Indian Female Subjectivity: An Experience of Collectivity

"Listen, listen and you will learn what it is to be a real woman"

Anita Nair’s world of female subjects is truly Indian in the sense that the characters are typically Indian with safeguarded notions of stereotypes. As she treats them to sessions of ‘common experience’ the characters, emerge as liberated female subjects, willing to learn from one another. She sensitizes her readers to the current life of patriarchial hold, simply by making her characters narrate their stories. As each story is told, one finds in it the nucleus tale of Indian woman in general. In the process, she sets her characters to undergo an inward journey – a quest interior, thereby measuring the strength and weakness of each woman. This is what one finds in Nair’s second novel, Ladies Coupe, which is a laurel of five tales, narrated to a sixth woman in the ladies coupe of a train.

This chapter is a discussion of Anita Nair’s perception of human experience and identity not always conditioned by education or institutions or other factors. Anita Nair tries to give a new definition for human life, stating that one becomes aware of the woman in her only when she is able to delink from the institutions or even from the gender. In other words, discovery of the self is possible only by a collective immersion in the grand version of human life. India is a country of communities—where community bath, community lunch, and community living are common and are accepted as a life-style. From that point of view human experience is not always a felt experience. It is also a learnt experience.

Ladies Coupe by Anita Nair locates six women characters drawn from different social positions who have undergone different kinds of human experiences in their own
place. Kushwant Singh comments in his article “Travelling in a Women’s Compartment” states that “they have nothing in common save their gender; some made happy marriages; some were not happy; one was raped and took her revenge, another seduced men much younger than herself”. (The Tribune, March 2, 2002). Here they undergo those experiences simply by narrating their tale. The protagonist, Akhila, who has almost nil experience in human life, who is simply a subject of an institution, who is a prisoner of her own fears and phobias, is exposed to a kind of narration of these tales of women. The entire incident takes place in the journey, in the reservation compartment in a train. After overcoming the initial block they communicate with each other and share their life with one another and share their experiences.

Nair believes that a woman’s life is the same all over India. In her Interview to Suchitra Behal, entitled “Writing for Oneself”, she states thus:

... there isn't too much of a distinction between the urban and non-urban areas....They carry the weight of their traditions, the manifestations of marriage in which they feel secure. The women of the generation that is now in late forties are not so liberated. (The Hindu On The Web)

She makes the following note on the genesis of the novel. Hence, she chose to construct her protagonist Akhila as a woman of different stock. “Akhila in some sense enjoyed being a martyr. She is not an exceptionally strong woman. She is just somebody who has coped. All she wanted was to be a good wife and mother. It is a typical South Indian dream, especially for women of that generation. Talking about the genesis of the novel, Anita Nair has remarked in a personal Interview to this researcher thus:
Thirteen years ago, I climbed on the top berth of a ladies compartment in a train from Bangalore to Madras and discovered an unexpected world. Once the door was closed and the blue night lamp switched on, the middle-aged women began a conversation that riveted me to my sleeping berth. It was a no-holds-barred conversation on mother-in-law, daughters-in-law, husbands, everything. I think it is the confined space and the fact that you are talking to strangers, someone you’ll never meet again. It is like a confessional box, you are assured anonymity....Their candour, the subversiveness, their subtle strength and courage inspired my novel, Ladies Coupe. In Ladies Coupe, one can expect to meet six women who are from the vast majority of Indian women—the suburban and rural women—who still have little control over their lives. It is a book I wanted to write very much because it disturbs me.

(Personal Interview)

However, as C. Margaret hall observes, “Historically and culturally women have been socialized to fill subordinate and restricted roles. Stereotypes about women continue to persist in most social settings as strong and even decisive influences in the value system of both women and men” (2). So, to be not victimized, a woman has to avoid / confront certain adoptive and submissive value negotiations. Hence, Nair chooses to distil the value system and the conditioning factors that define the life of Indian women, as they engage each other in narrating their tales. Values are central to life and are internalized in the childhood and youth. Women discover their most meaningful values and create real identities from the life given to them. Naturally, identity becomes androgynous and more autonomous. It enables women to shift from the subordinated roles to more powerful and equal positions in family life and social life. Depending on her level of awareness of her identity, the woman seizes the opportunities and possibilities for equitable and more meaningful relationships.
A ‘good woman’ is expected to conform to certain self-sacrificing, non-assertive, passive patterns of behaviour. The highest status for women is still said to be achieved through marriage. The roles of wife and mother are idealized and sanctified both in modern industrial and in less developed societies. The image of Sita of *The Ramayana* is the stereotype of taken-for-granted wifehood. Sita is the suffering, patient, and glum, mute and an “archetypal image of uncomplaining ‘Hindu Wife’. Sita does not grow, change or resent” (R.P. Sharma 222). Sita is a strong example of “Solid Woman”. Postcolonial feminist literature has always carried the heavy burden of dealing with, layers of misinterpretation of traditions and religions. At the centre of this dilemma is the role of woman and her independence, both economic and social.

*Ladies Coupe* has an all-woman cast and is about a single woman's decision to break free from claustrophobic traditions and multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt, provider, and live life on her own terms. It raises what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of woman in contemporary postcolonial India. Nair's India suffers from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. Of course, patriarchy, in its different forms, has tried in many ways to repress, debase and humiliate women -- especially through the images represented in cultural and traditional forms. Zena Sorabjee, a contemporary writer of sociology states in “Family for Woman’s Empowerment” thus:

In the patriarchal family, responsibilities and obligations are not equally distributed among those to be protected; the male children’s subordination to the father’s dominance is temporary; it lasts until they themselves become heads of the households. The subordination of the female children and wives is life-long. Daughters can escape if only they place themselves as wives under the dominance / protection of another man. The basis of paternalism is
an unwritten contact for exchange of economic support and protection given
by the male, for subordination in all matters, sexual service and unpaid
domestic service given by the female. (217 – 218)

*Ladies Coupe* deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shake
the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the
existence of an alternative reality. The novel questions whether the role of Indian woman, as
a representative of other women living under oppressive patriarchal systems, in relation to
culture resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a
world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs.

The protagonist Akhila is introduced thus: “So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years
old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of
escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect…” (*LC.2*). She is a
Brahmin, whose life has been taken out of her control, and at forty five, she is a “spinster,”
daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family, after the death of her father.
Getting distraught with these multiple roles, she decides to run away on a train journey from
family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman. In
the all-female ladies coupe, she meets five other women, each of whom has a story to tell.
The stories are all an attempt to answer Akhila's problematic question: “Can a woman live
alone?” (*LC 21*).

The passion for heroism, to be brave, willing “to take on the world” is the desire
within the heart for women who are aware of their subordination and subjugation. Mostly
this remained unuttered. The hearts open up voluntarily during their unofficial, casual,
regular, almost- daily 'Ladies Meet' by the village well, which provides drinking water to
the whole village. In many village societies this unscheduled meeting of women provides
the space for a new discussion— in style and context. Anita Nair conceives such a meeting of minds in *Ladies' Coupe*. She traces the lives of six women who travel together in the Ladies compartment. Akhila, the chief protagonist, is one of them and she finds herself in a quest for freedom, independence, and strength. She seeks answers to many haunting and gnawing questions about her spinsterhood and society. Born in a middle class Brahmin family, with two younger brothers and one younger sister, Akhila’s education was brought to a halt with Pre-university course because, “Her parents considered her education complete and she was expected to fine tune all her housekeeping abilities in preparation for the day she would be married” (*LC48*).

