

An Analysis of Modern Women in the Novels of Anita Nair

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Abstract

The paper will examine the condition of women in Indian society with the assistance of acclaimed novelist Anita Nair. Women have historically faced discrimination in a male-dominated society where patriarchy plays a pivotal role in sustaining the status quo. In the past, women were expected to be perfect wives and accept the injustices around them, while lacking gender awareness and being confined to their homes. However, modern women have undergone a significant shift in mindset, with the development of their own identities, self-worth, independence, and self-esteem becoming more important than patriarchal values. Nair's novels examine the transformation of women through her female characters. She presents a picture of modern life and the issues faced by women, such as sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, cultural conditioning, and the husband-wife relationship. The paper aims to highlight the resilience of female characters while exploring gender bias against women. Additionally, the paper will showcase feminist female writers who have produced literary works that benefit society. The paper will depict their struggle in a patriarchal system and the dynamics between men and women in the Indian Diaspora.

Keywords: Freedom, Individualism, Oppression, Patriarchy, Reality, Women's 'writing.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, women from various countries organized public rallies and protests, advocating for their rights and demanding equality. These women played a crucial role in changing global and Indian perceptions of women, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. They refused to be silenced and spoke out against abuse, oppression, and discrimination, voicing their concerns and perspectives. Today, women continue to inspire and empower others to embrace their identity and strive for equality. In some domains, including enterprise, technology, governance, and the creative industry, they have made tremendous strides. Despite the progress, many challenges remain, such as the gender pay gap, unequal representation in leadership positions, and violence against women. In the face of these challenges, women worldwide continue to speak out, organise, and advocate for change. They are shattering glass ceilings, paving the way for future generations of women to flourish within a more just and equal world.

Unfortunately, women have historically encountered unequal treatment as a result of gender stereotypes. It is wrong to discriminate against someone merely due to their sexual orientation. In ancient times, throughout the Vedic period, both genders had equal rights and privileges. Women were highly educated, employed, and participated in all religious ceremonies. They held a respected position in society. During the Later Rig Vedic Period, women had the freedom to choose their spouses, participate in social events, and pursue education. With time, a patriarchal society did, however, arise, depriving women of their rights and reducing their prospects.

Exploration of Gender Bias

Simone De Beauvoir argues that men and women are treated differently in the patriarchal framework and that being a woman is not something that one is born with, but rather something that one becomes (283). It is believed that males are strong and rational, whereas women are weak. These misconceptions lead to men's conventional and biased attitudes towards women. Sadly, this system persisted for many years, suppressing women's freedom and independence. Tenth-century thinking was dominated by a view of ancient sexism, where women are principally in charge of development and subsistence and father/husband power plays an essential part. From the 16th century on, women were excluded from professions and limited to household and

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reproductive positions like wet nurses and counsellors. The birth of capitalism established the distinction between places for manufacturing (businesses) and sites for reproduction (families). A contemporary portrayal of the housewife exists mostly in rich homes, developing and strengthening resentment for women forced to work outside because their spouses could not retain them. Women's unpaid labour contributed to the creation of patriarchal tyranny. The notion of housewives gradually became the dominant model, ostensibly a natural order. Social status is replicated in wealthy families, whereas labour is reproduced in lower-income ones. During both World Wars, factories lost all of their workforce. They received wages at work but not at home; as men returned from the front, women were invariably sent home. When comparing paid and unpaid work hours, women work significantly more than men. According to Bourdieu, males are heroic and struggle to fulfil the same tasks, but women are insignificant and unnoticed. For example, there is a significant variation in perception between a male and a female cook. Men contribute a great deal of wealth and status to sewing and cooking. The identical chores signify absolutely nothing when performed by females.

