CHAPTER-II

COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUSNESS: THE MYTH OF PATRIARCHY

Myth is and has always been an integral element of literature. It has always had a very significant position in human psychology and society, from its beginnings as primitive religious narrative, to its recent adaptation as an aid in the exploration of the unconscious mind. Myth is seen manifesting itself in two ways in literature, the conscious and unconscious use of myth. The appearance of myth in literature or art should not be regarded as unauthentic or of secondary value. It is by virtue of myths that the literature created throughout the world for centuries has gained its significance and permanent value.

-Vaijo Latha

The word “myth” has crossed several interpretations by various people. Myth prevails in every society and it passes from one generation to another. Due to the passage of time the form of the myth is taken to different shapes, yet the original does not change. The original shape from which the other shapes are made of the same kind is said to be the archetype. According to Carl Jung, every individual psyche inherits collectively an unconscious idea or thought that is universal. According to Jung, there is a deeper and more
significant layer of the unconscious which he termed as collective unconscious and with what he identified as archetypes. He identified these archetypes as unconscious and generally universal. Speaking about the collective unconscious Bansal says:

   It is an area of mind which Jung was too much involved. He believed that the deepest levels of the “collective unconscious” are common to all humanity and it can even be extended to man’s primate and animal ancestry. The archaic heritage, Jung believed, plays a dynamic role in the psyche (100).

Archetypes are primordial images. Ambika says, “Archetypes are universal symbols and in the words of Jung, these ‘myth forming elements’ are ever present in the unconscious psyche” (267). These archetypes are the symbols that help in the working of human life. And patriarchy that looks upon woman as inferior to man in the society is an oft repeated archetype since classical times. This designation of patriarchy applies to almost all human societies. As Talpade observes, “What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression all over the world” (244) and Mala Pandurang says the same as “The patriarchal structure is of nearly all societies” (10). Anita Nair too has unconsciously taken these archetypes as symbols for her novels. All her female characters are archetypes of women who suffer physically and mentally, caught up in a traditional male dominated society, whether they are rich or poor or
between the two, whether educated or uneducated or whether employed or unemployed. The women undergo a heavy psychological disturbance as they are to choose between tradition and modernity. Yet at the end they undergo a change. According to Jaya Srivastava, “A great deal of feminist literature is concerned with patriarchal ideology” (36). As Anita Nair’s novels mostly reveal the plight of women, she could be called a feminist writer, though she does not like her to be called so.

Anita Nair takes a place with writers like Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das and Manju Kapur and Shashi Deshpande who claim that they are not feminist writers. In an interview with Sneha Subramanian Kanta when the question, “Why have you never proclaimed yourself as a feminist?” was put to her, she replied:

Ever since *Ladies Coupe* I have been referred to as a feminist writer and I have vehemently opposed this for these reasons. One I do not set out to write what I write with the notion of ushering in change. The creative process begins for me when certain aspects of life trouble me. I then try and explore why is the way it is. But in doing so I merely hold up the mirror to the society we live in. Secondly while several women issues are close to my heart, I find I am unable to agree with everything that feminist theories propound. And hence to identify myself
with something that I do not completely endorse would be wrong and unethical (np).

Though Anita Nair often refuses to limit herself as a feminist writer, it is her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and their consequent revolt, invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work. As Mehta states:

Though writers like Anita Nair and Sashi Deshpande do not want to make a self-proclamation that they are feminist writers they are highlighted as feminist writers whose feminist opinions expressed both verbally and in writing are particularly useful for women engulfed by the contemporary challenges of balancing tradition with modernity (np).

Anita Nair and Sashi Deshpande vary in their attitude towards feminism but their novels are centered on family and finally the idea of “New Women” who question their existence in patriarchy and break the social order or make a silent war against it and succeed keeping themselves within social conventions. The prominent thing is that their women realize they are in the dominance of patriarchy in every aspect of life.

Feminism means an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation within the family, at work and in society and conscious action by women and men to bring about a change in the situation.
Feminism advocates equal rights for women. It speaks for liberation that is against the idea of subordination of women in both family as well as society. It gives voice for the voiceless who suffer physically and mentally because of the violence done against them. The Indian women novelists like Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathanathan, R.P. Jabwala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shoba De, Arundhati Roy are chiefly concerned with the psychological crisis of Indian women who are subjected to physical and psychological torture in a male dominated society. Anita Nair takes a striking place in the series of these women novelists who have skilfully explored the agonized mind of the persecuted woman. She has taken a pioneering effort in raising her voice against gender discrimination, rape, child sexual abuse, internal partner violence, female foeticide through her various portrayal of characters. Though all these are the various forms that express the plight of women, the one and only cause behind these is the deeply rooted concept of patriarchy in the society. Anita Nair is a strong feminist as she makes her women characters question their plight in the patriarchal society or break the rules formulated by it.

In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies a relationship of equality. She has attempted to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Though patriarchy is a common concept in every woman’s life, Anita Nair depicts carefully the diversity within
each woman, as she does not want to pin down the lives of women to one ideal. In the words of Sunita Sinha:

Nair’s India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in her novels not only shakes the ideological ground of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also implies the existence of an alternative reality (149).

Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it stresses a relationship of inequality and injustice. As Nirupama Dutt says, “In patriarchy all women in the world are second class citizens”(34). It seems that though the colonists have stepped out of the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. The colonization still continues in the form of male domination towards women. As S. Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose state, “Women continue to be colonized and subjected to the oppressions put into place by colonialism and consolidated by patriarchy” (49). It is obvious that the colonized man asserted his mastery by his unjust treatment of women.

As already said Anita Nair in her novels attempts to show how, for women, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but blind the eye of women who are weak towards
sentiments like love, protection and the assurance of security. Most of her female characters including the protagonists like Akhila, Radha and Meera become a prey to one of these guises but do not allow themselves to be carried away by it and defy in making an alternative reality.

In *Ladies Coupe* the protagonist Akhilandeswari is a forty five year-old spinster who plays various roles of a daughter, sister, aunt and above all the provider of the family after the death of her father. As Indra Devi views, “Anita Nair probably hints at the family’s easy acceptance of her as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods” (220). The family accepts her as the head as they have no other go, as Akhila has inherited a job in her father’s office while the others could not get it being so young. In the words of Srinivasa Iyengar, “Akhila would chart and steer the course of the family’s destiny to safe shores” (np). She is little recognized as the head though she shoulders all the burdens on her. She thinks it is too heavy for her, but seldom opens her mouth. When she sees a man in a railway station surrounded by a whole family of uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents, she finds a parallel between him and her and says within her, how big a task she has shouldered all these years, “Akhila looked at the man who carried on his shoulders the burden of other people’s dreams. That she knew all about. That she could understand” (9). Akhila fulfils the dreams of others but her
dreams and desires are least bothered about just because she is a woman. Her family members take it for granted, she being a woman, but forget her desires as a woman. She wants to break the family shackles and live in autonomy but being a woman she hesitates to do it. In this view Simon de Beauvoir says, “The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.”

