mukundan said that Ramakrishnan himself attained the social status because of wealth. Anita Nair writes about Ramakrishnan:

'Despite the rubberized coir mattress, he slept on and his renovated house. Despite the 2 HP motor that sucked up water from the intestines of the earth and filled the huge plastic drums in the newly built, tiled bathroom. Despite the black ambassador Nova parked in front of the porch for everyone to see, and the acres of fields he had accumulated like an avaricious bee gathering honey. Despite all this Power House Ramakrishnan still felt the sting of poverty and hopelessness in his dreams' (BM 268).

Generally, Nair is a well-known presenter of all aspects prevailing in a society. Here she introduced another character, Kamban, post-master of the Kaikurrusi village. He belonged to the lower Pulaya caste. In this, Nair pictures how caste politics operated in the rural village through this character. Very often, Mukundan visited the post office to get some magazines and there he met Kamban,

who slowly developed friendship with him. But Kamban avoided going inside of the village because people never accepted him and allowed him into the village. Even though Mukundan was a friend of him, he never invited him to his house. So, this atmosphere made Kamban suffer a lot throughout his life by being the lower class. Hence, Maya Vinai-points out that,

‘... The Better Man, where people belonging to various castes and religion assemble to share their political ideas as well as beliefs. Right from labourers like painter Bhasi to the bourgeoisie Mad Moidu to the aristocrat Mukundan Nair, and also an occasional visit by the capitalist PHR, it becomes a hub for all, thereby creating a sense of community’. (65)

Anita Nair in her second novel *Ladies Coupe*, narrated about the central character Akila. The novel described the suffering of some women in the patriarchal society. Once, Akila got a chance to meet five different women in a compartment: Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margret Shanti, Sheela, and Marikolunthu. They were all of different age group, education and social background. During travel, Akhila carefully listened to the stories of these co-passengers in the compartment and finding in them a solution to the question that has been with her for all her life. Self-realization or cry for Identity is the state of psyche that is recognized by the dealings with the member in the society and also by the identification of the society. A woman’s identity predicament is that where she struggles to accomplish as a human being in the society and family. Usually, Women are recognized as wife, mother and daughter which she accepted willingly. But later, she discards the relational identity and she wants to stand freely on her feet, equal to man in the society. Nair, through all these women characters portray the current position of women in their family as well as in the society.

Firstly, Janaki, an old woman, reveals her feelings openly that she has only dissatisfaction about the way she lived so far. At the same time, she says that she has everything she needed, yet she feels that she is in the patriarchal society. Maybe this is because she feels that she lost her identity in the masculine society. She becomes tired of her reality as a weak creature, depending on others to do everything for her. Finally, she had lost her identity in trying to be the perfect wife. She says,

‘My home ceased to interest me; none of the beliefs I had built my life around had any meaning. I thought if I were to lose it all, I would manage perfectly. I was quite confident about that. I think I was tired of being this fragile creature’ (LC 23).

Secondly, another character, Prabha Devi is the perfect daughter and the rich obedient wife. After her fortieth birthday, she realises that her identity is lost. She does not like the way she has grown and therefore she tries to change herself. She wants freedom and liberty. That is why, she considers using a swim suit and indulging in swimming gives her a sense of freedom and identity as a wife and a mother. She also wants to break the freedom from the bondage in which she is imprisoned tightly.

And then thirdly, Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher who faces suppression and domination in her married life. Her husband pokes his nose in all

her activities. So, she is dominated by her ego-centric husband. And then, she was forced by him to have an abortion, not only that, but he sustained to thrust upon his supremacy over her, deciding her higher studies, career and even simple things like choice of food and her hair dressing. Under remorse, she said,

“I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE
EBENEZAR PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. HATE HIM”.

