A Minor Research Project (MRP) of the University Grants Commission (UGC) 2013

The Lapping Sound of Tender Coconut Water: Fluid Expressions of Emotions in Anita Nair's The Better Man, Ladies Coupe and Mistress

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(2008-2013)

(Sanction Letter of 31 February 2008)

F. No.23-664/08 (WRO)

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Chapter One – Introduction

Emotional and Trans-emotional Trajectories of Art

Expressions of emotions have been theorized in aesthetics and art variously, explaining the different functions and symbolic significance of these expressions. Various aesthetic theories of artistic emotions, from the days of Aristotle to the Postmodern era have been actively engaged in understanding the differences and similarities between real life emotions and the emotions in art.

T. S. Eliot in his 'Theory of Impersonality, maintains that emotions are related to life and feelings are particular to art that are the products of objective treatment of emotions. Eliot's poetic theory advocates an objective critical treatment of emotions in poetry and art. His theory of objective correlative elaborates further the difference between the emotions felt and the emotions expressed in art, emphasizing the point that art forms should not slip into mere sentimentalizing. Objective correlative theory suggests that a poet or an artist needs to find a set of corresponding objects or situations to evoke an emotion in the reader. This implies that the real life emotions cannot be transferred directly into art for the fear of generating sentimental art. Writers after Eliot have been quite mindful of this theory and hence have refrained in fiction, poetry and drama from sentimentalizing characters and situations. However, till the time of T. S. Eliot, poetics and aesthetics have been relatively well defined in terms of their domains and genres. This situation changed with the popularity of other art forms like cinema and television which concretized issues like characterization and emotions in terms of visual metaphors. A novelist or a poet living in a present era has to be mindful of these techniques of characterization as readers live predominately in a world of visuals. This awareness has made many novelists of the present era experiment with alternative narratives and with a prose style loaded with images and metaphors. The conventional character delineation in such writers gives way to the use of non-verbal and inter-semiotic understanding of people's feelings and human behavior. Novels

are plenty these days that do not confine to verbal signifiers but rather which cross genres, disciplines and media to import new techniques of characterization and understanding of their emotions. Anita Nair is one such novelist who has drawn from various aesthetic traditions to enrich her art of characterization. Her novels such as *Ladies Coupe*, *Better Man*, *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting* employ unique techniques of character delineation and experimental modes of expressing the emotions. She has used in her novels the domains and terminology of chemistry – kathakali, house painting and recipes to classify human beings into certain recognizable traits. This research is an attempt to analyse the non-conventional art of Anita Nair's characterization and her techniques that enable her characters to express themselves so completely that the readers find an arresting sense of uniqueness in both the characters and their emotions. It will also focus on the metaphors Nair uses to articulate the emotions of her characters without being overtly sentimental.

The relation between aesthetic emotions and the real life emotions is considered as one of objective, mediated one as aesthetic emotions are not suppressed to motivate practical human behavior in the way the other emotions do. The aesthetic consideration of emotion touch upon disciplines such as philosophy and psychology as characters in art has their own minds as created by the artists. The issue of emotions is even more complex in fiction as it creates a kind of aesthetic paradox. In fiction, it is understood that situations and characters evoke intense emotions though the readers know that they are fictional. Another issue is the problem of imaginative resistance which suggests that readers are able to imagine many far-fetched truths but experience more difficulty in imagining the different moral standards held up in the fictional world. It should also be kept in mind that a novelist very often uses emotions in a novel or emote

his characters to generate a particular philosophical or moral stand. Even the novels which are not melodramatic or which have less explicitly expressed emotions arouse a sense of judgment or evoke an ideological stand point or even a feminist or Marxist interpretation of characters and their situations.

Emotions in art are not necessarily about anything and in the manner they can be non-representational or non-objective. Absoluteness of genre-based emotions is also to be questioned. For instance emotions evoked in music may carry trans-musical images and ideas. Similarly, the characters and their emotions depicted in fiction may have extra fictional ideas and images. This theory implies that it is possible to create fictional characters in terms of extra fictional domains and in terms of other art forms.

