Transgressions and Celebrations in Anita Nair's Fiction

Anita Nair encapsulates the central theme of the novel *Ladies Coupe* when she calls it “novel about ordinary women and their indomitable spirit. . . ” (*Ladies* vii). While acknowledging her debt to a few women of her acquaintance she proclaims that those women’s strength, courage and instinct for joy have inspired her to write this novel. In an interview with Anusree, Anita Nair posits that men and women are equal, but women often postpone their decisions for fear of society, and in her opinion women should enjoy and celebrate their womanhood. In another conversation with Sneha Subramanian Kanta she explicates her views regarding feminism, though she refuses to label herself as a feminist:

To me, feminism in the Indian context is about recognizing the importance of the female self and to be able to nurture it. Very often, we Indian women tend to negate ourselves as something that is expected of us. In fact, there may be no pressure at all from extraneous sources for us to do so. Perhaps it is conditioning or perhaps it is lack of self esteem, we do not consider ourselves important enough and so we tend to put our needs and desires on the back burner. This is what needs to be addressed. And this to me is what feminism ought to tackle. (“Our Author”)
These issues are addressed in *Ladies Coupe*, a novel in which a few women in retrospect articulate their thoughts and concepts regarding their life and individuality. The linkages of gender, caste, and class of their society presumably bind the women who belong to different class, society and generations; and they narrate how they resist and deflect gendered modes of power. They consciously or unconsciously internalize androcentric assumption of their society, and later realize the fatigue of their passive existence and forge new modes of resistance by learning to “rise above traditions to float” (208).

Women travellers in the ladies coupe of the train are, in the authors’ words like “Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other’s lives. . .” (22). She unveils the energy and inspiration women can impart to each other through their bonding. Women of different circumstances who meet together in the ladies coupe of the train to Kanyakumari include Akhilandeshwari, the 45 year old income tax clerk, the middle aged housewife Janaki, Margret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher, Prabha Devi house wife of an upper class family, the teenager Sheela and thirty one year old Marikolanthu. All women share their experiences with Akhila, the central character and leave a bolder and more obdurate Akhila who had been struggling to take a strong decision regarding her future life. Female solidarity and friendship is a concept central to women’s movement which assumes that “all women have certain areas of experience in common on which a sense of identification can be founded” (Gamble 315). Here each woman empathises with Akhila and willingly talks to her of their private
lives. Akhila’s friendships with her schoolmate Karpagam who chides Akhila for leading a life wallowing in self-pity, and with her colleague Katherine Webber delight and strengthen Akhila a lot. Padma, Akhila’s sister who “gnawed at her nerves like a relentless mouse” (160) for monetary benefits, has failed to understand Akhila’s condition.

The title of the story--Ladies coupe--suggests a long journey and women travellers often become a rare theme in Indian novels due to social inhibitions about women’s mobility. Journey is used as a powerful narrative device to bring together stories of many women’s lives in a single context of intimacy and sharing. In her travelogue KooKooKooKooTheevandi Anita Nair recounts that she has hardly read any travelogue by a woman writer(128). This reveals that though there are many women travel writers, they have hardly been promoted and have not been included in the literary canon of travelogues, and so they haven’t got much popularity. This denotes the social prejudice against women travellers. A lone woman traveller is particularly condemned and ridiculed by the Indian society. The destinations and motives of women in the novel are different, and for Akhilandeshwari that is a pure journey to freedom and escape from the life she is expected to live (4). The opening itself sets the tone of the novel: “This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape” (1). For the first time in her life, apart from her routine journeys to office, Akhila is conducting a long journey alone to deflate those norms of her society that have been binding her hitherto. Here, Anita is depicting a woman who is going out of her home to a public domain to free herself, presuming
her journey to be an act of freedom from the claustrophobic existence she has been leading hitherto in her life. Her sudden decision to travel alone to Kanyakumari shocks her family, but she is adamant in her decision with a fierce sense of protest against the multitude of ways in which the society has been curbing her freedom. In Kanyakumari, an alien land of dreams for Akhila, she enjoys her status as a lonely woman traveller, which is rare in the Indian context. She braves the comments and stares from strangers, which a lonely woman traveller often has to face in the society. Through the journey, Akhila tries to seek all that have been denied to her--her freedom, love, desires, sexuality, and friendship. She tries to free herself from her own inhibitions and prejudices on gender stereotypes and thereby it also becomes a journey inwards. “Journeying centerward is Self-centering movement in all directions. It erases implanted pseudodichotomies between the Self and “other” reality, while it unmasks the unreality of both “self” and “world” as these are portrayed, betrayed, in the language of the fathers’ foreground” (Daly 10). Here Akhila’s journey has also become a journey inwards that helps her to break gender inhibitions.

In the ladies coupe of the train to Kanyakumari, camaraderie develops among the inmates, and Akhila shares with others her perennial doubt whether women can live alone. Instead of burdening Akhila with their advice, each of them chooses to share their experiences with her. Eventually their urge to unravel their mind and feelings have palpably become sharper than Akhila’s fervour to listen. Against the norms of patriarchal society which often enforce silence on women through prohibitions and taboos, here women
are getting a space to give vent to their feelings. They are “trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen” (136). It also becomes a deliberate effort by those women to break the silences in their lives by talking of various undisclosed incidents in their life, and by unearthing feelings that lie hidden in the recesses of their mind. Many issues related to girls such as socialization, customs related to menstruation, sexual encounters, female desires, single or marital life, hetero/homo sexualities, experience of undergoing a medical process of MTP etc become part of their narration.

Whether women can live alone is an issue that has been discussed in the Indian society from the ancient times onwards. Manu, the ancient lawmaker has laid down that the father should protect a woman in her childhood, husband in her youth and son during her old age (Nubile 1). Even today the society follows the law, as a single woman is still unnatural in Indian society and so a woman living alone or a lonely woman traveller is looked upon suspiciously. Sudhir Kakar in his study “Feminine Identity in India” observes:

First of all, where and when tradition governs, an Indian woman does not stand alone; her identity is wholly defined by her relationships to others. For although in most societies, a woman (more than a man) defines herself in relation and connection to other people, this is singularly true of Indian women. The dominant psycho-social realities of her life can be condensed into three stages: First, she is the daughter to her parents.
Second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter-in-law to his parents). Third, she is a mother to her sons (and daughters). (44-45)

Akhila becomes a problem to her siblings, as her identity cannot be defined in this way. Single women like her are expected to live under the protection of other members of the family. But soon after her father’s death, Akhila has carried the image of a saviour of her family; and in her mother’s opinion Akhila has saved her family from poverty and ignominy while her relative Sarasa Mami resorted to sex work as a livelihood after the death of their breadwinner. Through her hard work, Akhila provides her young siblings with education, and dowry; marries them off, and looks after mother until her death. Akhila in her forties now wishes to lead a life for herself, in her own house enjoying her freedom. However, Akhila by then becomes a liability, and her wish to live alone a threat to the respectability of her family. She is repeatedly told by her siblings that a woman cannot live alone and in their opinion Akhila as an unmarried woman should be protected by them. She is compelled to live with her sister Padma; but Padma annihilates her peace of mind by deliberately taunting her and depicting her as a perverted woman in front of the neighbours. She is scandalised, attacked with innuendos and is treated with aversion and suspicion. V. Geeta observes:

Until recently, in most countries, women who did not marry, or were not fertile, who became widows at a young age or were ‘defaminized’ in other ways—because they did not
conform to conventional reproductive norms—were viewed with horror and suspicion. (*Patriarchy* 7)

Interestingly, Akhila has freed herself from the shackles of her Tamil Brahmin community and its gender norms at the age of nineteen by becoming the bread-winner and the head of her family. Now her brothers and sister consider her a cash cow, and they are limiting her using gender and caste norms. So Akhila in her forties is asked to seek permission from her brothers—“men of the family” (150)—before taking a decision regarding her own life.