Akhila provided education to her brothers Narsi and Narayan and soon when they took their jobs she felt that the iron bands around her chest began to loosen: “Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?” (77). The woman in her makes her question herself, but the same woman in her silences her as she is not able to face her family members and tell them that she has her own desires. As Narsi and Narayan were men they did not ask for anybody’s permission to get married but “decided” to get married. There was no one to tell them that they should wait for their elder sister to get married before they think of a wife and a family. Akhila thought that her mother or brothers would open their mouth, “what about you? You’ve been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don’t you want a husband, children, a home of your own?” (77). As per the traditional practice of the Hindu family, the daughter gets married and leaves her family forthwith while she becomes the possession of the husband. But
Akhila’s family, though being a strict Hindu family, did not consider this as they merely used her as a cash-cow and very well knew that she would remain silent being a woman. As Jeyanthi makes a remark of Akhila, “She is compelled to forego all her desires just to feed her family. Nobody cares for her as she is a woman. She is destined to be a flower withering on account of burden of filial responsibility. She is to live in self-denial” (47).

In Indian society sons are given more importance than daughters. They are held in high esteem and daughters are expected to respect their brothers as their superiors even if they are younger to them. Feminism is strongly against such a gender discrimination, that has been since time immemorial. Akhila’s mother is a woman who is a strong believer in this gender discrimination. She lives with Akhila, but expects her to obtain permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour. She says, “Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first. You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family” (150). Akhila at the end boldly takes up a decision to live alone. Even then Akhila’s mother says without reluctance “Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they’ll let you live alone” (204). When Akhila breaks her silence to say “For heaven’s sake, I don’t need anyone’s consent” (204), Padma mocks at her telling her that they are the “men” of the family.
Akhila’s defiance was stronger than that of the family members who believed that a woman cannot live alone. So Akhila boarded the train to Kanyakumari hoping to live a life for her. Akhila’s defiance becomes stronger as she meets her friend Karpagam, who is a “new woman”. As Keith May says, “A New woman was dissatisfied with ordinary society and was reluctant to become or to remain a mere wife” (105). Karpagam does not want to remain a mere wife of her dead husband but violates the rules of society set for a widow and leads a life of her own. Anita Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring an awareness to the society of women’s demands and their need for self-expression. Karpagam is portrayed as a strong woman striving for self-definition in a patriarchal social organization that says that a woman should be out of all her desires after the death of her husband. Karpagam is a widow but unlike other widows she wears the kumkum and colourful clothes. She is a courageous woman who does not bother about society. She breaks the rules of the society. She lives a life for her. She simply does not care about what others would say:

I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me, didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some
man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his
death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men
(202).

Karpagam has lived alone for many years. She and her daughter have
never felt that they are alone. When she learns from Akhila how she
has been used by her family, anger pours out of her. She does not
look upon Akhila merely as her friend, but as a woman who has
crippled her life for her family. She tells her how as women, she and
her daughter have challenged life after the death of her husband.
Thus she breaks the dangerous framework of patriarchy that denies
personal freedom to women. Her words to Akhila are, “Whatever you
think you want to live alone. Build a life for yourself where your
needs come first” (202).

Feminism claims for equal rights for a man and woman. It is
against the strict social pattern that women are inferior to men. And
Anita Nair has carefully drawn characters like Akhila’s mother, to
express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal
structure that has imposed strict social, political and economic
limitations on women. Akhila’s mother is a conservative and orthodox
mother, a devoted wife with her own theory that a wife is always
inferior to her husband. She is a sort of a woman who never takes
decision on her own but leaves all decisions to her husband as she
believes, “He knows best” (14). According to her:
A good wife learnt to put husband’s interests before anyone else’s even her father’s. A good wife listened to her husband and did as he did. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly.

(14)

Moreover Akhila’s mother is a woman who could never accept a wife taking up a job. When Akhila wants her mother to take music lessons as her friend Karpagam’s mother teaches dance, she disapproves of it telling, “I don’t approve of what Karpagam’s mother is doing” (13). She reminds Akhila that her father had told her when they were first married, that he wants his wife to take care of him and his children and that she should not get caught up with her job so that she may not have time to take care of him the house and the children. So even after the death of Akhila’s father, her mother lets her eldest daughter Akhila shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family, taking advantage of her sense of duty and above all her acquiescence to keep them safe, secure and comfortable.

Sandra Lee Bartky states:

Feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. This means that the feminist apprehends certain features of
social reality as intolerable. The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As the philosophy of life it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated cause of women’s oppression. (23)

Anita Nair chooses Sarasa mami’s family as a complete contrast to Akhila’s family to interpret how the moral dilemmas of women are trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against oppression and destiny. In this situation women are forced to become contradictory to social order. As Subramani Iyer, Sarasa mami’s husband dies, Sarasa mami goes to every doorstep demanding to be taken as a servant-maid. But everyone in the neighbourhood just gives her a handful of rice as if she were a beggar. For a while Sarasa mami endures. She sells all little pieces of jewellery she owned. Finally when there was nothing left to sell and ‘hunger gnawed at their wilting honour and shook the respectability out of their bones’ she sells her eldest daughter Jaya. Sarasa mami becomes one of the revolutionaries who can stand up to the world. Even Akhila’s mother calls Sarasa mami a revolutionary, ‘When one lives in a society, one has to conform to its expectations. I am not one of those revolutionaries who can stand up to the world. I am a simple woman. A widow. And I need to belong to the society we live in” (83).

Shilpi Rishi Srivastava opines, “Feminism is a raising of the consciousness of an entire culture. From childhood, beliefs and attitudes, perpetuate women’s inferior status” (173). Janaki is a
fellow-traveler in the coupe with Akhila. All through her girlhood she has been taught that she was groomed for a man and marriage was her destiny. Her mother and aunts took great care to perfect what they called the skills of marriage—cooking, cleaning, sewing, and pickling. She was advised to accept whatever her husband does and just because he was her husband. This attitude instilled in her, had made her a fragile creature, and a dependent wife. Fortunately she was blessed with a friendly husband. She liked to be within the confined atmosphere of marriage. Her life had become a monotonous one, where she was not given a chance or situation to search her inner strength. So she had never thought of being an independent woman. This attitude had made no change in her life though she was in her fifties. As the other women listen to the story of Janaki, they are not much pleased as they believe and experience the power within them. For them marriage is not their destination as they had a quest for something more than that. Anita Nair has brought in the character of feeble Janaki to contrast the strength of other women.

Violence against women is a deliberate device used by men in a patriarchal society for the sake of maintaining women’s inferiority to men. As Francine Pickup opines:

The violence to which women are subject is not random, or abnormal or defined by specific circumstances alone. It is used as a weapon to punish women for stepping beyond the gendered boundaries set for them, and to
instill in them the fear of even considering doing so. It is a systematic strategy to maintain women's subordination to men (10).

Violence against women could include female child sexual abuse, rape and intimate partner violence. Manju Kapur in the novel *Home* has dealt with the main theme of sexual violence against female children, whereas Anita Nair in *Ladies Coupe* has tried to focus on this through the character of Sheela Vasudevan and also says how she makes a defiance against it silently. Though Manju Kapur and Anita Nair do not want to be called as feminist writers, both of them have chosen to speak of this often unspoken issue.

In *Ladies Coupe*, through the character Sheela Vasudevan we come to know about her maternal grandmother in whom one could see the manifestations of femininity. Through her Anita Nair has not only brought out the need to assert the individuality of the female selfhood but has also finely dealt with the issue of female child sexual abuse. As Judes Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, “Sheela’s retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men” (122). It is shown how men take advantage of the silence of young children. Sheela is a representative of young children who are sexually abused. Anoushka Shankar, composer and daughter of the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, who died recently, has revealed in an article published in *The Hindu* how as a child she suffered “sexual and emotional abuse” in silence for several years at the hands of a man,
her parents trusted implicitly. The words of Anoushka Shankar as given by Hasan Surror in an article in *The Hindu*:

> “As a woman, I find I am frequently living in fear. Afraid to walk alone at night, afraid to answer a man who asks for the time...” she said. “Growing up, like most women I know, I suffered various forms of groping, touching, verbal abuse and other things I didn’t know how to deal with, I didn’t know I could change”(1).