Aesthetic attention is another area that deserves a closer look in the context of contemporary art. Characters and situations in fiction hold the reader's attention partly because they address themselves to the feelings of readers and call forth a response which the readers value both for itself and the consolation that they may attain through it. Readers of fiction are called upon to witness willingly scenes of tragedy or even characters who are mean or negative. In this sense it is difficult to say if they really enjoy a work of fiction or accord to it a positive value. However, the world of fiction is not purely philosophical as psychology too is involved in it. Fiction compared to drama is less representational and hence it is difficult to find a cathartic resolution for the paradox in fiction. Further, a novelist may not portray an emotion to create a willing suspension of disbelief but rather to intensify the effect of a character or a situation. Thus, the

relation between emotions directed to reality and those directed to imaginary characters and situations stand very differently in the context of fiction.

Anita Nair has made it very clear in her interviews that the genre crossing is a need of the hour in fiction. She says that the multi-generic approach in her novels can be justified in terms of the interest and novelty that it would generate. In an interview with Meena Kandaswamy, she says that by switching genres, she makes her story telling interesting and flexible. She says:

> I suppose I keep switching genres with each of my novels because I need to make the process of writing as interesting as it can be for myself first. I would like to think that only by doing so would I be able to keep my writing fresh and challenging. There are no real secrets but I do know for sure that before the writing I need to put in a certain amount of research to be able to give the story telling an interesting twist. And once the process of writing begins, everything and anything becomes grist for the mill. I suppose if there is a secret, it is this: that I won't rush myself that until the book goes to press there is room for change. (menu.wordpess.com)

Anita Nair also expresses clearly her interest in many terrains. She says that this felicity about many domains is essential to portray characters that have their own areas of interest. She speaks to Meena Kandaswamy:

> I do a lot of research when I start work in a novel and until it goes into the press. Sometimes research isn't first about reading the right books or talking to experts. It is also about watching a lot of cinemas, hanging around in places frequented by the kind of people my character are, talking to anyone within the relevant area of interest, observing people similar to my characters etc. It is about asking a lot of 'how's and whys' without embarrassment. Despite this I do sometime make silly errors in terms of pronunciation of a word in Tamil or Malayalam or a cultural misfit, which you can be sure some kind reader very gently points on to me. I try and rectify this thereafter in the next edition. (menu.wordpress.com)

Expressions in art are also closely linked to the use of metaphors. A metaphorical style is the one which tries to describe a concept or emotion in terms of another. In fiction, as in poetry, such a metaphorical style has been used by various writers to avoid direct depiction of feelings; Anita Nair too uses such a style. Her writings stand out in a flood of contemporary women's writings that depict women as battered and abandoned by shoals of low self worth. The novels of Shashi

Deshpande, Geeta Hariharan and Kaveri Nambisan depict such women. Anita Nair on the other hand, working on what is called Chick-lit, makes her women different and her art move literally against the tide. Her women are not cerebral; nor are they the prisoners of their feelings. They are life affirming and celebrate love, passions, sexuality, freedom and the condition of being a woman. While her characters are passionate and self fashioning, Nair's narratives are not less experimental. She works on stories which are made of parts – novels in parts which string together a patchwork of life sketches. People travelling together or strangers meeting at different places tell their tales to each other in Anita Nair's fiction. Thus journeys, social gatherings and work place become the pretext for storytelling. Nair also uses the conventions of Chick-lit to her advantage. Women, for instance, not only have mobility but also discuss their sexual adventures in her novels. They also consider having sexist destiny and not a matter of sin. These women are mostly employed and hence they have some degree of control over their finances. However, they are not necessarily the upper class Indian women. Nair evokes through her characters, the ordinariness of middle class family and her women have to negotiate the rigid patterns of traditional life and conventional gender roles. Perhaps these patterns which partly cripple the women are depicted in her novels in the form of certain geometrical designs. These designs are mostly lines, square and circles. The linearity of a journey, the square of the rooms and the circles and designs of a *kolam* appear repeatedly in her novels. However, women transgress these patterns and go beyond the conventions, trusting their emotions, desires and needs.

