Chapter Three

God's Own Country:

Characters and Themes in Anita Nair's Novels

"The sense of the visual interaction between character and landscape can be a striking feature of fiction" (Raban 113).

"A novel is essentially bound up in a local, real, the present and the day-to-day experience of life", observes Eudora Welty. Place is an all inclusive framework; it conditions a novelist's mode of characterization, his sense of direction – in brief, his entire point of view. Like Eudora who created stories in multiple genres, throughout Nair's writing the recurring themes of the paradox of human relationship, the importance of place and mythological influences help her shape the theme and character. Welty's interest in the conflicting relationships between individuals and their communities, stems out of her natural abilities as an observer. The complexity involved in the relation between father-son and that of mother-daughter is highlighted in Nair's *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*. In his study, *The Rise of the Novel*, Professor Ian Watt has shown that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the novel is that it gives its personages "a local habitation and a name". Localisation is a practical matter of placing the characters in an environment within which they perform their roles. A study of Nair's use of landscape in her fiction will further justify
the title of this chapter. Place is vitally important in arguably every story Welty has ever written. She believed that place is what makes fiction seem real, because with place comes customs, feelings, and associations. Similarly, for Nair place plays a significant role in her novels. Nair is also noted for using mythology to connect to her specific character and locations to universal truths and themes. Nair has made extensive use of mythology, especially in *Mistress* and her collection of short stories. It is the significance of place in a fiction that Nair has attempted in her 'thickly populated' first novel, *The Better Man*. The phrase ‘thickly populated’ specifically aims at sharp characterization and has invented myriad characters like Achutan Nair, ‘One-screw Bhasi’, Anjana, Power-house RamaKrishna, Meenakshi the Naxalite etc. For Nair it is also the tension between characters that allows the movement of the narrative to progress at a brisk pace. Characterization constitutes the real essence of all her novels. The story is set in a sleepy village called Kaikurissi in Northern Kerala. This village conditions the novelist’s mode of characterization. The novel begins with a monologue by Bhasi, who introduces a host of characters: Vishnu, the priest, Che Kutty the toddy seller, Shankar, the tea-wallah. These characters represent the essence of Kerala because temples, toddy-shops and tea-stalls form the life of Kerala. The names assigned to the characters and the towns are typical of Kerala. The characteristics of Kerala and the issues close to this state are highlighted in this novel. Kerala is depicted as a ‘land of lottery’ and ‘toddy shop’. Thus the author attempts to recreate the setting aptly. The author shifts the novel from Bhasi’s monologue into the third person narrative to introduce the Protagonist. Mukundan. Nair’s non-belief in heroic heroes inspires her to create characters who are ordinary men and women, leading everyday lives. None of her characters are supremely faultless. The impact of an overpowering and dominating father is quite visible in Mukundan. When he turned
18, Mukundan secured a clerical job in an explosive factory in Trichy. His later plan of settling in Kerala with his friend Narendran was also foiled by the latter's sudden death, eight months prior to their retirement. Thus, left with no option Mukundan returns to his village, which he had tried to stay away from, all his adult life. At the age of fifty-two, Mukundan has no hopes of getting a bride, young enough, who could give him a progeny. When he found hope in twenty-seven year old village school teacher Anjana, he was unwilling to stake his reputation in the eyes of the villagers. Mukundan's indecisiveness is solely responsible for his state. The influence of his dominant father follows him as a shadow all his life. Moreover, his father constantly reminded and drummed into his ear day after day, "If you wish to survive, you need to think of yourself first." (TBM 71).

Mukundan was unable to free himself from his father's influence but all his acts are a mere duplication of what he detested in his father. Unconsciously, he tried being as ambitious and powerful as his father but failed to get rid of the fear and angst he had within him. Mukundan's dealings with his mother Parukutty, beloved Anjana and dear friend Bhasi clearly exhibit his egocentricity. His desire for recognition and acceptance, importance and adulation blinded him to everything else. He realized that a survivor is someone who is selfish and there is no point in surviving when there is no one to share one's happiness or grief with. His insistence on not being just his father's son and his struggle to carve out his own identity in the village forced him to make some contribution to the betterment of his village. In his quest for identity, he betrayed Bhasi and joined the side of the all-powerful Ramakrishnan – the richest man in Kaikurrussi. Mukundan could not mourn his father's death as he always
wished him dead and held him responsible for his crippled spirit. He hated his father for being a tyrant, who tormented him throughout his life. It was only his father’s death that made him realize that despite his father’s faults, callousness and brutality he was a man who had the courage for his conviction. Mukundan discovered that he was merely an extension of his father bereft of the much-needed valor. Mukundan hid his inadequacies by using his father’s domineering methods as an excuse to explain his own weakness of character. Mukundan is portrayed as a timid man, who used his integrity as a façade to deflect attention from the fact that he was a failed man in his life. He was as selfish, insensitive, brutal and incapable of loyalty or love as his father Achuthan Nair.

Mukundan can be compared to Deven Sharma, the male protagonist in Anita Desai’s *In Custody*. Deven too comes from a lower-middle class family and seeks to reach out into a wider world in the hope of self-fulfilment. He is portrayed as an average man completely lacking in initiative because of his timidity. However, he has literary aspirations and longs for distinction. The story revolves round his weakness and his trials and travails to become a success. Like Mukundan in *The Better Man*, Deven too, is portrayed as ‘a diffident and awkward hero’, who feels himself a victim of circumstances. Towards the end of the novel, when everyone deserts him, Deven suddenly finds his own strength and learns to accept his responsibility with fortitude. In *The Better Man* too, Mukundan’s decision to follow his conscience and stop chasing ephemeral dreams and to amend the wrong done to Bhasi makes him a reformed soul. His kind gesture of gifting a quarter of an acre land to Bhasi in order to resettle him in Kaikurrusi makes him acceptable to the readers. The climax of the
novel helps him rise above his shallow nature that he exhibited in the beginning of the novel. Taking advantage of the *pooram* (a temple festival in Kerala) with *Vedikattu* (the ritual of bursting crackers) Mukundan stealthily procures gunpowder and decides to eliminate the Community Hall, a statement of his weakness, his cowardice and his lack of integrity. The new and transformed Mukundan did not want the remnants of his past staring at him. He becomes a man and 'a better man' in the true sense of the term. He is transformed from a coward who feared fire-crackers to a determined and self-righteous soul.

Mukundan is portrayed as a failed lover in *The Better Man*. All the intimate moments he shared with Meenakshi (his childhood soul-mate) were relegated into some corner of his mind after he left Kaikurissi:

Mukundan had Meenakshi — his first cousin once removed; companion and soul mate. They crawled together as babies. They paddled together in the pool and when they were a little older, they learned to swim together... They knew each other's bodies and minds as well as they knew their own. And then suddenly one day they were considered to be too old to spend so much time in each other's company...And because their meetings were so infrequent, they began to function as two separate beings. For the first time in their lives, they had secrets for each other. His dreams were no longer hers. Her plans no longer his (TBM 53/54).

When dumped by Mukundan, Meenakshi seeks solace with a *Kathakali* dancer Balan, whom she marries. Thus, Meenakshi dwindles into a memory Mukundan preferred not to dwell upon. Thinking of her, aroused many emotions, chief among
them guilt. When they met later, she too had dismissed their adolescent fumbling as a part of growing-up process. There was no bitterness, no references to the past, no dredging up of forgotten promises (TBM 55).

Mukundan's second attempt to seek love in the form of Anjana also fails. His unwillingness to stake his reputation in the eyes of the villages costs him dear. In The Better Man Mukundan is engulfed by his own loneliness. Mukundan did not receive any affection from his father, though he yearned for some token of affection, some proof of acceptance or praise. On the contrary, all that he got were harsh words and sticks of the cane that his father always kept handy. His mother Parukutty also failed to protect him from this harsh treatment. He too failed to stand by her when she needed him the most. These were the words that Parukutty spoke to her son pleadingly, “Take me with you, Son. I am unhappy here” (TBM 31).