Shouldering the burden of the family as a breadwinner at a very young age of nineteen, after the sudden death of her father in an accident, Akhila kept on slogging to educate and settle her three siblings for 15 years. For 26 years, with her job in the Income Tax department she was able to give everything— time, money and care to her mother and siblings. Even when she turned forty-five, nobody in her family, not even her mother, showed any interest in her marriage. “In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster” (*LC77*). At thirty-five, choosing history as main subject, she enrolled in the Open University for a Bachelor of Arts Degree. “There is probably no one more suited to study History than a spinster, she thought. To watch the unravelling of life from the sidelines” (*LC 85*).)

Women cannot have meaningful identity without acknowledging emotional relatedness to others. They are empowered and supported through these relationships. When women clarify identity and increase self worth they inevitably change their relationships with men. This is what happens in the life of Akhila when she became the breadwinner of the family after the sudden death of her father. Akhila’s behaviour was the
ideal according to the deepest promptings of culture, which appealed to the role she had to play and not to her identity. This accommodating self-denial was a painful experience, often at tremendous psychic cost to her. “Amma had Akhila to replace her husband as the head of household. Amma had her. ... Akhila. Akhilandeswari. Mistress of All Worlds. Master of None.” (LC 84)

Akhila had to live in a world of assumptions and ideas, of survival or subsistence. Her energies are consumed by making both ends meet. She became the ladder for her siblings to attain a decent social status through good education, employment and marriage. No one is worried about her life and marriage, neither her mother nor her siblings. The role of a responsible breadwinner, which she took up when her family was stranded after the accidental death of her father, became her own trap. In our society, the stamp that is put on one is very difficult to shake off. Akhila is branded as a spinster and a sacrificing elder sister. As the years rolled by she realizes that no one thought about her life and marriage—not even her mother. Her desires are neither considered nor fulfilled by her brothers and sister. On the contrary when she bought a flat to live alone after her mother’s death, Padma, her younger sister came to live with her because, “A woman can’t live alone” (LC 21). Even a small private space for herself is denied to her. The Indian woman is particularly conditioned by traditions and conventions and willingly accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of the welfare, honour and prestige of the family even at the cost of her own personal happiness. The reason is as C. Margaret Hall puts it,

In patriarchal societies, female values are defined by men, not women. Whether women accept and internalize traditional female values or traditional male values they are vulnerable to the indoctrination of patriarchal values frequently being victimized as a consequence of this dominance. (6)
So, in Indian patriarchal societies women are subjected to subordinate positions in all areas of life. Men are reluctant to give ground with respect to their own super-ordinate position. Nevertheless, change is the inevitable order of life. Hence, awareness of their secondary status increases restlessness in women. The more Akhila learns about her identity, values, beliefs, rights, and privileges through her education and relationship with outside world, the more she longs for her freedom and acquisition of social status. Whether it is simple desire that of eating an egg or a secret desire that of sexual gratification Akhila has to encounter many hurdles in the form of society, gender, caste, and selfishness of her family members. “What Akhila most desired in the world was to be her own person? In a place that was her own. To do as she pleased. To live as she chose, with neither restraint nor fear of censure” (LC 201).

On the contrary, she is always known as ‘Chandra’s daughter, Narayan’s Akka, Priya’s Aunt, Murthy’s sister-in-law’. In this relational identity, she is denied her own identity. She is always an extension of someone else’s identity. What Akhila most longs for is an identity of her own. She wants to be recognized as a woman with all her desires and dreams, potentialities and privileges, likings and limitations. Above all she wants to be loved and love others truly like any other woman. The disappointment of love and care from the family, drives her unconsciously to have an illicit and passionate love affair with Hari, who is much (fifteen years) younger to her.

In India women enter into conversation readily with strangers, and in their discourse, the borderlines like private / public, formal/ informal do not exist. It is usually a desire to know the other as well as to open up one’s self. For most of them, their life is their ‘story’, told and listened to eagerly.
Anita Nair makes use of this ancient or traditional Indian custom of women sharing the news about their families when they get together or meet at the common well or pond in the village. The young girls (teenagers) who are not given freedom to wander about like men, are allowed to go to the riverside or to the village common well, along with the mates girls of the neighbourhood, to pluck flowers, take bath, and to draw king water. Utilising this opportunity the young girls used to linger long, playing and sharing the news and gossips, desires and dreams of their future, and all the secrets of their age. Men have more occasions to meet at social and work places. Women however suffer from the lack of exposure or free access to such common meetings or occasions. Hence they make use of their get together at the well or riverside and exchange their ideas, views, and the events at home freely and openly without any inhibitions. This provides good release to their otherwise burdened lives and its problems. This is an oriental and Indian custom — exclusive women’s gathering near the pond — reliving their story and releasing their tensions — and it has a therapeutic effect in their life. It is a culture bound traditional custom incorporated in life. Anita Nair has converted this technique of ancient traditional custom and uses it as a narrative technique in her novel instead of looking up at the west for techniques. This is one of the appealing and appropriate postcolonial elements in this novel. This literary technique is treated subtly and cleverly by Anita Nair in Ladies Coupe.

Akhila, a victim of circumstances, a martyr at home, and a stoic in life, finds herself released in her interactive passions. She is decolonised and sensitized, thanks to her encounter with other women with whom she travels in the train. As she listens, she learns to be a woman of body and spirit. As she travels with five women, she gets involved in a conversation with them. Prabha Devi is quite communicative and Janaki, the elderly woman is quite inquisitive. Akhila tells them that she is a single woman and she is forty five years old and that she has always lived with her family. Janaki wants to know if she is employed.
Akhila replied that she works for Income Tax Department. Prabha Devi puts forth a question with due apologies as to why Akhila chose to remain unmarried. To this Akhila answered with little hesitation, that she did not choose to remain single. It all happened that way, after the death of her father. She continued to say that she had to look after the family in her father's absence and by the time all her siblings got settled she became much too old to marry. All the women in the couple tell Akhila about their lives. Women's options are extremely complex being influenced by culture, class and gender. Traditionally women are taught to put others before themselves. They have been pressurised to put family life above other spheres of activity. Marriage does not define all the life chances of women. As Lakshmi Moktali puts it,

The patriarchal system prevailing the world over barring certain exceptions, has established certain norms or practices for the women over the centuries through the ideological, biological, sociological, anthropological as well as other justifications for controlling the other group i.e. female. The role, status or position of a woman in a family, therefore, is clearly subordinate to that of man in a patriarchal system. (100)

Janaki has been married for forty years. Janaki has a doting husband. She tells Akhila of her wedding night, her daily routine and boredom after having been married for so long. Janaki is the conventional homemaker who learnt to love the man she married. She always has a man to protect her. She is first protected by her father then by her brother, and then by her husband, and after him it would be her son. Janaki believed that to be a good mother and a good wife are the only true duties of a woman and she made her home her Kingdom. It was too late to amend her life when she realised that even a strong independent woman can make a good wife and a good mother. Actually she is a pampered wife and
confused mother. She wanted to scream, "Don't call me Mummy. I am not your mummy. I
am your wife. Remember, you used to call me Janu once. Wife, Darling. Sweetheart. And if
you find it hard saying those, call me woman, but don't call me Mummy!" (LC 34). The
devotion of Akhila's mother to her husband is reversed in the case of Janaki.