Anita Nair's fiction, as she claims, is not feminist in the conventional sense. She repeats in her interviews that she has written for both women and men and about women and men. Neither do the women in her novels reject men but they embrace their need for sexual gratification. Even

then women in her art do underwrite the myth of sacrifice from women – a theme that powers her narratives. Though her women are initially trapped in the gender roles, the societies' expectations and their own caution against desire, they eventually come to their own identities by affirming life, love and sexuality. In this sense, her novels are narratives of self-discovery where in characters undergo positive transformations. Her narratives are also revelatory and redeeming as they function as confessions and self-healing of the protagonist. Desires also propel Nair's narratives. Her protagonists crave for company, recognition, fame, wealth and love. They are very clear about these desires.

Anita Nair's novels can also be considered as Narratives that mark visible changes in her protagonist. Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, Radha in *Mistress* and Mukundan in *The Better Man* are all trapped in unhappy familial circumstances. Eventually, they break the shackles, become true to their emotions and grow in stature.

Space is another dimension explored in Anita Nair's novels. Her characters alter radically the domains of entrapment. From kitchens, drawing rooms and gardens, Nair's narratives take her characters into metaphysical openness by putting them into journeys, art, cooking, and parties. In a metaphorical sense, parties, food, drinks and dress and journey afford them an identity based on affirmative transgression. They also become agencies of change – interest which these characters develop to keep themselves going.

Women in Anita Nair's novels like Akhila, Radha and Meera are both victims and individual with agencies at times. They are caught in relationships which are partly their own making and partly made for them. Eventually, these characters reject the part made for them to move on in life.

Another fascination that Anita Nair reveals in her narratives is for the myths. Her characters mostly take their names from myths as Akhila and Radha do. Names such as these evoke, ironically though, the condition of Indian Goddesses who represent mythical superpower. Meera, in *Lessons in Forgetting* is equated to Greek goddesses to imply her western upbringing. Myths from Hinduism and Christianity and Greek mythology appear in abundance in Nair's craft. These myths also function as metaphorical twists which allow her to reinterpret the present emotional and moral situations of her characters in terms of the part. They also impart a certain degree of universality for the private rebellion of these women by reminding how even Gods and Goddesses had to face emotional and personal crises. Further, these myths give an objective distance for the novelist to look into her characters' situations. They also provide voices and agencies for her characters, to articulate their innermost dilemmas.

Anita Nair's focus, as mentioned earlier, is not on the failures of the characters but rather on their will to tide over the difficulties in life. In an interview with Bindu Menon for Cafedilly.com, Nair says that she is more fascinated by the way women change their lives than being the victims of circumstances:

> Women who try to break from claustrophobic traditions and multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt, provider and live a life of their own terms – how women become strong, not naturally, but due to changes in circumstances in lifestyle. (Cafedilly.Com)

What Nair implies is that women who script their own lives fascinate her more and that her brand of feminism is constructivist and it believes in the acquired strength of women. A part of this strength is the ability of these women to articulate their feelings. Nair's characters, as she claims, also grow in terms of their ability to interpret their situation and analyse others. One can find Anita Nair's characters using metaphors to interpret their own emotional states and in analysing other people. However, she is very mindful in keeping her narratives focused on the strength of characters and not on their weaknesses. She says:

> I'm not trying to be a moral science teacher but there is this certain strength deep inside that every individual has – I look at her each character achieves this. (Cafedilly.Com)

In this sense, Anita Nair's narratives can be considered as Novels of self exploration that bring the protagonist to certain degree of conviction and strength.