Mukundan is convinced that his mother wishes to avenge her death and the ghost seems to speak to him in a hollow voice:

I want you to know the fear I felt when a hand smashed into my back, pushing me down. I want you back, pushing me down. I want you to know what I saw when the floor reached out to slam my life away. I want you to feel the anguish I felt as I realized I was going to die before my time (TBM 32).
Mukundan’s egocentricity, lack of integrity, his detachment from his loved ones and the loss of identity in his own native place and sense of rootlessness form the moral fiber of the society is reflected in the novel. Mukundan’s struggles to win the local bigwigs and grab the power once owned by his father Achutan Nair take the story forward. To establish his identity and toe-hold in the village he tries to organize Pooram (temple festival) – an important cultural event of Kerala. It is the tension between Mukundan and the other characters that allows the movement of the narrative to progress at a brisk pace.

Bhasi, another prominent character in the novel, is armed with a college degree in botany and a post-graduate degree in English language and literature. Despite his degrees he is a house-painter by profession. He represents the educated, unemployed masses of the hundred percent literate Kerala. Nair voices her concern about unemployment, a major predicament of the educated youth in Kerala. Bhasi voices this distress of the author when he says:

I have a college degree in botany and a post-graduate degree in English language and Literature. I have a piece of paper that states I qualified with distinction in the study of plants. And a certificate of merit issued by the University honouring me as one of the ten rank-holders in mastering the intricacies of the English language. But it wasn’t enough. There was a time when I knew that I wanted to cling to the last fragments of self-respect, I would have to leave (TBM 7).
Bhasi also plays the healer and confidante to Mukundan. Bhasi believes that the human body has a natural in-built capacity to heal, to safeguard against trauma and disease. He is shown as an individual with the capacity to reinforce the natural vitality. The protagonist, Mukundan seeks Bhasi’s help to cure him and his father. Bhasi plays a pivotal role in shaping the character of Mukundan in the novel. But Mukundan was so besotted by the idea of being someone important that he didn’t realize how important Bhasi was to him till the end when he makes amends by giving a piece of his ancestral property to Bhasi.

In her interview to Aditi De, Nair has mentioned about how she conceptualized the character of Bhasi. She says:

Well, One-screw-loose Bhasi didn’t exist until I was halfway through the book. After the short story collection, when I went back to the novel, it just didn’t seem right. Am I just chronicling a village, I asked myself. Big deal! (Laughs) At that point, I was working with an ayurvedic client. I thought: maybe I should use this stuff, it’s interesting. Then this character emerged. I went back and wrote the first chapter. Then, I had to weave him into all the chapters.

Consequently, in order to incorporate this interesting character whom she had met, Nair had to rework right from the first chapter. This makes Bhasi’s opening monologue in the novel appear as an afterthought tacked on to bring all the pieces together. Bhasi also plays the catalyst in making Mukundan evolve as a better man.
When the conflict and resolution between Bhasi and Mukundan appear at the end it is the former who plays the second important role in the novel. By using the nick-name of “one-screw” for Bhasi, Nair makes the transmutation effective. Raja Rao, in his first novel, translated the nicknames by which various women characters are identified, for example “Nose-Scratching Nanjamma,” “Waterfall Venkamma,” and “Corner-House Narsamma”. Uma Parmeshwaran says, “Such transmutations are not always effective but they animate the world of Kanthapura and The Untouchable with a breath of novelty (if the reader is unfamiliar with the vernacular) or authenticity (if the reader is familiar with the vernacular)” (Parmeshwaran 57). Nair also uses such nicknames as Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, Barber Nanu and Village Crier, Pavitran.

“Character gives us qualities”, says Aristotle. The characters in The Better Man have a lesson for everyone. Mukundan learns that happiness cannot be had by being the cause of someone else’s unhappiness. Bhasi learns that man cannot control and change another man’s destiny. Man cannot play God. When the committee members of the community hall along with Mukundan’s support, demand Bhasi’s land, Bhasi feels cheated and experiences the pangs of an outsider.

Each one of them at Shankar’s Tea club, my everyday cronies, had known about Power House Ramakrishnan’s ploy to take control of my land and they had willfully kept it from me. Even Shankar, whom I have always liked and trusted. In the final reckoning they were all natives of this village, bonded by birth and bonded together. While I was the outsider. The other one who could be dispensed with. (TBM 289)
When Mukundan too refuses to stand by him, Bhasi feels helpless and pained, "How could you be so oblivious to my anguish? Could you really not see that you were building your dreams on the dust of my hopes?" (TBM 328).

Bhasi, too realizes his imperfections towards the end of the novel.

I had tried to play God. I had made myself the impresario of another man’s fate. I had let myself believe that I could shape a man’s life as surely as God does. That in me resided a superior power that allowed me to fashion a future course that even God hadn’t known how to. Like the firefly trying to match the brilliance of the stars, I had let the limit of my knowledge rule me... Man can heal, but a little. Man can aid self-discovery, but only a little. No man is the master of another man’s destiny. For man is not God. And fireflies are not stars (TBM 330).

The above lines reflect the philosophy of life. Small doses of philosophy and profundities delivered by Bhasi and Mukundan suggest the limitations of Man. The Realization dawns upon Bhasi that he does not possess extraordinary power as he had believed. He could not control or heal Mukundan as he had thought. No matter how authoritative man becomes, he cannot dream to be at par with God. The powerlessness and futility of mankind is revealed through these lines. The fundamental truth that he had learnt over the years was that affection openly given is never valued. Unlike other men of his age, he had thought he should never fall in love. He didn’t want to experience hurt, anger, betrayal, anguish, sleepless nights, long empty hours—as an aftermath of the tumultuous emotion called love. Destiny had other designs for Bhasi, the parallel college lecturer who falls for Omana, a
student. It was a one-sided adulation which he thought she enjoyed. On the contrary, she was already engaged to be married to her cousin, Sudhir settled in Dubai. The pain of losing her to someone else would have been bearable if she had left him his self-respect and not robbed him of his dignity, which she did by mocking him, “I don’t have to make a fool of you. You do it all by yourself” (TBM 102). Bhasi too, forcefully bit into her lips and had his fill of violating her pride. Being humiliated at the hand of the one he loved and unsure of his teaching skills he left his job and caught a bus to Kochi. He decided to learn a trade like his father who climbed the coconut tree to make a living. He came to be known as painter Bhasi after being a painter’s apprentice for seven months. When Bhasi is intrigued by Mukundan’s unhappiness, he makes it a mission to get to know Mukundan and a bonding between the two men takes shape. Mukundan’s betrayal of Bhasi’s trust and his eventual redemption forms the core of the novel.

Powerhouse Ramakrishnan represents Capitalist society. He is “a social climber, a status seeker, a snob and opportunist” (TBM 206). The above quote from the novel describes every inch of the character of Power house Ramakrishna. He ventures into new businesses, invests and makes extra profits. Even in the name of community service he attempts to grab land. An ordinary man, transformed into the richest man in Kaikurrussi, wielding power and position is overnight seen as an immediate threat and arch rival to Mukundan. Mukundan feels Ramakrishnan has usurped his rightful place. Ramakrishnan operated on a simple theory: every man has his price. Based on this theory, he conspired to buy Mukundan’s complicity in the building of his dream – The Powerhouse Ramakrishnan Community Hall. He
represents the bourgeoisie with his acres of land, rubber plantation and a car-hire service. Being the richest man in Kaikurussi he commanded a lot of respect. Nobody dared to protest against his decision to grab Bhasi’s land for building the Community Hall. He symbolizes the ‘moneyed mafia’ of society.

Marx and Engels believed that the dominant capitalist middle class would eventually be challenged and overthrown by the working class. In the meantime, however, the middle-class capitalists exploit the working class, who produce excess products and profits yet do not share in the benefits of their labor. They further regarded all parts of the society in which they lived – religious, legal, educational, governmental – as tainted by what they saw as the corrupt values of middle-class capitalists (Kirszner & Mandell 2035).

Bhasi, represents the working class who is exploited by the cultural elite of the village. Nair through these characters tries to highlight the inequities present in the society. Bhasi is shown subjected to wrongs by the powerful men and he is repeatedly exploited and defeated by the pressures of the economic system in which he lives.