The novelist problematises female sexuality and in a society where sex outside conjugality is proscribed, unmarried Akhila is afraid of the desiring self in her. Though Akhila wishes for a partner in her life, she has been too timid to broach the subject in her family, and her family too pretends to be oblivious to it. She discontinues her affair with Hari a co-passenger on her train to her workplace whom she befriends, as she is scared of social ostracism against her relationship with a man who is many years younger than her. She tries to cover her desires behind the image of an elder sister of the family or *Akka* who sacrifices everything for the welfare of the family. She ceases to wear bright colour dresses “to hide herself in the drab moth tones” (4) and she considers her starched cotton saris a symbol of her stiffness of mind. As Brinda Bose comments in *Translating Desire*:

> The expression and representation of sexual desire in Indian culture is indeed as old as the hills, and the *Kamasutra* is not its
only proof. However, there can be very little doubt that in the political reality of our twenty first century existence, we are being pressured to believe that desire is a dirty word, and it is time we stopped and considered why. . . . (x)

So Akhila suppresses her desires though it occasionally erupts as desires and dreams. Akhila is haunted by her repressive sexuality and has indulged in sexual fantasies and dreams. While travelling she welcomes the trespassing hands of a stranger on her body, but she abstains from yielding to her desires and hides her desires in self-loathing. Her family also wants to preserve her in the image of a selfless asexual Akka and her desire to lead a life alone shocks her siblings. Nivedita Menon remarks in her observation on Indian society: “The porous borders evident here between the categories of ‘unmarried woman’, ‘widow’ and ‘prostitute’--each of them a woman unbound by marriage--reflects the intense patriarchal anxiety about controlling female sexuality” (Seeing 133). Therefore, in the novel, when Akhila initiates sex with Vinod whom she meets at Kanyakumari, it is for her, “A need satiated. Her past purged. A point proven to herself” (Nair 275). Swamped in lust Akhila is imagined as the Shakthi, the powerful Akhilandeshwari, the goddess of universe and her ten incarnations. Alessandro Monti, while analysing the novel comments that “I was told by Anita Nair that tantric thought was the key to understanding the self-assertive progress achieved by Akhila”(57). Madhu Khanna’s enquiry into goddess-women equation in Sakta Tantras expounds how all women irrespective of their caste, class status are considered as the physical incarnation of Sakti
Refuting the dominant patriarchal ethos of brahmanical religion, it honours female body and senses. “Rather than degrading the female body, it celebrates the sacredness of a woman’s body and her senses in several forms of non-procreative yogic rituals for spiritual liberation” (117). Anita Nair celebrates female power equating it with ten entities of goddess Sakti and Akhila becomes power when she breaks a social taboo. For Anita, lust is “The energy that defines life” (Ladies 274), and Akhila gains that energy by herself becoming lust.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her analysis on feminism and family in fiction opines, “The major contradiction that feminist fiction in India today must negotiate is the family. The (bourgeois) family, it is widely acknowledged, constitutes the dominant milieu and constructs the primary identity of women” (“The Heroine’s” 80). Family at the same time remains at the centre of women’s identity, and the major site of women’s oppression. Therefore, the first step in the feminist conscious raising involves a recognition and articulation of this oppression within the family. The representation of women’s resistance to the family in fiction is either through their negotiation of power within it, or through their attempts to escape from its restriction or both (81). Each narrative in Ladies Coupe is imbued with hints of such power struggles that exist within the family. The middle aged Janaki, a middle class housewife has always led a sheltered life. She was protected first by her father and then by her husband, and now she feels tired of being a fragile creature. “Women like me end by being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses” (22-23). Once she believed women’s sole duty was
to get married and to be a good mother and wife; and she worked hard to fulfil her duties adhering to “that tired old cliché that a home was a woman’s Kingdom”(23). Janaki has camouflaged the drab monotony of her life with the myth of a happy contented homemaker who scarcely sought a space for herself beyond the conventional roles. However, suddenly she feels that her home ceases to interest her and all the values she cherishes become insignificant due to the restlessness unravelling in her mind in her middle age. Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique comments on a strange, silent, growing sense of dissatisfaction American women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century, as they felt, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (32). Friedan probes into the various social forces that have foregrounded the image of ‘Happy Housewife’ who is not interested in politics, national issues, art, science, ideas, adventure, education, and “who had no thoughts for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the house”(18); and that tied women to such an image.

The vacuum in her soul and fragility in her character nauseate Janaki. Her doctor and her husband Prabhakar consider her restlessness as natural to women who have reached the stage of menopause. Prabhakar is a partner who has always been gentle and loving, and he promptly shares household duties with Janaki. However, her husband’s incessant role-playing as a provider and protector of family irritates her. Gender norms of a traditional society give the role of a protector and nurturer to man and that of the protected and sheltered to women; and her husband dons the role very well throughout his life. Her son accuses her of being a spoilt one who is unable to do anything alone. But
the realisation does not bring any action on Janaki’s part, and Janaki seeks recourse and happiness in the familiarity and friendly love she has been sharing with Prabhakar for the last forty years.

Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher of the school where her husband Ebenezer Paulraj wields the role of the principal. Though a career woman, she can hardly claim an equal status with her husband as the school is only an extension of her home. He plays the role of a Daddy putting everything under his hegemonic gaze in the house as well as in the school. Margaret, the gold medallist in MSc chemistry, was blindly in love with him once. Her parents impressed by his well-built body and aristocratic family fully supported her selection. During the first months of marriage, her only wish is to appease him, and it results in her continual self-negation. According to his demands, she discards her academic interests for higher studies and career and joins the school in which he is the principal. Though highly educated, she has hidden her personality behind the gloss of wifely subservience. She yields to his decision to abort her first pregnancy though her mind rebels against his decision, and undergoes the trauma of MTP. He wishes to see her always as a lovely girl, and she realises that Margaret Shanthi, the woman, has no place in his mind. Later this total acquiescence to his ego and the forced self-effacement render her restless and unhappy and, she loathes his vanity, hypocrisy and hegemony. In public as well as in private spaces he continues to humiliate her to satisfy his ego. Though she wishes, she cannot break free from the marriage due to her parents’ strong disapproval of divorce. Stealthily she expresses her protest. She destroys her
slim delicate body, the symbol of her femininity in his concept, by overeating. “I hated to look myself in the mirror. But at least I was no longer daddy’s little girl” (123). Ebenezer is proud of his muscular body, which for him is the symbol of his masculinity, which he maintains by defending his keen appetite and through hours of exercise. She sabotages his muscular body, the seat of his vanity through rich big salacious meals; and thereby reducing him to a fat man who waddles. Evidently, she cannot fully transgress the conventional domestic space or gender roles, as she continues to wield the responsibility of the preparer of food alone. Caroline and Filippo Osella note down “the subversion of or resistance to masculine domination which South Asian women sometimes practise. We read over and over of women joking about their menfolk behind their backs; over- salting the food...” (Osella and Osella 35). Margaret Shanthi deploys such a method, but she continues the role of feeding other people’s hungers. In addition, she has to retain a relationship where both have no sincerity to each other. However, she presumes that now life has become much easier to live since there is no power struggle between them as she has freed her life from his egotism and domineering attitudes. Margaret who appears self- sufficient to Akhila believes that her virtue is her “immunity to what people think of me” (136).

