

Creating Female Space: An Alternative To Patriarchal Oppression And Dominant Social Norms In The Selected Novels Of Anita Nair And Githa Hariharan

Molly M.A.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pavanatma College, Murickassery (P.O), Kerala, 685604. mollyma812@gmail.com

Abstract

*Traditional writers mainly projected women as happy housewives and dedicated mothers. But Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan in their fictional world reject the unrealistic images of the magnified magnanimity of motherhood and the jubilant complacency of wifehood. The novelists under study definitely aim at motivating and empowering women to survive successfully in a socially inequitable sexist society. Woman bonding or sisterhood can make a counter world which is an alternative to malecentric oppression and dominant social norms. Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan deal with such women who counter the male oppression with the help of sympathetic women. Women conceive of their mutual friendship as a political weapon against a heavily subjugating androcentric value system. Their sisterhood perceives woman's bonding as one of the inevitable solutions to their innate urge for human dignity. The present paper showcases Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and *Lessons in Forgetting*, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* demonstrate effectively the ideas of woman bonding and sharing of woman's experiences and how strategically such bondings are used in the narratives of self-discovery.*

Key Words: *Female Space, Woman bonding, patriarchy, male oppression, social norms*



Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan present several women characters who are fettered by familial and social roles and utterly exhausted and bored with their work and fed up with their socially assigned roles. While racing through the chores, sometimes the utter futility of living overwhelms them despite their urge for survival. In their novels, the readers are requested not to conceal their sense of futility and feeling of emptiness, but to confront the contemporary reality boldly and conquer their own limiting beliefs and the severe apathetic attitude towards life. The female friendship elevating, soothing, enabling the fighting self, presented with its most powerful description in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. Akhila, the central female character's social surrounding obstructs her self-comprehension as an individual, dropping her to the position of a thing. Without Karpagam, Akhila, the protagonist could not

have kept herself intact. It is her interaction with Karpagam that first helps Akhila to express her opinions and desires. Karpagam performs various therapeutic and motivating functions for Akhila. She provides the necessary moral boost to extricate her from her familial impose, encourages her to reconstruct her life to seek self-reliance and develop a will to survive. She also helps her to get out of her constricting femininity and become a more dignified human being. The protagonist significantly changes both internally and externally due to her friend Karpagam's influence. It is Karpagam who is the most important guiding figure in the heroine's critical examination of the unquestioned assumptions by which her previous existence has been governed. Karpagam plays a formative and constructive role in Akhila's life. She is a dynamic and independent woman, imbues Akhila with the strength to fight against her destiny. Inspired by her, Akhila realizes that she must live for herself and one can see her gradual growth and her discovery of a voice and a will. The woman bonding between Akhila and Karpagam has potential for emotional warmth and mutual sharing and it is adequately developed to emerge as a model of symbiotic bonding.

Akhila, the central character, lives not by her own desires but according to the expectations she senses. A complete product of the society shaped by the "male gaze" (<https://maryjanesfilm.com/what-is-the-male-gaze/>), she behaves in a self-effacing, unassuming manner that is geared to attract the least attention, ensure a near-absence. She is living in a world made by man as he wants it. Her life is really controlled and it consists of the place of work and house, not anything additional. Though she is the eldest in the family, she is even accustomed to request her male siblings consent if she wants to go on a staff trip. Her life is directed by her brothers, and her sycophant sister's family exploits her. Akhila is confused, but with the help from her childhood friend Karpagam, she realizes that she must live for herself. The good work Karpagam begins is continued with the sympathetic intervention of the passengers in the coupe. This is also the first journey she is undertaking, hoping to meet other women who would help to resolve a problem she has been tackling:

Do women need men? She says; 'As far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can't live alone, what do you think? Can a woman live by herself?' (21).

As the five other women attempt to answer her question she goes deep into their lives. Her co-passengers recount their tales and give out their mysteries deep-seated in their hearts. They are silent in their male dominated homes but get a chance to communicate in the special 'female space' of the ladies coupe. Feminine insights are exchanged and Akhila gathers strength from these exchanges, realizing that she is not alone, that her problems are not unique. She seeks guidance and perspective from the experiences of these strangers. The women's narratives form part of her discovering process as they reinforce the validity of her dreams and she begins to dare to realize them. The caravan expedition through various subways and uncultivated plants, unfurls a retrogressive excursion, which the women attempt in their lives. Their rearward trip encourages them comprehend the main wounds and hurts felt by them throughout their life. The rising and falling which they have seen in their abilities as little girl, sister, darling, spouse and mother influence them to recognize how secluded they remain in the midst of the group where they are the part and not the entirety. The realization of their self, lying ignored and uncared shouts to burst forth and when such realization dawns upon them, they feel empowered.