Across various cultures, a consistent bias exists in favour of the birth of boys over girls. The arrival of a baby boy is frequently celebrated with exuberance, and the mother is honoured for delivering a male child. Fathers take satisfaction in the knowledge that their family lineage will endure. Conversely, the birth of a girl is typically marked with less formality, and the mother receives diminished recognition. Regrettably, in certain regions, infanticide, the act of killing baby girls shortly before or after birth, has become prevalent. Additionally, some facilities provide early sex detection services to enable parents to terminate female fetuses selectively. Women's lives were also hampered by early marriage, particularly those of young girls. Young girls are pressured into early pregnancy and marriage, which has an impact on women's and children's health. There have been cases where girls from remote communities have been abducted, raped, and then married to the perpetrator. There have been instances of female genital mutilation as a result of the assumption that girls who retain their virginity are more faithful to their spouses.

In early childhood development, it is observable that children are often directed to adhere to gender-specific colour preferences and toy choices. This societal imposition dictates that boys should favour the colour blue and engage with toy cars, while girls are expected to prefer pink and play with dolls. In societal contexts, there exists an expectation for men to utilize physical force and verbal aggression as a means of asserting their masculinity, while conversely, women are typically anticipated to confront and resist such forms of aggression. This phenomenon is rooted in societal expectations rather than the intrinsic preferences of the children themselves, highlighting a concerning level of hypocrisy within our societal framework.

Women often face complex and conflicting stereotypes when navigating between two distinct cultures. They frequently find themselves conflicted between the constraints of traditional gender roles in their country of origin and the opportunities offered by their adopted home. Women now live in a difficult situation where they must continually navigate their feelings of identity and individuality. For many women, nevertheless, this circumstance may also be liberating, as it gives them the chance to rethink their social positions and pursue new avenues. By embracing the freedom to shape their own identities, women can break free from the limitations of gender norms and achieve greater personal fulfilment. During the 1960s and the start of the 1970s, the term "migrants" was mostly used to describe males who moved with their families, which included their spouses and kids (Boyd and Grieco 2003). However, women received little consideration in this setting, and their lessons were frequently disregarded. Women were either considered passive agents or their experiences were generalised, which led to an incomplete understanding of their unique struggles and hardships. Women were frequently in the vanguard of migration, faced considerable obstacles, and made important contributions to the prosperity of their families and communities. As such, the absence of focus on women's experiences was a grave error. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the perspectives and contributions of women and the vital influence they played in migration.

Women face contradictory circumstances and personal identities in both the societal and domestic domains during the relocation and settling process. Professional women with high levels of expertise may successfully manage both their personal and work lives. While attempting to better their job chances, women migrants with varying degrees of expertise rise to the obstacles of a foreign environment to improve the lives of their families back home. Women from diaspora families frequently find it difficult to reestablish a feeling of belonging and

culture in a foreign environment that is frequently tainted by racial politics. Despite the harsh reality of plantation life and men's exploitation as forced labourers, women were able to adapt and achieve economic and educational possibilities, ultimately leading to their liberation.

Modern women contributed significantly to this transition by encouraging individualism. They moved their attention away from family ties and the feudal structure and back to themselves. Women have shown the aptitude to overcome the obstacles created by changing societal structures and their surroundings. This has caused a rise in the percentage of female leaders. During the 18th and 19th centuries, women began to emerge as a force that rebelled against prejudice. Indian civilization saw the emergence of a new type of woman, separated into three segments. The first part was marked by the identity conflicts of the emerging middle class, who started questioning the injustice and enslavement of women caused by child marriage, widowhood, and lack of education. They emulated the West and initiated reforms to improve women's status. The second part was related to the impact of education on women's status within the household and how it could halt the rising influence of Western values and culture on the minds of young men towards the conclusion of the nineteenth century. This felt like an attack on Western influences. The third part emerged when women joined the liberation movements and raised important issues during protests. The middle-class women's struggles caught the attention of reformers, who implemented major changes such as the abolition of Sati Pratha, widow remarriage, and a greater emphasis on women's education. However, these reforms were primarily available to upper-class women. Fortunately, the 20th century witnessed the awakening of the nation, and literature played an essential role in this.