Being a spirited woman, Prabha Devi cannot hide her true self behind the façade of docility. Though her partner Jagdeesh likes her gay spirited self, it always embarrasses him, due to his fear that her behaviour may annoy his parents. However, her encounter with a male friend Pramod who attempts to violate her body is enough to quench all her spirits. Prabha Devi is extremely
shocked; and she is dismayed more by the fear that someone might have spotted the incident and might consider her a brazen woman. Thereafter she decides to lock away the gay spirited woman in her who has caused her mental trauma by attracting another’s attention. She withdraws herself from every activity outside home and gives up her confident fearless strides and becomes a different woman who is beyond reproach and above all suspicion “With eyes forever downcast and busy hands”(183). Susan Bordo’s observations are pertinent in this context:

Rather, my aim is to demonstrate the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women (since we live in this culture, too) are vulnerable. Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self loathing. For example, anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires. Those desires … have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite. The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure "male" will, or she
capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground. (7-8)

Her fear of her body leads her to a total self-denial and a total withdrawal of all her desires, appetites and her former high spirited nature. She knows Jagdeesh has never been a domineering man but she lets him rule her. Now he starts questioning her about the money she utilises and of the time, she spends away from house. Prabha Devi seeks where the golden path of marriage is, where one can freely enjoy both companionship and equality with the partner. After many years when she can no longer bear the ennui of her passive existence she again ponders on doing something for herself that will save her from her dreary existence. Her lessons in swimming which she secretly manages to learn while accompanying her son to the tennis court of the club helps her to regain her lost confidence and gay spirit. Here swimming becomes a symbolic act through which she conquers the fear of her body. While lying afloat she feels her body is no more an object that may be violated or disgraced by the society at any time and that she is the sole owner or the subject of her body. Prabha Devi reflects on how to subvert gender restrictions and to be free from inhibitions or over-concern regarding her body. She learns to make bolder movements and claims for her mind and body, and discovers how to do something more with her time instead of remaining always tied up within the routine duties of an upper class housewife.
The nexus between caste, class and gender has defeated the last narrator Marikolanthu. Clara Nubile in her study on gender, class and caste in the Indian context comments that “violence is first gender-related, but also caste and class-related, as Dalit and tribal women are often the target of male violence and they are systematically beaten up or raped by the police or by upper-caste men” (27). Marikolanthu’s words unfurl a story of stark insecurity and grim poverty since she belongs to the lower strata of society. Her dress, appearance, and lack of education alienate her from the other women of the coupe, and she huddles in the upper berth. Though the other women have noticed her, they never invite her to their group. They feel relieved when Marikolanthu keeps to herself without interfering in their talks since they know that the material condition of their life is totally different from hers and so they can hardly share anything; not even a sign of familiarity with women like her who belong to the lowest social strata of life. Therefore, they simply treat her as nonexistent, and a total indifference to her condition is found in other upper class women. Postcolonial feminism reminds us that the mainstream feminism has underwritten the politics of class, race, or imperialism. It insists that feminist criticism should be sensitive to differences in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. It stresses that the low class/ caste women are often doubly colonized both by patriarchy and by the class, caste or racial antagonism which is perpetrated by the upper class women themselves. So same yardsticks should not be used to measure the condition of women of different class, caste or race situations. Marikolanthu is initiated into her unsheltered life as the servant of the richest Chettiar
family of the village who thrive through silk manufacturing and exploitation of the poor class. Marikolanthu’s widowed mother from morning to night engages in the endless toil of making food for the Chettiar family that demands the total service of mother and daughter. The Chettiar family exploits their poverty and dominates them mentally and physically. Her widowed mother who is a cook there sows the seeds of subservience and masochism in Marikolanthu’s mind: “We shouldn’t expect anything from anyone. That way there will be no disappointment” (221), and teaches her to be satisfied with the meagre wage they get. Therefore, Marikolanthu renders her heartless service to Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of the Chettiar family; and looks after her son without expecting any reward other than Sujata’s leniency. Class, caste, and gender nexus of her society has wronged Marikolanthu a lot in her life. Being born as a lower class woman, a daughter of the working class, everybody around her tries only to exploit and later discard her. She is raped by Murugesan, brother-in-law of Chettiar family; and as a result disowned and discarded by her brothers. Sujata eventually throws her out of the Chettiar house even without giving her wages. While Marikolanthu suffers physical, psychological and social implications of rape including her pregnancy, none dares to tell Murugesan about of the aftermath of his crime. Conversely, Marikolanthu has to confront the helpless ranting of her mother and the rage of her brothers who dispossess and expel her from the family for destroying the respectability of the family. In her mother’s opinion, her life is over and she will “end up in the gutter like a street dog
with its litter” (245). Nivedita Menon delves into the social implications of rape that often punish not the perpetrators but the victims:

In the patriarchal perspective, rape is a fate worse than death; there is no normal life possible for the raped woman; the way to avoid rape is to lock women up at home, within the family, under patriarchal controls. In this understanding, the raped woman is responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed the *lakshman rekha* of time (by going out after dark) or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (by dressing in unconventional ways or by leaving the four walls of her home at all. *(Seeing 113)*

While recognizing rape as a fatal crime, feminists try to demystify rape and reject the idea of rape as a fate worse than death. In the feminist view, ‘the rape survivor’ a word feminism prefers over rape victim, does not lose her honour; and it is the rapist who should be disgraced(115-116,140).

Murugesan’s brutal rape of Marikolanthu is an act of revenge and class antagonism as well as sexual violence. Murugesan, a member of the upper class family turns intolerant seeing the well-groomed Marikolanthu in Chettiyar’s house. His repugnance heightens seeing her wearing modern dresses and watches on her wrists. For him the rape is also an act of reminding her who she really is and in his opinion he has all rights to use her body since “I knew all about the women like you. If the Chettiar sons can feast on the body of yours. . . remember I am a relative” (249). This
articulates much about prejudices cherished by the high caste and high class
against the low class women and about their morality. “The rape of lower
caste women is a socially sanctioned way to express sex and class
domination” (Abdulali 204) in the Indian society. Being the brother-in-law of
the richest family of the village, Murugesan is least bothered about justice.
While the perpetrators of rape are considered irreproachable in the society, the
offended are further violated through character assassination, and attacks on
their moral behaviour. For Marikolanthu’s brothers she is an outsider who
has trespassed into a land of shame, and thereby she has no room or rights in
her home. Mother’s compulsion of Marikolanthu to marry Murugesan
reinforces the same sexist notion that is rampant in the society about the rape
survivors. “The morals of Indian society do not permit consensual sex outside
marriage, but if you rape a woman, you can marry her!” (N. Menon, Seeing
114). In the patriarchal view woman is a property, which needs to be passed
on untarnished from one owner to another.

The adolescent Marikolanthu, due to her ignorance and fear is forced
to hide the incident of rape from others. Her mother seeks the help of her
aunt Periamma whose attempts to abort her pregnancy in a crude manner fail
and Marikolanthu’s requests to seek the medical help also is denied and gives
birth to a male child. Her situation becomes akin to what Adrienne Rich
describes:

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then
disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again.
Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful,
socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded “illegitimate”, usually in poverty, always outside the law. In some cultures, she faces murder by her kinsmen. Whatever her choice, her body has undergone irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event. (Of Woman 12)

Her mother’s reluctance to seek medical help for abortion for fear of social ignominy thwarts Marikolanthu’s right to abortion, and the right to determine her pregnancy. In the feminist perspective “safe and legal abortion is an essential right of self-determination”(N. Menon, Seeing 203). Marikolanthu thereafter lives negating her own self, in total servitude and subservience in the Chettiar household doing disparate roles such as a caretaker of mad Chettiar Amma and assistant to Sujata etc. It is often said that “For the Indian mother . . . the son is the major medium of self-expression. It is her motherhood that the traditional family values and respects. . .” (Nandi 74). But here the same motherhood becomes a cause of shame for Marikolanthu, and she is expelled from her own family by her brothers. Owing to the patriarchal society’s reluctance to accept the children born out of wedlock her son is brought up as a consequence of the rape, and his human rights are largely violated. The child is totally neglected by Marikolanthu and after her mother’s death, she sells the child on mortgage to Murugesan’s factory in revenge.
Thirty one year old Marikolanthu whom Akhila meets in the ladies coupe is working as a helper in the mission; and now renouncing her roles of servitude and subordination, she wants to regain her real self in order to live for herself. Later when she happens to hear about Murugesan’s death, her hatred towards her child burns down with the pyre of Murugesan. With much remorse, she regains the child from his factory where she has mortgaged him. What she has to tell Akhila is about what she has learned from the vicissitudes of her life “I’m not telling you that women are weak. Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally” (209-210). All women narrators in the novel are seeking the same strength by subverting the repressive forces of patriarchy.