Sheela is fourteen year old. She is able to identify a bad touch when her friend’s father touches her, but she doesn’t know how to avoid it. She is not able to protest against it immediately, though she feels ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina’s father Naazar:

> One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Naazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his forefinger tingled on her skin for a long time. Thereafter, Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina’s home (66).

On another occasion, the bows on the sleeves of her blouse had come undone and as Hasina and her mother watched, Naazar knotted the bows slowly and meticulously. Sheela felt her breath lodge in her throat and when she saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother’s eyes,
shame wrapped itself around her. Naazar is bold in his attempts as he very well knows that neither Sheela nor his wife or daughter will speak against him.

Sheela is aware of such attempts by men. She knew about the Celine incident even though it had happened about the time when Sheela was five year old. Celine was a young girl who used to go and play in her friend’s house. The friend’s father had done things to her that friend’s fathers are not supposed to do. So Celine became pregnant and her parents took her to a place where no one could know about her abortion. The friend’s father too went away to a far-away town “where he would find plenty of young girls to ruin” (65). So Celine is a representative of young girls victimized by men who continue to gambol with women. Sheela is hurt and embarrassed at the behavior of Hasina’s father but she did not want the gambol to continue anymore. So she takes the right decision, “She would never go to Hasina’s house again” (66) as a means of self-protection. Thus Sheela becomes strong in her defiance against a man’s abuse on her physique. Though Manju Kapur and Anita Nair have dealt with the same issue unlike Anita Nair, Manju Kapur has reflected in Home, how the young victim Nisha has not yet developed an understanding of sexuality that allows him or her to make a free and fully conscious response to the adult’s behavior. In Home, Nisha appears to be strong enough to withstand Vicky’s assault and express her repugnance, but she rapidly loses control over her body when he uses violence to make
her surrender to his evil designs. Anita Nair differs from the other writer in making Sheela develop confidence to make her self-protective.

Feminism as a philosophy of reform envisages profound changes in traditional social structures such as the family, in the economic role and power of women and in fundamental attitudes and personal relationships. Prabha Devi is a character who is married into a traditional family, makes her way to improve her fundamental attitudes and personal relationships as a woman in social order. As Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose observe, “Patriarchy shows its ugly face from cradle to grave” (76). Parents are more concerned about boys than girls. When Prabha Devi is born, her father sighs, as it would be a hindrance for his business prospects and he says, “Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, added your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (69). But Prabha Devi’s mother is pleased when a daughter is born as her thoughts are confined that a daughter is someone who would take her recipes to the other house and treasure her jewellery and someone who would say that she did this and that in her mother’s house. Even while playing games as a child, a girl is destined to choose to play cooking or baby-sitting games, “Expensive dolls with blonde hair and eyes were laid down on her bed. A kitchen was set up for her to play, house and mother games. This one daughter of hers gave her more pleasure than all her four sons put together” (170).
When Prabha Devi is born her father openly tells his wife about his displeasure at the birth of a daughter. He does not hesitate to reiterate this open comment as it never occurs to him that it would hurt his wife as he takes pride in saying it, for he is the man of the family. But Prabha Devi’s mother is not allowed to open her mouth for sharing her views. In complete contrast to her husband she thinks that her daughter gave her more pleasure than all her four sons did. But she keeps quiet about it. She has to be so as she is a woman. “Long ago she had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell. To be shunned. And so Prabha Devi’s mother swallowed the thought as she had done all her life” (170).

Women have no say in the choice of their life partner. They are not even asked whether they are ready to get married. When they reach the age of eighteen they are given away in marriage, as it was a matter of concern to keep at home a girl of eighteen, no matter whether she was docile or well mannered. Prabha Devi’s character depicts the longing of a woman for independence and an identity. When Prabha Devi turned eighteen she was decided to be given in marriage to Jagdeesh. Her brothers and their wives were very happy as they thought it was not wise to have an unwed sister at home, though she was docile and well mannered. Her brothers and father were there to decide her future where as she was not asked a word. James Tar Tsaaior says of this, “Within this male constructed tradition female children are not reckoned with as they are
subordinated to male children” (27). She was married to the son of a prosperous diamond merchant. They did not ask for the preference of Prabha Devi in this, but went on with it as it could be a means to expand their jewellery business. Prabha Devi was not given the freedom to express her opinion; she had to accept the life chosen by the men of their family. Anita Ghosh is right when he says, “Men and women in the Indian society do not have the same kind of freedom to express themselves. Women are still greatly dominated by men and the society in general” (35).

Prabha Devi had been a woman compelled to perform her roles as a daughter, wife and daughter-in-law. Her desires as an individual have always been next. This had made her seek for independence as a woman. Her trip to New York with her husband Jagdeesh paved the way for her to be an independent woman:

Prabha Devi wanted to be like the women she had seen in New York. With swinging hair and a confident stride. They seemed to know exactly where they were going and once they got there, what they had to do. Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Such poise, such confidence, such celebration of life and beauty. Prabha Devi wanted that for herself (177).

So Prabha Devi came back from New York as a woman with thoughts of freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of choice of dress.
There was a complete transformation in her clothes. She packed away her saris and began to wear silky caftans, “With that Prabha Devi felt she was finally a woman of the world sans the slouch, the downcast eyes and the sari pallu weighing down her youth” (178).

A woman in Indian society is not given freedom to share her opinions in bed with her husband. She is merely a sex object. It is often forgotten that love making involves mutual participation. It is believed by men that it needs no discussion as it is something done beneath a thin sheet. Prabha Devi after her return from New York takes the liberty to express her opinion at bed time with her husband Jagdeesh, “There are ways in which pregnancy can be avoided, couldn’t you wear a condom?” (179). Jagdeesh neither expected it nor could he accept it. He was stiffened with shame and embarrassment. According to him sex was something a man and a woman had, under the cover of the night and a thin sheet and it was not a topic fit for open conversation. For him, the wife should agree to whatever the husband does. He even disliked Prabha Devi for taking such a liberty and so his “desire for her was replaced by dislike” (179).

Prabha Devi who was attracted towards the western modern women of New York meets with shame and guilt and this becomes a turning point in her life where she is unable to choose between tradition and modernity. Prabha Devi develops into a woman of confidence, the confidence of looking beautiful. She didn’t want to be recognized as a mere extension of Jagdeesh’s Mrs. So she could not
bear the thought of Pramod her husband’s friend irresponsible of her presence in her husband’s absence:

If she was by herself he merely tilted his head in greeting and ignored her. Prabha Devi didn’t like it. How dare he? She thought Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else’s personality? Jagdeesh’s Mrs. and no more (180).

Savitha Singh says, “Woman is always conscious of her beauty and feels proud when appreciative eyes follow her” (np). This pride in her made her practise her wiles upon him and also succeeded in it. When Pramod took advantage of it and came home in wanting of her, she realized suddenly with a sinking of her heart that she was married. She never thought that her sense of liberty would take her to that extent. She could not imagine the consequences. She did not want to break the rules of tradition. She did not want to bring down the reputation of her husband. So once again Prabha Devi is back to her traditional role of a dedicated and devoted wife:

Prabha Devi made a decision. She would camouflage this body that had sent such reckless messages to the world. She would lock away that gay spirited woman who had caused her such anguish, and unlearn every single mannerism she had worked so hard to acquire. She would never again ask for anything and would be content with what was offered to her. She would withdraw herself from life. She
would revert to being who she was when she first married Jagdeesh (183).