Since Janaki is always at the receiving end (being cared and protected by her
husband) she can never think about her deep self and unique identity – her womanhood.
Hence, when her son started loving his wife after the marriage, Janaki cannot understand his
needs and changes. For the first time she feels angry towards her husband for his inability to
make peace between mother and son. All along life was smooth because all the decisions
were made by Prabakar, her husband and she simply obeyed and never questioned or
opposed them. Therefore, she is not able to understand the complaints hurled at her by her
son who compares her with the mother of his wife.

You are spoilt. Everyone has spoiled you. Your family and then Dad. You
're such a princess. You want everything done your way. Your selfish way. I
can't help compare you with Jaya's mother...how generous she is... how she
is willing to give all of herself to her children. You don't do that. When have
you ever thought of anyone but yourself? (LC 36)

Janaki continues to tell Akhila of her son and daughter-in-law, her fights with her
son who seems to have switched allegiance to his wife's family and about her present
situation. She wants her daughter-in-law to think of her as a composed and contented
woman, which she actually is not. But her son's angry comment that she is always selfish
and wants to have her own way, makes her think. She realises that all along, she has taken
life for granted. She never made an attempt to love her life with all its ups and downs. She
has simply accepted everything and never learnt to give, share, or express her likes and
dislikes; above all she has been behaving like a “princess” and never like an ordinary woman. In fact she has been living in a golden cage so far and she wants to fly free and feel free and live like any other woman. She decides to start a new married life after forty years. “I am tired of sharing you with everyone. I want you to myself.” She realises the true love of her husband and decides to feel and enjoy the friendly love in their old age. Janaki’s words reverberate in Akhila’s mind and it occurs to her suddenly that she could not find answers in her own life by “treating other people’s lives as if they were books” (LC 23).

Sheela is a young girl in her teens. When she enters the coupe around midnight, “something about the way she sits reminds Akhila of her brother Narayan, on the day their father died” (LC 60). She is on her way back home after her maternal grand mother’s death. She is happy that death relieved her of her suffering. Sheela tells the women of her grandmother, whom she called Ammumma, and her grandmother’s rules for her, “You mustn’t become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself” (LC 67). Her grandmother impresses upon Sheela the fact that a woman has to be physically appealing, though she is old. Her grandmother’s strange behaviour a few days before her death, as if she knew all about it before and the news of her grandmother’s hospitalization brings her uncles and aunts to her house which her father resents. Because they take over the running of the house, Sheela’s otherwise kind father turns irritable and pours out his frustration on her. The flow of gusts and the artificiality of their actions are quite tiring. Sheela’s grandmother is diagnosed with cancer. Finally she turns insane and dies. Witnessing the lives of the three generations of women, Sheela understands the meaning of womanhood. She even dresses up the corpse of her grandmother and she knows her ‘beautiful’ grandma would be happy with her.
Fulfillment is an expensive awareness that calls forth the inner potential of the being and it is true love that makes contentment a possibility in life. This act of defiance of tradition, good conduct and convention on the part of young Sheela reminds Akhila of her own father's death – of how Sundays became just another day of the week in her house and how Akhila became the man of the family at the tender age of nineteen. She thinks of her friend Catherine who introduces her to the pleasures of eating an egg, a strictly prohibited item in her Brahmin household. This is her only act of rebellion and self-indulgence, as the head of the family.

Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher. True to her interest in chemistry, she thinks and describes life and love in chemical language. “Love is a colourless, volatile liquid. Love ignites and burns. Love leaves no residue-neither smoke nor ash. Love is a poison masquerading as the spirit of love” (LC 104). She compares people to chemicals. She is married to the Principal of the school she teaches in. She comments on love thus: “Love beckons with a rare bouquet. Love demands you drink of it. Then love burns the tongue, the senses. Love blinds. Love maddens. Love separates reasons from thought. Love kills. Love is methyl alcohol pretending to be ethyl alcohol” (LC 111).

When she is forced to abort her first pregnancy by her own husband, Margaret comes crashing down to rude reality. Thus begins the friction in their relationship. But “Just as ferric oxide turns to rust, so it was with the hopes I had for our life together” (LC 100). Margaret’s husband is a strict disciplinarian at school and his students are terrified of him. Margaret, on the other hand, is kind and compassionate. Their different viewpoints lead to arguments between them. She says, “Restlessness seemed to urge me on, to break routines. To do things differently” (LC 113). When prolonged and intensified, this restlessness results in actions of resistance –direct or/and indirect.
Margaret's husband had a lean, athletic body about which he was quite proud. He was always finding fault with Margaret, be it her body or her poor culinary skills. One day it is about her studies; 'What is the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together.” Another day it is her appearance; “Long hair doesn’t suit you. Cut it off. You’ll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob. Do we really have to go to church every Sunday? I don’t think it is wise to eat ‘bhel puri’ from these roadside stalls. We could always go to a restaurant.... The final break point seeped in when he revealed his selfish preferences even in the marital life. “Let’s wait till we’re both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other. What more do we want?” (LC 105).

On reaching this breaking point, Margaret decides to exact 'sweet revenge' on her egotistical, selfish, and dominating husband, “Ebenezer Paulraj- the destroyer of blades, grass and human alike. I hate him. I hate him. Hate my husband. Hate him...” (LC 98). Margaret’s family cannot accept the idea of a divorce and hence, she has to continue bearing Ebe’s vanity and constant derisive contempt of her. Margaret bides her time and she eventually takes her revenge in a unique manner namely, through his taste buds. Ebe is always proud of his taut muscles and silky skin. She coaxes him into eating more, giving up his diet-conscious lifestyle and finally converts him into food gorger. He loses shape, becomes slow moving and loses his control over the school students and eventually Margaret too. She describes it thus:

While Ebe remained fat, there were no adrenaline surges; no power struggles. All was quiet and calm and watered down in our lives. When you add water to sulphuric acid, it splutters at first. But soon it loses its strength;
it loses its bite. The trick is to know when to add it, and how much.... and
Ebe became a man I could live with once again. (LC 134)

Woman cannot become an equal in vacuum. As values permeate their activities,
exchanges with others allow woman to know and experience her most important values.
Crises, conflicts, or confrontations heighten their awareness of who she is and the increased
intensity in interaction causes her deepest values to surface. To live fully she must identify
with the value of equality in her deep inner levels of her being. Like the Gandhari of the
Mahabharata, like Sita of The Thousand Faces of Night and like Dunyazad of When
Dreams Travel, Margaret scores over her male counterpart and thereby the male dominated
Indian patriarchal Society slowly subtly, silently and successfully. Psychoanalyst James
Baker Miller analyses gender attitudes and states, “...submissiveness, passivity, docility,
lack of initiative, inability to decide to think and the like... If subordinates adopt these
characteristics, they are considered well adjusted” (6-7). Margaret had fit in the definition
until she revolted, retaliated and refused to be a subordinate. Margaret departs with a parting
shot at Akhila “you will discover that once you stop worrying what the world will think of
you, your life will become that much easier to live” (LC 136).

Certainly Margaret has left a deep mark in the thoughts and attitudes of Akhila. She
realizes that all these women, Janaki, Sheela and even an intelligent intellectual like
Margaret who wears the self-sufficiency as a halo, are trying to make some sense of their
own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen. She also tries to justify her
failures and her own sense of hopelessness by preying on the fabric of other lives, seeking a
similar thread to connect their lives with hers. This Akila thinks will make her feel less
guilty of her past as well as present life. Akhila invariably thinks about Hari, her young
lover and muses about a possibility of a ‘second chance’ (LC 155).
Prabha Devi is forty years old and has a son and daughter. Suddenly, a week after her fortieth birthday, it occurs to Prabha Devi that she has forgotten the sound of her own voice. “She opened her mouth and spoke her name; Pra-bhaa-de-vi. A sound emerged that was a little like a bleat and more like a mewl. So this is my voice, she thought, “Between an irate sheep and a kitten being strangled” (LC 168).