Meenakshi and Anjana are the two living women characters in the novel. Child-hood soul mate of Mukundan, Meenakshi is relegated into some corner of Mukundan’s mind after he leaves Kaikurissi. Although she has been brought up in a world that teaches women to depend on men. she learns that she is ultimately alone.
Although the desertion she endures is not intentional, she must bear the brunt of circumstances that are not her choice but are rather imposed on her by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Usually women are depicted as the oppressed through the stereotypical representation of their being weak, vulnerable and sexual objects of the male’s desire. Meenaskshi and Mukundan had also shared some intimate moments before the latter left Kaikurrissi. But on his return, Mukundan observes a transformed person. She had donned a new role in life.

Meenakshi had become a Naxalite. Armed with books on revolutions and driven by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin, Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of bourgeois vermin. And her first target of attack was Achuthan Nair – Mukundan’s father, her uncle. Feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression. She and her group incited the labourers to rebel. When that didn’t work, haystacks were set ablaze; cows let loose in ready-to-be-harvested paddy fields and irrigation ditches gutted with mud. To them Achutan was the system, and these were some ways of upsetting what he represented (TBM 56).

In his *Party Organization and Party Literature* (1905), Lenin argues that literature must become a part of the common cause of the proletariat. He does not support the then prevalent idea that art must be controlled, and suggests that freedom of expression must be complete and unfettered. Nair’s attack on capitalism and Meenakshi’s path of non-violent resistance to evil depicts contradictory conditions of revolutionary peasantry. Though she is driven by Marxist ideals, she and her group
were not blood-thirsty. She preaches hate and anger but it means love and charity for all they cared.

Meenakshi’s failed marriage with Kathakali dancer Balan makes her a lonely figure. To diminish her loneliness, she finds solace in Naxalism. She emerges a stronger woman. She rejects the sympathy of relatives and neighbours. Being more educated than the other women in the village, she takes control of her child by running a crèche authorized by the panchayat. She runs the crèche until her son Mani is old enough to go to school. Then she gives it up and sets about becoming a shop-keeper. In the process of lending an ear to the woes of troubled women of her village she acquires a reputation for sagacity and wisdom. There is a streak of steel within her when she takes the toughest decision to forgive her husband and look after him when he returns as a decrepit old man. This can be compared to Saru in Shashi Deshpande’s Dark Holds No Terror, where Saru tries to reconcile with her husband Manu and the novel ends with a tiny hope of resettlement. A sense of guilt sweeps Meenakshi off her feet. She is willing to forgive her husband for deserting her.

Sociologists find that woman suffers due to her emotional attachment with home. She does not want to bear the pain of being away from home as a wife and mother. But since her sense of individuality has matured by the introduction of education, she does not want to lead a passive married life of a sacrificial and shadowy creature (Sandhu 11).
Anjana, twenty-seven years old and a lonely woman, feels resigned to the idea of a state of eternal spinsterhood: “She had become, she thought, with a little bitter smile, one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, with sunken cheeks and vacant eyes.” (TBM 223).

However, in her desperate attempts to get settled, with the aid of a marriage broker a marriage comes through. Soon after her marriage she finds her husband incompatible. Meeting Mukundan does bring a ray of hope which proves to be short-lived, as he is more concerned about his reputation and position in the affairs of the village. Towards the end of the novel, Mukundan visits Anjana to plead with her to forgive his trespasses and accept him again. Anjana warns him of the consequences, “The Villagers won’t approve of it. Or me. You will be kicked out of the committee. They will ostracize you. You won’t be invited to anyone’s wedding or housewarming or be included in any of the village’s activities.” (TBM 355). For Anjana, Mukundan’s well-being was her primary concern. She represents the traditional Sita image, an object of pity and compassion.

Generally, there are two types of roles played by women characters in Indian fiction: conventional and unconventional. Both the types become objects of sufferings. According to Bala Kothandaraman, “The unconventional are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society. or for questioning them…”. Anjana plays the role of the unconventional where she stakes her reputation and reconciles with Mukundan.
Para Kutty, mother of Mukundan, is dead when the novel begins. Like Mangala and Jameela in Hariharan’s *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, she too, continues to haunt her son throughout the novel. A lonely woman, with a dominating husband and a cringing child, she lived a life of misery. To add to her woes, her husband takes on a mistress eventhough she vehemently protests and refuses to allow the mistress to enter her house. However, Achutan Nair adds insult to injury by building a house for his mistress right across the street. A pathetic and dismal Parukutty fails to protect her son from the wrath and merciless beating of her husband. As a result of this she feels helplessness and a sense of despair. With aging *cheriyammas* (aunts) for company she begins to assert her identity by provoking her husband’s fury by dumping outside the house the entire paddy which was not a part of the produce of the land that she had inherited. She even dares to invite her cousin Devyani, with whom Achuthan had forbidden her to have any contact. She also razed to ground an almond tree that Achutan Nair had planted near the gate. Demonstrating various means of protest she lived a lonely life till her death.

The other minor characters in *The Better Man* comprise of a Communist party worker comrade Jayan, Haji Suleiman from the Masjid Committee, Abu Seth – neo gulf-returned native of Kaikurussi. Parameshwaran Namboodiri from *Plashi Mana* makes the novel rich in social detail. The Haji was a wise man, a scholar for whom the rich Muslims of Kaikurussi rallied together to provide money and offer protection as he had no sons draining the oil fields of Arabia. It is very common of Malayalees/Keralites migrating to the Gulf countries not only for the sake of their livelihood but
also strengthening their financial status. This is a major source of income that boosts the economy of the state. Haji is an exception, as he did not have his sons making money in the Gulf. Parmeshwaran Namboodiri adhered to the vestments of the past, and so, the Bentley with its cherrywood paneling was the reminder of his glorious past. “It demanded awed attention, subordination of viewpoints, and the overruling of one’s conscience.” (TBM 305). Comrade Jayan’s unshakeable faith in the principles of Communism was unspoken as he could tell with supreme confidence, on what points Lenin differed from Trotsky. But contrary to his Communist ideology, he sought refuge and blessings at Mata Premananda’s feet and was guided by her for his successful political career. It exposes the hypocrisy prevalent in society.

Nair’s first novel is autobiographical to a great extent. Based in Kaikurussi, an imaginary village in rural Kerala, it is about her town Mundakotukurussi. The characters that she has created are based on her observations. One such character that she has created in The Better Man is Krishnan Nair. “Krishnan Nair had always been the caretaker of the house and the many acres of paddy fields the family had owned.” (TBM 38). In her book, Goodnight and God Bless she reveals:

Then one Onam, I met Krishnan Nair. He was a retired family retainer who sometimes chose to help my mother in the kitchen when there were guests visiting. He cooked not because it was his profession but he liked doing so... He would talk as he cooked. From family anecdotes to village affairs to cooking hints to philosophical notions. There will never be another man like Krishnan Nair” (Nair 180/182).
In fact, Krishnan Nair’s tremendous influence on the author inspired her to bring out his character in her very first novel. Nair’s particular interest for a chicken curry prepared by Krishnan Nair made her recreate the magic recipe in her book. She attributes her fondness for cooking and food to Krishnan Nair. In the novel, it is Krishnan Nair who cooks and assists Mukundan, the protagonist with the housekeeping.

Valsala, wife of a schoolteacher, represents the womenfolk who indulge in frivolous expenses and displays of ostentation. Her extra-marital relation with Sridharan to satiate her carnal desires depicts sexual emancipation of women and the changing image of woman in a conservative middle-class family. Being materialistic by nature, Valsala could not have eloped with her lover and abandon the right to her husband’s property and retirement benefits.