Literature in Promoting Feminist Discourse and Advocacy for Women's Rights

The prevailing system of female representation perpetuates the subjugation of women by depicting them as fragile, nurturing, and naive. According to Gayatri Spivak, women's oppression stems from their portrayal as objects of both patriarchy and imperial dominance. Narratives and depictions are crafted to articulate a perspective on the world, and over time, these dialogues become entrenched and persistent. Feminist voices challenge these discourses, questioning the legitimacy of the creators and the notion of universality.

Writings by a multitude of authors have championed women's issues, which have been instrumental in increasing consciousness and fostering constructive transformations in society. The visibility of women in leadership roles has improved over time. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, stated "The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting...than the story of that emancipation itself (Woolf) illustrates how men seem to revere and mock women. Furthermore, the motivation for women desiring greater autonomy is easy to understand: they are hurting and do not wish to continue struggling. Kate Millet's work, *Sexual Politics*, describes how patriarchy affected sexuality discourses, resulting in inequalities based on gender. She said that prejudice started against women and moved on to include racial and class issues. John Stuart Mill, author of "The Subjugation of Women," emphasised that women need to have the same rights as men, including the ability to vote. The argument for women's lower constitutional status was that they should be kept inside the home, in which they would be protected from the social influences that may taint future generations' morals and be seen as morally superior to men. Published in 1845, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" by Margaret Fuller is widely recognized as the inaugural American feminist declaration. Fuller advocated for women's rights by challenging gender norms and introducing the concept of gender identity. Similarly, Wollstonecraft emphasized women's education and contested unequal rights in politics and the workforce.

India's education system received much attention during British rule because of the Charter Act of 1813. However, women's access to learning was largely constrained in Indian culture. When the East India Company issued the "Wood's Dispatch," which included the Educational Development Programme, in 1854, the government assumed responsibility for ensuring all women were competent and that education and job opportunities for women received particular emphasis. Among these was the 1929 Hartog Committee, which Sir Philip Hartog led in an assessment of the nation's educational situation. The committee's main goal was to give school curricula greater diversity. It also placed a strong emphasis on women's education, allocating the same financial resources to both and giving girls' education the same priority as boys'. It sought to increase the

number of elementary schools for girls and, whenever feasible, place them in classes with boys. It provided female instructors with teacher training and encouragement. The inclusion of women in Indian higher education commenced with the graduation of two Indian women in the year 1883, marking their status as the first female graduates in the country. A pivotal juncture in the advancement of women's education in India materialized with the establishment of an Indian Women's University in Bombay in 1916.

New Woman

The "New Woman" phenomenon emerged in India, signalling a significant shift in societal attitudes. The Victorian era marked the onset of this transformation, introducing various advancements that empowered women. Coined by Irish author Sarah Grand in 1894, the term "New Woman" encapsulated the aspirations of independent women seeking profound societal changes. (Wikipedia) She bravely challenged the constraints of traditional gender roles, enduring hostility from both men and women who were opposed to the idea of women in the public sphere, and who accused her of moral corruption. (The New Woman) As the twentieth century progressed, an increasing number of female writers gained global recognition and acclaim for their contributions. This led to a pivotal shift in Indian English literature in the 1960s, reflecting the evolution from the traditional demure woman to one characterized by education and independence.