Prabha Devi is torn between tradition and modernity. Prabha Devi takes back to her traditional role, but quests for an individuation. She is not satisfied of her roles merely as a wife and a mother, but wanted something more than that. She does not want to leave her family and seeks it but to attain it existing in her traditional role. This becomes true with the words of Neeru Tandon:

She is progressive and conscious of her rights like the contemporary western counterpart, but she quickly compromises the fact to that a woman’s real position lies within the family-unit with her male-counterpart, which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being ‘liberated’. (12)

The society compels a woman to see her roles and duties as a mother and a wife as her priorities. Anita Nair shows how women without breaking their traditional ties, at the same time seek their individuation. So Prabha Devi has become the keeper of Jagdeesh’s home and the mother of his children. She listens to him and obeys him. She lives on the outposts of his life. She thinks she is tired of this monotony. She wants to have an individuation to acquire a spiritual content. So she decides she would learn to swim by herself. An instinct works in her, “She would have to call that instinct to the
fore again. After all, she had spent nine months in her mother’s womb swimming” (188). The moment she realizes she had stayed afloat she experiences a moment of supreme content. She knows that life would never be the same again. Thus Prabha Devi is a woman who asserts her individuality not by liberating herself from the traditional conventions but by connecting herself with them.

Sharmila, who meets Prabha Devi in the airport is an instance of the women who are treated as second class citizens in the Indian patriarchal set up who are not given any importance in decision making. She, unlike Prabha Devi, has a strong desire for higher studies. According to Ajantha Parthasarathy:

In India the institution of marriage has a very traditional set up which subjugates and tortures women. Through suppression and dominance it makes division between husband and wife. It defines the position of husband and the wife in the family. Traditionally a husband commands his wife and subordinates her desire. The husband demands complete selfless surrender to him. Thus she being a property of her husband loses her personality, qualities and dreams. She is not given any “room of her own” (122).

Sharmila had been the most brilliant student in the school. She was destined to be either a doctor or an IAS officer. But she met with a
bad destiny in marriage. She discontinued her studies and got married to Naresh who said that he didn’t mind her studying even after their marriage. But she had to fulfil, the role of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law and could seldom be able to pursue a degree. She says to Prabha Devi, “This is the woman whose son now rules my destiny and dreams. My thoughts have been reduced to whether I should cook rice or chappatis for lunch, fry okras or aubergine; load the washing machine with cotton whites or cotton coloured…”(175).

Anita Nair raises her voice against the sufferings of married women under male-chauvinist husbands. She is greatly concerned with a deep insight of the feminine psyche and her problems in her marital life. She condemns in her writing the brutal approach of man to his wife. Though a wife is said to be his better half, she is always ignored and disrespected by him in real life. Virginia Woolf’s opinion is worthy of being quoted in this regard:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant... Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband (45).

Margaret Shanthi is the best example for this notion. She was a gold medalist in M.Sc., Chemistry. She had dreams to work towards a
doctorate and go to America. But as Jeyanthi says, “Marriage is the ultimate end of a girl’s life, she has to accept, adjust, accommodate and compromise with the interests of her husband whether she is educated or not” (72). Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj, who was her own choice and accepted by her parents, wanted her to be a teacher like him. While she liked to have a long hair he wanted her to cut it short as he didn’t like it. When she was happy about her first pregnancy, to her shock he simply asked her to go in for an abortion, least bothered about her feelings. He refers to their unborn child “as that cell in you and it’s only a zygote and no soul in it” (118). He just asks her to abort it, thinking of it as a tumour that has to be removed. When Silvia Meregenthil says, “His expression suggests a critical degree of cruelty and lack of sensibility that he projects onto her psyche” (22). Margaret remained in silence burying down all her agonies.

In the Indian society though men and women do more or less the same work women’s contribution is generally undervalued. She not only works outside but also does all daily chores. Margaret Shanthi raises the pertinent question:

“What about me? I wanted to ask. Don’t I have a right to have any expectations of him? Don’t I work as hard as he does and more because I run the house as well? Why do you think he is busy and I have all the time in the
world?...He never has any time to devote to the house!"

Margaret has no other option except to follow the traditional patriarchal conventions that demand her to take on the role of a submissive wife who cannot break the rules of marriage. This is because in her family no one had ever been divorced. Theirs was a respectable family and in that no one gave up on their marriage. They grit their teeth and worked harder to preserve it. She too did the same.

Psychological violence against the wife becomes a recurring reality. As Silvia Mergenthel puts it:

Perhaps the most invisible aspect of intimate-partner violence is psychological violence though it is likely the most pervasive type of maltreatment that women in violent relationships are made to suffer. Psychological violence includes manipulative or threatening behaviours that are used to instill fear. It also includes fear, verbal abuse, such as making comments that are derogatory, demeaning or embarrassing (20).

Ebenezer Paulraj tries to keep up his reputation by diminishing his wife’s merits in the presence of others. When he makes derogatory comments on the subject taught by Margaret in front of the coterie, she meets with a great psychological unrest. “And if you ask me, there
can't be a more dry or boring subject than chemistry. But the little imps like it because to them it's like a game” (123). She strives with shame, anger and disgust. In front of his coterie he does not give his wife the opportunity to answer a question. By doing so he formulates derogatory observations regarding her inability to discuss things with others. She was very much embarrassed at this as, “they all turned to look at me” (130).

Margaret Shanthi is aware of her frustration and rage against her “male-peacock” husband. But she swallows everything for the sake of protecting her marriage. Even at the end she does not break her marriage but triumphs over Ebenezer being inside. Later when she realizes that she has been in a subservient position under the overwhelming power of her husband, she plans to take revenge on him, by eroding his self-esteem. But unlike Ebenezer she strives to achieve this in a non-violent way. She makes him an addict to her dishes that always had puris fried in ghee and potatoes, peas, cauliflower, fried eggs and creamy milk with sugar. Flattering coyly was her weapon, “You’re a big man. And you need to eat a big meal. And it isn’t as if you don’t exercise. Besides you need your strength”. As she did this Ebe could not resist and a year after, fat found its home on him. Folds appeared around his neck. So she made him a man, whom she could live with, to become pregnant and give birth to a baby girl:
Ebe slowly became a fat man. A quiet man. A man who no longer needed the coterie or defaced books. I was the one to appease his appetite for food and occasionally for sex, in every which way I knew. He needed me like he had never before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again (134).

So Ebe who had made Margaret abort her first baby had been made to become the father of the second, through Margaret Shanthi’s silent war against the male-egoist tyrannical husband. Through this Anita Nair has brought out how a woman can triumph over a man silently.

Rape is a serious threat against women. Men take over women as with this early as they are of a weak physique. Moreover men take up this weapon of rape easily against women as women keep silent about this. Even if they take it out, they meet with shame and injustice. When Lisa Ernst says:

Rape is a man’s right. If a woman doesn’t want to give it, the man should take it. Women have no right to say no. Women are made to have sex. It’s all they’re good for. There is nothing more in them. Some women would rather take a beating, but they always give in (11).