The variegated characters represent a particular section of people that reflect the social fabric of Kerala of contemporary times. In *The Better Man* through the characters and the themes Nair attempts to chronicle a village and the happenings of the small town in Kerala, the lifestyle, the beliefs, customs, and culture. The unfolding of the novel in the imaginary town of Kaikurissi in the Malabar area and brings vivid images of R. K. Narayan’s Malgudi. This cannot be a coincidence as Nair has admitted in one of the interviews about her fascination for Narayan’s works as a child.
Throughout the novel, Nair prioritizes the theme of loneliness above all other themes. Many of the characters particularly Mukundan, Bhasi, Valsala, Kamban, Phillipose, Ramakrishna etc. experience loneliness in the course of the novel. The novel is also an account of Mukundan’s growth from being a man with selfish concerns to a man with a wider concern which extends beyond him. Achutan Nair’s character echoes the tyranny of a domineering father. His “courage of convictions” is a recurrent motif in the novel. *The Better Man* also has the theme of the victory of human will over human weakness. There are many sub-themes such as loss of identity, unemployment, Socio-Political concerns, sense of rootlessness, immigrant’s identity, Naxalism, Communism, Capitalism etc. Unemployment is a major concern in the highly literate state of Kerala and it has been deftly dealt with by the author. When Mukundan, post-retirement returns to his home state Kerala, he encounters a serious loss of identity and rootlessness. He finds himself in an unfamiliar and strange setting where people fail to acknowledge his presence. Bhasi also experiences the immigrant’s identity crisis when he migrates to Kaikurrussi seeking employment.

Among her four novels published, women occupy a central place only in her second novel, *Ladies Coupe*. Nair has been labeled a feminist after the publication of this book. Though she vehemently refutes the charge of being a feminist writer, with a careful reading of *Ladies Coupe*, one can identify all the female characters being explored by the writer from both aspects – psychological and sociological. Through the myriad characters and their experiences in the novel one can easily perceive the changing image of Indian women.
Ladies Coupe depicts the plight of Akhila, a forty-five year old single woman employed as an income-tax clerk. She has never been allowed to live life on her terms. The novel takes off with her decision to discover her own life and in her pursuit of freedom she takes a train to Kanyakumari. Having got a berth in a second-class compartment in the Ladies Coupe, she meets five other women – Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu. During the course of the journey, Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers. All the characters lead stereo-typed roles, into which women are moulded by patriarchal society. They all hope and strive to break free from that mould. When all the five characters meet and share their woes with the protagonist, Akhila, the latter finds the answer to her quest for freedom. A brief introduction of the five passengers follows before an in-depth analysis of each character is made.

Janaki is a pampered wife and a confused mother, Margaret Shanti is a Chemistry teacher who is married to a self-absorbed insensitive tyrant. Prabhadevi is an ideal wife and daughter, who, too undergoes a major transformation. The youngest character, fourteen-year old Sheela is gifted with an exceptional ability to perceive matters that are beyond the capacity of normal souls. Marikolanthu falls prey to a rich and lustful man, who destroys her innocence.

The stories revealed by all the five characters provide Akhila with an answer to her quest for freedom. Akhila’s quest for freedom is turned inward and aimed at the goal of self-discovery. As in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, in Ladies Coupe women occupy a central place. Nair presents both restrained and apparent analysis of conflicting phases, underlying reasons and suggests a way out of it. It becomes more
interesting to analyze the image of women in *Ladies Coupe* when it is portrayed by a woman writer. Today, the woman plays diverse roles both indoors and outdoors. She participates in all the hitherto male-dominated spheres. But a conflict persists in her mind and makes her restless. Family, marriage and social norms bind her completely.

Akhila, who is the protagonist, has multiple roles to perform – that of a daughter, sister, aunt and provider. In his book, *The Technique of Modern Fiction*, Jonathan Raban says:

Manners equip the novelist with a bridge over which he passes from talking about the individual to talking about society...Conversely, some characters in fiction are so ‘culture-bound’, that they never become individuals in their own right (Raban 90).

Akhila represents the middle class values of a Tamil-Brahmin family. She is cast almost entirely within the mould of her culture. Nair’s depiction of Akhila in the beginning of the novel throws light on the inner psyche of spinsters, who are past the age of marriage and have to cope with the demands of Indian society.

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... Akhila was not a creature of impulse. She took time over every decision. She pondered, deliberated, slept over it and only when she examined every single nuance and point of view did she make up her mind (LC 2).
Thus Akhila is described as a colourless, grim, dispassionate and disgruntled soul. And yet, an individual, who shoulders the responsibility of an entire family, is shown as a determined, decisive and mature person. Akhila is further shown as a very organized person. This facet of her personality can be established even solely on the basis of her style of dressing.

Even the saris she wore revealed this. Starched cotton saris that demand much planning and thinking ahead. Not like gauzy chiffon and ready-to-wear polysilks. Those were for people who changed their minds at least six times every morning before they settled on what to wear. Those were for the fickle and feckless. Starched saris need orderly minds and Akhila prided herself on being an organized person (LC 2).

At the beginning of the novel itself, Nair has thrown light on the various facets of Akhila’s personality as someone who is in pursuit of her identity, strength and independence. Akhila’s image reflects a realistic picture of a contemporary middle-class woman, who has a penchant for exposing the societal flaws prevalent in orthodox families in India. Akhila, a conservative Brahmin, is determined to break free from the shackles of age-old customs. Marrying one’s uncle is an accepted norm in the Tamil-Brahmin community. The independent-minded Akhila at the age of fourteen has no qualms expressing her displeasure and disapproval at her mother’s decision to marry her uncle (Akhila’s father). Further, she strongly opposes her mother’s theories on what a good wife ought to be. Her mother’s formula of a
successful marriage is in subordination of women. Akhila refuses to believe that a woman’s need to prove her equality creates strife and disharmony in the house.

Being employed and having enjoyed financial independence Akhila knows the significance of economic freedom. Even as she was growing up she had felt that if her mother had a job she would be able to buy her things without troubling Appa. Thus, the seeds of need for financial stability and independence were sown in her adolescent days unlike the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande:

The women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande — Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* — share need to be highlighted: they all are ultimately appendages to men. Though in the beginning, they question the social mores, yet due to their emotional pull towards the traditions, they finally try their best to conform to their roles (Sandhu 55).

The above quote points to the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels who have changed their attitude owing to education and economic conditions. The educated working women experience conflict of values as she find it difficult to combine the two roles thrust upon her. The image of a contemporary woman is projected in her novels.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila explains to her mother:
You sing so well and Appa always says that you have one of the best singing voices he has ever heard. Why don’t you teach music like Karpagam’s mother teaches dance? Then you would, have some money of your own (LC 13).

Unlike Deshpande’s protagonists Akhila’s mother believed in insubordination and firm devotion towards her husband and his orthodox set of ideas. The mother’s response to the daughter points towards her dedication and submission towards her husband. She reinforces her faith in the role of a pativrata,

I don’t approve of what Karpagam’s mother is doing. All kinds of people come into their house. Brahmins and non-brahmins. Do you think your father would allow such comings and goings on here? Don’t you know how strict he is? Anyway, do you think your father would let me...? (LC 13).

Akhila’s mother belongs to the category of submissive women who have become patient and undemanding due to centuries of tradition. While the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels have changed attitudes owing to education and economic conditions. The educated working women experience conflict of values as she finds it difficult to combine the two roles thrust upon her. The image of modern woman is projected in her novels. Similarly, when Nair’s heroines are compared to that of Anita Desai’s, one can see the striking difference in their
portrayal of the women despite the fact that both focus on middle class family and are not primarily obsessed with women’s woes.

Desai’s novels depict the mental conflicts coiling their heroines whereas Nair makes her characters suffer and enables them to come out of it. Desai’s heroines sulk, sob and submerge themselves in their calamity but for Nair’s characters, their sufferings become their strength and weapon to fight out their predicaments (Mishra 101).

Nair’s portrayal of Akhila shows her determination to live life her way after a long suffering. Akhila’s belief in the institution of marriage at the beginning of the novel gradually changes and towards the end of the novel she seduces a young man, a stranger called Vinod in her pursuit of discovering the woman in her. Her awareness of her needs and the self-realization leads to her empowerment. She wishes for companionship as well as motherhood. This is evident in her conversations with her co-passengers when she reveals her innermost desire, which did not materialize, when she says, “I did not choose to remain single.” At the age of 45, she feels marriage is unimportant but she likes to have companionship. She wishes to lead her life on her terms but is constantly reminded by everyone that a woman can’t live alone. Her unfulfilled wish to mother a child is explicitly described. “…a boy. A teenage boy. An attractive man. Then she would remember that she was forty-five years old. Old enough to be the boy’s mother.”
After she engages in a one-night stand with a stranger, Akhila feels emancipated from the age-old customs.

