

# Reconstruction of Female Uniqueness in Anita Nair's *The Lilac House*

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## Abstract

**This paper examines to explore the elements of feminism in Anita Nair's *The Lilac House*. It deals with a number of problems that are faced by the women in the society such as female foeticide, gender discrimination and dependence on family members. It also explains how they overcome such problems to move on in their lives. Feminism lies not on worries and depression but on happiness and expectations. Fighting against male dominated society has become old as women have paved their path to make things better in their own way without any hesitation. Using it as a tool, the protagonist and other female characters overcome the hurdles after the betrayal of their husbands. This paper also explores the freedom of the women to fulfill herself as a human being.**

**Keywords: Betrayal, female foeticide, marriage, patriarchy, self-discovery.**

Among the various Indian writers in English, Anita Nair is easily accepted as a proficient specialist of the genre of fiction. Anita Nair herself does not associate her writing with the term feminism. She refrains from calling herself feminist but her writings essentially deals with women from different strata of life and their collective struggle to establish themselves in a male dominated society. While Anita Nair does not call herself feminist she also does not like her female protagonist to depend on male for support. Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, Radha in *Mistress* and Meera in *The Lilac House* struggle to find their place in a patriarchal society.

In her works, Anita Nair mainly focuses on the real human condition on the earth. At the same time, she is artful in interlocking her stories in the Indian scenario, unique in presenting her conceptions and innovative in sharing the experiences of language. All the novels of Anita Nair are surrounded in Indian culture and the characters and settings are fundamentally Indian. Her stories may be said to be philosophical as well as practical, based on the structure of Indian middle class families. In this context, she displays a

sharp mind and observation skill with which she details stories depicting the problem of Indian women, in an easy manner.

The feminist perspective in the novel is marked by male-controlled hegemony in the structure of Indian family. In the patriarchal society, women are colonized, which results into the relationship of inequality leading to injustice. Now in the modern world though education and political rights appear to be developed, patriarchy has still got its hold in the domestic life of women. They have to struggle to assert themselves through self-discovery and self-reliance. Simon de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* says,

Women is superior to man, namely: *Materially*: because Adam was made of clay, Eve from one of Adam's ribs. *In terms of place*: because Adam was created outside of paradise, Eve in paradise. *In terms of conception*: because woman conceived God, something man couldn't do. *In terms of appearance*: because Christ after his death appeared to a woman, namely Magdalene. *In terms of glorification*: because a woman was glorified above the choir of angels, namely blessed Mary. (366)

Anita Nair's novel *The Lilac House* was published in 2010. The novel was set in India and traces the intersection of lives of two individuals undergoing devastating personal tragedies. Meera is the protagonist of the novel. Jack is another person who plays important role in the novel. The story is narrated in Meera's and Jack's point of view. Both the characters are flushed out by their memories of a time not so long ago. It also portrays how family background is responsible for the women subordination and suppression in the society.

*The Lilac House* provides perfect example of victimized women in patriarchal society. In an analysis of man woman relationship, the male characteristics were coupled with mental thoughts and positive activity. On the other hand, a woman is regarded as dutiful person. In the olden days women is completed traditional, uneducated, and superstitious and confined. So woman has become narrow and controlled. They are unknown of the outside world. A woman is cut off from the dynamic world.

The novel has a strong feminine flavor where the author portrays female protagonist as a strong woman. Marriage is an integral part in women's life. Educated women in India try to assert their individuality though they are constrained in their family life by the traditional patriarchal culture. They are also constrained in the quest for freedom when there are children to look after, since they think that children are their responsibility. Simon de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* says, "Women is no longer passed from one clan to another through marriage: she is born into and annexed to her husband's; he buys her like a head of cattle or a slave, he imposes his domestic divinities on her: and the children she conceives belong to her spouse's family" (270).

Meera, the protagonist is forty-four years old, well-educated housewife, married to a corporate husband and has two children, a daughter and a son. She was happily submerged in the role of corporate

wife. She was the writer of cook book and guides for corporate wives. She was also a typical Indian middle-class wife, who is happy to be dependent on her husband. Evelyn Shyndya in *Empowered Woman in Anita Nair's Lessons in Forgetting* aptly defines Indian womanhood as, "Women in India who feel proud that they are well protected by their husbands without realizing that they are making themselves helpless" (84).

Meera feels like a queen in her domestic world. She was unaware of her own individuality, her selfhood and her own independent world. She was married to Giri, who hails from a comparatively poor social background. Giri married Meera under the impression that the family owned the beautiful Lilac house, which in fact was only on a lease with them. After their marriage Giri stayed in Meera's house. But Meera's mother and grandmother, even Meera expected Giri to move to his own apartment. But Giri refuses to move out of the Lilac house.