Prabhadevi’s father, who expects a boy-child, is much disappointed of her birth but gradually changes himself to accept her. Her mother sees to it that she has a perfect household. At the age of eighteen she is married to Jadish. She goes to New York on a trip with her husband. She is left dumbfounded at the confidence of the western women. Consequently, she decides to give herself a modern look. She starts wearing Western clothes, high heels etc. adopting western way of life. Thus, she cares for herself only for a brief period, and lives in western style. “When people shot at her admiring looks, she pretended not to notice. But she knew that wherever she went, she attracted attention. And she revelled it. “I am young. I am beautiful. I am desirable. How lucky I am to be me” (LC 179).

However her modern looks invite a wrong kind of attention from her husband’s friend, who makes sly and stealthy advances at her. Shocked and scared, Prabha Devi makes a hasty decision. She locks away that gay- spirited woman who had caused her such anguish, and changes every single western mannerism she has worked so hard to acquire. She never again asks for anything new and remains content with what is offered to her. She withdraws herself from life. She reverts to her past life - “A woman beyond reproach and above all suspicion” (LC 83). She starts wearing her saris, waits for her husband at night to return from work and gives birth to his babies. In short, Prabha Devi lived as ‘A husband’s toy and a baby machine’. Life limped back to being dull and routine. But soon, the old
yearnings re-surfaced in her fortieth year. With a strong determination, Prabha Devi learns swimming, facing many odds, when water caressed her raw nerves, and while ‘floating’ in a pool, her body became a cluster of desires. Her days in the pool gradually awoke her and her husband sensed this new woman in their bolder, thriller and more sensuous. By learning to stay ‘afloat’ Prabha Devi has learnt to break free of tradition and keeping her identity intact. Akhila finds her as the most self-confident in the group, one who “could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float” (LC 208). Prabha Devi’s sharing has made her to “Learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on the banks” (LC 208).

Beliefs and values are products of the intellect and emotions. The family relationships and social bonds are cemented by the beliefs and values. Even the world views and cosmologies are sustained by them. So women try to change or re-orient their values which are customarily perceived as deviant. This negative labelling all the more makes it difficult for women to be confined to their restricted domestic roles. The contradictory demands such as expecting women to be frail and at the same time allotting many gruelling responsibilities, pressurises their inner life. But, the heightened awareness of her real life situation leads her to better knowledge of her identity and autonomous decision making. And this is what has happened in the life of Prabha Devi too. One fine day she decides to change herself again now that her children are grown up. She learns swimming and that instilled confidence in her. “You are doing this for yourself. For the first time in many years, you are doing what you want and not what everyone else thinks you ought to want, she told herself sternly” (LC 187).

She becomes a totally new woman. She thinks aloud. “I am afloat. I am afloat. My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear.” And Prabha Devi knew that life would never be the same again. That nothing else that has ever happened would measure up
to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had "stayed afloat" (LC 195). She finds and becomes herself again when she chooses to live according to the dictates of her mind.

Women react to life emotionally and empathetically and so they become victims of the push and pull of circumstances. Change will subsume women's life unless they become active participants in the process. Economic class membership influences the quality of woman's life. Hence, economic independence is the most necessary component of woman's empowerment. The experiences narrated by Marikolanthu, emphasises this factor clearly. As Akhila is drawn into the most private moments of the lives of the members in the coupe, she is still seeking an answer to the most gnawing question of her life- can a woman stay single and be happy, does a woman need a man to feel complete? Marikolanthu, who narrates her story of rape, forced motherhood, lesbianism, heterosexuality etc, strikes the last nail on the coffin of the question.

Marikolanthu is born into a poor family. After the death of her father she and her mother turn to the Chettiar, a rich man for help. Her mother is employed in the kitchen and she is supposed to take care of the Chettiar’s grandson (Sujata Akka’s son). Marikolanthu was a little girl then. As time passed she manages to earn the affection of Sujata Akka, who gives her small gifts now and then. She grows up into a young woman. Then one day Marikolanthu is raped by Chettiar’s relative, Murugesan. Although Sujata Akka feels sorry for her she could do nothing to remedy the situation. Sujata Akka’s husband, the master of the house, lost his temper and said,

All right, I believe you. Murugesan raped her. But do you realize what you are asking of me? Do you expect me to sever relations with my brother for the sake of a servant, no matter how precious she is to you? I want you to
As Sohaila Abdulali, a sociologist observes, “In India rape victims are suddenly left out-of-help, and even fellow women who sympathize, could not extend to them a helping hand.” (205). The tragedy does not evince a positive and helping sisterhood feelings. Marikolanthu becomes pregnant; her attempts to abort the baby prove futile and a male baby is born. She hates the baby and refuses to nurse it. She entrusts the baby to her mother. “Amma, I don’t want him... How could I forget what had happened as he grew before me, a reminder of what my life had turned out to be...” (LC 150).

Therefore, she goes to work as a maidservant in a household of two western women, working as nurses. Her mother’s illness forces her to take employment with the Chettiar again. Sujata Akka needs Marikolanthu very much as she is very lonely. “Neither of them loved me. But they needed me. Those who can’t have love, have to settle for need. What is love, if not a need disguised?” questions the life-beaten Marikolanthu. Thus, bitten and bruised by the gender-biased society, Marikolanthu could accept her son Murthy only after so many years—that too after the death of her mother and Murugesan, who raped her. The poignancy of the painful emergence of a victimised motherhood is stated thus.

As the flames leapt, my hate burnt with them.... The bitterness unravelled. ‘Muthu’, I called softly.... For the first time, I felt shame.... But I felt shame for having used him. How was I any different from that long line of people who had used me and then discarded me when their need was over? I knew that I would have to make up to him for that. Once again, I felt a quickening in my phantom womb. My child was about to be born.... I wasn’t going to wage wars or rule kingdoms. All I wanted was a measure of happiness. All I
wanted to be was Muthu’s mother. For so long now, 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.

(LC 268)

The ideals of manhood are diametrically opposed to those of womanhood.
The texts in Manu Shastra ordain that “only three values relate to girls. They (girls) are for
“gift” (Dana), “sale” (Vikarya), or “abandonment” (R.P. Sharma 75). Down the ages, many
feminists have attempted to picture the problems of women. Yet, among them, Anita Nair’s
perspective of feminism is on a physical and psychological plane. The culture that created a
Sita and a Gandhari has denied existence to woman, except as a daughter/sister, a
wife/daughter-in-law and mother/mother-in-law. The Indian society has denied woman the
possibility of being a “SHE”, a person capable of achieving individuation. She is a non-
person and as described in Raja Rao’s, The Serpent and the Rope, “man’s relationship with
woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave. Woman is an object
and she is essential to man because ‘it is in seeking to be made through her that man hopes
to attain self-realization’ (173).

One of the primal and seminal concerns of feminisms is to declare that a woman is a
being. A woman is not the “Other”. She is not an appendage to man. She is an autonomous
being capable of finding her own way to salvation, through trial and error. Liberation is
meaningful, if woman is not confined within the bonds of family. After marriage woman
has to become submissive like Sita, the ‘Solid Woman’, the archetype of womanhood. The
ideal way of making her autonomous is to make her aware of her dignified identity and
empower her within herself and with outside society. Then, like Karpagam, Akhila’s
childhood friend, a woman can brush aside male chauvinism. All the characters in the
novel, Akhila, Margaret Shanti, Sheela, Marikolanthu, Prabha Devi and even the veteran Janaki, meet with moments of self-revelation of their status as women in their communal sharing of collective subjectivity. They perceive that the familial structure, marriage and husband are not as important as they are made to appear by the traditional patriarchal fundamentalists.