For many women in the novel their marriage is not their choice, rather they are groomed into marriage as if it is the destination of their life and are married off at an early age itself.

Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl’s deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designed feminine roles. She learns that the ‘virtues’ of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks. (Kakar, “Feminine” 51)

Janaki, Akhila, Prabha Devi, Marikolanthu, Padma all are groomed by their parents to await a prospective good match and from adolescence onwards
they are given training in domestic skills. Each narrator recalls how she is given “training in service and self-denial in preparation for her imminent roles of daughter-in-law and wife. . .” (Kakar 51). Adrienne Rich discusses “the covert socializations and the overt forces that have channelled women into marriage and heterosexual romance” (“Compulsory” 636-637); and she comments that heterosexuality needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution (637). The Chemistry postgraduate holder and the gold medallist Margaret Shanthi finds a hero in the well built body of Ebe, whom she considers a man who would be approved by her Mills and Boons romances. Since Ebe does not reciprocate her love in the same selfless manner and equality is far away from their relationship, what she gets from the relationship is humiliation, erosion of self-respect and adverse conditions for the utilization of her intellectual capacity. She feels disillusioned by his hegemonic attitudes and falls prey to his aggressive selfish conduct. Therefore, it can be concluded that she also in fact becomes a prey to the “idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, etc.” (“Compulsory” 638-639). Sujata, the daughter-in-law of the rich Chettiar, loathes the physical relationship with a man and she knows her husband’s liaisons. She fears she also may become mad like her mother–in-law who is kept in a room upstairs; and as per the rumours, it is her husband’s extramarital affairs that render her insane. Their rich husbands who are fully engaged in business, fulfil their wives’ material needs but there hardly develops any intimacy in their marital life. Women who have no role in the business despise their lonely existence inside the house. There develops an
intimate relationship between Sujata and Marikolanthu, and Marikolanthu identifies in her eyes the same longings she finds in the eye of Miss K to Missy V, two lady doctors with whom she once worked. In Adrienne Rich’s words:

Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women because coming out of "abnormal" childhoods they wanted to feel "normal," and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfilment. We may faithfully or ambivalently have obeyed the institution, but our feelings--and our sensuality--have not been tamed or contained within it . . .

This double-life--this apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative--has been characteristic of female experience. . . (“Compulsory” 654)

Here in the novel, many women in the patriarchal social set up are leading a double life hiding their discontent in life pretending to be someone else. Janaki who is dissatisfied with her sheltered life is scared of changes; and prefers to continue in the same role. Margaret Shanthi is fully disillusioned in her life with Ebenezer Paulraj, but seeks recourse in a plan of turning the situation in her favour through a conventional role of a provider of rich,
salacious food. Marikolanthu’s drab social conditions turn her into a masochist and she hides her true self in disparate roles, but later she realises the need to retain one’s identity: “I had been content to remain a sister to the real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother. Surrogate lover. But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing” (268). Prabha Devi also tries to cover her true spirited self for a fear of society and later she conquers this and learns to love her body and to make demand for love, or a space for her own. Akhila for many years of her life adopts the image of an elder sister, an asexual Akka to cover her true self, to disguise her desires and she accepts for herself what is befitting to an Akka. Later, her journey to Kanyakumari is a protest against the society’s double standards that curtail the happiness of her life.

Akhila’s mother is an example of masochistic femininity. Chris Weedon defines that “Masochistic femininity is also acquired through the family, which encourages women to seek satisfaction in constantly deferring to men and to men’s definition of what they should be” (40). It prepares women psychologically to accept the material structures of their oppression. Her mother’s mind is firmly rooted in the ethos of Tamil Brahmin culture, and she is highly warped by the sexist gender and caste norms of the Tamil Brahmin community. For her all Brahmins are above reproach. In accordance with the prevailing customs of Tamil Brahmins, Akhila’s mother is married to her uncle who has carried her in arms when she was a child and she finds nothing wrong with it. Though Appa is not a tyrant she wishes to perpetuate the myth of a tyrant husband, who will easily be annoyed, who can be
placated only through unfailing devotion, and who unlike the uxorious husbands of the neighbourhoods never lets his wife rule him(11). She always serves Appa first, and never does the family dine together. In her opinion, no good wife can serve two masters and a woman’s allegiance should only be to her husband after marriage. On the other hand, in Akhila, there is a rebel who prompts her to think against the patriarchal Brahmin community, though she conspicuously lacks the courage to realize the happiness of her life.

Susan Bordo while analyzing the relationship between food, sexuality and desire as represented in advertisements and literature comments that from Victorian era onwards depiction of women eating or their craving for rich food is considered a taboo.

Such an image would violate deeply sedimented expectations, would be experienced by many as disgusting and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for sexual appetite…. Women are permitted to lust for food only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they are near starvation.(110)

In the Indian context also women are generally associated more with cooking and serving food than with relishing food, though these norms are changing now. So depiction of women indulging in scrumptious food is rare in literature. In the novel Akhila’s mother is a preparer of rich food and serves it
with utmost devotion to her master. Food for her is a means through which she expresses her devotion and service to her husband. On the other hand, Akhila relishes food--its taste, smell and feel in her tongue. She relishes the taste of egg and becomes an egg-eater defying the Brahmin ethics. However, she has to do that in the secrecy of her kitchen. The narration of Akhila abounds with a detailed and spicy description of food and that reveals her appetite and taste for food. In Kanyakumari at the hotel where she stays, she alone tastes every item on the menu card. For Margaret also, eating becomes the only comforts and that gives her a secret thrill. However, as sweets are prohibited to her she has to hide the biggest bar of chocolate and relishes it secretly. Here eating becomes a metaphor for personal freedom and breaking up of all hindrances.

Mythological, artistic, polemical and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from blood-craving Kali... to *Malleus Malificarum* (‘For the sake of fulfilling the mouth of womb[witches] consort even with the devil’) to Hall and Oates’ contemporary rock lyrics: ‘Oh, oh, here she comes, watch out boys, she’ll chew you up’. (Bordo 116)

All women characters whose story unfolded through the novel belong to south Indian social milieu. Often they are seen bearing the brunt of the notion of their religion or patriarchal society in a sharper way than their male counterparts as the honour of the family or society is often attached to the conduct of
women. While analysing the notion of honour in Indian society Uma Chakravarti writes:

Women are the repositories of family honour--of their own family as daughter, and of their husband’s family as wife and mother. ‘The prestige of the family is in the hands of its daughter’ is a common saying and oft repeated to girls by the parents and to married women by their in-laws. The implication is that if their conduct is dishonourable, women can ruin their families forever. The concept of honour serves as a link between the behaviour of an individual woman and the idealized norms of the community. By constantly evoking the twin notions of honour and dishonour, families either condition or shame women into appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. (Gendering 151)

Consequently, women are forced to bear the marks of their culture or religion in a more prominent way, which often curtails their mobility. In the novel Karpagam, Akhila’s friend comments on how Tamil Brahmin community is obdurate that a widow should dress in white and go about “looking like a corpse ready for the funeral pyre” (202). Karpagam defies such norms and asks, “Who made these laws anyway?” (202). Sexist social stance has often religious or mythical underpinnings. Her parents consider Akhila’s education complete after her pre-university course, and she is expected to perfect her housekeeping abilities in preparation of marriage (48). In this family of two boys and two girls, girls are prepared for marriage and boys for job, which
reveals the gender biased notions of society. When Padma has her periods for the first time, Amma dresses her as a bride and says “My little one is a woman now” (77) and she is married off with a huge dowry. While Marikolanthu’s education is stopped at an early age because her mother thinks that sending a girl far away from home involves much risk. When she menstruates, she is suddenly put in the middle of a lot of prohibitions, taboos, and superstitions. Her mind is rattled by a lot of questions but she gets only baffling statements as answers such as “Because you are a woman and a good woman is one who safeguards her virtue” (225). She is left in ignorance that imperils her life later. Mothers of Marikolanthu and Sheela prefer to keep their girls ignorant about the ways of the society, and dissuade them from asking questions.