Seema Bansal says, “The slogan of Indian leaders and social reformers is ‘educating a girl means educating a family’(133). But this slogan has not yet come true in Indian society. Anita Nair not only gives
voice against rape but also against the denial of education for female children through her portrayal of the characher Marikolanthu. In India most of the female children are denied education, as the parents think it is a risk to send a girl child to school. Anita Nair throws light on this discrimination also. Marikolanthu is too innocent to understand the risk of being a girl when her mother tells about it. She is denied education just because she is a girl. When she completes her fifth standard her mother is not willing to send her to the town school to continue her studies, but agrees for her brothers:

You do understand, don’t you…We’ll send your brothers to the town school when the time comes but how can I send a young girl by herself. It would be impossible to send you to school by bus every day. There is too much at risk. I didn’t understand what is risk. (215).

Marikolanthu though she does not understand anything, just nods her head as a good girl. So it became the fate of Marikolanthu to accompany her mother to Chettiarkottai everyday where she was a cook. Meanwhile Marikolanthu became an unpaid baby-sitter for the Chettiar’s grandson. Through this Anita Nair shows how the education of a girl child is neglected and the negligence is least bothered about.

Indian girls when they attain womanhood are not taught how to protect themselves and develop confidence and self-will. Instead they
are taught how to dress up themselves to show that they have become matured physically. When Marikolanthu attains womanhood she is asked to dress herself with a long skirt and dhavani over her bosom, that only confuses her why she has to undergo such a change. Her mother does not build in her the mental courage but threatens her of her womanhood “You are a grown-up girl and not a young child any more. Don’t you know that there are dangers lurking in every corner, hiding behind every tree and bush?” (238).

When a young girl is raped, it is her parents who get disturbed and worried, for nobody will marry that girl. The world looks at it at the physical level and fails to take into account the mental shock, fear and trauma the girl meets with. Marikolanthu is raped by Murugesan when she does not agree to yield her to him. He brutally takes her. He is one among the men who thinks that women are born to have their carnal desires gratified. “I know all about women like you. Why are you pretending to be a guileless virgin?” (239). Murugesan is sure confident that Marikolanthu could never point an accusing finger at him, as he is the Chettiar’s relative. When she is found pregnant her mother is worried: “No man will be willing to marry a woman who’s lost her virginity” (246). So Marikolathu meets with injustice and the rape had brought turn of events in her life. She wants to erase the whole episode from her memory but in vain. But nothing seems to have happened to Murugesan, who has committed a heinous crime. He lives a luxurious life and dies as a rich business man. Though
Marikolanthu has been used as a sex object by Murugesan and thrown away, she has met with shame and disgust and hatred. Yet at the end she decides to make up for her loss of happiness. She finds a job of her own and does not bother about, what the society would say about her living with her son with a nameless father. She is a new woman whose voice is echoed in the following poem by Shange Ntozana:

I am space and winds
Like a soft rain or a torrent of dust
I can move
Be free in time
A movement is mine always
I am not like a flower at all
I can bloom and be a wisp of sunlight
I'm a rusting of dead leaf and so familiar with tears
This is mine
So as long as I breathe
I'm gonna dance for all of us
Everybody dead, everybody busy
Everybody too burdened to jump
Through a night a hot and bluesy jump
In the guts of ourselves a dance
Is like a dream
I can always remember make it come again
I can make it come again (3).

Within the story of Marikolanthu as she brings in characters like Sujata, Anita Nair throws light on the ignorance and innocence of women who think that their husband is their everything. They
become worshippers of their husband, no matter even if they choose a concubine outside. Though their husbands have done nothing to them, they say that they are their protectors. Marikolanthu is angry when Sujata says, “if she has a job, that will replace a husband’s protection” (246). Marikolanthu knows that neither her mother nor Sujata had their husbands to look after them, but even then they call it husband’s protection:

Husband’s protection! The phrase made me cringe.
Neither Sujata Akka nor my mother ever had their husbands look out for them. The Chettiar took care of Sujata Akka’s needs. And amma had to look after herself. The men in their lives had done nothing and yet to them a fulfilled woman was one who was married. Everything else was secondary (246).

Man thinks that a wife should depend on her husband till she dies. He is even too self-centered to think that she cannot live after his death. This is well said by Anita Desai, “Women’s lives were spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death, dying, always behind bars” (14). In Ladies Coupe there is a reference to one such man who has been too self-centered to poison his wife and children and he hangs himself in the ceiling as he thinks his wife cannot live after his death. Anita Nair voices against such things through the protagonist Akhila when she says, “Did his wife want to
die with him? What about his children? How dare he takes their lives as if it was his right to decide whether they lived or died?” (273). It is here Akhila admires Sarasa Mami’s way of making up her life using her daughter Jaya after the death of her husband. She had lived in the best way she knew. She is angry over the men who think that a wife cannot make a living after the death of her husband.

In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair has also attempted to write for lesbianism as she has the positive image of the lesbian as a woman of strength and independence as it is a central thesis for lesbian feminist theory. Elsa Gidlow says, “The lesbian personality manifests itself in independence of spirit” (9). Anita Nair had brought it in her writings to mark it as a liberation of women. She tries to show that through lesbian relationship women are liberated from the aggressiveness of men. When a woman is tired of a man’s love-making, ironically which could not be called love-making at all, as he is selfish to seek only his desires at that time, she yearns for a kind of love that will not hurt her, and at the same time will not break the traditional conventions of marriage. This is true in the case of Sujata in *Ladies Coupe*. She is vexed about the sexual life she had with her husband as a routine whenever he needed. She does not find any emotional attachment with him and also knows that he goes out in search of other women. Whenever he needs her, she does not refuse as she is afraid that he might bring a mistress to the house:
When he comes near me, I feel as though a lizard is crawling up my skin. But I close my eyes and let him do whatever he wants to. I know he goes to other women, but if I don’t let him do it once in a while, he’ll find a mistress like his father did, and flaunt her beneath my nose. Every night when I go to bed, I wait for his touch. Only when he turns on his side and goes to sleep do I fall asleep (259).

Sujata in this situation finds a vent in Marikolanthu’s love. In this love Sujata found how she was treated as a woman with desire. It was not a violent love but a gentle love-making. This gave Sujata a hope in her desert-life, “She asks for little except that she be treated as a desirable woman; that she be wooed with abundance and loved gently” (260). So as a feminist Anita Nair does not limit herself to a particular movement, but goes even ahead of it, as per her self-will.

It is often said that Anita Nair’s maiden novel The Better Man is about friendship and betrayal of two men. But one could not say that there is nothing to do with feminist trait in this novel, because Anita Nair voices the plight of simple, sober, unsophisticated abandoned women in this novel. She has focused particularly on the tragedy of the unsuccessful marital life of Anjana, a young school teacher, and the protagonist Mukundan’s mother who is abandoned by her husband Achuthan Nair, as he leaves her and goes to live with another woman. Anita Nair has chosen these characters to show how
women struggle for survival and realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering in helplessness. This is what is said by Sheela Rani Khare:

Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women’s rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women’s struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness (177).

When Mukundan’s mother, Paru Kutty comes to know that she has ceased to be a wife as her husband is after Ammini, she is unable to bear it but silences herself against it as she is, “too frightened to stand up to him and demand to know what was going on” (74). But when Achuthan Nair tells her that he is going to bring Ammini to that house, she blasts at him to demand due respect for her. She does not want her to be meant a little. She demands recognition:

I’m willing to live with the shame of you taking a mistress. But I’m not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and I insist you treat me with the respect due to me. For as long as I am alive I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn’t (74).