Meera is a woman, who feels happy with what she gets. But she is not satisfied with her husband Giri. And one day Giri vanishes from her life, leaving her and his children. She feels the sorrow and pain of being betrayed. When she suspected Giri after having an affair, she tried to console her self-thinking that she was not a compulsive philanderer.

Besides, Giri is not Zeus. He isn't a compulsive philanderer, merely a middle aged man who has had his head turned. Meera tells herself, don't panic, who else can offer him this cornucopia of elegance? Which other woman can lay his table as I do, or make a home for him as I do? The felicity of our lives maybe shadowed, but will never be trained or violated. Giri will not risk losing any of this. (74-75)

Meera is compelled to look after her family's financial and basic needs. So she emerges as a new woman. She manages to stand on her own feet, finds a job as a research Assistant to a Professor of Cyclones from the University of Florida. Nair portrays the character of Meera as an organized person. She does not have any identity for her own, because she assumes different roles as a daughter, granddaughter, wife and mother. The absence of Meera's identity reveals sad reality of position of women in India.

Jack on the other hand was nurtured with feelings for India but he does not consider the international life, his wife Nina was looking for. He unravels the mystery behind his daughter's coma state and finds that her life is indeed highly commendable. The self - actualization of Jack originates from the spirit of the traumatic past. "Vicious as ahead of monsters, it razors ring of violent storms. Sometimes twice as many. It is here the danger awaits. For the eye walls winds have no soul, know no mercy" (241).

Smriti, the daughter of Jak and Nina resides with her father after the legal separation of her parents. Inspired by her father's Indian stories, she comes to India in pursuit of her higher studies. She became an active member of the forum. She was inspired by the slogans of the forum like "The dying daughters of India need you" (153). This slogan creates awareness on dowry, burning the women and female foeticide in

little towns. For an awareness campaign she goes to her father's village, Minjikapuram in Tamil Nadu with her friend, Rishi Soman. When she visits a hospital there for treating glass injury, she was shocked to see many pregnant women who came for scanning to find the gender of the foetus. If it is a girl child, they do abortion either willingly or forcefully. Smriti finds it illegal.

'It's illegal!' Smriti's voice rose. They do it here. Why do you think we came here? The scan doctor is not from this town. They bring him from somewhere else, and he tells us if we ask him, the woman whispered. All these pregnant women, they come from various parts of the district. Do you think there are no hospitals where they live? It's because of the scan doctor.  
(292)

Owing to interest in social awareness programs she becomes a victim. She tries to collect proof against all these illegal actions for making a report. So she meets a woman, Chinnathayi whose daughter dies at the nursing home after an abortion. Smriti wants some paper regarding this issue from Chinnathayi. But Dr. Srinivasan who is responsible for the hospital along with his men pass a wrong message to Smriti using Chinnathayi's name and calls her to meet at sea beach. There three men destroyed her. She becomes a motionless, pathetic and frozen figure. Smriti, a girl brought up in the United States has gone into the troubles when identifying her with the fellow Indian women. She considers it as her duty to remove the social injustice. Maya Vinay in *Interrogating Caste and Gender Anita Nair's Fiction: Prestige Books International* says, "Smriti in *The Lilac House* is a victim of such a mistaken identity. Men in India are still unequipped to face such a kind of modernity, which is a shoot of progressive Western education and upbringing" (118-119).

The next character is Kala Chithi. She is Jak's aunt, who lives with her husband Ambi. She has a long hair which attracts her family and also her husband. Her husband was impressed by her long hair and marries her. And also, he gets promise from her that she should not cut her hair without his permission. But Kala disobeys his words and cuts her hair without his knowledge. This incident causes some misunderstanding between Kala and Ambi. So he decides to break their relationship. Ambi is not ready to forgive her and he decides to marry another girl. Kala also decides to go away from him. Before she leaves him, she cuts her hair at the nape of her neck and gives it to Ambi. "Before I went, I cut my hair at the nape of my neck. A long braid woven with Jasmine and Kanakambaram.' this is all you ever wanted of me. Keep it. And let me go.' I said, walking out" (206).

If Kala is given the rights to cut her hair at the right time without being afraid of her father, she would have ended up with the person who loves her instead of loving her long hair. Meera and Kala face the same fate in their marital life. Kala decides to leave her husband and defies her tyrannical behavior. She sets an example for modern women by asserting her individuality. After the abandonment by her husband, Kala becomes an independent, strong woman and is able to think of her own life.

This paper portrays the condition and status of women and how they suffer in the patriarchal society without having any identity on their own. It also reveals how they overcome their problems. They rebel against their men in search for freedom and identity. They challenge their victimization and find a new balance of power between their men. They strongly believe in conformity. Women strive hard to get their self-identity as a better position by shifting their thought from why to why not.

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