Sheela’s narrative reveals the insecurity children face in our society. Sheela realises the sexual undertones in her father’s friend’s behaviour towards her, but there is hardly any atmosphere in her family where she can openly discuss such matters with her parents. In the case of an adolescent girl, parents often try to “Kill her spirit and tame her tongue” (70). Hilary M Lips comments on the numerous socialisation practices that instil a sense of powerlessness in girls: “parents and teachers, often unwittingly, are teaching girls not to try things (because their efforts either do not make any difference or may result in failure or danger) and not to speak(because no one will pay serious attention to them)” (90). Sheela, the teenage girl narrates of her intimacy with her grandmother; and the support she is getting from her when her parents fail to understand her.
The novelist breaks the inhibitions on female sexuality and each woman talks openly of it. In an interview with Sapna Anu B. George, Anita Nair observes:

I am not ashamed about sex; I felt it perfectly natural as I was narrating another area of sensuality; perfectly natural like the feel of a silk cloth of the sensual pleasure of a delicious dish cooked and eaten. I just see it as an appetite. It does not make me even remotely ashamed talking about it.

In Akhila’s mother’s world under strict brahmanical ethos, women never knew what it was to desire. Akhila is afraid of the desiring woman in her as she is living in a society, which is eager to control female sexuality. The sexual status of a woman is linked to the respectability of family’s name as well as the decency of other members of the family. Therefore, her siblings think that if they allow Akhila to live alone, it may affect adversely on their status in the family. Moreover, “One of the most common assumptions that we encounter is the assumption that men have a greater ‘need’ for sex than do women. This negates women’s right to pleasure and somehow serves to excuse the sexually coercive behaviour that some men engage in” (Chandiramani 231-232). In the Indian society where strict segregation of sexes generally exists, Akhila’s friendship and affair with Hari is transgressive. But as it defies the caste, class, and age norms set by the patriarchal society, Akhila is too scared to continue the relationship. But the novel ends with a bolder Akhila’s decision to revive her broken bond with Hari. Margaret Shanthi is disgusted with the sexual relationship with Ebe
because of his domineering ways: “Or was it I who wanted an equal in bed and decided that I could no longer keep up the pretence of being a little girl?” (133). Ebe who is highly fascinated by the coloniser’s culture likes to play the role of a colonizer in bed as well as in home and school. Society’s eagerness to put woman under strict surveillance accrues from patriarchy’s overtly double standards and ambivalent attitude to female sexuality, and its attempt to curb female sexuality with prohibitions and taboos. Pramod, though he fails in his assault on Prabha Devi, can easily practise a mental coercion on her with his words “There is a name for women like you” (183). Marikolanthu maintains physical relationship with Sujata as well as with her husband. When Sujata comes to know of it she expels Marikolanthu from her house calling her unnatural and fiendish, and reprimands her for making her do things that no woman would (264). In spite of her homosexual inclination, Sujata is prejudiced against same sex love and considers it an aberration. In Brinda Bose’s opinion, “The nexus between perceptions of nationalism and female (non)sexuality has had long and troubled histories in many contexts, and it will perhaps not be inaccurate to say that in India it has been one of the most complex” (“Introduction” xxi). So other colleagues of Akhila’s office consider Katherine Webber an Anglo-Indian as immoral, and advice Akhila to refrain from her friendship with her.

“The novel is about women’s conditions in a male dominated society, told with great insight, solidarity and humour” (Bergquist). The patriarchal ethos of the society are derided by the novelist with her sarcastic and humorous descriptions. A streak of humour runs through Akhila’s description
of her mother’s theories of housewifely duties, mother’s devotion to her husband, and in the descriptions of Thiruvalluvar haunting Akhila. Chemical terminology is skilfully incorporated to describe the relationships in the life of a chemistry teacher who analyses the character of every person she meets by reducing them into chemicals. Thus Ebenezer Paulraj, her husband, who has authority in every fibre, and priggish righteousness in every breath is concentrated sulphuric acid, “Biting. Scathing. Colourless. Oily. Dense. Sour. Explosive” (120). Hider Eid in his review of Ladies Coupe comments: “By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story, of women rediscovering their bodies”.

In The Better Man Anita Nair chooses to narrate the story of Mukundan as well as that of Kaikurissi a remote, slumbering village in Northern Malabar. When her parents thought of moving away from her native place Mundakottukurisi, a village in Palakkat in Kerala, Anita Nair started gathering copious details regarding the village with an aim of writing the history of the village since she was highly fascinated by her native place. Later she perceived that she had collected enough raw materials for her first novel, and Mundakotukurussi was envisaged in the novel as a fictitious place Kaikurussi. The main thread of the novel weaves around the protagonist Mukundan’s life and his various psychological dilemmas and emotional turmoil. In this novel, physical and psychological realm of a man is interestingly and convincingly unravelled through the writing of a woman.
Jasbir Jain comments that “As the normative patterns applicable to outer reality are defined by male discourse, when a woman writer works her narrative through a male consciousness, questions of sexuality and psychology are raised and several other aspects need to be discussed” (“Men in” 43). Jain posits that while men’s portrayal of women is most often unquestionably accepted, the adoption of male perspective by a female writer is observed dubiously. She rejects the underlying assumptions that it is a great challenge to write through male consciousness or that it is a move towards androgynous writing:

Women writers when they turn to male narrators are not necessarily guided by the desire to escape a female consciousness or to demonstrate that they have a grasp over the male psyche. Most of the time, it is not the average swash-buckling hero who interests them. What fascinates them is the dreams men have and the layers of sensitivity which lie undiscovered in them. (“Men in” 57)

Anita Nair also does the same while unravelling the character of Mukundan, a single man with so many eccentricities. Mukundan after his retirement from government service, reluctantly settles in his native place Kaikurussi, which for him is beset by harrowing memories of his dead mother and the formidable presence of his living father.

Among the women characters of the novel the timid Paru Kutty, mother of Mukundan confronts sexual domination from her husband
Achuthan Nair throughout her marital life. When Mukundan is eight years old, Achuthan Nair leaves his service under the white imperialists in Burma and settles in Kaikurusi as a feudal land lord, tyrant and master of oppression (56). He never wants any one to flout his authority and he establishes his unimpeachable authority in his house by inflicting mental as well as physical tortures on his wife as well as son. Interestingly it is Paru Kutty who owns the house and property, and she inherits those from her mother and aunts as per the matrilineal system existing during that time. But like her mute, old aunts, she also remains mute and submissive for a major part of her life. By the late nineteenth century onwards, the Nair matrilineal tharavadu of Kerala was giving way to patriliny, and patriarchal families displaced the matrilineal households (Arunima, There Comes 1-2). In this context it is easy for Achuthan Nair to wield his authority on Parukutty and her old aunts. Though she leads a very submissive life without realising her power and authority for a long period in life, she unleashes a strong battle towards the end against his oppressive measures. But when he decides to bring Ammini with whom he has an affair to the same house Paru Kutty shrugging aside her cowardice unambiguously voices her stance: “For as long as I’m alive, I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn’t”(74). Thereafter she openly expresses her disgust for Achuthan Nair which she has been suppressing for years during their married life. She starts doing what Achuthan Nair detests the most such as inviting her relatives to her house, cutting the trees planted by him and refusing to store the rice belonging to him in her house. But her appalling lonely life ends when she is found dead in a pool of blood under
staircase; and the widely believed rousmers spread in the village say that Achuthan Nair’s unscrupulous hands are behind her untimely death.

