



Feminism and literature: A study of Anita Nair's 'Mistress'

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Abstract

Feminism is a belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and chances as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. This is the definition one can notice in the Oxford dictionary. The expression is as old as the English Language. Anita Nair has turned out to be a great success. "Mistress" is the story of women's search for freedom and women's conditions in a male dominated society. The novel raises the questions whether the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to cultural resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs. Hence, this paper tries to point out how Anita Nair projects Indian feminism and attitude through women characters in her novels through her novels. Anita Nair has signaled the arrival of a sensitive writer who could perceive deeper mysteries in people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful journey of discovery. These novels have a talent for probing the insular world. In these pages I shall attempt an appreciation of Anita Nair's powers for the delineation of the deeper layers of the woman's personality.

Keywords: feminism, rights, power, chances, men, mistress, dominated, representative, resistance, sensitive, personality

Introduction

Feminism is a belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and chances as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. This is the definition one can notice in the Oxford dictionary. The expression is as old as the English Language. For centuries women were merely portrayed as the souls of dependence and this dependence can be effectively identified with a couplet from Manu, the ancient codifier of Hindu law, who has rightly summed up the dependence of a female in our society in these lines:

Duteous girl obeys her father,
Husband sways the duteous wife,
Son controls the widowed mother,
Never free is a woman's life. (23)

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, women are often allocated a secondary role. However, they possess the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight which contribute to the happiness of others.

Feminism can also be defined as a global phenomenon which addresses various issues related to women across the world in a specific manner as applicable to a particular culture or society. Though the issues related to feminism may differ for different societies and culture, they are broadly tied together with the underlying philosophy of achieving equality of gender in every sphere of life. So feminism cannot be tied to any narrow definition based on particular class or race of religion. This can be observed clearly by Ernestine's words in his History of woman suffrage. Humanity recognizes no sex,

mind recognizes no sex, life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex, like a man woman comes involuntarily into existence. Like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers. Like him she was to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws, and for greater penalties she has to suffer from ignorance. Like men she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal. (1)

Beginning from the inception of the Universe, there has been a fascinating myth associated with the creation of woman by the Supreme Creator, Lord Brahma. And indeed, beginning from Brahma Himself, the idea of feminism in Indian literature, both oral and written, had begun to be established, though perhaps not as blatant as it is today. It is said that Brahma had first created man and in his generosity, had desired to give man a companion. But by then, he had depleted all the materials in the creation of man and hence he had borrowed umpteen components from the handsome creation of nature and had thus made woman out of them. Lord Brahma had introduced woman to his earlier creation man stating, "She will serve you lifelong and if you cannot live with her, neither can you live without her". The primeval myth carries an unambiguous implication of woman's image in life and literature for centuries. (Genres in Indian Literature, 2012)

Objectives

The objective and purpose of this paper is to show the importance and power of women in our day-to-day life as well as because they are equal to men and they always help and care us to lead a happy and peaceful life. The present attempt is a pleasant gift to the readers and the readers of the world who think that women are not inferior to men and their

contributions are also very important for all-round development of the nation.

Contribution of women writers in Indian english writing

Women writers in India are moving forward with strong and sure strides matching the pace of the world. They are recognized for their originality and individuality. These writers are able to portray sensitively a world that has in it women, and with content rich in substance. Their women are real flesh and blood protagonists who are awesome with their relationships to their surrounding, their societies, their families, their mental makeup and themselves. And for the women writers narrative fiction became a canvas to challenge the hegemonic practices of a gender biased society. And so Feminism is rapidly developing as a significant critical ideology it constitutes a major segment of the contemporary writing in English. It has emerged as a concept that encompasses both a philosophy and movement for socio – political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within a given society, which provides a broad spectrum on the feminist writing, with focus on woman's question and the problem of gender. The Indian women writers includes Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, etc. Anita Nair is an Indian bestselling author of fiction and poetry, with her famous novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* translated into 21 languages. Born in Kerala and raised in Chennai, Anita always had an affinity towards writing and the courage to pursue it under all the situations. When she started writing her first novel, she had no surety of her work being published. And, today, all that uncertainty is just a part of the history with having written more than 10 books. She strongly believes: You are the person who holds your destiny in your hands. Even if the whole world conspires against you to push you down and rub your face into the dust, at some point that foot will be lifted off and you will stand up again. She is a novelist who relates to the many roles women play in their lives and it is reflected in her work too. In 2006, she is one of India Today's 30 Power Women in India, and has won many awards for her contribution to the field of literature, including the JFW Award for Literary Excellence (2010), the Kerala Sahitya Academy (2012) and the Arch of Excellence Award (2012) by the All India Achievers' Conference, New Delhi, for Literature. For her contribution to Children's Literature, she was presented the Central Sahitya Academy award. Anita Nair is a novelist, poet, travel writer, essayist, short story writer and writer of stories for children. She is working as a creative director in an advertising agency in Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore).