India witnessed a wave of transformation in the contemporary era that impacted various aspects of its society. Writers have effectively utilized the English language to convey the spirit of Indian culture. Indian writers M.G. Vassanji, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, and Kavita Dasvani have presented a realistic view of the struggles faced by immigrants in the new domiciles using their writings. The way these writers depict the true status of women's treatment in Indian culture is highly effective. Their work exhibits a remarkable ability to communicate the intricacies of contemporary India and the difficulties faced by women there and throughout the nation through language. Through their writing, they provide a vivid and authentic portrayal of the diverse regional nuances that make up India's cultural landscape. Whether exploring the experiences of women in rural areas or urban centres, these writers offer a nuanced and detailed perspective that brings illumination to the actualities of women in the nation of India. All things considered, their work is a potent example of literature's value in fostering social change and furthering the cause of gender equality. Mahasweta Devi has accomplished significant advances in this nation's literary and cultural studies. Her first-of-its-kind attention to the customs and recollections of tribal people is evident in her work, which addresses concerns and trends at the local level. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated a collection of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*. Spivak emphasises that the breast in these stories represents an exploitative structure of society rather than just a symbol. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, an Indian writer, portrayed an authentic depiction of the country in her works. She highlighted the dire situation of women in patriarchal societies and the sexist attitudes that perpetuate their suffering. She advocated a new code of conduct for behaviour that would respect women similarly to men and centre relationships around affection, trust, and compassion. According to G. Sankar's "Post-Modern Feminist Ideology in Nayantara Sahgal Select Novels- A Critical Study," Nayantara emphasised the importance of a woman's obligation to stay true to herself, which she weighed far greater than her duty to her loved ones and society at large. In her work *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande, who ranks among the most prominent authors in Indian literature, explores the tension between tradition and modernization that affects women in a middle-class setting. The main character of the book is Indu, a middle-class, educated, and driven woman who struggles against the societal constraints placed on her. The story portrays how, after supporting their families, women's emotional needs remain neglected.

Indian women writers have experienced incredible changes in adapting to a certain genre to explore an undiscovered collection of ailments and portray the plain realities of society as effectively as the hardships of Indian women through it. Female authors revealed the hidden circumstances. Women's fear served as inspiration for entire groups of female authors to begin writing. The aforementioned female writers, among many more, have accentuated the importance of women as unique individuals defying conventional roles, removing irons, and discussing women's frustrations regarding exploitation and oppression, thereby reawakening a sense of identity, and asserting their uniqueness. Women's pains, oppression, annoyances, rejections, reprisals, and defiance of social norms are discussed in their works.

Status Of Modern Women in India

The role of Indian women in the social and political landscape of their nation has significantly evolved since gaining independence. Despite persisting obstacles and societal injustices in a male-dominated power structure, women in India have made substantial strides over the past half-century. The Hindu Code Bill mandates equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons. Furthermore, the Marriage Act no longer regards women as possessions of men, recognizing marriage as a personal affair and granting partners the right to seek divorce if dissatisfied. (Singh)

The provisions of the Indian Constitution form a solid foundation for gender equality and women's empowerment. They safeguard women from unjust treatment, promote their well-being, and ensure their proportional participation in politics, the economy, and society. Articles 14, 15, and 16 enshrine fundamental rights that guarantee equality and prohibit gender discrimination, offering women the opportunity to live with dignity and equal opportunities. Moreover, the Directive Principles, encompassing Articles 39, 42, and 43, advocate for economic justice, equal pay, and maternity leave. Additionally, Article 51A(e) underscores the moral obligation to renounce behaviours that degrade women's dignity. (LawBhoomi)

Women's social and economic involvement plays a crucial role in the empowerment of women in India. Through various reforms and legislative measures, women have gained opportunities to participate in political representation, as evidenced by the presence of women Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha. The contemporary manifestation of women's empowerment in India is markedly different from the past, with women establishing their self-help groups, engaging in industrial work, and initiating entrepreneurial ventures. Education serves as a pivotal tool in fostering women's self-assurance. The statistic indicating that 26% of the workforce in 'New India' comprises women is not only reassuring but also serves as a source of inspiration. In the new millennium, work culture is elevating society by embracing two fundamental work ethics: empathy and acceptance. (Pace Makers of Development Women in History: Past- Present- A Critical Review)