The accounts of Akhila's co-travellers in the train expose the desire of each female to confide their difficulties to a compassionate person. Each woman has been enclosed in her own silence and yearns to be heard. The accomplishments of Prabha Devi, Margaret and Marikolanthu make Akhila's determination strong. Prabha Devi's swimming adventure underlines the realization that it is never too late to embark upon a new experience. It also shows that something that gives you simple, undiluted pleasure is more precious than all the riches in the world, or the riches that your husband can give you. Prabha Devi is able to create a life of her own after years of a vacuous life spent in merely waiting for

husband. Margaret's tale exhibits how a woman can plan to get her own way. Margaret's other half Ebenezer Paulraj is the most horrible instance of male prejudice. An ineffective and proud pretender, he moves Margaret into a place of obedient calmness, making her out to be an ordinary typical type of woman. A girl with a radiant scholastic progress and a warm and lively individuality, she is diminished to a quiet additional. His ingenious malice to kids in his school is redone in his dealing of his spouse. Exhausted of her subordinate place in his household, she at last brings her life into her own hands, collects her powers with incomparable resolution. She holds her vengeance by devising the diversion that will make him not dangerous to her, a weak glutton. She fattened Ebe by her culinary skills. Marikolanthu has suffered rape and it mars her life completely. She bears severe subjugation, societal, domestic and economic. It is finally affection for her child that expedites her correct track where she discovers joy and satisfaction. Her decision to raise her child demonstrates her forming into a new character. If Prabha Devi's struggle creates in Akhila a desire to love, Marikolanthu's travail strengthens and fortifies her. When she exits the coach at Kanyakumari, she is a new-fangled Akhila. Akhila has grown into her selfhood and she is convinced that she will not allow her family circle exploit her any more:

Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered (270).

She like her friends learns to live by her own rules. She is able to throw her head back and voice her triumph, the triumph over oneself and culture.

In *Lessons in Forgetting*(2010), with deft strokes, Nair portrays how women help each other to nurture their latent inner resources to fruition enabling them to grow out of the bondage of depression and disappointments. Vinnie, Meera's companion, runs a boutique and she is an emancipated, bold woman who drives the car by herself without depending any one. In the absence of Giri, Vinnie whom she shares her emotions, encourages her to go to the party: "you don't need an escort. No one makes much of these things any more. A woman by herself at a party is like a man by himself" (183). Meera makes up her mind to abandon her old identity and she takes the responsibility of her family. She goes to party without anyone else and even her grandma supports her to confront the challenges. Lily observes:"What I have to say is important. I don't want to talk about the wind or the trees. If they bother you so much, chop them down" (269).

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi, the protagonist, subverts the dictates of patriarchal systems and seeks to empower herself. There are three mentors in Devi's life-her grandmother, mother and later her housekeeper, Mayamma, the major link of the "woman bonding" Devi experiences. In the initial phase of her growing up, Devi comes under the influence of her grandmother who narrates to her the tales of mythical heroines. Her grandmother's narratives have a deep influence on her psyche. Grandmother is her first teacher and she imparts secret knowledge to her through a purposeful re-telling of the tales of the forgotten women of the past- Damayanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga. Here is a magical intimacy between Devi and her grandmother and it is this physical, mental and sentimental closeness that gives the beat and tenor for Devi's introduction into the world of women, and her fight against age-old custom.

The woman who plays the most decisive role in Devi's growing up is Mayamma, the pragmatic storyteller. She narrates stories of genuine life, more bizarre than legendary tales. Her life is a story of constant distress. She recounts the tale of her own life, an existence that she accepts to have been controlled by men. Physically powerless to alter the path of fate, she has to acknowledge her part in the social order. Devi unearths an admirable companion in Mayamma. She pays attention to her life story with all consideration and interest; she strives to bring the realistic quintessence from them to improve her life a bit. Still in the midst of childlessness, Devi discovers comfort in the tale of Mayamma who

finds out the policy of endurance and as she puts it: "I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry" (126). It is this that each woman has to discover for herself, and endurance is the utmost model in the battle-ridden life of woman.

