

# Evolution of Women in the Novels of Anita Nair

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## **Abstract**

The prominence of women in India has been subject to great changes in the past few years. With the various reforms to promote equal rights of women, they were able to experience equality, and freedom from discrimination. Even though, women's rights have become law, there are various instances at which women are subjugated. Women writers focus on the day-to-day problems and agonies of women and elaborate on it in their writing so that they are brought to light. Anita Nair's female protagonists are not different from this stereotype. Analyzing each of these characters will help to understand their current status in the society, and their measures to emancipate themselves from the clutches of subjugation and domination.

**Keywords:** Racial discrimination, subjugation, patriarchal society, social status, emancipation, liberation, Anita Nair

## **Full Paper**

Women are the embodiment of strength, love, sacrifice, and courage. To achieve these characteristics, women today have changed significantly from what they were in the past. Literature has closely witnessed the evolution of women through ages and has noted down their transition over years. Initially, they were subjugated by the family members, society at large. This subjugation is because education was confined only to men who held more power in society. They projected women as they wanted them to be in their literary works. When women started to read and write, they started to depict their real

status through their writing. Bande quotes the words of Tharu that “in Indian English literature, particularly of the early decades of the twentieth century, the writers saw women as goddesses, thus snatching away their right to be just human” (13).

With the advent of women writer, the status of women is brought out to the world, regardless of their geographical, cultural, religious, social, economic, and political differences. Most of the women share one thing in common and that is ‘affiliation.’ The life stories of women, most of the time, focus on the agonies and problems that they confront throughout their lives. The women characters in the novels of Anita Nair are not different from this stereotype. Women characters, be it, Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, Lena in *Alphabet: Soup for Lovers*, and Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* has been victims of patriarchal society. Anita Nair had made her characters suffer the agonies and die in the male-dominated world, and then rise like a phoenix from their ashes. All these women characters have undergone significant transformation toward the end of the novel teaching lessons to readers that it is a woman who has to voice for their freedom. Therefore, understanding the similarities and dissimilarities of these characters and their evolution as phoenix will help the readers evolve over time.

Akhila, the protagonist in *Ladies Coupe*, has sacrificed her youth to support her family after the death of her father. She is a 45-year-old spinster, and the breadwinner of the family in an income tax office is burdened with multiple family responsibilities. She is never appreciated or acknowledged for what she had done for her family. Besides, “the world thinks that women are incapable to take decisions in the correct manner.” (Bhattacharyya, 10). Akhila has to acquire permission from her younger brother for going on a trip with her colleagues, as it is considered inappropriate because a woman is considered that they cannot decide for herself; however, to support the family, she is allowed to work with men the entire day. All these factors force her to take drastic measures against social and religious norms. Akhila’s solitary travel make a fundamental proposition of her life results in illuminating dawn. She takes the train journey to become a different woman – an experience that would help her realize what she is capable of. During her travel in the ladies coupe, Akhila’s question to her co-travelers, “I just want you to tell me if you think a woman can manage alone” makes the thesis of the novel (LC 23). Especially, after listening to the stories of five other

ladies passengers who share the same ladies coupe in the train, Akhila learns every woman has some suffering which they have to break away to become emancipated.

The real stories of Janaki Prabhakar, Sheela Vasudevan, Margaret Paulraj, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu in *Ladies Coupe* make Akhila come out of her cocoon and evolve as an independent woman who has the authority to make her choose. As stated by Arundathi Bhattacharyya in *Indian women at the crossroads*, “power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests.” (8). To experience the power that she has, Akhila goes to the extreme of spending time with a stranger, Vinod, after her train journey, make her abolish the potential role of men and gain complete independence as a modern woman. Though this action of Akhila may be alarming to some people; these kinds of evolutionary actions of modern women will create equilibrium in society. The last chapter of the novel provides the resolution where the transformation of Akhila is celebrated. She continues her journey with these thoughts, “She has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone—but at least she would have made an effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now. That she will be allowed to try and experience it...(LC 23).” Toward the end of the novel, Akhila calls Hari which shows that she attempts to achieve the missed emotional part of her life after deciding that it is her live and she had to live it to the fullest.

The next protagonist of Anita Nair is Lena Abraham in *Alphabet: Soup for Lovers*. She is the woman who eagerly waits for love and care. She lives with her husband KK in the plantation house in Annamalai hills. Her life moves on even though there is no love between man and wife. She married KK as chosen by her parents and not out of love for him. As a result, she is forced to lead a life without any spice in it. Lena’s demands the basic things from her husband, love and care. Just like other Indian women, she wanted to be wedded and have her own offsprings like the other women, and that role is denied as there is no love and bonding between KK and Lena. When her needs are not fulfilled by KK, she leads a reluctant life. KK is more focused on running a successful business rather than caring for his wife and meeting her demands. Therefore, she starts to love nature, and the food that her cook prepares for her, chatting with her maid Komathi, teaching her English, running a crèche and spending time with young kids so that her unfulfilled

aspect of life does not rule her. KK owns an estate and runs a home-stay cottage in the hills. When Lena's life is becoming dull day-by-day, the unexpected guest, Shoola Pani- a South Indian film actor, turns up at Lena's home-stay cottage. Her life takes a new direction as she finds a company that she had been longing for years.