Once she had thought that she couldn’t love another man she like she had loved Hari. Giving him all her body and soul. This morning she thinks anything is possible. That she will have the courage to pick up from where she left off and begin again. That as much as she desired Hari, she desires life more (LC 275).

The need for self-fulfillment is so intense that she is willing to let go off the burden of the societal pressures that had clogged her mind all these years. The dilemma of Akhila can be substantiated by what Marx and Engels emphasized in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). They have considered the status of women in the family and in society from an entirely new angle. They have emphasized that it is only in a communist society that woman will have dignity and will be able to find self-fulfillment.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels located the origin of women’s oppression in the rise of class society. Their analysis of women’s oppression was not something that was tagged on as afterthought to their analysis of class society but was integral to it from the very beginning. When Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, ideas of women’s liberation were already a part of revolutionary socialist theory. The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that (under communism) the instruments of production are to be exploited in common. and, naturally, can come to no other
conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at (by communists) is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production (as quoted by Smith).

According to Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), the most important phase is search for a genuine identity. It is in this stage that the quest for freedom is turned inward and aimed at the goal of self-discovery. Elaine Showlter notes that:

...the middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home (14).

Showalter is making her remark in the context of the “rise” of women writers in early Victorian England. More significant, however, is Showalter’s characterization of the “phase” of “self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” that “literary subcultures, such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian, or even American” women writers engage in (13). Indian women writers have also attempted to follow the same path as that of their western counterparts. Nair’s attempt to depict the transformation of the changing phase of the status of women in India has been explored in this novel.
Akhila, the protagonist succeeds in her goal of self-discovery. She succeeds in retaining her dignity even as she finds self-fulfilment. Like the male progeny, Akhila takes over the reign from her father after his death. She rescues her mother from the threat of poverty and degradation. She even enrolls in the Open University for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the age of thirty-five to prevent her mind from straying. Akhila finds herself a misfit in the society she lives in. Because of her unmarried status, she doesn't have many friends and fails to identify with the world of householders. She finds her soul-mate in Katherine Webber as both have no preoccupations with the four corner stones of the grihasthashrama – husband, baby, home, and mother-in-law. Akhila's journey in search of her identity isn't an easy one. It means breaking free from her conservative background. She secretly feasts on hard-boiled eggs for a whole year and also picks up the art of boiling eggs. She tastes her first victory and establishes her individuality when her orthodox mother accepts her taste for eggs. Thus begins Akhila's journey as a spinster, government employee, historian and eater of eggs. In her moments of weakness, Akhila lets her heedless thoughts overrule her. The woman in her seeks a sense of gratification and allows a stranger to take liberties with her. Akhila's relationship with Hari fails to culminate in marriage as he was younger to her and this relationship would not get social acceptance. After her mother's death Akhila's overwhelming desire to lead an independent life of her own, recoils when her overbearing callous sister Padma moves with her family to stay with Akhila. Akhila tolerates the invasion of space and privacy but she resents being thrust into a life that was dull without any highs or lows. She hated herself for being an extension of someone else's identity. When asked to define happiness, she parrots the New Year greeting card message that Katherine sent her. It says, "Happiness is being allowed to choose one's own life, to live it the way
one wants. Happiness is to know one is loved and having someone to love. Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow.” (LC 200).

Karpagam, a widow who wears the *KumKum* and colourful clothes, remains a source of strength and inspiration to Akhila, and also like a goddess leads Akhila out of the dismal hues of her world. Akhila confidently puts her brother Narayan’s doubts to rest when he inquires how any woman can cope alone. Akhila has her answers ready, “I know I can. I did once before when you were children. Now I can for me, for Akhilandeshwari. Nobody’s wife. Nobody’s mother.” (LC 208). But her last and final act to realize her decision is influenced by the stories of the five co-passengers.

The other characters in the novel play an equally significant role. It is their revealing stories that lead Akhila to her final destination in her search for strength and independence. Janki is a pampered wife but with a strong sense of insecurity. Her habit of switching channels each time a life-insurance commercial appeared on televisions shows her height of insecurity. Her urge to be pampered definitely leads to her accepting a diminutive image which clash with her self-image and results in marriage at the age of eighteen to a twenty-seven year old Prabhakaran and gets from him all the attention she desired. From her girlhood she was being groomed for marriage. Marriage was her ultimate destination. A perfectionist in the skills required for marriage – cooking and cleaning, sewing and pickling – she symbolises the plight of most Indian women, who are always looked after – first by father and brother then husband. When her husband is gone, there will be her son. She says, “Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses.” (LC 23). All her life she believed that a woman’s duty was to get married, a home was a woman’s kingdom
and she strived hard to preserve it. Even playing a fragile little creature tired her. With all the affection and attention she receives, Janaki is bored with her monotonous life and craves for a change and it hints at the dissatisfaction experienced by women at a certain age. She believes that women can achieve satisfaction solely by being with her male counterpart. She says, “I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband; when my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile; our men treat us like princesses.” (LC 22/23).

A true image of the ideal Indian woman, Janaki believed that a woman’s role was to keep the family intact and reach out to every member. She finds herself in a very agonizing state when forced to bear taunts and derisions at her son’s house. Unable to bear the insults, she decides to live with her husband. Janaki’s story hints at the dissatisfaction experienced at a certain age by every individual, though what she believes is not true for the women of today’s times.

Sheela, a fourteen-year old girl, is the youngest of the lot. Nair thrust upon her an unusual ability to perceive what adults around her could not. She is gifted with strong instincts that protect her from impending danger. When her friend Hasina’s father takes the first step to outrage her modesty, she does a simple innocent act of wiping the line of sweat from her upper-lip and trying to knot the bows on the sleeves of her blouse when it had come undone. She could easily sense the danger lurking behind these innocent acts. She instinctively stopped going to Hasina’s house later. Even as an adolescent girl she could sense that her ammuma (maternal grandmother)
hated imperfections of any kind. Hence after ammuma’s death, “she braided the hair into a plait, rubbed foundation onto her face, shoulders and chest. She dusted expensive talcum powder on her Ammuma’s face, neck; all over the body rimmed her eyes with a kohl pencil touched her eyebrows. …and turned her into an obnoxious creature – a garish, dressed up dying harlot.” (LC 74). Only she knows that her Ammuma did not want to look diseased and decaying. She doesn’t care for her father’s disapproval and disappointment. In Sheela, Nair has created the image of a young girl, fiercely independent, who allows her instincts to rule rather than do what was expected of her – ‘the sober dictates of good conduct.’

Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher, is married to an insensitive tyrant called Ebenezer Paulraj. With the sole desire of taking revenge on her brutal husband she feeds him and turns him into a fat man. She believes that being fat can erode his self-esteem. If he survived, he would continue to give her sorrow with a single-minded joy. Among the five elements that constitute life, she classifies herself as water. Water has several qualities. It moistens, heals, forgets, accepts, flows tirelessly and also destroys. Like water, she has the power to dissolve and destroy. She wants to end her miseries by bringing an end to her self-absorbed narcissist husband. Her story reveals the metamorphosis from a dutiful wife to a revenge seeking one. Her greatest virtue is her immunity to what people think of her. Nair has bestowed the chemistry teacher, Margaret Shanti, with a sound knowledge of chemical elements. Margaret describes other characters by ascribing those names of chemicals akin to their nature.
Premilla Madhav is bromine, Daphne, lithium, Sankar Narayan, cobalt, Xavier, nitrous oxide; Kalavati, arsenic and finally Nawaz, the ex-principal, as tetra sulphur tetranide. She thus describes her husband,