The primary goal of feminist perspective, according to Maggie Humm is “to understand women’s oppression in terms of race, gender and class and sexual preference and how to change it” (X). As such, the feminist principle is an “uncompromising pledge” and an antidote to all types of exploitation and oppression of women. The personality of woman has been damaged and distorted and her very status as human being is interiorized under the overwhelming male-domination in Patriarchal Society. In Indian social thought, Manu, the ancient law-giver of Hindu *Dharma Shastras* assigns women a secondary position in relation to man. According to *Manu Smriti* or *Manu Samhita*, a woman should depend upon a man from her cradle to grave and should never live as an independent entity. It states thus:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth upon her husband, her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she had no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband in default or upon those of her father; if she had no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign: a woman must never again govern herself as she likes. (195-196).

Forty-five-year old Akhila did not choose to remain single. It happened that way. She asks her fellow passengers in the coupe, Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu, whether they approve of her decision to remain single and be happy. Margaret feels that Akhila is happy the way she is, and she
need not marry. Akhila hardly thinks of getting married. She is convinced that, “a woman can live alone”.

At the end of the journey, Akhila and her friends are on the threshold of self-discovery. The manner in which Nair relates these transformations is revelatory and redeeming. The awareness of repression leads into a questioning of the validity of their imposition. The process of revolt is an intense and honest introspection on the part of the characters leading to a painful sense of alienation and a self that is dividing between the old acquiescence and the new urge towards an individuality that has so far been suppressed. The sense of revolt, which manifests itself, is a slow tentative rejection of societal and patriarchal oppressions.

The awareness of repression results in a sense of revolt and consequently the oppressed become bold and resisting. The resolutions arrived at through introspection and the moral courage to revolt again may vary in their manifestations. There is bold rejection of society, accommodation and acceptance, withdrawal and a shrewd tackling of repressive factors. The whole process finally leads one to an explanation of the dilemma of the new woman who is caught between traditionalism and modernity.

Anita Nair highlights the positive role and positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood. The form the novel takes is such that it can easily be dissected into six parts. It is like six short stories merging into one through the main character and the train journey. The train journey becomes a symbol for an introspective journey within each character. The individual journey into these six lives gives us a picture of their society. The six women hail from different social backgrounds, reflecting on their conditions and arriving at certain conclusions that help the protagonist Akhila to arrive at hers.
In Akhila’s life, there are many landmarks that have led to her gradual change and formation of character. The first time when she, a member of the traditional Brahmin family takes an egg, is a liberating moment in her life. She has suppressed her physical desires always and consequently, has an erotic dream and wakes up in a sweat. She sees (in the dream) her whole family reprimanding her. The bus incident where she has let an unknown male hand caress her in the crowded bus shows how starved she is of the physical contact that is a natural phase through which every woman passes. She is not a willing spinster, but it is her family that has branded her so. Her friendship with Hari, a co-passenger on the 7:20 train is the closest she comes to, having an emotional love bond. Hari adores her and wants to get married to her, but she refuses, as he is younger than her. She loves him but frightened of the taboos of the society. She is afraid to break the stereotypical frame in which she has been enclosed and lets her love relationship die. For five years, he keeps sending her New Year cards to which she does not reply. At last her encounter with her school friend Karpagam also helps her to test her courage to defy society.

On the journey to Kanyakumari, Hari is foremost on her mind. She listens to the talk of the women. She realizes how desire and gratification had been important in the lives of Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margaret and Marikolanthu. Even fourteen-year-old Sheela had faced such encounters. These women had felt the need for such and had used their sexuality to advantage. Akhila remembers her own brief encounter and feels the urge to have a physical and emotional bond that would appease her parched soul. At Kanyakumari, a young boy falls for her and she has a night’s relation with him. After that, she decides that she does need a man and dials Hari’s number. After listening to the life stories of the other women, she relives her experiences and decides that she has a right, even at the age of forty-five to love Hari and begin life anew. Her decision is her rebellion against society and its repressive forces. She has had a spiritually and emotionally liberating journey and Akhila
discovers life anew. Gender defines class, but identity promotes mobility beyond the subordination of woman. Identity empowerment effectively supplants self-annihilation through excessive personal sacrifice for the needs of others. It also increases her potentialities and creative abilities. Cultivating uniqueness leads towards self-empowerment and increased self-knowledge increases power and effectiveness in interpersonal exchanges.

It is interesting to note that Nair uses the journey motif for her creation (Akhila) to undergo a process of transformation. For, a journey places one in a position of dependence and vulnerability even as it opens the way to forms of mastery. Like a traveller, Akhila must find her way and consider the forms of power at stake, in order to restructure her identity. This she does with the help of other women and their collective sharing of their lived experiences.

Akhila undertakes this journey as a form of escape. She never climbed into an overnight train to a place she has never been before. Her desire to go away alone, a sense of excitement of being able to do something all by herself, not having to take permission, of taking an independent decision etc. is something new. Travel enables one – geographically to cross cultural boundaries, trespass, and visit and at times even capture. When travelling, one displaces oneself, makes or meets an unfamiliar identity of one’s own self, which paves the way for a restructuring of identity.

In choosing to go away, Akhila encounters another ‘I’ within her. “She travels through a gallery of nightscapes, each framed by the window” (LC 2). She moves on to see what has never been seen, go where she has never gone before with a sense of escape; “…the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape” (LC 1). Thus, Akhila’s experience until now has been somebody’s experience. It is this journey, which brings her to her real identity. Nair creates a space for Akhila, places her in a position
of unfamiliarity and dislocation, which in turn gives Akhila the freedom and courage to find out about herself. It is not only the journey but also the presence of the other women in the compartment, each with a story to narrate, a narrative of confinement and captivity, which helps Akhila to restructure her identity.

The final chapter in the novel is entitled ‘Akhila Speaks’. Akhila learns through all these experiences and realizes the futility of clinging to support systems, be it a man, a woman, or institutions, for ultimately everything leads to nothing but one form of confinement or capture of some sort. She realises the value of freedom and lives to cherish it, to do as she wants and not as what others want her to do. She has discovered the real woman within her. “For within me is a woman I have discovered” (LC 270). The narrative comments that “Akhila discovers that she likes being alone. She has no more doubts about what her life would be if she chooses to live alone. It may not be what she dreamt to be, but at least she would have made the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now” (LC 271).

She gives vent to her desires and tastes power, and learns mastery, when she seduces Vinod, a young stranger, who accepts her attentions, willingly and quite eagerly. Akhila tastes freedom and realizes the fact, “where the body goes, the mind will follow” and repudiates all that has been instilled in her. Akhila transforms into an empowered self, very much like the Mahavidyas; Akhila is at once the ten different aspects of the mythical women. What is recommended is generally approved and family binds in chains the woman of India. However, as woman she enjoys exclusive powers too.

Akhila is at once Kali, Tara, Sadasi, Bhuvaneswari, Bairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumathi, Bagala, Matangi and Kamala. Akila is at once a personification of all the ten
mythical goddesses of varied attributes - passive and active, violent and non-violent, good and bad, strong and weak, creative and destructive, - a complete human entity.