She always supports and tries to protect Mukundan even though she cannot shield her boy from the wrath of her husband. Yet the grown up Mukundan hardly understands the plight of his mother and always finds some excuses to dissuade her from accompanying him to the place of his work. In fact unlike Paru Kutty he cannot free himself from the trepidation he feels for Achuthan Nair, and so is afraid to wound him by acting against his will. Thus the bleakness of Paru Kutty’s life is further vitiated by the neglect of her son.

Anjana is also a victim of domestic violence like Paru Kutty, and she meets with indifference and brutality in her marital life with Ravindran. Incessant failures in his business change him into a callous and indifferent man, and that causes the failure in their marital life. Though both Paru Kutty and Anjana protest, Anjana gets better chances to survive, while the loneliness imperils Paru Kutty’s life. Anjana manages to get into the profession of a teacher with her parents’ support who proclaims that “My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you”(232). She finds happiness in reading and listening to the radio, and in her job. In Mukundan she expects someone who is opposite to Raveendran—quiet, gentle, caring and loving. But later she is disillusioned when Mukundan rejects her in order to keep his public reputation. When she is insulted by Mukundan’s behaviour she hardly hides her repugnance: “You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it….You disgust me. Please leave...”
But their estrangement ends when Mukundan approaches her as a ‘better man’ who is free of his androcentric concepts, and who no longer wants to imitate his father, and who pleads forgiveness. Here Anita Nair rewrites the conventional notion of romantic love and masculinity. As Jasbir Jain comments, “This romantic view looks at woman as a beautiful being, capable of surrender both physically and emotionally, and it goes on to build a notion of female heroism which is based on sacrifice and self-abnegation” (“Introduction” 18). Here the woman is not accepting a domineering patriarchal masculinity, but she is ready to forgive and accept him when he realises his faults.

Meenakshi, a cousin and childhood friend of Mukundan has many peculiar tinges to her character, and the novel is in fact her story also. She has donned different roles in her life. Being the daughter of a poor mother who is living depending upon Achuthan Nair, she knows that she shouldn’t expect much from the family; and she always seeks a way to escape from the despotism of Achuthan Nair and the drab monotony of her life. As an adolescent she cherishes the mutual love she shares with Mukundan in Kaikurussi. But when Mukundan leaves Kaikurussi for a job, he decides to dismiss their adolescent love as part of their growing up process. Joining a group of Naxalites Meenakshi seeks ways to flout the authority of rich landlords like Achuthan Nair, and later selects a Kathakali artist, Balan as a partner in her life. Later, Balan deserts Meenakshi and her child in search of different roles in Kathakali. Then she also has to don different roles in life such as that of shopkeeper, one who runs a creche, and an LIC agent to make
both ends meet for her family, comprising a small child and a decrepit mother. Living as a single woman in a patriarchal society, Meenakshi endures slanders and acrimonious comments, though she tries to remain impervious to them. Both Mukundan and Balan wish to use her as an object of gratification and neither takes their affairs with her seriously. No one is earnest in making a lasting relationship with Meenakshi since she is the daughter of a poor mother without any financial underpinnings. The retired Mukundan finds in Meenakshi “still magnificent body and handsome spirit. And a tag that read –No string attached”(64), but her resistance leaves him shamefaced. It may be to resist her scandalous single woman status in the village that she accepts her infidel husband who comes back to her as sick and decrepit; and thereby she willingly adds herself as an extra burden. It seems that through her masochism, she is unconsciously imitating a suffering feminine ideal that has been cherished in the society in order to prove that she is not a ‘fallen woman’. Yet she claims that her reclamation of Balan is a form of revenge in order to deflate his vanity: “This time I could have said no. Which is why I said yes”(62). Towards the end of the narrative Meenaksi decides to lead a life for herself free of all fatigues and burden and decides to go away from her family accepting the job of a matron of a working women’s hostel. She dreams of leading a restful life there reading, sewing, or watching TV. Here Anita Nair depicts the insecurities and visicitudes in the life of a woman who is burdened at the same time with her uppercaste lineage, poverty and bare necessities of life. Even in her failures she keeps that “streak of steel that ran within her”(62), which often bewilders Mukundan as he badly lacks it.
Though a novel narrated from a male perspective, *The Better Man* upholds the feminine principle and the decline of hegemonic masculinity; and Mukundan frees himself from his predilection with power and masculine dignity, and eventually becomes a better man in the novel. Connell and Messerschmitt describes hegemonic masculinity thus:

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue.

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.(832)

In G. Arunima’s opinion, until the early 19th c power within the *tharavadu* was not based on gender, but it was a generational privilege. The male and female of elder generation took decisions, and the colonial rulers treated ‘headship’ of the household as a gendered right and the elder male uncle got greater legitimate power as he is given the right for the revenue settlements (*There Comes* 19). This paved way for the emerging of a controlling
patriarchal figure in the tharavadu: “By the late nineteenth century, the Karanavan was the figure of power that both women and the younger male kin had to contend with within the tharavadu” (20). Moreover, “The position of the Karanavan as the head of the tharavadu was one of the most significant changes in matrilineal kinship under the colonial rule” (27). With that, women’s importance within the tharavadu declined (53). The Nair reformers who tried to convert the matriliny were patriarchal, and the modification of matrilineal practices allowed no room for the rights of women. During this period of transformation, men began to gain authority in terms of property and authority. Achuthan Nair who settled in his wife’s matrilineal tharavadu after his service to the colonial rulers in Burma represents the dominant masculine stereotype during that period of Kerala. Achuthan Nair represents the hegemonic masculinity of colonial, casteist, feudal Kerala. He disapproves when Mukundan invites the low caste Kamban to his house, even though Kamban is a postmaster in the post office of the locality. Achuthan Nair can be seen making every effort to maintain the status quo of his authority. He considers himself a man who has seen the world and never allows anyone to flout his authority and firmly believes a survivor is one who thinks of himself first. He condemns all types of mental and physical weaknesses even of his pregnant wife and small child. He tries to nibble away at his son’s talents and aptitudes, as he wants to make him a strong-minded practical man with a flair for surviving any situation like himself as he claims. But he feels rather impatient when he detects in the boy’s nature a weakness that is more akin to his wife, and his resentment and criticism of Mukundan continue even after
Mukundan becomes an adult. “There exists considerable evidence that hegemonic masculinity is not a self reproducing form, whether through habitus or any other mechanism. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women” (844). Achuthan Nair does this by inflicting physical and mental tortures on his wife and son, taunting his son for being a sissy and keeping his subordinates like Krishnan Nair in awe and fear. This creates deep emotional wound in Mukundan who has internalised his father as a dominant masculine figure. Sudhir Kakar identifies some emotional problems of boys as part of their growing up:

I have tried to identify three culturally influenced psychological constellations that emphasize the narcissistic vulnerability and emotional self-absorption of the masculine psyche in India: first, the length and symbiotic nature of the mother-son relationship; second, the rupture of this connection at the age of four or five and the radical alteration of the child’s ‘lifestyle’; and third, the little boy’s disappointment when he perceives his father as more of an onlooker than an ally in his boyish struggle to cope with his new circumstnaces. (The Inner 157-158)