Prabhadevi, married to Jagdish, a prosperous diamond merchant, is quiet and timid to the extent that she has never tried doing anything new. She does not like the way she has evolved and therefore she makes attempts to change herself. Her birth made her father sigh. At 15 years of age, she was moved to a convent school to be groomed well by the nuns so as to get a good alliance. She was permitted two hours of outing every week (i.e. Saturday morning) because boys prefer girls who are friendly and can hold their own in a conversation. She becomes the woman her mother had envisioned. Her visit to New York brought back with her a whole set of possessions. She longed to be like the women in New York with swinging air and confident stride. Her quest to acquire poise, confidence, celebration of life and beauty metamorphoses her into “a woman of the world sans the slouch, the downcast eye and sari pallu weighing down her youth.” (LC 178).
From a meek and mean person she is transformed into a confident, youthful looking, passionate woman. She does all this not only to restore the balance of their relationship but also because she didn’t like the person she had become. Prabhadevi, who was governed and shaped by the patriarchal value structures, brought about this change by realizing the need to exercise freedom, choice and will. She had imprisoned her natural longings for so long that they began to erupt in peculiar form. She practised the walk, trips to Mary’s cosmetic counter to learn how to apply make-up, watched talk shows and soap operas and the last thing she acquired to complete the transformation were clothes. After motherhood, in order to revitalize her energies and boost her self-worth, she enrolled in a baking class and joined swimming which brought about a feeling of supreme contentment in her. For Prabhadevi, her outward appearance is of prime importance. The transformation in her comes in the way she looks and conducts herself and not by bringing change in her inherent nature. Her flirtatious nature and advances made towards Pramod made the latter succumb to Prabhadevi’s attentions. Lapping up a stranger’s attention was yet another conquest for her. But very soon she “realized with a sinking heart that she had ignited something she had no idea how to extinguish.” (LC 182). In her attempt to submerge in the subtleties of her bodily hungers she had perhaps forgotten that repressed desires and emotions are more dangerous. On renewing her desires and longing for her husband she becomes the bubbling beautiful Prabha from the calm and composed woman. Nair describes Prabha’s renewed concupiscence in the following lines: “But she discovered that desire spawns desire; fulfillment begets fulfillment. A kiss for a kiss. A caress for a caress. What one gives comes back manifold.” (LC 195).
Nair brings the last character in the form of Marikolanthu, who is a victim of a man’s lust. She is poor, uneducated and represents that class, which leads unsheltered lives. This sixth passenger who narrated her tale has a strong belief that women are strong and capable of doing much more than men but for that she has to seek that vein of strength in herself. There is no sense of rightness; no chronology about the roles in her life. She succeeds in taking control of her life for the first time. A woman, content in her role of a substitute lover, discovers her self and recognizes her desire to be the real mother to her son ‘Muthu’.

All the characters in the novel try to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who is willing to listen. The revelation of the five co-passengers leads Akhila towards the path of self-actualization, self-realization and self-fulfilment. Like her fellow travelers, she too is determined to break free from all that her conservative life has bound her to. The characters represent the middle and upper middle class, educated, urban woman with the exception of Marikolanthu. By liberating oneself from the clutches of family a woman can survive only if she has inculcated in her the culture of self-dependence – both physical and mental. The characters are representatives of the third phase of feminism of Elaine Shawalter wherein self-discovery as a result of recognizing the value of woman’s experience becomes a fit subject for literary-expression.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila represents the New Indian Woman who is dissatisfied with the roles assigned to her by the patriarchal society and manages to reject the cultural/social background totally to transcend the horizons and thus depicting a revolutionary spirit. Her predecessors were caught between tradition and modernity.
But she represents the changing image of woman in today’s time – a major theme of the novel. Her quest for freedom, self-discovery and self-actualization runs through the novel. The slow, but firm assertive strides she takes in her pursuit of freedom from the age-old customs, and feminine consciousness prevails throughout the novel in the form of all the female characters, the protagonist encounters and interacts. For them it is the revolt against the family traditions in search of freedom and quest for their selves. The novel presents how human relationships are re-defined. Akhila’s extra-marital adventure certainly indicates the move towards sexual emancipation. The novel also highlights the theme of freedom from bondage of culture, from the concepts of family, marriage and sex as defined by male-chauvinism and are thrust upon women. The protagonist does urge to seek self fulfillment through self-expression. She questions the two codes of morality existing in society based on gender – one for men and other for women.

Mistress published in 2005 exhibits Nair’s ability to extract varied themes and create dynamic characters. In her interview with Aditi De published in Hindustan Times, Nair admits, “I’ve never believed in heroic heroes. We only look at people when they achieve something. I know people who are extraordinary, but who lead quiet lives. So, whatever I write is not going to be large-than-life characters. Probably they would have quirks that would make them misfits, but they are ordinary people”.

The author’s focus at sharp characterization is reinforced in all her works. Her interest in observing people from day-to-day life and highlighting them in her work is her forte. On her official web-site she has gone on record, “...I aim at sharp
characterization and it is this tension between characters that allows the movement of
the narrative to progress at a brisk pace.”

Nair confesses that she jots down character summaries, personality quirks and
significant sentences in a little notebook that accompanies her everywhere. The author
is very conscious of the fact that readers often expect characters to behave as ‘real
people’ in their situation might behave. As real people are not perfect, realistic
characters cannot be perfect. The flaws of Nair’s characters are developed. Be it
greed, gullibility, naivette, shyness, a quick temper, or a lack of insight or judgement
or tolerance or even intelligence – all these aspects of her characters are highlighted
with precision and these make them believable. Moreover, characterizations being her
forte and her area of focus, all her novels have myriad characters. Mistress being no
exception, also has a large number of characters – major and minor. The major ones
include Koman, Radha, Christopher and Shyam.

Koman is the protagonist but the other three – Radha, Christopher and Shyam
– are also well developed and do not act merely as foils. They are round characters.
They are also complex ones and not easily understood. These characters act
differently in similar situations as real people do. They wrestle with decisions, resist
or succumb to temptation, make mistakes, ask questions, search for answers, hope and
dream, rejoice and show despair. In order to accentuate this diverse nature of her
characters Nair has used the medium of art – Kathakali and the Navarasas
(Sringaaram, Haasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Veeram, Bhayaanakam, Beebhalsm,
Adhbhutam, and Shantam)
Kathakali is a highly stylized form of classical Indian dance drama noted for the attractive make-up of characters, elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented in tune with the anchor playback music and complementary percussion. Originated in the country's present day state of Kerala during the 17th century and has developed over the years with improved looks, refined gestures and added themes besides more ornate singing and precise drumming. Nair’s knowledge of Kathakali and her insight into what it is to be a Kathakali artist is a result of the author’s rigorous training at Kalamandalam. Under the able guidance of K. Gopalakrishnan, Assistant Professor in Kathakali, she learnt the nuances of the art to be able to justify her work. Nair has very effectively used her understanding of the dance form when the protagonist Koman explains the nuances of the dance, “The steps in Kathakali are vigorous. This is a masculine dance. Even the slowest of compositions has an underlying vigour. Think of the damage it could cause the eyes and spine, the vital organs. With your feet placed sideways, the impact is gentle and it gives the steps lightness.” (M 363). The above-mentioned aspect of the author further reinforces her commitment towards the revival of the dying art form through her fiction.

Koman, the protagonist, narrates his life story in first person narrative. The entire story is woven around the life of Koman. Being a Kathakali dancer he demonstrates all his feelings and emotions through this art form. Throughout the novel, Koman comprehends characters and their life around him with the help of his knowledge of Kathakali and its dramatic performances. The narrative delves into
Koman’s past. Koman is elated with the world of Kathakali dance performances and mythical figures. This elation is reflected when he observes other characters around him. For instance, when he sees Chris and his gestures as he takes out the Cello from the car he says:

As he gently draws his Cello out from the back of the car it seems a gesture I ought to recognize... the squaring of shoulders, the tensing of his back, and the tilt of his head. I think of a scene from Kalyanasougandhikam. Is this the unease Bheema felt I wonder when he found an old monkey blocking his way to the garden of divine flowers? Obstructing his path willfully, as if to thwart his beloved wife’s desire to adorn her hair with the fragrance of the divine blossoms. Is this the feelings that erupt up Bheema’s spine? That someone I ought to recognize. That we are more than we know (M 27).

In this manner, Koman interprets every action, emotion and dialogue of the other characters with the aid of his in-depth knowledge of Kathakali.