In all the years that Achuthan Nair had been married he had never heard her use that tone with him. To everybody’s surprise, Paru
Kutty is a new woman with courage and confidence to raise her voice against her husband and demand justice. Her rebellion ends in success at last and Achuthan Nair never takes Ammini into her house. She had succeeded to live as a woman alone without her husband till the end.

Sasibala states:

Indian Literature of the earlier era had depicted woman as one who is docile, self sacrificing, the embodiment of selfless love and a veritable monument of patience, ever willing to suffer. Such virtues are highlighted as the virtues of womanhood, the virtues of pathivratha (122).

Women in India accept and observe this pathivratha only as society compels them. Even after they are abandoned by their husband, they are expected to live in his memory and prove their loyalty to him. They do not happily accept it but observe it with an agonized heart. Suffocated they rebel against this and succeed in breaking the traditional concept. They crave for something more than this. They come out of this predicament and become empowered. As they become empowered, they become independent and achieve happiness. Anita Nair in her novel Lessons in Forgetting draws one such character by name Sarada Ammal, Jak’s mother.

Sarada Ammal is an abandoned wife. Her life becomes so, because of the selfishness of her husband who thinks that a wife is
just to provide a heir to their family. His parents too think so. He is
desirous of renouncing the world and going to an ashram, but marries
Sarada, as his parents compel him saying that they wanted a heir:

If someone is to be blamed it is me for being such a
coward. I should have told you. My parents knew I never
wished for this. A wife, a child, the murkiness of
grihastha ashrama... It was my duty to provide them with
an heir. For the family line to continue... I couldn’t hurt
them. So I was obliged to shelve my desire (14).

It is obvious that Sarada is considered a machine to reproduce and
once when the work is over, it is a man’s pride to throw her away.
Sarada becomes an abandoned wife, with his young son Kitcha. She
is baffled at her status, “Neither a wife nor a widow, who am I Kitcha?”
(17). Even at this situation it is her pathivrtha that makes her say, “If
he left me for another woman, 'I would woo him back. I would bring
him back to us” (17). Abandoned women like Sarada want to bring
back their husband because, though Sarada is the victim, the society
would find fault with her. To the eyes of the society, she was a failed
woman, unable to keep her husband. This is revealed through the
words of her sister, “They held Akka responsible for her husband
leaving her. She just wasn’t a good enough wife, one who could keep
her husband at her side. She was a failed woman” (96).
Though Sarada is forsaken by her husband she lives in memory of him. She waits for him to return. Even a little word about him makes her happy. This is revealed when a relative comes to their house bringing them a holy pouch saying it was sent by her husband from the ashram. She is overwhelmed to say, “He has sent this for us, Kitcha. He has. What does it say? He hasn’t forgotten us” (232). She sits there caressing the vermillion dust with the tip of her finger as if it were her husband’s arm. She does this to convey herself that he was there and with her, observing pathivrtha as it is the highest virtue of womanhood.

It takes time for Sarada to relieve herself. She later finds a job in a small town school and has a steady income. Even then, “She is tiring herself, by being a needy creature who rose with bare-faced hope each time someone buzzed the doorbell”. This hope comes to an end when she reads an envelope that said that her husband was moving to Rishikesh. As Simon De Bevoir says, “Feminism has always meant independence of mind and spirit and body” (258). Sarada gains this independence of mind, body and spirit through education. She does her B.Ed. She is enlightened that “she no longer talked about her husband or even referred to him” (234). So it is time for her to break her marriage and apply for a divorce. She becomes a courageous woman to choose her life with another man who loved her, “And this time Amma chose a man who loved life” (234).
In the words of Neeru Tandon, “Feminism achieves a respectable individual liberty for women with their natural instincts. It vehemently opposes the categorization of women as mere sex objects” (25). For a girl marriage is her destiny. There is no respect for her individual liberty in this. Her marriage is decided by her parents and the man who chooses to marry her does not respect her individual instincts but just take her for a sex object. Anita Nair raises her voice against this concept through the character of Kala in Lessons in Forgetting. Kala is Jak’s Chithi. She is given in marriage in a hurry as the society does not accept girls kept for long without marrying: “Daughters are never for keeps. They are loaned to us for a while” (195).

Kala’s husband chose to marry her as he was overwhelmed by her long hair. Neither her father nor her husband realized the pain she had due to the heaviness of her hair. Kala with a long hair became a sex object for him, “On Friday nights my husband made love to me with much gusto. It was the night when my freshly washed hair fell like a shroud on my back and he played with it” (197). For Kala her long hair was a burden that gave her an unbearable pain on her neck. She wanted to open her mouth about this, but couldn’t do it as her destiny was linked to that of his as she says, “I had no life to call my own. I was nothing on my own” (196).

At one extreme, she could not bear that heaviness and cut off her hair to the hip. When her husband found it out, it was his pride
of a man to ask her “You didn’t even think of asking my permission?” (203). Once again only when her hair reached the same length he was back to being the man he was. Kala wanted to ask “Do you love me or my hair?” (204) but she couldn’t. She became furious when her husband decided to wed again, as she was still childless. But as a man he was proud to say that he would father the child and the child would have two mothers, one being Kala and the other, his biological mother. At this juncture Kala found her self-respect crumbling and decided to erode his pride. She cut her hair and gave it to Ambi and said with courage, “This is all you ever wanted of me. And let me go”. She felt proud when her father said crying “one abandoned by her husband. The other abandons her husband” (206).

As a feminist writer, Anita Nair’s feminism is rooted in the larger frame work of human rights of personal freedom and right to body. But women in literature, over centuries have been the archetypes of Sita, the silent-sufferer, the model of Indian womanhood. So a woman is always passive to accept the dynamic role of the man in her life. What Gauri Shankar Jha says is relevant to this context:

Pitaa Rakshati Kumaree,
Bhartaa Rakshati Yauvanee;
Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyee;
Na Stri Swaatantrvam Arhati. (Sastri, 1983, IX, 3)
(The father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth, and the son during her old age; a woman does not deserve freedom)

Therefore, it has been made compulsory that a wife should accept a lower status than that of her husband. She denied the right to express herself. Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* is a submissive wife, fully dependent on her husband Giri. She is an educated woman with a post graduation in English. But this is just a trivial thing to her husband and so she remains a corporate wife, proving the virtue of womanhood. This is exactly what is epitomised by Shoba De as, “We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized” (69).

Meera is educated, but not empowered. Says Eveline Shindya:

- Dependent women are not empowered women.
- Empowerment means to motivate women with the courage to break free from the chains of restrictive beliefs, and social or religious conditions that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to realize their power (198).

Like most Indian women, Meera worships her husband and moves every inch, at the move of her husband. She does not even smile on her own, “Wives are the same everywhere. When Giri smiles, so does she. A wife in love” (5). She has to give a fake smile if Giri
wants her to smile, “Give them a sample of that famous Meera’s charm!” (5).

Anita Nair beautifully portrays the status of women in Indian society. A wife’s identity depends on her husband. If she becomes an abandoned wife or a widow, she has no identity in the society. Meera who is a famous cook book writer, is least recognized after her husband leaves her. All these days, the publisher of cook books, who with no second thought chose Meera’s recipes to publish, rejects her work after Giri has left her and tells to her face, “I had to make some enquiries and I hear that you are separated. That changes the whole angle, you know. And ‘just Desserts-Desserts for when the Boss comes to Dinner’ is too niche and too much of a risk” (89).