I waited for a clap of roar, a hurling meteor, a hurricane, a dust tempest for some super Phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelations. (LC 98)

At this juncture, she would have gone to divorce him. But, being sensible, she does not dare to do so because she is afraid of society. However, she decided to take revenge on her husband. Therefore, she decided to make him clumsy. She carefully selects food and feed him to turn a fat man. As she planned, he becomes fat, loses his egotism and needs her help more and more. Earlier she was controlled by him and its upside down that she, now, holds him completely in her hands. Here, a unique way adapted by Margaret helps her not only to go back into the society proudly, but also changes her parents' outlook and attitude of her husband. (Agalya 4)

And then the fourth character, Sheela, a fourteen-year old girl, is portrayed as a more matured than her parents and knows the people and their inner urge. Unlike other characters, the importance of relationship between children and their grandmothers is insisted through this character. So she is shown that she loves her grandmother's advice about practical life. So, her grandmother's advice and experiences prepared her to gain boldness to see a great emancipation with her ability. That is why, Sheela dresses her grandmother's dead body in a good costume with her jewels. She does it because she thinks of the words of her grandmother who used to tell her that, “The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy” (LC 67).

The fifth character is Marikolanthu who is seen as the most pitiable, poor and deprived woman in the story. Why this because, she not only faces poverty, alienation and deprivation, but also faces the problems of caste difference. Here, her mother is a cook in the rich Chettiars' house, where she is raped and she does not get any justice for it. Nair portrays these type women as an indicator of their despondent loss of identity. When she gave birth to that illicit child, she decides to take revenge upon such people. So, she remains unmarried throughout her life by caring her son and mother. In spite of the cruelty of fate, Marikolanthu emerges as a strong self-determining woman trying to strike stability in her untidy life in the society.

Anita Nair, through her stories, strongly creates an image of such women who have left behind a shadow of new identity and a self- realisation in life, growth and experience. Actually, what they wanted to have is only an cordial existence with the males without sacrificing their freedom, rights and desires.

In the third novel *Mistress*, Nair expresses the changing relationships of husband and wife through art and life. The main protagonist of the novel is Koman,

a kathakali dancer. And Radha is Koman's niece. Radha's husband is Shyam, who is a business man. Christopher Stewart is a travel writer who came to India to meet Koman. In the first part of the novel, Radha was portrayed as a good wife of Shyam. In the later part, she was dominated by her husband; even she was not allowed to talk with the employees who were working in their factory. So, she is treated only as mistress for Shyam to fulfil his needs and desires. In the meantime, she gets an opportunity to meet Chris and admires him in the first sight itself. However, Koman noticed Radha's interest in Chris. And then, he talks to himself:

Chris, I see, desire Radha. And she, him.

Who is he, I wonder again. This young man from across the seas, with cello and a smile on display. And knowledge he hides in his heart. I have no time to think any more...Radha cringes. Chris drops his eyes and breaks their embrace. And I look away. I think of Nala and Damayanti. Of lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so... (M 29)

After seeing the charming Chris, there is a tremendous change in Radha's behaviour. For instance, she disrespects her husband and spends a lot of time with Chris, for whom she became a translator to explain the life of Koman. This proximity between them paved the way for Radha to be attracted by Chris and then she fell in love with him. Thereafter, she spends her full day and night with him. As Koman comes to know all about the love between them, he advised Radha to be careful and away. But to his surprise, she said that her marriage is dead but she had fear on her life. She thinks that her love is that of man and wife love. Once Radha became pregnant, she thinks that she is caring Shyam's child. But Shyam got angry on her because he knows that he cannot become a father for that child as he is already sterilized. However, he reacts, "a wrenching pain tears through me. I bite on my hand to muffle the sound of my agony" (M 351).

In this bitter context, she vehemently discards both of them as the two are the same in different way of dominating and patriarchal. So, this novel ends with the unborn child in Radha's womb. In the novel she explains the loss of identity of Radha.

Finally, in these three novels, Anita Nair describes the Cultural Inclusion and Social Manifestation. All the characters suffer one way or other in one situation. In *The Better Man* class domination occurs. Through the characters, Nair reflects that society is bonded with this class system. Not only Kerala throughout India it reflects. In the novel *Ladies Coupe*, she express the freedom from bondage of culture, from the concepts of family, marriage and sex as defined by male-chauvinism and are thrust upon women. In *Mistress*, Nair explains the hopeless certainty at our predictable knowledge of worldly wisdom, our false joy in barren routine of life, in short, our state of being.

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