The inevitable happens when Christopher Stewart, a travel-writer from America, arrives at a riverside resort in Kerala to study from Koman the world of Kathakali. Eventually Koman’s niece Radha falls in love with Christopher. Koman is concerned at her growing distance and dissatisfaction with her husband Shyam. Koman again resorts to Kathakali and its lexicons to alert Radha in a metaphorical way to desist from living a life of dissatisfaction. Koman reminds Radha about the
significance of Kathivesham in *Kathakali*. Kathivesham is known to be the villains of Indian mythology; the destroyers of all things good and noble. ‘Kathi’ in Malayalam means ‘knife’; an indication that the character is both arrogant and evil and yet has some redeeming qualities, usually a streak of nobility. The lines on Radha’s forehead speak of dissatisfaction, according to Koman. He interprets the lines as the white bulbs a kathivesham wears on his forehead and the tip of nose. Koman sees Radha’s husband Shyam as Keechakan, the able commander-in-chief of the kingdom of Vidarbha, who longed for Sairandhari but failed to see that she detested him. Koman also sees Shyam as Bheema, the hasty one, who jumps into battles and life without any introspection. Bheema was sent by his wife on a quest to find divine flowers in order to escape from his uncouthness and his lack of finesse. Koman thinks Shyam is a good-hearted creature whose goodness Radha takes advantage of. The characters are shown closely associated with *Kathakali* and the various emotions that emanate from the characters depicted through this art form.

The shadowed zones of the stage, according to Koman, are occupied by minor characters that are known as *aashaari* (carpenter in Malayalam) in the *Kathakali* lexicon. He explains:

Not everybody can play the *aashari*. I know; I have played him. It requires an understanding that is beyond the comprehension of a novice...He makes a mess of the steps, skids, falls, rolls his eyes, looks this way and that, and does it all with perfect timing. Only an actor with impeccable sense of rhythm and versatility of expression can
handle the *aash*ari. And Shyam is that aashari, wearing the guise of a fool and never missing a step (M 30).

The novel thus exposes at various stages Koman’s understanding of life and his interpretation of characters owes much to his knowledge of the art form – *Kathakali*. As a *Kathakali* performer his dilemma is implicit when Koman explains, “This dance form requires the performer to interpret…I have to imagine and intercept not just my own life but the lives of all the other who have been part of my life” (M 35).

In this way, Koman plays the role of observer-participant in the novel. He captures all the nuances and contradictions of the relationship being made and unmade in front of his eyes. In the course of his vivid narration, he explores and finds meaning in art and life. His insightful interpretation of the characters draws parallels from various *Kathakali* performances. Koman’s story unfolds before Christopher Stewart, whose incessant questions about the former’s past reveal more about the protagonist.

E.M. Forster in *Aspects of Novel* defines the story as “a narrative of events, arranged in their time-sequence” (30). The story of Koman is chronologically presented to the readers. When the art form, ‘*Kathakali*’ is on the verge of extinction, the plight of Koman, a *Kathakali* artist evokes the Karuna rasa. He acts as a mouth-piece of the author who is genuinely concerned about the dying art form and attempts
to revive it. Koman considers a Kathakali dancer, 'an endangered species'. He further blames the society that makes a mockery of this art by relegating the status of an artist to a model in a commercial for liquid blue. He also voices concern at the growing popularity of cinematic dance which is a combination of folk and classical salsa and the twist, aerobics and jive.

Koman’s love life, his involvement with Maya, Angela and Lalita and the various stages of his love life are explicitly brought to the readers. According to E.M. Forster birth, food, sleep, love and death are the main facts in human life. He further adds, “Love is the fifth great experience through which human beings have to pass. When human beings love they try to give something, and this double aim makes love more complicated than food or sleep... Love may weave itself into our other activities... Love may start various secondary activities...” (47).

Koman’s association with Maya, Angela and Lalita in his capacity as an artist evokes a variety of emotions. Moreover, he relates them to mythical characters that are enacted in a Kathakali performance. He associates Lalitha with Nakhrathundi, the demoness who fed on lust. Lalitha satiates her sexual urges but Koman refuses to give her the much deserved status as she is a prostitute. Lalitha knows that Koman cannot cease to be a Kathakali artist and she a whore; her name doesn’t matter to him. Sex is basic and underlies all other loves. E. M. Forster believes, “When human beings love they try to get something. They also try to give something, and this double aim makes love more complicated than food or sleep. It is selfish and altruistic at the same time, and no amount of specialization in one direction quite atrophies the other” (47).
Koman's attraction towards Angela in their first meeting culminates in the union of the two. The relationship of Koman and Angela is representative of the conflict among sets of cultural concepts and social-psychological values and norms experienced by Koman, an Indian when confronted with and affected by Western values. The inter-cultural tension that exists between the two, Koman and Angela is captured by Nair. This cultural conflict has always assumed a vital significance for the Indian novelist in English. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book, *The Twice-born Fiction* writes:

As early as 1909, Sarath Kumar Ghose wrote a novel called *The Prince of Destiny* dealing with this inter-cultural theme where, the hero the prince of a native Indian state has to choose between the love of and English girl and marriage with an Indian princess. And as late as 1960, J.M.Ganguly's *When East and West Meet* shows that the East-west motif has not yet been exhausted (Mukherjee 64).

Set in independent India (1970-71), Nair's *Mistress* has attempted to present this encounter. Here, the West appears as a character, which represents the attitudes or set of values of the west. Angela, who comes to India do research and finish her dissertation, does not want a relationship. She sees Koman as a playful, mischievous, affectionate and teasing, generous and romantic person at the exhibition-performance of *Kuchela-vritta*.
Koman is representative of a genuine lover of art. None of the trappings of success—fame, money, acceptance, and recognition mattered to him. *Kathakali*, a complex art form and which is incomprehensible to even the Keralites finds no takers in London, where Koman moves with Angela. Koman’s life with Angela represents the cultural shock one experiences when confronted with isolation in an alien land. Consequently, Koman becomes a misfit in this new environment and returns to India.

Confrontation with the West for the discovery of one’s own country, and of one’s own self: this is not an infrequent motif of contemporary Indo-Anglian novels. Homecoming after a sojourn abroad and consequent readjustment and revaluation of the terms in which to face life constitute the major issue in a number of these novels. Although the level on which this revaluation takes place varies considerably, the recurrence of the theme itself is significant (Mukherjee 72).

In the same view Naik writes, “Indian authors portraying British characters have emphasized the portrayal of British characters (here, Angela and Christopher) have emphasized the antagonism existing between West and East, the gulf which separates individuals belonging to different societies.” (Naik 148). Like the majority of writers who suggest that the gulf cannot be bridged and point out the necessity for the Indian to realize his heritage and find his way back to his roots, Nair too deals with the dominant theme of West-East conflict in a less comprehensive and fundamental manner.
Rasa is evolved in the reader due to the Bhava expressed in the characters. Koman’s encounter with Maya and Lalita, the least demanding mistress evoke Shanta rasa. Maya is the manifestation of detachment, freedom and an absence of desire. Maya, a married woman, but lonely at heart craves for companionship. In Koman’s association with Maya, the latter revels in the love affair of the heart and the body. The comfort they share with each other evokes the feeling of Shanta Rasa in Koman.

The other theme that runs in the novel is the loss of identity. Koman symbolizes ‘loss of identity’. His hybrid parentage denies him a clear religious identity. It is ironical that as a Kathakali artist he dons different roles and costumes for his performance but has no identity of his own. Koman’s true nature is revealed when even as an artist he disapproves one vesham. ie. Rama in Balivadha. The degree of deception that this particular role demands unnerves Koman (M 176). He feels any episode in a Kathakali performance should have the power either to inspire or redeem the audience.