Kali, endowed with power to destroy

Tara, with golden embryo ready to float

Sadhasi, an evergreen symbol of fullness of women

Bhuvaneswari, a maker of this material world

Bhairavi, ever seeking the ways and means to fulfil desire

Chinnamasta, a naked one symbolising destruction and renewal in cyclic order

Dhumathi, an old hag riding an ass with a broom in one hand and a crow in her banner, personifying misfortune to others

Bagala, The crane headed ugly one, known for jealousy, hatred and cruelty

Matangi, ready to dominate

Then there is kamala. Pure consciousness of the self, bestowing boons and allaying fears.... The Akhila, her family knew (LC 275).

As Rachel Bari comments, Akhila is “together and separate” (47). Her journey into the insides of the culture has nurtured her. She learns to live by her own rules. To wrest the reins of her life back, she thinks, looking at her return train ticket. She is able to throw her head back and voice her triumph, the triumph over oneself and culture. “This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari” (LC 276).

Each woman throws a question on the open, a question that concerns women, and attempts to decipher the meaning of love and family, the enigma of the relationship between man and woman, and the meaning of being caught in the exploitation of man. Why should the woman be like a firefly going and falling into the fires of man? Therefore, in one respect one story completes the other. The most impressive story of Janaki finds an answer in the
story of Margaret. The sense of guilt in Prabha fades when Marikolanthu accepts Murthy as her son. Thus, each story has a complementary effect on another. At another level, we find that most of the ethical issues and values are tossed by the society only when there are some issues in stay, particularly money, status and influence. To state a case, reference may be made to Murugesan's indifference towards Marikolanthu even when he was found guilty of raping her, because she is poor and has no status. Money, status, and influence, matters to only those who posses these values. This actually subverts the social code system. Marikolanthu's story actually subverts the social codes of acceptance and negation of virtue and good living. So, each life becomes a quest and each one finds the woman in them in their own way. These composite experiences enable Akhila to find her own identity as a woman.

Women are known only when they play a role. To be a free and full-fledged woman, Anita Nair comes out with the ten attributes of womanhood. In the Hindu mythology, the power and role of woman divine and woman extraordinary are defined as 'Mahavidyas'. Interestingly the first one is Kali-one who destroys. Akhila feels that she can destroy all that comes between her and the flow of time. This is where she dispenses with the burden of the cultural past. The role of being Tara is equated with creativity. It is a poetic way of asking for a new world, for the newly liberated woman. Sodasi- not by mind alone but by body also. Akhila's fullness at forty five also is not emptied. Bhuvaneswari- She is identifying herself with the world and materiality.-fountain of enjoyment. Bairavi- The achiever of her desire, will, wish, etc. Chinnamasta -As the world is destroyed and renewed, the woman also continues-the invincible nature of the self. Dhumathi, Bagala, and Matangi- the bad and devilish nature of the woman. Kamala -Bestowing boons and gifts. Akhila's role as the bread winner of the family is identified.
The stories of the various co-passengers refer to their personal crisis such as loneliness, ill treatment, rape, abortion, and madness, betrayal by men and how each one coped with them. This sets Akhila thinking; the other women are merely patterns of consciousness of a single psyche. Akhila reconciles with life by her decision to return to Hari. Anita Nair refers to the avatar of the ‘Devi Akhilandeswari’ to insist on the many-headed but unitary subjectivity of women. Nair also confidently depicts the plurality of women’s desire.

As one reads the mythic stories and beliefs structured around the Mahavidyas and associate them with Akhila and others, the women in the train caught up in crisis and plight — social and cultural — are found to obtain their illumination of empowerment. In their collective mould up, ignited by their experiences, they are likely to emerge as strong forces, very much like the Mahavidyas. They understand that they could resist and transcend.

The novel is structured like a gossip form of narrative in the hands of Anita Nair. The narrative is plural interlocked only by the presence of an audience — Akhila. From a folkloristic point of view, such a structure is a tale, because it is oral, audience participatory and directly communicating with no pretence of literary qualities or techniques. Hence, the narrative gains the power of communication, readily consumed by the readers with the vigour of orality.

In postcolonial India, women continue to be victims of double — standards. In the patriarchal culture, which is still prevalent and powerful, at one level they are idealized as mothers and protected as sisters, but as wives they are battered and even burnt. This female subjectivity, the marginalization of woman and their continuing subordination is recorded in the texts of Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Nina Sibal and Githa Hariharan.
Githa Hariharan believes that the business of the writer is not to find new emotions but to use ordinary ones to make them into a work of art. She is very conscious of the main current of Indian Tradition. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* she explores various aspects and prospects of women in South Indian Brahmanical Society of the last decade. The novel deals with what it means to be a woman in India. It reveals the status of women belonging to three generations, – Sita, Devi and Mayamma – bearing the mythological names found in the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana. The battles these women wage as they pass through a lacerating process of identity crisis form the story of the novel. Like the Mother Earth, they sacrifice, share and care; give to whatever is on or within them; but if in turn, they feel destroyed, they withdraw themselves from the male world. The sensitive portrayal of these characters makes them more identifiable. As Malashri Lal states, 

*The Thousand Faces of Night* could be described as a narrative of a split consciousness. While maintaining that there is a paradigm of the Law of the threshold in the Indian context that implies a strong sense of the inside and out there, she (Githa Hariharan.) argues that men have partaken of both the worlds. The law allows multiple existences for men, but only one for women and a step over the bar is an act of transgression. Women have long been complicit in such gendered roles. (109)

The novel opens on Devi’s last day in America, in a state of hectic euphoria with her American boyfriend Dan. All through her two years of M.A., Dan keeps company as a friend, an experiment for a young woman eager for new experience. The possibility of imposing permanence with marriage – however flexible in transient America – is somehow obscene to Devi who could not shed ‘the burden of Indianness’. So, refusing an offer of marriage from her black American friend Dan, Devi decides to return to India for the sake of her widowed mother. Her brief sojourn in America is a dream to her, in which she is no
longer the "weak, dog-padding Devi" but an invincible individual and "an uncompromising survivor"..."She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet half-way, naked and vulnerable, her home-coming" (TFN 9). It indicates that the battle is begun.

The ‘Prelude’ in The Thousand Faces of Night is an introduction to the novel which moves on to arrive at varying levels of intellectual self-realization which enable the characters to either attain liberation or reconciliation through self-knowledge. It is a striking experiment in an innovative study of the interrelation between narrative technique and feminist theory in contemporary women’s fiction. In the ‘Prelude’, the use of point of view, symbolic names, interior montage, time-shift, irony and the interrogative structure mould the tenure of the novel that follows. The interiorized experience of the narrator that begins with the ‘Prelude’ encompasses not only the novelist’s reasoning but also emotions, sensations, memories and fantasies.

Githa Hariharan uses a combination of western feminist fantasies of flying, with stories from Indian Epic the Mahabharata to create the magical world of the female child Devi. Fed on stories of the vengeful Amba and Gandhari, Devi creates her own magical realist world in which she is a female warrior, “an incarnation of Durga, walking the earth to purge it of fat-jowled slimy-tailed greed” (TFN 43). This is a feminist fantasy of decimating exploitative men. Devi’s idyllic world and her fancies are shattered by the edict of Sita, her mother, when she told her father... “This has gone far enough...stop dreaming now” (TFN 45).