Modern Women of Anita Nair

Anita Nair is an Indian novelist. Anita has highlighted the problem that Indian women confront when balancing traditional and modern values. The prevailing cultural standards limit the liberties of women and discriminate against their humanity. Lessons in *Forgetting*, *Mistress*, and *A Better Man* are among her best-known works. Her writing is completely influenced by Indian culture. Nair was born in Kerala, which is rich in natural beauty and cultural heritage, and it served as the backdrop for several of her works. In her bestseller, *Ladies Coupe*, Nair depicts individuals who go through hardship and despair but ultimately triumph in overcoming their obstacles. Anita has emphasised the need for Indian women to blend traditional and modern lifestyles. She has provided examples of how women are oppressed in Indian culture. Our culture's prevalent ideals restrict women's rights and degrade their worth as human beings. Sunitha Sinha's analytical research brings insight into how women are oppressed and devalued according to the rule of men in Nair's India. Her writings motivate us to question the conceptual underpinning of the dominance of men in our conventional society and imagine a world in which women receive treatment with dignity and respect. (149) Anita Nair's novel also depicts women's search for an identity. Identity is especially significant for women since most women battle with self-confidence and self-identity at some point. Identity is crucial because it enables people to understand their place in society.

This paper aims to analyse the female characters in popular books like *The Better Man*, *The Ladies' Coupe*, and *Mistress*, and their impact on the Indian social system. The objective is to highlight how the portrayal of contemporary women in these novels has evolved and how they have influenced later generations. The essay provides examples of how the portrayal of conventional women has transformed into that of the "New Woman" through the characters depicted in Anita Nair's novels. It also explores how these gender preconceptions have led to challenging individual relationships.

Analysis of Female Characters and Their Personal Growth

The novel "*The Ladies' Coupe*" follows the journey of Akhila, the central character, as she navigates through the various challenges and struggles that life throws her way. Akhila experiences an identity crisis and believes

that she is no longer in control of her life. She seeks to be detached from her immediate family and obligations and start on a voyage of self-exploration. Suman Yadav (2020), in her research paper "Changing Role of Women in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé," observes in the novel Ladies Coupe how women are transforming their social status, and the coupe is an image in their lives. The female characters are narrating their pilgrimages through Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in a manner that resembles it.

Following the passing of her father, Akhila had to shoulder the responsibility of supporting her family entirely, sacrificing her youth and aspirations in the process. However, her efforts went unrecognised, and she felt unappreciated. Because of her bitterness and dissatisfaction, she decided to travel to get away from her boring existence. On the train, Akhila meets five other women with distinct personalities and stories to tell. Margaret Shanti, one of the women, is unapologetic about her life choices and how she rules her husband. She takes pleasure in damaging his pride in his athletic appearance, having married a self-obsessed man who failed to meet her needs. Her openness and honesty are a breath of fresh air, challenging societal norms and expectations. She commented while also criticizing society that life becomes easier when you stop caring about people's opinions. You should prioritize your well-being because nobody else will.

Through their conversations and interactions, the women on the train help Akhila discover more about herself and gain a new perspective on life. The novel is an exquisite examination of the complexities of existence and the various routes that women choose to pursue self-realisation.

Sheela is among the characters, and she happens to turn out to be the youngest of them all. In many traditional communities, it is common for girls to keep embarrassing events to themselves. This is largely due to fear that society will ask unsupportable questions about their character, which is considered intolerable. Even yet, Sheela adores her grandma, who is sixty-nine years old and still full of courage and confidence. It is believed that worldly cravings should end in the elderly years. Sheela is presented as a defiant figure, nonetheless, one who disregards norms and practices. Through metaphorically portraying her dying, widowed grandmother as a bride, she subverts stereotypes about women. This act challenges the patriarchal norms of Indian society that dictate how women should behave.

Akhila's life is a tale of contrasts - the clash between her modern outlook and her mother's traditional teachings, the tension between her desires and her family's expectations, and the struggle between asserting her independence and fulfilling her familial obligations. Despite these challenges, Akhila prioritised her family every time, dedicating herself to educating her brothers and helping her sisters find suitable partners. However, despite her constant efforts, her family seems to take her for granted, neglecting to acknowledge the numerous sacrifices she has made for them. This leaves Akhila feeling trapped and unappreciated, longing for a life where she is free to follow her path. In rebellion against the strict Brahmin society and its patriarchal norms, Akhila seeks out experiences that challenge the status quo. Through her relationship with Hari, she discovers the emotional aspects of life that she has long neglected and rediscovers the joys of womanhood. However, it is solely via her struggles that Akhila realizes she is capable of living independently and managing her life without relying on anyone else. Her journey is a testament to the power of self-discovery and the strength that lies within us all.