Devi does not live happily ever after on getting married, grows resentful of the restrictions of the domestic enclosure and finally asserts her freedom by walking out of the prison of marriage. Eventually after having rejected existing myths and role models, Devi creates a different destiny for herself as she seeks to find a renewed meaning to her relationship with her mother. Sita too realizes the purpose of her existence beyond lifelong service and dedication to others. Renewing her missing association with her unused veena is a vital move towards internal curing. It would free her from only performing given tasks. The tempting call of the veena that Devi listens to on her homecoming implies rebirth of a novel, optimistic mind-set of Sita with herself and the girl, and the regeneration of life itself. It is a call to deal with the repressed self and the buried bitterness. True to themselves they could make sense of their lives and help each other grow with no urge to control. Return to the mother, her home and the real music of veena are symbols for the process of renewal. The end of the novel marks the beginning of such a meaningful joint pursuit with separate independent goals and values.

Hariharan reinterprets the archetype of mother and daughter from the view of feminist sisterhood. Devi is unable to find out her identity within the structure of the man centred social arrangement i.e., as a spouse in an organized matrimony, or even as a defiant sweetheart, she at last comes back to her mother, "to stay and fight and to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the beginning" (139). It is the love of mother that restores in the protagonist a rekindled desire in life. In the novel, this relationship gets its influence from the women's prior feeling of segregation from their mistreatment by men and from their finding through agony, of the redeeming charm of mutual experience. For Devi, there is an expectation and a feeling of revival as the past is wiped out and the present turns into an ordeal to put up a future. Devi's final assertion of her autonomy is thus the merriment of the supremacy of the celestial Devi as well as that of the whole group of women.

Woman bonding also plays a crucial role in Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*. There are three women storytellers; Shaharзад, Dunyazad and Dilshad who are connected to each other by attachments of family, love and the palace life. They comprehend the authority, the happiness and the liability of story-telling and, each in her own manner, perform this activity, as an amusing present for others, as intelligent messages in life and as a form of empowerment to control antagonists. Dunyazad, the younger sister, who has been perpetually held in her elder sister's shadow, attempts to retell Shaharзад's story from new, female perspectives. Dunyazad and Dilshad are absolutely free from the fetters of the phallogocentric structure. Their connection to the creative world is totally in relation to the women. They narrate each other tales, 'one story responding the others' for seven days and seven nights. Women as Cixous argues must develop a language of their own so that the female centred sexuality may be reclaimed. The elevation of Dunyazad and Dilshad as the crucial narrators is a step towards rediscovering a new language, a language that may capture the imagination, feeling and sexuality of women and they discovered their feminine potentials.

Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan believe in the empowerment of women through 'woman bonding'. In their novels, they represent their women standing together against violence and exploitation. In *Ladies Coupe* when fear of failure, and a feeling of low self-esteem haunted Akhila, it was her childhood friend, Karpagam, who helped her to get rid of her feelings of fear and inadequacy. The women in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* are silent in their male dominated homes but get a chance to communicate in the special "female space" of the ladies coupe. Feminine insights are exchanged and Akhila gathers strength from these exchanges, realising that she is not alone, that her problems are not unique; she seeks guidance and perspective from the experiences of these strangers. Githa Hariharan's moving description of the magical intimacy between Devi and her grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, is symbolic of many possibilities that are open to all women through the important mentor figures, role models and inspired women present among them. Devi reminisces: "My grandmother's lap

was soft and murmured gently like little brown and yellow bird, but the bony thighs I felt through her soft sari were as warm and solid as the afternoon-baked earth below me. Her pallave covered my face, enclosing it in a silken refuse” (18).It is this corporal, mental and thrilling relationship that renders the rhythm and tune for Devi’s opening into the world of women. In Nair’s *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010)and Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel* (2009) explore woman bonding and highlight how the women characters expose their souls and minds wholeheartedly to each other, cast off their mask, voice their resentment, reconstruct their fragmented life and discover their potential and start living afresh.

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Bio-note



Molly.M.A is an Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Pavanatma College Murickassery, Kerala . She has published several articles and presented papers in National and International Seminars.