Meera has been a wife to the expectations of her husband. She has always dressed to Giri’s choice, as she believed men always desire their wives to be charming and attractive. This is rightly pointed out by Githa Hariharan in the novel Thousand Faces of Nights as, “The house wife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does (70). Meera has always restrained her expenses, having no big dreams, having no desire for designer clothes, diamonds or expensive holidays. She does all these things to please her husband, as she is not an exception of women with little desire in a male-dominated society. Moreover she is just an object who has to
look attractive and go by the dictates of her husband. Meera is like a goat tied to her husband, nodding her head to him and wandering around him. She is like Mukhtar Mai’s protagonist who says:

Men are the ones who ‘know’; women must simply keep quiet and wait. Why tell us anything? Men make the decisions, rule, act, judge. I think of the goats tied up in courtyards to keep them from wandering around the countryside. I don’t count for more than a goat here, even if I haven’t got a cord looped around my neck (104).

When Giri leaves forsaking Meera, she becomes a disoriented Meera. All these days she has been silent towards Giri’s indifference because she has felt it could make Giri move away from her. As Durrani comments, “Victims generally feel, it is better to suffer in silence than to be separated from their loved ones” (177). Meera never expects Giri will forsake her. Meera is emotionally struck at the abuse he has left her, in his unfinished email. Anita Nair throws light on a man’s pride to abuse a woman badly through Giri:

I wanted to reach across to slap her face. Her face that she has slathered with half a tin of fucking Nivea cream. That’s her greatest fucking concern wrinkles... But what I really want to do is... shake her till her teeth rattle and tell her, Fuck you and your fucking old house! (40)
Though Meera becomes disoriented at Giri’s reversal, she manages to come out of it. She has confidence in her. She manages to stand on her own feet in his absence. She finds a job as a research assistant to Prof. Jak and performs well her role of a mother and daughter. She evolves as an empowered woman. Meera is no more a disoriented Meera. She proves her autonomy. Here as a feminist writer Anita Nair brings out how a woman is confident of her autonomy. Stella Rose speaks of a woman’s autonomy thus:

Feminism is a powerful tool for voicing some of the basic concerns and aspirations of women. The seminal question is not gender equality but gender independence, not just women’s liberation but women’s autonomy. A woman gives her best in autonomy. It is in autonomy she is liberated (45).

Through the character of Meera, Anita Nair brings out the plight of Indian women who are dependent on their husbands and how they can come out of it and become self-assertive, strong-willed and autonomous, not depending on others for their survival. In the words of Vandana Bhagdikar, “They are the ‘New Women’ able to live strong-willed, independent and free from traditional constrictions to achieve a heightened sense of dignity” (201).

Like the feminist writer Mannu Bhandrai’s women characters, Anita Nair’s Saadiya in Mistress reflects the dilemma of Indian women
who are portrayed as standing at the crossroads of community and freedom, symbolized by ‘home’ and ‘world’ respectively unable to choose one above the other. As Anita Gosh observes:

> With respect to Mannu Bhandari’s women, if their ties with the community deny them freedom, then the process of leaving the community creates in them the fear of isolation. The act of breaking away from their communal conditioning becomes fraught with pain and frustration. Manu Bhandari’s writings depict the helplessness and confusion of women in their attempts to overcome these conflicts. (2)

Like Manu Bhandari, Anita Nair has drawn the character of Saddiya to show how women are denied freedom as per the rules set by their community and how she is unable to shrug-off her emotional and psychological dependence on men, family and community. As quoted by Sunita Sinha, “Feminism is an attack upon social opinion, wherever it discriminates in its attitude towards man and woman” (221).

Anita Nair through the character portrayal of Saddiya, shows her concern for women who are denied basic freedom even at home, restricted within the strict framework of religion. As Prasanna Sree says, “Through the centuries, women in Hindu tradition are depicted as silent sufferers, they have been given a secondary status both in
the family and society” (18). In the same way, over many years, the Islam looks upon women as inferior to men and has made women suffer under its strict laws.

Saadiya is the youngest daughter born in a traditional Muslim family. Her father is very particular in keeping his womenfolk in Islamic tradition as he often says, “it is our duty to safeguard the bloodline” (99). So it is the fate of women like Saadiya to be born and die in the same room. The four walls become their world:

Saadiya stared at the square of blue over her head. Twenty feet by thirty feet. That was the measure of her sky, the peripheries of her life. She touched the grey walls of the terrace roof. Even if she stood a solid six feet and two inches high, making sure she would never see what was not meant for her eyes, ensuring that she was not visible to anyone. Saadiya felt what was by not a familiar sense of despair. Would she like her sisters and every other women born here, live and die hidden by these walls? Was there never to be a way out from here? (99).

Saadiya cannot express her thoughts. She wants to cry out the discrimination that their religion has drawn between men and women. She wants to tell her father what is right and wrong. She wants to break her throat to say, “It isn’t fair that you men get to go wherever you want, see and do whatever you like, and we are expected to be
content with this patch of blue and this maze of alleys” (99). The more Saadiya questions about such restrictions the more she craves for freedom and attempts to break the rules. But violation of rules will end in violence against women. This is what is the result in Saadiya too. In the words of Neeru Tandon:

Violence against women has been accepted and even condoned throughout history. More than 2,000 years ago, Roman law, gave a man life and death authority over his wife. In the 18th century, English common law, gave a man permission to discipline his children and wife with a stick or whip no wider than his thumb. Feminists claim that men are more likely to use violence to keep their dominant position. While society claims to abhor violence, we often make heroes of men who are aggressive (140).

These words are true with Saadiya’s strict father. Breaking the rules when she steps out and goes to the common alley where men would walk, she knows that her father would be furious. As she expects, the furious father, takes violence as his weapon to discipline his daughter. Patriarchy overflows through his veins and says he is the man of the family. This makes him too violent to press a very hot iron rod on her calves twice. Moreover, he wants him to be the hero of his family who could keep up its honour, by disciplining his girls this way:
You feel the need to break rules. This is my Saadiya; good girl. The next time you feel the need to break your reins, remember how your flesh melted... This is a lesson for you as much as it is for me, that it is unwise to give girls even a little rope. That it isn’t in women to understand the nuances of freedom. And if I have left you unpunished I may risk the honour of my family (130).

Here Anita Nair reveals the gender discrimination marked by religion. It is obvious through Saadiya’s story that women in Arabipatnam are not allowed to go out of the four walls even for education. There is no reference of girls being sent to school. Moreover they were fully covered with black dress all over their body excepting their eyes: “She took away the black fold of the cloth that covered her face and flung it on to her shoulder” (101). But men enjoyed endless freedom. Women seldom saw the sea though they lived close to it. These questions arise in Saadiya’s mind:

Though we live so close to it, we don’t get to see it ever. All the men in Arabipatnam went to beach everyday, like they went to the mosque. It was a part of their routine. We were allowed out, perhaps once a year. At other times, we knew the sea existed only when the breeze set in at early noon, bringing into our homes a whiff of salt and on hot days a brackish odour, part fish, part decay, part mystery (138).
Women pursue freedom by rebelling against the religious code. The rules are likely to be broken as the situations trigger the urge to cross the line. So Saadiya breaks the religious code, crossing the line set by it. Her father expels her from their society in order to keep up the honour of his position in the religious circle. Saadiya craves for a new world of freedom and that is why she leaves her home and goes with Sethu, a man who is not of her religion. She expects total freedom, in the sense that it allows her to follow that freedom her religion and inculcating its rituals on her child after marriage. When this is denied by Sethu her husband, she thinks of her past in her father’s house. She breaks the traditional conventions and comes out, but unfortunately she is unable to come out of it fully. She stands at the crossroads of ancestry and life and at the end chooses death as the only solution to the problem. She drowns herself in the sea, “not to feel so torn between my ancestry and my life as it is now. The body washed up three days later. A bloated Saadiya ...” (228). Neeru Tandon has this to say by way of comment on the attitude of Saadiya, “By remaining free, women hoped to retain not only their independence but those rights that, in spite of some change, they still lost on marriage” (126).