The female characters of Nair are strong, dynamic and are able to articulate their views. Akhila of Ladies Coupe and Anjana of The Better Man play a prominent role like Radha in Mistress. Radha commits adultery and sacrilege and by doing so breaks control of the social norms. She is bold and confident enough to fulfill her desires by going against society. She is depicted as one who indulges in sexual encounter prior to her marriage and also gets into an adulterous relationship with Chris after being married to Shyam. Being dissatisfied with her husband she opts for an extra marital affair with Chris. Nair’s portrayal of women lacking moral values
reflects the moral degradation present in society. Husband-wife relationship is also one of the universal themes discussed in Nair’s novels. In Mistress, the loss of faith in husband-wife relationships raises a big question on the piety associated with such relationships. When the Indian social system advocates the restoration of all such relations, Nair’s novel dares to tell the truth however bitter it is. Despite being wedded to Shyam, she gets drawn towards Chris and all the mythological feelers provided by her uncle Koman to dissuade her from her passionate bonding with Chris fail. Married to Shyam for eight years, Radha is a mere cherished possession for him. Nair takes the readers to Radha’s past wherein she terminates her pregnancy when betrayed by her lover. She settles for an arranged marriage with Shyam. Devoid of any guilt she breaks all social conventions and gets involved with Chris in a tumultuous and passionate affair even when her marriage to Shyam had earlier saved her pride and kept her integrity intact. To bear the tag of ‘this insufferable man’s wife’ was a burden to her. Radha represents ‘the new woman’, the liberated woman who is willing to pursue her dreams and do things her way. She has no inhibitions about breaking traditions or going against societal norms. Portrayed as a rebel and stubbornly difficult woman, she feels no sense of remorse for having broken two hearts – that of Shyam and Christopher. Both her decisions – marrying Shyam and entering into an adulterous relationship with Chris – are impulsive by nature. Unlike stereo-typical Indian women, Radha’s irresponsible and callous attitude towards all her relations depict the emergence of woman who is neither perfect nor free from the foibles. The universal character such as determination to oppose sexual harassment and male-domination, the urge to create a milieu for the full expression of her emotional and moral self and most importantly the craving to be accepted as an individual, a person
in her own right and enjoying the same status as man has always enjoyed seem to be the traits of the ‘new woman’.

Prominent Indian women writers like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai have earlier used similar themes reflecting on the moral and spiritual urge of the ‘new woman’. These writers deal with the themes of suffering, dominance, urge for companionship, etc. It is through these themes that the moral and spiritual needs of the ‘new woman’ are projected. They explore their roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers in a new frame of reference which they have evolved for themselves (Shrivatsav 18).

Nair’s women characters seem to experience the tensions of a basic opposition between the felt need for freedom from traditional restrictions, on the one hand, and their social obligations, responsibilities and duties on the other. This results in the individual’s defiance of the conventional norms of social codes of behavior. The protagonist, Koman interprets the characters through mere observation and his knowledge of *Kathakali*. The sorrow on Radha’s face is compared to that of Damayanti in ‘*Nalacharitam*’. The novel ends with Radha’s experience of guilt for having wronged her husband. The incompatibility between the two runs through the novel. Being married for eight years, their marriage is nothing beyond the bedtime ritual. For Shyam, she is a ‘cherished possession’. It is not a relation between two equals. Shyam is ambitious, meticulous, and fastidious whereas Radha is just the opposite. Shyam, with good business acumen, promotes eco-tourism by gratifying the needs of foreign tourists and offering packages that appeal to them. His humble
background pushes his ambitions further. He struggles to achieve fame, money and success through various ambitious projects. He knows that the connoisseurs of art among the tourists will certainly appreciate a *Kathakali* performance and so he sells this art and claims to be helping in resurrecting the dance form. He taps the available resources of Kerala such as backwaters, *Karimeen*, Chinese fishing nets, plantations and wildlife sanctuaries and lures his foreign tourists. Shyam can be seen as an embodiment of Capitalism. Marital disharmony between Shyam and Radha is a theme experimented by a prominent novelist like Anita Desai in some of her novels like *Cry. the Peacock*, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, *Voices in the city* and *Where shall we go this Summer?* The concept of marriage which is related to a delicate union of two different minds has not been properly realized in most of the Indian patriarchal families.

The other minor characters include Saadiya and Sethu – parents of Koman. The union between the two: Saadiya – a Muslim with Sethu a Hindu and tension builds up when the latter refuses to perform circumcision on the infant. Unable to carry the feeling of regret and a sense of remorse for marrying a Hindu, Saadiya drowns herself and ends her life. The religious tension between the two communities is represented through the two characters. Nair has highlighted the social and cultural differences of both the religions through these characters. The incompatibility perceived in their relationship further points toward the extremist views followed by the two religions.
Mary Patti, a missionary, takes up the responsibility of bringing up Koman for twelve years. He is brought back by his father Sethu when he realized that Koman’s religious identity is in jeopardy. Set in an imaginary town called ‘Arabipatanam’ dominated by Muslims in North Malabar, the characters reflect the values and beliefs of that particular region. Aashan, the master who trains Koman in the fine art of Kathakali, represents the voice of a Kathakali artist. He exposes the pathetic state of a Kathakali artist. The words uttered by Aashan in the novel define a Kathakali artist:

An artist is a slave to his art. It rules him. It determines his life. It won’t let him compromise life. It won’t let him accept mediocrity. It is his conscience. A performer? There are many performers. People, who go through the motions of exercising what they think is art. They are not artists (M 281).

The wretched plight of an aging Kathakali artist is revealed effectively, when with age Aashan is left with no Vesham, on stage or in life. The self-pride of an artist resists him from accepting charity. Aashan and Koman represent the glorious guru-shishya parampara. Nanu Menon, the art critic is representative of those critics who trivialize art performances in their reviews. Such critics review Kathakali from a literary point of view with hardly any knowledge of the art form. Nanu, himself a failed Kathakali artist, now a self-appointed guardian of performing arts cannot tolerate an interpretation that is beyond his comprehension.
Christopher Stewart, Angela and Koman's son comes to Kerala disguised as a travel writer to trace his roots. He succeeds in his desire to meet his father as he interrogates Koman, the Kathakali artist. Chris-Radha and Koman-Angela relationships represent the discord and tension in cross-cultural union. Intercultural tension exists in their relationship, which has always assumed a vital significance for the Indian novelist who writes in English.

In the novels, West is sometimes presented as a character or as a set of values by the Indian novelists. After so many years, the novelists continue to use this theme to emphasize the inter-action of the two sets of values. Meenakshi Mukherjee firmly believes that the other reason for the Indian writer's concern with the East-West theme could be a manifestation of the Indo-English writer's constant awareness of a western audience. Nair, through her novels, shows to the West the culture, values and the heritage of India. Koman represents India and he also symbolizes the decadence of Indian heritage. Nair supports individual freedom but she considers family bonds and personal relationships to be of prime importance. Her novels deal with contemporary Indian society, which is a traditional society in a state of flux and change. Through her characters she reveals a spectrum of moral attitudes which include the traditionally moral, the immoral and the amoral. Nair definitely ensures that her women characters are not relegated to the background and are, infact, better drawn than their male counterparts.

Dissonance of marital relationships is also a recurrent theme in the novel with the failed marriages of Sadiya-Sethu, Koman-Angela and Radha-Shyam. The theme of art as a demanding mistress runs throughout the novel. Nair acknowledges the
borrowing of the title from Emerson’s statement, “Art is a jealous mistress”. Kathakali dancer, who exhibits all his feeling and emotions (the navarasas) – express the various subtleties of the human feelings. Celebration of woman’s identity in Radha, who searches for release from the constraints of the traditional and tradition bound institution of marriage is also one of the themes in the novel. Visualizing the reality of life through the art form is a major focus in the novel. Apart from that there are other sub-themes like Degradation of art, culture and morality. Exploitation of the land and other natural resources leading to environmental issues are also brought forth by the author. Being actively involved with the Nila Foundation, the author through her fiction informs the readers about the urgent need to save Nila, the largest river and the life-line of the state. There is also a mention of exploiting the elephants in the name of tourism.

With her impeccable representational realism and evocative descriptions of the idyllic setting of Kerala, Nair has perfected the art of writing fiction and extending the thematic range of Indian English fiction by not only working on the everyday reality like broken marriages, man-woman relationship in our society but also themes like dying art forms, national myths in contemporary situation. Love and sex are depicted in the Indian English novel with frankness and without any inhibitions. All her novels are culturally rooted and they emphasize the myths of the land.
Works Cited:


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