Among the top bestselling authors of fictional and poetic writing is the famous Anita Nair who has earned the fame to being India's well known author of many novels. In a very short span of time, this wonderfully acclaimed lady has achieved the feat of penning down more than ten novels, from a time when she had no idea that her work would end up being published. She is also the proud recipient of many prized awards. She is best known for putting down her imagination in simple words for the readers. In 2002, *Ladies Coupé* was elected as one of the five best in India. The novel is about women's conditions in a male dominated society, told with

great insight, solidarity and humour. It was rated as one of 2002's top five books of the year and was translated into more than twenty-five languages around the world.

Achievements of Anita Nair

Nair has performed exemplary work on the writing front since her very first piece of work, for which she has been awarded invariably with many prestigious awards. She has received the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award. Among her many achievements is the feat of being named a finalist for the 2007 PEN / beyond Margins award in the U.S.A. She has also been nominated as a finalist for *Literaturpreis* 2007 in Germany. She was also listed on the Orange prize long list in the UK. She won the FLO FICCI Women achievers award in 2008 for Literature. Her recent novel "Idris: Keeper of the light" was also shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in the year 2014.

Nair delves deep into human psyche and allows the reader to enjoy a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colorful and unique characters. She evokes experiences that are drawn from day-to-day life and her approach often enables the readers to suspect the character to be one of their neighbor's or of a friend. I have restricted myself to focus attention exclusively on Anita Nair's third novel 'The Mistress' which deals with human relationships, man-woman relationship and analyses pre-marital, marital, extra-marital relationships and estrangement between husband and wife. In it she holds revolutionary ideas about marriage and man – woman relationship. In her opinion, social consciousness of today, is leading us to the point where conditions for better growth of two complementary components, man and woman, would be ensured by their separate and individual development. Her main stress is on development of personality and genius, which is quite difficult to achieve. Economic independence is incidental and not important in man – women relationship, what matters most is the importance of surroundings and environment.

A brilliant blend of imaginative story-telling and deeply moving explorations into the search for meaning in art and life, *Mistress* is a literary tour de force from one of India's most exciting writers. *Mistress* has been named a finalist for the 2007 PEN/Beyond Margins Award in the U.S.A. and has been nominated a finalist for *LiBeraturpreis* 2007 in Germany. A creative writer must have the perception and analytical mind of a sociologist who provides a record of human life, society and social systems existing at that point of time. Theme of man -woman relationship seems to be of particular interest to Anita Nair. She depicts this theme in her third novel *Mistress*. She concentrates on the predicament of modern woman in a male dominated society and her destruction at the altar of marriage. These days, most marriages appear to be unions of incompatibility than compatibility. Men are apt to be rational and women sentimental and emotional. Their attitudes and interests are different. Naturally, they look at things in different ways and react to situations differently. Not only is the man himself different, but also as often happens, in a society of changing values, family ways, surroundings to which the woman is expected to adjust herself, are entirely different. In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the changing relationship between husband and wife in the society.

Husband – wife alienation resulting from lack of communication and temperamental compatibility forms the theme of *Mistress*.

Anita Nair has proposed a new philosophy regarding man-woman relationship in the context of modern times in her novel *Mistress*. She firmly affirms that social and conventional basis of marriage is being eroded and this would ultimately lead to a situation where marriage may not be solemnized or performed at all. Recently the supreme court of India has recognized the right of individuals to stay together without getting married. This is called live-in relationship. Man – woman may live in mutual companionship. The relationship may be continued as long as they trust each other and as long as the basic emotional bonding subsists.

The Mistress

Anita Nair main stress is on development of personality and genius, which is quite difficult to achieve. Economic independence is incidental and not important in man – women relationship, what matters most is the importance of surroundings and environment. In *Mistress*, Anita Nair depicts the changing relationships of husband and wife in society. Her concept of a free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom, but relates to her mental and emotional attitude and wellbeing. The novel deals with several themes like art and adultery, excitement of new found love, ennui in conventional relationships, squalor and ugliness of love, abuse, dashed hopes and dark family secrets. It is a book which deals with infatuation and obsession across the gulfs of religion, marriage, legitimacy and conventions. It also deals extensively with pre-marital and post-marital sex. Most of the affairs that develop, come with a whiff of bad endings, like the river Nila, which rarely has enough water and symbolizes the shallowness of the life of the main characters of *Mistress*.