Once the novelty of the marriage wanes, she becomes restless. Mahesh’s insensitive and non-chalant attitude makes her aware of the trap she is in. In the words of Damodar Rao, “the areas of outward confrontation are very few. Her mental states rather than actual events occupy the centre stage and the conflicts, having been internalized, result in
So, the emptiness and disillusionment in the heart of Devi makes the “blissful numbness” of Gopal’s music appear to be soul stirring and attractive. She is much caught up in the illusion of womanhood. She thinks that Gopal’s music is the ‘Knight Deliverer’ who can open her ‘lush prison’ and give her the much-longed freedom. Gopal’s numerous praises, romantic whispers and shy leers entrance Devi with supreme joy. Whatever she has failed to receive from Mahesh – at the emotional level, the romantic excitement, glowing words of flattery, prolonged physical presence, sentimental gifts with personal touch, stylish endearments, etc. – she finds in abundance with Gopal. In short, “it is a romantic fascination for the unavailable, a longing for a union that defies social sanction” for Devi (Premila Paul 117).

Though Devi realizes that the stories of women she knows are far more contemptible than their mythological equivalents, she feels the urge to protest, to rebel against the causes of it. Instead of selecting the passive virtues of Gowri, Parvathi, Haimavathi and Sita, she decides on the avenging images, such as Durga, Kali Devi, Sakti and Amba. Susan S. Wadley aptly remarks:

Inasmuch as spiritual power of sakthi is believed to be acquired through suffering, especially the suffering of servitude, one apparent contradiction is resolved: if women have more sakthi than men, this is (at least in part) because women stand in the position of servants with respect to men. This also helps to explain why women, rather than trying to undo the sexual hierarchy, are often its staunchest supporters. (22)

The images of peacock and peahen symbolically portray the process of disenchantment of Devi in her relationship with Gopal. When she finds herself reflected in the mirror-studded buttons of Gopal’s Kurta, she is reminded of the submissive peahen
whose image is reflected in the numerous-eyed feathers of the peacock. Strange are the ways through which the deep-rooted practices of male domination engulf its victims—the female subjects. She realizes her secondary status in the life of Gopal, whose first and best love is always ‘ragas’. She decides to return to her mother—her origin. Naturally, it denotes a change for something new—may be a new life.

It is to Sita’s neat fortress like house that Devi returns. “It was Diwali time again, just as it had been when she had returned from America. But she no longer shrank back from the fireworks... Devi saw the long stretches of sand, the road that led towards the house by the sea” (TFN 139). Devi begins life anew with the festival of lights—Diwali. It is very appropriate to turn a new leaf in life on the auspicious day of the victory of good over evil—light over darkness and Lord Vishnu’s killing of the evil Asura—‘Naragasuran’. The Hindus in India celebrate ‘Diwali’ as a festival of lights, to commemorate the killing and ending of the tyrannical rule by an Asura king known as ‘Naragasuran’.

Sita wants to live as an ideal woman and wife. But unfortunately her thoughts, plans and actions take her elsewhere. To assert herself, she chooses the weapon of power and position in the society, which depends mostly on economic condition and social status. Hence she literally drags her husband Mahadevan from one promotion to another, till he becomes a full-fledged Sahib, and a healthy bank balance. But when his attention is swerved by Annapurna, a poor, distant cousin of Sita, she deftly removes her from the household with a master stroke of ingenuity. Creating a scene or crying over spilt milk is not Sita’s style of functioning. She is a talented gardener of life, whether it is uprooting, weeding, tilling, watching, sewing or upbringing. When Mahadevan died of heart attack as a sick old man in his fifties, keeping back even his last struggle with pain, Sita remains unperturbed, unemotional and least sentimental about everything. She burnt the papers and
body of her husband, quickly and efficiently, “poured both bags of ashes into one jar, and booked herself a seat on the first plane to Madras” (*TFN* 106).

Sita manipulates Devi’s life too by thrusting deftly her idea of womanhood to Devi. But Sita can direct her daughter’s life, only up to matrimony and not beyond. Sita’s glorification of motherhood has no effect on Devi, because it comes from her mother who is “too snobbish even to caress” her daughter. In fact Sita’s words “When I held you helpless in my protecting arms, when over years, when you lisped that precious word Amma, what vistas of joy opened up before me” (*TFN* 86), rings a false note and sounds very hollow like her character to Devi. Sita actually creates a vicious cycle of dependency on others around her, because of her strong and commanding presence in their lives and makes them her playthings, like the strings of veena to produce her own music. Sita’s real attachment in life rests not on human beings but in things like her veena or garden. These images and symbols reveal her inner strength as well as weakness of her character. She is capable of producing mellifluous and sonorous melodies from the thin strings of veena, pouring all her energies out. At the same time, “abruptly one morning, she can give up her love. She can tear the strings off the wooden base, and let the blood dry on her fingers, to remind herself of her chosen path on the first difficult days of abstinence” (*TFN* 103).

In her self-destructive anger, she is mythical Gandhari from the *Mahabharatha*, who, in her anger at being married off to a blind prince, has tied a bandage over her own eyes. This terrible self-punishment not only reveals her suppressed anger but is an ever present reproach to those who have wronged her. In the words of Sita it could be: ‘You want me to change my preferences and the desires that give my soul delight and self, an identity. I will do so; but only at the cost of a bigger prize. If I have to put on a pseudo identity, I will see that you also put on the same, in spite of your likes and dislikes’.
If Sita is a conformist of social material success and power syndrome, Parvatimma, (unseen mother-in-law of Devi) is a real non-conformist. Her very act of seeking independent salvation clearly indicates that she is not a tradition-bound old-fashioned housewife, just believing and practicing culture-bound theories of womanhood. Breaking the boundaries of gender, she sets out for her spiritual search, leaving the house, husband, children and all relations. Thereby, she breaks the traditional custom and prerogative of the man – the individual, spiritual search or wanderings to attain “Mukthi”. “She gave me this home. She gave us all a home” (TFN 62). This is the description of Parvatiamma by Mayamma, the maidservant of the household. Devi compares Parvatiamma to her ‘story telling’ grandmother who is ‘content with a long-distance blessings’ from God. But Parvatiamma had been more ambitious. Silently and suddenly, she leaves her home – (husband, children, and relations, household) in a self-absorbed search for God, which is a prerogative of the male in the gender specific Hindu society.

Born in a traditional Hindu Brahmin family, married to Baba, the traditional Believer of Religious Puranas, who thinks that the housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, restrained in expenses, “Parvatiamma’s suffocated self seeks fresh-air of freedom in the bajans-filled puja room and eventually goes out. While Sita’s choice is one of self-denial, Parvatiamma’s is affirmation of the self. While Sita asserts herself and her role (as wife and mother) through commanding affirmation, Parvatiamma asserts herself by negation of motherhood and wife-hood. Her peculiar spiritual quest and ultimate choice blow up Baba’s attempt to canonize woman by assigning a great deal of subjective responsibilities to her. By her untraditional act of searching for fulfilment outside her family, Parvatiamma has turned Baba’s theories upside down. Theoretically Baba believes that having a virtuous wife guarantees the husband’s spiritual attainment, but practically when his wife (Parvati) leaves home in search of
spiritual salvation, he declares, “For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a home-coming” (TFN 64). Githa Hariharan has indeed made a powerful point and has shown a new side of the ‘Night’ i.e. womanhood, in the ‘home-exit’ act of Parvati in order to reach heaven.