In the feminist concept of the ‘New Woman’, she challenges the traditional notions and is essentially a woman of awareness of her inferior status in the family and society. She tries to bring it up in her best of efforts. She chooses to rebel against the
accepted rules and regulations formed by the society. In the words of Neeru Tandon:

Her protest is not for equality only but for the right to be acknowledged as an individual - capable for intelligence and feeling. She does not look for freedom outside the house, but within too. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society.

In *Mistress* Radha is a woman who rebels against the patriarchal society. Shyam is a dominating husband who thinks that a wife should not interfere with his business affairs. He owns several business. But in none of them he needed Radha for anything. He just wants his wife to pretty herself for him and keep herself home. For him a pretty glossy wife will be malleable, “He prefers a glossy, silly wife. Glossy, silly wives are malleable” (61). He is a husband who thinks that a wife should always be inferior to her husband, so that she can be easily controlled. But Radha likes to visit his women employers and empower them. She wants to be independent. When once she meets her friend Susie, she asks her, “But Radha, why don’t you drive? She immediately says “But Shyam won’t let me” (60). This shows that she cannot do anything beyond his control. But she wants to be independent. She doesn’t want to merely sit at home and waste her time. As a first step, without informing her husband, she visits
Shyam’s employers in the match factory and teaches them many things starting with literature. She is severely criticized by Shyam.

In a patriarchal society a husband’s proud concept is that he has nothing to do with his wife’s income. No matter she earns or not, she should not be independent in any way. He always wants her to be at home and she should not dream of anything else more than that. This attitude of Shyam is revealed when Radha says:

I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn’t want the house filled with bawling babies. So I thought I would find something else to do which didn’t involve making money, but even that isn’t right (73).

The tradition on concealing their sufferings within was “womanly” according to Indian society. But the “New Woman” revolted against this. She could not be a silent bearer against male-chauvinism and male-egoism. She was not ready to be used as a sex object whenever her husband needed. Radha breaks the silence and questions Shyam, “Don’t I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights” (73). So according to Radha, if
a wife is not given the right to opinion, she cannot give her husband the right to touch her.

Rape is a subject which society takes less preference to discuss, even if it is rape within marriage. By discussing this in her writings, Anita Nair brings to limelight the most hesitated issue. Jacquiline rightly points out:

> Rape has always been a horrible indignity heaped on a woman by the male species, merely on the strength of brute force. Rape is still a menace for women, an act of aggression of male. Rape is not rape of the body alone but rape of the mind itself. The feeling of being victorious and gloating over the act makes the rapist even more detestable. This violence and denigration becomes worse when it occurs within the sanctity of marriage (41).

Shyam is an aggressive husband who proves his brutal strength by raping his wife Radha. By doing this he thinks he has made her feel low of herself. By possessing her through this violent manner, he thinks that he had proved his dignity as a husband. He gloats over his victory, thinking that he has slapped her with indignity. He is a tyrannical husband who repeatedly claims her to be his wife as he rapes her:

> “You are my wife. I have my rights”, I said. “Don’t I have the right to say no”, she demanded. I kneeled her legs
apart and tore her panties away. I spat into my hand and smeared her with my spit. “You are mine, do you hear me”, I muttered. Then I fucked her. “You are my wife, you are mine,” I said (163).

Radha, the physically and mentally weak Radha, is unable to resist this. It is not only rape of her body, but mind too. She is not able to shut her mind to this. “I felt sore and bruised, invaded and robbed. Is this rape, I asked myself again and again” (165). The bruised Radha is not lost forever. She makes up her mind. She knew how to deal with it. She is not the woman who will remain silent at a husband’s brutal victory. She is ready to break the sanctity of marriage:

If I can give this attack a name, I will know how to deal with it. My mind was made up. I would pretend that nothing had happened. I would cheat him of the pleasure of having imposed his will. Shyam might think he owned me, but he didn’t. I was never his. And I never will be. All day long he had expected anger, but I felt no anger. Revulsion, yes and disgust. But not anger. Shyam thought all was well. I let him believe it. For there was Chris now (166).
Hence Radha is determined to break the leash of social norms and choose Chris outside the marriage, unable to bear with her tyrannical husband.

Child-bearing occurs only when both the husband and the wife are fertile. And if a wife delays in pregnancy it is always believed that infertility is with the wife because in a male-dominated society it is a dishonour to the male to blame him of infertility. When Shyam and Radha are left without a baby, it is Rani Oppol, Shyam’s sister who unreasonably blames Radha saying that she is infertile, “May be there is something wrong with her. You must go to a specialist and get it verified” (202). Shyam too has never thought that the delay in pregnancy could be because of his infertility too. He is very confident that he is a man. He even stoops down to the extent of an indecent husband who maintains a secret calendar of Radha’s menstrual periods. When Radha finds this out, she is angry at this attitude of Shyam. She thinks that it is something personal of her and does not like Shyam’s intervention in this, “You see you want to rule me. You won’t let me breathe. It isn’t right” (203). She is heart-broken at this. She even sobs. But she does not allow this distress rule over her. She musters up courage and confidence in fury says to her husband, “I was pregnant once. So it isn’t that I can’t conceive. Perhaps you need to find out if you can father a child” (203). She says this even without any uneasiness of her being pregnant before marriage, because she turns furious against Shyam’s pride of a man more than
that of a husband. She is a revolutionary woman as she does not feel bad about, telling her husband right to his face a matter that cannot be told by a wife to her husband. She boldly tells to his face that she was pregnant before she was married. Her ultimate aim was to bring down Shyam’s pride of a man. At the end of the novel one can find that she decides to live alone, neither longing for Shyam’s nearness nor the love of Chris. She decides to live in autonomy.

In all the four novels it is seen that the female characters struggle against the negative forces often engendered by the ruthless and sapless patriarchy, with their new emerging ideas and views against the age-old norms of the patriarchal society. Anita Nair has portrayed the plight of women, who silently accept this patriarchy and also the women who raise the question about their way of life in it and see it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a battle-field to vanquish their oppressors. She portrays how the freedom of women is curtailed by the dominant ideas of men and how they are able to overcome it or make a reconciliation to make the life perfect and beautiful. She also highlights the fact, how some women are very stubborn about not crossing the patriarchal code, as that of women like Akhila’s mother in *Ladies Coupe*. Hence Anita Nair is a feminist writer with her presentation of the feelings and aspirations of the women, that have made her novels a powerful weapon for the awakening of women who suffer in the patriarchal society.
The purposive and formative tendency inherent in man is the spontaneous expression of his goals in life and awareness about the self. As Ester Fialova argues, “There are two aspects to the expression of a dynamic personality. An individual grows, develops and slowly builds a concept about his or her self” (np). The next chapter makes a study of how the characters in the four novels grow, develop and seek their self to achieve the goal of their individuality.