Lena begins to enjoy the company of Shoola Pani and Komathi, the cook never misses to notice the change in her, which even her husband KK fails to notice it. "In her home, in the quiet of her bedroom, Lena gazes at herself in the old-fashioned full-length mirror fitted into the bureau. Her cheeks are flushed. Why? She asks herself sternly. Because she has made an ass of herself in front of one of India's best-known movie stars." (ASL 39). The passion and love of Shoola Pani takes over Lena, and she goes to the extreme of breaking the societal norm that is imposed on her. She attempts to fulfill all his desires, and one such is Lena's request to Komathi to prepare daangar chutney to him. Lena's attention is fully on Shoola Pani and therefore, she decides to change herself so that Shoola Pani likes her. When Komathi says that KK doesn't like these kinds of traditional dishes, Lena ignores and asks her to prepare things that he likes. This change in attitude shows that Lena's focus shifts from her husband to Shoola Pani. The difference in everything between KK and Shoola Pani makes Lena look for a person who shares her likes and dislikes.

The presence of Lena near Shoola Pani makes him express his love to her; however, he controls his thoughts to realize whether it's a crush or a real feeling for her. Komathi, who observes the actor from a distance, realizes that both of them have an interest in each other. She is able to realize that the distance between Lena and her husband KK is the reason behind the closeness that is developing the actor and Lena. Lena also realizes the vacuum in her life when she is away from the actor. Therefore, she gives the space for the actor to fill it as her husband fails to realize her needs. She has been married for almost sixteen years now and has never thought of herself as a woman who would look beyond her marriage. The changes that love has brought within her make her terrified. Though the interest on the actor carries Lena away, she makes a serious effort to stay committed to her husband KK and make sure that she doesn't break their marriage. However, the interest in the actor takes over as KK finds happiness in solitude and in developing his business.

As a result, Lena goes to the extent of sharing everything with the actor, thereby trespassing her limits by committing adultery. However, Lena and Shoola Pani prove that they both share true love and they also try to bring peace and happiness in the lives of people around them. Shoola Pani works hard to find Komathi's husband who had left the family years before. Lena and KK's relationship had no intimacy and they lost interest in each other. Therefore, Lena moves away from the life of KK. She takes a step forward in bringing peace and happiness in the lives of everybody. By moving away from the marital relationship with KK, she moved toward to find her happiness with the actor. Lena along with Shoola Pani was able to find the lost life of Komathi.

Lena, at the beginning, is depicted as a self-centered modern woman; on the contrary, when she feels bad for beginning to the reason for the separation of Komathi and her husband, she tries to handle the situation with the help of Shoola Pani. She attempts to undo the mistake that she had done in her childhood. Lena realizes that Komathi's heart is searching for her husband, and therefore, she takes the responsibility to find the lost life of her. This shows that Lena is focused on searching for her happiness and her determination and courage to face challenges successfully. The bold decision of Lena to leave her husband and join Shoola Pani advocates the notion that a woman can live without conforming and submitting to the traditions by creating their own identity in the contemporary world.

The last female protagonist of Anita Nair is Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting*. The life of Meera is yet another tragedy as her husband abandons her when he comes to know that the Lilac house in which she lives does not belong to her. Being a calculative person, Giri believes that the beautiful Lilac house is her property and marries her believing that marriage with Meera would get him a better social status. On the other hand, Meera sincerely marries him out of love. Giri believed that "With Meera, he would be able to move on. Finally, he would be free of the yellowing past and the stench of making do. His. Like the lilac house, L'air du temps" (LIF 41). Meera easily falls into the trap of Giri in the name of love. Being unaware of Giri's intention, she starts to love him. Even then, she thinks of reasons for Giri's attachment and interest towards her.

After marrying Giri, Meera adapts herself to become the corporate wife as expected of him. She also goes to the extent of losing her identity and finds happiness in being identified as the wife of Giri. She leads a life of a typical middle class woman who becomes a puppet in the hands of her husband. "... wife of Giri, Queen of her world, mother of two, author of cook books, mentor of corporate wives and friend to the rich and the celebrated, that she who has everything can afford to be forgiving' (LIF 47)." These lines show that Meera is a character who changed according to the demands of the situation and the people around her.

When Giri realizes the truth that he cannot claim the Lilac house, he abandons the entire family and moves out of her life. She also understands that Giri has never loved her as she did and had only accepted her as a package with the Lilac house. Besides, he had also bad-mouthed about Meera to his daughter, because of which she starts to hate her mother. Meera takes time to realize that she was a caged bird till then and starts to find her look for ways to explore her world with new-found wings. She joins as a research assistant to J.A. Krishnamurthy, the cyclone expert. The change in her life gives her confidence and the feeling of a new woman. "Now that Meera has known it again, she finds strength" (LIF 186). Meera takes the initiative to help JAK as he assumes the role of a caring mother when he serves, Smiriti who has been molested by criminals. Meera stands to understand the kindness and care showered by JAK, and starts to develop affection for him. Besides Meera, the other women characters in this novel also work on emancipating themselves. The problems that each of them face make them even more when they evolve successful.

All the three women in the novels of Anita Nair has been subordinate and were acting according to the whims of their husband/ family members; however, when they cross the threshold, these women slowly rise to emancipate from the clutches of bonding to liberate themselves. The theme of all these novels is to pursue the challenging decision taken by women to set free themselves from the traditional roles and remain committed despite certain unfulfilled aspect of their lives. The common thread in the three stories is 'gender' discrimination. In *Ladies Coupe*, it is the society as a whole, and everything is based on the norms fixed by the men of that society. In *Lessons in Forgetting*, women had to fight against the odds of society. Sometimes, a few women sacrifice their lives and become martyrs and others evolve with a new found



identity. Smriti becomes the martyr to save the lives of female wombs, and Meera and other women evolve as a new woman.

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