If Devi learns the ‘theories of womanhood’ (TFN 109) from the lives of women characters of the mythological stories narrated so vividly by her grandmother, the practical lessons were provided by the real-life events and experiences of Mayamma, the old maidservant in the household of Mahesh. As a poor illiterate girl, Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. A drunken husband who snorted like an angry bull and treated as an object of pleasure and not a human being or woman, and a cruel and custom-ridden mother-in-law who tortured her on account of her barrenness before Mayamma bore a son-these two characters and their endless cruelties along with the wastrel son who died in his youth made her life a complete misery and total wreck. But according to Mayamma the success of life for a woman depended on her ability to endure and go on in this male-dominated society. In the words of Sudhir Kakar “…motherhood confers upon her (the Indian Woman) a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant is borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood especially if the child is son it is both a certification and redemption” (59).

Mayamma had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand. She bore every suffering and did all the penances to covert the title called ‘mother’. Though illiterate, she firmly believed in the power of endurance. She was the symbol of sincerity, honesty and reliability and a nurturer of all virtues of the inmates of the big House. Frail and old, she now replays in her mind the myths that she could not play out in her real life. She recreates another genealogy of women, through her silent endorsement of
the radical actions of Parvatiamma and Devi. She gets confirmation of this identity when Mahesh, after the desertion by Devi, decides to go for a long holiday, handing over the keys of the house to her with implicit trust. Though the members of the house leave one by one, their trust in Mayamma never wanes. She is actually indispensable in a home, where each one looks up to her as a solid rock of mother-figure. Though she does not belong to the house, it becomes her ‘home’ eventually, because of her simplicity, devotion and understanding love for the members of the house. Rama Nair comments on the culmination of the novel thus:

The Protagonist liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role play to attain a state of free creative individuality.... Now it is the self, the androgynous principle that is neither male nor female that is in quest of selfhood. This is the idea that is stressed in the epigraph, (Prelude) a verse by Devara Dasimaya. (173)

Thus, the principal characters of The Thousand Faces of Night clearly understand the statement of Baba “Whatever dependent on others is misery; whatever rests on oneself is happiness” (TFN 68). Hence, Devi boldly decides to return to her mother, to begin her life anew and Sita dusts her veena to produce soul-searing melodies again.

One’s progress or failure feeds into the others. The story of Devi, a woman in the process of ‘becoming’, on her own terms, is interlaced with the narratives of Sita, personifying perfect motherhood and Mayamma whose motherhood is socially defined as failed. Devi’s return to her mother in a sense, a move forward is linked with Mayamma taking a step forward by letting Devi go, leaving a marriage and all conventions to which Mayamma was a reluctant custodian. Devi is rejection of her marriage, gives a severe blow to Sita’s motherhood and her ideas of a perfect woman and housewife. It makes her return
to her past interrupted musical life with veena. Thus the individuals are quite firmly linked though there are differences of generation and social strata. True to them, they could make sense of their lives now and help each other grow with no urge to control. Thus the end of the novel marks the beginning of such a meaningful joint pursuit with separate independent goals and values. Having failed to define her identity within the framework of the male oriented social structures as a wife in an arranged marriage, or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns to her mother, “to stay and fight and to make sense of it all” and to start from the very beginning to seek the river, miles away, where the dim forest gives way to a clear, transparent flood of light (TFN 126). It is in relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself.

Mayamma bore the brunt of life bravely, believing and proving the tradition that womanhood stoic is endurance of her fate. Parvatiamma, of the same age group, but belongs to upper social economic strata, could not breathe freely in a dominant patriarchal society with an oppressive system which is pitted against women. Unable to express her hostility towards, those who inflict humiliations or endure it bravely, Parvatiamma chooses the next alternative – escape. Under the guise of spiritual quest, she leaves the family abruptly.

But Sita’s character represents the present woman. She does not escape or endure like Paravatiamma or Mayamma. She is the new Gandhari. She does not stop with self-sacrifice (sacrificing the artist in her) but puts on the role of the saviour of the family’s prestige and fortunes with deft expertise. She holds the strings of the whole family in remote control. The dominated subject becomes the dominating mistress. But her achievement of ‘ideal womanhood’ fails in the case of her own daughter Devi.

Devi represents the future – a confused and indecisive girl, influenced by the stories of her grandmother, she wants to be the mythical Devi-like-avenger. She moves from self
pity to revenge, from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She too runs away, but not from men; she hopes to find salvation through the ‘worldly’ route rather than the ‘tapas marg’ adopted by her mother-in-law. But finally she understands that the ‘Solid Woman’ idea of her mother Sita is a failure and hence, she chooses to surf along the current. Like the liquid, which takes the shape of its container, Devi decides to walk in to the future as her without any shackles or inhibition. The same applies to other women characters representing different generations - Sita, the second and Mayamma and Parvatiamma, the first. The novel brings alive the inner and subdued world of Indian women’s lives – which is filled with dreams that are often shattered.

Githa Hariharan suggests that in a reversal of roles, Devi’s story creates a space for her mother to relinquish her conformist, protective attitude. The name Sita is not a random one. The invocation recalls the Sita of the Ramayana and interrogates a traditional model of woman-hood both as the ideal Hindu wife and as a literary ancestor. The novel suggests a shift from a self-sacrificing to a self-preserving feminity. The location of the house-by-the sea holds the promise that the wildness of sea can enter the house.

Thus, the analysis of the narrative indicate that while there is a strong desire to transit denial and resistance of culture, there is also a need to return to one’s own culture. Akhila’s identification with ten native syndromes in one way is her return to her culture space. So she decides to return to her hometown. The escape becomes the gateway to her new life. Suppressed desires are accepted with no sense of taboo or fear. Here lies the understanding and knowledge of subjectivity, enabled by a feeling of Collectivity.

Similarly, the Paternalistic laws of Manu, the ancient Indian sage, run like a disturbing thread through the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* and give female subordination, the legitimacy of religious dogma. These laws are articulated at intervals by
Devi's father in law. This dominant male discourse is however subverted by the female discourse of Devi's grandmother. If Manu speaks of female subordination, the grandmother's discourse glorifies strong, rebellious and above all, angry women – Draupadi and Amba from the Indian Epic Mahabharata – who have damaged and even destroyed male dynasties. So, from a postcolonial perspective these novels are a study of culture and self.

From the foregoing analysis of the present day Indian women's tales, one understands that the mythic narratives of Mahavidyas are the secret, guarded and vicarious propositions to women to become empowered. They serve a vicarious proposition towards empowering of Indian woman who suffers at the hands of patriarchy. Consequently, the narratives by women writers like Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan, aim to achieve empowerment by a gendered community experience. Akhila and other women emerge out of their estranged and oppressed subjectivity into the light of collective subjectivity. Here a woman finds support from another woman. A psychic release from the oppression is provided during the sessions of communication.

Irrespective of age, status or career, a free exchange of experiences is possible, and these sessions of collective composite experience is a possibility practised in Indian life. While woman suffer at the hands of culture of strong rule or long subjectivity, the escape routes are provided only by mobility / journey, by sharing / meeting an alter ego. Mahavidyas provide a psychological success while Akhila and others in the coupe find what they want in meetings and sharing of their experiences. Akhila, the protagonist becomes empowered in the process. What is needed is the willingness to get away from the tutored ethics and face life with strength and empowered subjectivity.
Chapter IV

Notes and References

Books and Other Non periodical Publications


Ibid. 6.

Premila Paul, “Return to the Veena: Progress towards Self-Realization in Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night”, Contemporary Indian Women Writers in


Ibid. 75.


**Articles and Other Publications in Periodicals, Miscellaneous Print and Electronic Publications**

Anita Nair, personal interview, 2 February 2007.


<http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/“Mahavidyas”html>