Mukundan is brought up till his eighth year by his mothers and aunts. His father’s arrival back at his home perplexes him mainly because of his father’s outright rejection of his personality by considering him a weak creature like his mother. This torments him very much and he craves for his father’s recognition to reach up to the hegemonic masculinity. For Mukundan, his
father is a masculine ideal wielding portentous powers too difficult to appease. Apparently for Mukundan his masculinity is intertwined with his father’s approval: “I was waiting for you to let me become a man” (82). Though Mukundan repeatedly accuses his father of destroying his life by bruising and battering his spirit, an ardent admiration for his father or the patriarchal ideal represented by his father is found in the recesses of Mukundan’s mind. Mukundan remains a bachelor for fear that his selection of a woman may not please his father (83). Mukundan was born and brought up in a phallocentric world where male superiority is predominantly celebrated. From his childhood onwards, he perceives how his father is basked in adulation, and how his demands are readily met by his mother, aunts, and servants. He is hardly found resisting the supercilious behaviour of his father or the cruel treatment meted out to his mother. On the contrary, he cringes when his mother complains about his father and remains passive to her request to take her with him to his place of work. Obviously he lacks such an adulation for his mother. “The powerful injunction against being the same as the woman produces a confusion in which all ‘womanly’ attributes are rendered problematic, made into something ‘other’” (Frosh 112). Thus, he becomes complicit in his mother’s death as he fails to save her from the cruelties of his father. He admits that he is too scared to challenge his father and cannot take his mother with him in spite of her incessant pleas to rescue her life. This guilt haunts him so much that he succumbs to hallucination and mental traumas and he gradually recuperates from this condition through Bhasi’s herbal medication and friendship. Here Anita Nair subverts the
mother son bonding which is often idealised in Indian literature. But she might have employed another myth of Parasurama, the sage from the Indian mythology who kills his mother as per the order of his father.

As the days of old feudal lords come to an end, new power centres arise in Kaikurussi and Achuthan Nair’s senility parodies his former masculine power. As Connell and Messerschmitt opine, “Hegemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones” (832-33). The present icon of villagers is the rich, devious business man Power House Ramakrishnan who is catapulted to affluence and power through the winning of lottery ticket. In spite of Mukundan’s apparent jealousy and rivalry towards him, Mukundan is really enthralled when he is invited to be in the Community Hall committee as he always craves to be at the helm of village affairs like his father once had been “It has always been my greatest desire to take my father’s place in Kaikurussi”(322). So Mukundan stands with the decision of Community Hall Committee—a few elite rich male villagers—to oust poor Bhasi from the village by appropriating his land to construct the Community Hall for Kaikurussi. He decides to keep at bay his affair with Anjana, as he knows that an affair with a married woman who is not formally divorced will taint his new status. So Mukundan, in order to achieve a hegemonic masculinity like that of his father rejects and betrays his close friendship with Bhasi his benefactor—a poor rootless, landless man—and his love for Anjana. Though Mukundan desires
the company of women, a deliberate elimination of women is seen in his life for the realization of his status—first his childhood friend Meenakshi, then his mother and later Anjana. Patriarchal society equates woman with emotional weakness.

Later Mukundan realizes that “His greed for recognition and acceptance, importance and adulation, had blinded him to everything else”(349), and he decides to be a ‘better man’ than his father. However, interestingly it is only after the death of his father that Mukundan can free himself from the psychological burden of becoming a masculine ideal like his father. This new Mukundan’s decision to reconcile with Anjana and Bhasi and to give a piece of land to the landless Bhasi ensues from his newly formed courage to pursue his happiness and to give a wee bit respect for his early concerns regarding masculine ideals. Mukundan’s decision to demolish the hollow structure of the community hall with gunpowder symbolizes his attempt to undermine the dominant power structures of the village that crush and alienate the poor and the marginalized like Bhasi and Anjana. It also denotes the termination of Mukundan’s slavish adulation to the patriarchal ideals and power structures and his attempts to become a better man. Mukundan’s action also can be seen as a protest against the onslaught on the rich herbal flora of Kaikurussi through the construction of Community Hall.

The women of Kaikurussi, since they are destined to early marriage and lifelong confinement to the household duties, are found weary by the time they are twenty-five. In Bhasi’s words they are doomed to undergo “a lifelong tedium of chores, a monotony that is mind-glazing than backbreaking”
Neeli, the low caste domestic worker of Mukundan’s house, lacks an identity in the opinion of the masters. Mukundan comments that there always has been a Neeli in Mukundan’s house who has cleaned and served the house for years, and she rarely becomes known. So Mukundan doubts whether the Neeli who cleans his house is the same Neeli who has been his mother’s errand girl and confidante, or a new one (25). The disempowered and silenced outcaste women who have served high castes for generation lack a specific name and identity in their master’s eyes. Even in the modern society, they are facing the ignominy of their low caste status. Krishnan Nair reprimands Mukundan for allowing Neeli to enter the house where Machilamma or the goddess of the household resides, as the presence of the low caste will pollute the place. Uma Chakravorty, while analysing the caste and gender issues comments that women of upper caste may experience gender based discrimination, but they can have or share material resources and the privilege of their caste. Dalit women and men belong to the other end of the hierarchy, and then also dalit women are the more oppressed. While the upper caste men wield the maximum power, the dalit women are at the lowest strata (Gendering 160).

In the novel Mistress “Anita Nair writes about man woman relationship and complex Kathakali aesthetic with equal felicity” (Mukundan 1). The central character of the novel is a Kathakali maestro Koman “the mistress of arts” (A.Nair 307) and the life of Koman and his artistic growth are the main thrust of the novel. In the author’s words, “And I was provoked into thinking—what are the compromises that an artist makes in order to
survive? That question was, in a sense, the catalyst of *Mistress*, and a recurring theme in it” (“On Integrity”). The theme of the novel is set against the background of Nila, and residing on its bank Koman is reminiscing his past to the travel writer Chris. He talks of his progenitors, his lonely childhood in a convent, his reunion with his father and brothers and his initiation into Kathakali and his artistic growth and dilemmas. His uncompromising devotion to Kathakali hardly allows him to dilute the pure tradition of Kathakali to give it a popular appeal.

As a parallel narrative, the life of Radha, Koman’s niece and his pet is unravelled. Radha’s marital disharmony and her infatuation with Christopher Stewart is the main crux of the novel. Radha is the only daughter of her wealthy parents, and her marriage with Shyam is only a ploy by her father to save Radha from a failed affair, and to protect the family honour. Radha’s father has nurtured Shyam, the son of his wife’s impoverished cousin; and for Shyam the daughter of his haughty mentor has been a rich asset in his voyage to prosperity. The greatest ambition in his life is to purge the ignominy of his past riddled with abject penury and shame of servitude through his thriving business. A business-minded man who is well versed in all the tactics of business, Shyam is considered ill-suited to her temperament and tastes by Radha. The compulsory heterosexuality of the society forces her father to think that a marriage is the only solution that will assuage the distressed temperament of his daughter, and that prompts Radha’s father to compel his daughter into an unwanted relationship. He finds no alternative other than a marriage to save his daughter from depression and social scandals regarding
her premarital sexual liaison. In spite of the incongruities in their character and attitudes, Radha is forced to marry Shyam and they spend eight years together. Radha has been leading a double life hiding her discontent inside.

I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn’t want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles....I think of the butterfly I caught and pinned to a board when it was still alive, its wings spread so as to display the markings, oblivious that somewhere within, a little heart beat, yearning to fly. I am that butterfly now. (53-54)

Shyam and Radha’s marital life is beset with sharp incompatibilities and disharmonies. Radha is seen criticising Shyam’s tastes and his choices of music and channels, while Shyam entertains patriarchal notion of women as mere objects of desire. Though Shyam owns several businesses, he neither needs Radha to interfere in his business nor wants her to embark on a job for the fear that it will undermine his standing in the society. He doesn’t allow her to drive either. He is fond of cherishing the thought that she is spending her time in beauty parlour and tailor shop prettying herself for him. Soon after Radha meets Chris, a travel writer from the West, she falls in love with him and she builds up an imaginary bond between Chris and her. Chris reciprocates her infatuation with equal passion. Radha’s infatuation for Chris mainly develops from Radha’s attempts to escape from Shyam and to resist his ways. Therefore, when she decides to sever ties with Shyam she cannot
accept Chris either “Yet, when I think of Chris, what I see is a shadow of Shyam. And when I think of Shyam, what I see is the possibility of escape with Chris. I know for certain that I cannot live with one or the other” (398). Therefore, she takes a decision to live alone and to bring up her child in her womb alone. Towards the end, she sympathises with Shyam but his domineering attitudes alienate her from him. Chris comes in search of his paternity, hoping he can find his father in Koman. Here Radha’s child also is growing without the proximity of a paternal figure. What happened in the case of Koman and Angela is going to repeat here in the life of Shyam and Radha. Since one of the central themes of the novel is Chris’ journey in search of paternity, Anita Nair is not rejecting the paternal figure from the life of a child. Yet the novel at the same time uphold a woman’s right to free herself from the oppressive ways of patriarchy and bring up the child without the fear of illegitimacy. She upholds the rights of a single mother.