Set in the picturesque state of Kerala, "The Better Man" is an intricate and compelling novel that was published in 2000. The story revolves around two female protagonists, Anjana, and Valsala, who take centre stage in this tale of love, independence, and self-discovery. It is intriguing due to its rich descriptions, relatable characters, and encouraging message. Marriage is portrayed by Anita Nair as a cruel institution for women in her novels. In *The Better Man*, the leads aspire to break free from society's constraints and embrace their uniqueness.

Anjana, who was once an independent girl before her marriage to Ravindran, was allowed by her parents to be her true self. However, after her marriage, she struggled to maintain her identity as she was expected to be unique and different from other women. Despite her best efforts, Anjana could not seem to achieve this. As time went on, Ravindran and Anjana began to drift apart from each other, leaving Anjana feeling lonely and disconnected from the person she once loved. Whenever Anjana attempted to talk or initiate a conversation, Ravindran would leave the room, his lack of interest in Anjana was evident. After giving him several opportunities to change, Anjana finally decided to end their relationship due to the disparity between them.

The written work of Anita Nair focuses on women's emancipation and portrays Anjana as a strong woman who is capable of making her own decisions. As the story progresses Anjana chooses to begin her new existence with Mukundan, demonstrating incredible courage and determination. This brave deed represents her newly discovered independence and her capacity for self-determination.

The narrative of Valsala portrays the quest for love and the struggle for personal freedom, particularly for women in Indian society. Valsala was married to a schoolmaster named Prabhakaran, but she was dissatisfied with her life and eventually fell in love with another man named Sridharan. It seems as though Valsala has lost all of her feminine feelings. The comparison is made to a pala tree in her garden that has flowered, releasing an intense scent that makes her feel seduced. (Patil) Despite societal expectations, Valsala refused to conform to the norms and expectations of her community and continued to pursue her love for Sridharan. What makes Valsala's story remarkable is her unwavering determination to find love and personal fulfilment, despite social stigma and criticism. She resisted caving into peer pressure and instead listened to her inner consciousness, ultimately accepting her position as Sridharan's mistress. This act serves as a powerful example of Valsala's feminism, as she recognized that sex, love, freedom, and equality are essential sources of energy and empowerment for all women. Through her actions, Valsala challenged the conventions of Indian society and brought up important issues concerning the gender and sexual orientation of women. Her story is one of transformation, as she transformed into a "New Woman" who refused to be held back by societal expectations. By accomplishing this, Valsala served as an inspiration to all those who seek to break free from the limitations imposed by society and pursue their path in life. Overall, "The Better Man" is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the themes of love, independence, and self-discovery.

CONCLUSION

The journey of Indian women is truly inspiring. While they remain rooted in their traditions, valuing the roles of being a daughter, a wife, and a mother, they have also undergone a remarkable transformation. They have become breadwinners and financial providers, displaying an impressive blend of historical and contemporary elements. These women have evolved, and their stories merge to form a singular narrative of finding oneself. Through Nair's descriptions of their lives, these women are transformed from subservient to active, from traditional to modern, inspiring us all to embrace our full potential. The powerful works of Anita Nair venture to examine the complex issues faced by women, including their socioeconomic prestige and the unique obstacles they ought to encounter within interpersonal relationships. Despite the bleak nature of their situations, each character in the narrative can overcome societal barriers and construct a new and empowering reality for herself. As the story progresses, these women become increasingly self-aware and recognize the discrimination they face due to their gender. But rather than being defeated by this realization, they use it as a catalyst for growth and development. By breaking down the barriers that stand in their way, they emerge as stronger and more empowered individuals, capable of fighting the world on their terms. These characters are inspiring examples of what it entails to identify as a "new woman" in a world that too often seeks to hold women back.

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