What holds the novel '*Mistress*', on pre-marital, non-marital and extra-marital sex is the way, the author binds it with Kathakali, a popular and rigorous dance form of Kerala? The principal protagonist is a Kathakali artiste of international repute. The different cases of interplay between the characters are expressed through navarasas- the nine phases of human emotion. There is an interesting aspect in Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* that its treatment of man-woman relationship is based on her entrenched faith in 'new humanism according to which woman is not to be treated as a mere sex object, but man's equal partner. Her concept, of a free woman, who has transcended the limits of economic or social freedom, developed a mental and emotional attitude. This novel on one level looks at the turbulence of large families where dependency breeds strong emotions. Shyam, a self-made entrepreneur has been humiliated by his uncle, Radha's father. His uncle comes with a proposal of marriage with his daughter:

“What is wrong? Shyam asked as gently as he could”?
She has been involved with a man,
So why don't you get them married”? (*Mistress* p-121)

They say that nemesis always has a way of catching up (*Mistress* P-121). Shyam is in love with Radha. He had foolish dreams since his childhood wanting to possess her at any cost.

Even though he knows that she had pre-marital relationship with a married man, he thinks that it is an innocent relationship. It does not matter and he will be happy to marry her. He asks his uncle if she is agreeing. His mother approves their marriage. His sister, Rani Oppol is suspicious that Shyam has been forced to agree.

Women's Identity

In earlier days, women were merely portrayed as dependent souls. They prefer happiness of others. Women's identity is hidden behind the mask of sacrifice and dependency. Their voices are no better than the voices of the dumb, not audible to the world. Nowadays, women have enough courage to exhibit their individuality at various levels. Though they possess the voice of the dumb, they have made it audible in recent years and started shaking the convention of dependency. They are ready to undertake challenging journey of self-discovery to make the whole world recognize them. A certain percentage of women have successfully reached their destination and remaining are on their way to the destination of 'Self-discovery'.

Radha knows that it is a sin to woo another man, a foreigner, Chris. Her husband loves her despite her guile nature. He suspects that she is attracted towards Chris. Her frequent visits to Chris make Shyam worried and put him in a vulnerable situation. Chris is a writer, a journalist. He is interested in music. He has come to probe and find out if Koman was his father. Koman has had many affairs. Radha, herself has to grapple with the question whether her uncle, who had an affair with her mother, was her father.

Radha meets Chris secretly. Koman made many mistakes of romancing with Radha's mother who was his own brother's wife. As a wife, she is a symbol of the glory and prestige of her family and transmitter of tradition from one generation to another. Radha fails to restore her life even after her marriage to Shyam. As a wife, she must protect her husband's reputation. The illegitimate relationship gives a chance to others to comment about her husband. She never bothers about her husband's reputation and she tries to quench her thirst for sex, by romancing with Chris. She has forgotten that Shyam had given her a new life by marrying her when her life was in ruins and her family at crossroads. Unfortunately she forgets Shyam's help. He feels deceived, but he loves her very much. This shows his good nature and his true love for Radha. Anita Nair throws light on different aspects of human relationships and brings out the factors, which are responsible for change in behaviour of man towards man. She feels that men have been successful in suppressing woman for centuries. She does not waver in her version of better world where men and women can live and work together harmoniously, developing a higher level of consciousness by means of a closer sharing of meaningful concepts, meaningful to the conditions that are present and prevailing.

Feminists have advanced the issue of empowerment of women through education as a means of challenging patriarchal ideology of male domination and women subordination. Empowerment entails life-long struggle for survival and transforming the structures and institutions (e.g. laws, social practice, political process, religious matters) that seem to perpetuate or reinforce gender discrimination and social

inequality. According to Graham-Brown (1991), for the individual, empowerment through education promises an escape from poverty, oppression. It also promises greater social prestige, job mobility and better future prospect. Education empowers through language.

A tripartite relationship between or among languages, literature and culture has been well established and documented (Olaoye, 2002, Isyaku, 2004). According to them, there is no literature without language. Culture and language too are inseparable and the trios are intricately interwoven. They play vital role in man's education and national development.

Conclusion

Anita Nair has proposed a new philosophy regarding man-woman relationship in the context of modern times. She firmly affirms that social and conventional basis of marriage is being eroded and this would ultimately lead to a situation where marriage may not be solemnized or performed at all. Recently the supreme court of India has recognized the right of individuals to stay together without getting married. This is called live-in relationship. Man – woman may live in mutual companionship. The relationship may be continued as long as they trust each other and as long as the basic emotional bonding subsists. Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, women are often allocated a secondary role. However, they possess the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight which contribute to the happiness of others. Anita Nair's 'Mistress' brings into focus the issue of self-realization. Though Anita Nair is not a feminist, her stories delve deep into the expectations of married Indian women and the choices they make within the relationships. They are entangled in their suffering and rebellion born of that pain, and convey a message of hope, through the change that is out there and can become possible through one's courage and initiative.

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