Compared to the firm personality of Angela who approaches Koman to master Kathakali with great vigour and enthusiasm and later passionately loves Koman, Radha appears less self assertive in the novel. Angela is seen vigorously proclaiming her individuality: “No one could give me to you. I am not a parcel. I chose you, remember?” (366). Chris, son of Angela comes in fact in search of his paternity though he keeps his real motive in the guise of a travel writer who wants to depict the life of Koman. Chris doubts Koman who once held a relationship with Angela as his father. Though educated, financially well off, and a former employee in Bangalore, Radha appears to lead a passive life in the novel and allows herself to be a passive victim of
Shyam’s obnoxious ways. “All my life I have stumbled from one thing to another, persuading myself that this is how it should be. I have never behaved as if I have a mind of my own. I have never made a decision. I have let myself be swept along” (402). Radha is interested in art and literature and she is fond of launching a career, but is hardly seen doing anything. She herself admits her cowardice which compels her to approach Shyam and behave deceitfully in front of him: “I have played wife all this while, despising him” (426). She admits she has forgotten what it is to step out and fight the world and has forgotten all skills needed for survival (426). But Radha at the end decides she cannot continue to play wife merely because it frees her of worries (426) and she decides to assume some responsibility for her life (402).

Shyam often expresses his love and adoration for Radha, but Radha obviously for him is a rich possession, since he considers the daughter of his rich and haughty mentor an asset in his way to prosperity. When he is on the verge of losing Radha he tries to compensate his loss by possessing an expensive tusker. Often his mind is highly warped by sexist notions and hunger for power. Radha feels “sore and bruised, invaded and robbed” (165) when he forcefully makes physical relationship with her. Shyam who hardly understands her feelings ruminates over the incident in a different way: “Women like to be made to feel like women, dominated and put in their place. Even my Radha. So I wasn’t wrong after all....I will buy her a pair of emerald earrings....What woman can resist the sparkle of jewellery?” (164). Since “‘Marital Rape’ does not exist except within feminist lexicon” (N. Menon, Recovering 126), Shyam hardly realises his act of force and violence a crime
“In ecofeminist terms, Shyam sees nature/woman as a resource for the benefit of man” (Nambari 266). Being a man of shrewd business tactics, he sells the beauty of nature and river for the tourists through his resort, and his business world is thriving through his resort on the bank of the river Nila.

Of her conception of female emancipation and the gendered roles in the family, Anita Nair explicates in an interview with Sneha Subramanian Kanta.

I don’t believe a woman’s emancipation is tied to the roles she has to play in life. In fact, a wife/mother represents only a facet of a woman in a relationship. However even as a single woman she is still sister, daughter, aunt etc. Hence it would be almost impossible for a woman, or for that matter, a man to be completely isolated from relationships.

Both The Better Man and Ladies Coupe end hinting at a prospective union of Anjana and Mukundan, Akhila and Hari respectively. The characters of her novel instead of breaking away from the family bond try to ensure democracy within family relationships. Indira Nityanandam comments that “Ladies Coupe is not an indictment of the institution of marriage....Instead it stresses on the need for mutual respect and understanding as well as self respect” (“A Post-Colonial” 130). But a destructive note in the man–woman relationship is predominantly found in Mistress. The relationship of Sethu and Saadiya, parents of Koman, ends up in the suicide of Saadiya. For Angela’s sake Koman leaves his land for England where the alien society and culture leaves him estranged and incapacitated and their relationship withers and he
stealthily escapes to his own land. Radha discards her marital life and lovers, and decides to remain single. Only the relationship between Koman and Maya that is out of wedlock lasts in the novel. While Mukundan in *The Better Man* and Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, who lead single lives near their middle ages, dream of a life with their lovers with renewed passion.

For Saadiya, her love for Sethu is in fact her eagerness to escape from Arabipatnam. So the repentance on leaving her parents, her culture and religion gnaws her conscience that ends in the disharmony of marriage and her suicide. When as a girl, Saadiya craves always to explore the world outside since in Arabipatnam female folk live in complete seclusion within the walls, where separate alleys are made for women. Her father firmly believes that they are descendants of Marakars a pure Arab stock and so need to safeguard the bloodline (99). As she trespasses into the public space, her father punishes her with a molten iron rod on her calf three times. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticising the dominant representation of women comments: “Arabs and Muslims, it appears, don’t change at all. Their patriarchal family is carried over from the times of the prophet Mohammed. They exist, as it were, outside history” (181). Anita Nair’s representation of a Muslim society during the nineteen thirties in Arabipatnam smacks of ambivalence.

Anita Nair makes her heroines take subversive stances in the novels. Akhila’s affair with Hari who is many years junior to her ends after they spend two days together. Later Akhila tries to strengthen herself by picking up a momentary relationship with Vinod, and there after reviving her intimacy
with Hari. Anjana decides to put an end to the oppressive relationship with her husband and welcomes Mukundan to her house. In a society where the paternity of the child is the mark of the respectability of the mother and child, Radha severs her ties with Shyam and her lover Chris and decides to bring up the child growing in her womb alone.

There is no transgression from the private and public in Radha’s life. She in fact limits her space to the domestic world by leaving her life in Bangalore. Yet, towards the end, she transgresses the androcentric concepts of the society by severing her ties with oppressive and unwanted relationship, and by deciding to rear up her child alone; and thereby she challenges the patriarchal notion of illegitimacy. The names of the characters Radha and Chris are evocative of eternal love story of Radha and Krishna and as per Indian mythology Radha who is a wife of another person never marries Krishna. “Radha and Chris are, in fact, clever updates of iconic Hindu lovers Radha and Krishna” (Chaturvedi 111). But the name Shyam also is a synonym of Krishna. In the concluding part of the novel both appear in Radha’s reminiscences.

Anita Nair’s male protagonists are not symbols of aggressive masculinity. Girija Nambiar describes how Koman is surrounded by feminine symbols and he is the mistress of the demanding art of Kathakali (268). Mukundan and Bhasi of The Better man renounce their craving for power and ego, and become better men. Anita Nair who has profusely made experiments in different genres employs different narrative techniques and different styles in each novel. In The Better Man, the conventional way of narration are
interrupted through the monologues of Bhasi, which is blended in with the inception of each of the five parts of the novel. In *Mistress* each chapter is comprised of the monologues of Koman, Radha and Shyam. Each of the nine chapters is named after Kathakali Navarasa and evokes corresponding mood in that chapter. Both novels are pervaded with copious Kerala images drawn from nature, seasonal changes, and landscape. Nuances in the rainy season of Kerala are evoked along with the depiction of love and passion that has been igniting in the minds of Koman and Angela (361-363). In Hajela’s opinion, “But what seems most amazing and noticeable is the way the novelist bears her knowledge of dance to the texture of the novel and Koman’s visualising the reality of life around him through the art-form of Kathakali” (12). *Ladies Coupe: A Novel in Parts* is compartmentalized by the narration of six people, and each narration is intertwined with the reminiscence of Akhila. In Chaturvedi’s opinion “She may refuse to admit being feminist but she has certainly taken upon herself the task of asking questions that nobody else dared to ask. In her attempt to do so she even challenges Indian mythology” (111).