Another interesting feature in Anita Nair's writings is that she keeps switching genres. From a rail-road narrative to kathakali and recipe writing and cyclone studies, her novels deal with different contextual frames. Such switching of domains, she observes, is her attempt to make the process of writing interesting, fresh and challenging. These contexts are probably extended

metaphors, the oblique way of looking at emotion. They are also the results of her research to give her are story telling an interesting twist.

In an interview with Meena Kandaswamy for the Indian Express Nair explains her creative process, emphasizing how the very aspects which disturb one become the craft:

> The creative process begins for me when certain aspects of life trouble me. I try and explore why it the way it is. (menu.wordpress.com)

Nair's exploration of a subject is in terms of the colours, the scents, the landscape, the people and their humour. While capturing these details of a problem or a situation, she reveals her ability to wear many thinking caps – that of a copy writer, a columnist and a Novelist. The world of a novelist often blends with the world of a journalist and that of advertising professional in Nair's fiction, making her an intuitive psychoanalyst, a sociologists and a business woman.

Anita Nair's novels are life affirming as she claims and she appears to be interested in the spectacles of human life. In an interview for News.Infibim.com Nair explains what instigates her to write:

> My biggest source of inspiration has always been life. Human begins must be the most fascinating creatures on earth. Everything we do, we say, how we live, whom we

> live and hate, why we go to war, what instigates violence, what inspires kindness – everything is a source of inspiration for me. (Infibim.com 2010)

Anita Nair also connects her craft to research and metaphors. Her point is that the crux of her art is the metaphorical expression. She states:

> I do a lot of research when I start work on a novel. I look for metaphors that have room for characters. (Infibeam.com 2010)

The characters who carry in them immense metaphorical potential, she states, are a blend of emotions and myriad sensitivities. The meticulous sensory details too call for the use of metaphors in her style. She states clearly in this interview that metaphor is both a figure of speech and a structural device in her art. Such metaphors are necessary in depicting characters who are caught in the opposition between ideological appearance and material oppression of women and their sexualities to represent the real world. Her characters do not remain to a single domain. They move among the sacred, the traditional, the ideological and the real. These movements across the boundaries of domains are indicated with the help of metaphors. Nair's metaphors trace the lives of these women which move from kitchen to bedroom, to the street and to the world at large. These metaphors also indicate how her men and women rediscover their emotions and bodies.

Nair's women, as in a typical Chick-lit cult are ordinary women who love freedom, security, dignity, love, laughter, sex, happiness, nice clothes, good food, cure for grey hair and cellulite.

They also crave for muscle tone and unwrinkled skin. All these cravings of her characters who are also constrained to the roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother are best articulated either in terms of myths or in terms of metaphors which refer to other domains. Nair's art fills the reader's mind with emotions that are portrayed through unique metaphors such as kathakali or cooking. These metaphors which are strong and splendid in imagery render her narratives a touch of poetry, making them a blend between the worlds – of myths, food, animals, alchemy and emotions my melding these metaphors into her writing style. Anita Nair creates a unique platform for reminding expressions of emotions. The subsequent chapters of the study would analyse three novels of Anita Nair to see how she generates images and metaphors that capture the emotional, spiritual and private lives of her characters. These chapters will also consider the aesthetic and the psychological context of her metaphors to unpack her fictional devices that constantly draw from other disciplines. Anita Nair's metaphors also make an aesthetic context of emotions such as love, sorrow, content, fury, fear, disgust and wonder, in the lines of Rasa theory. The subsequent chapters will also identify these nuances of emotions besides seen how aesthetic expressions provide room for both self assertion and transgression.

Chapter Two:

Contours of Fear and Ambition in *The Better Man*

The story of *The Better Man* is set in the little, imaginary village of Kaikurussi, in Kerala, the state where Nair was born and that permeates her poetic and evocative writings. In the past, Kerala was part of a region known as Malabar. Malabar is no more but, like Anita Nair says, it is still a state of mind, a powerful feeling, arising from a longing for the past, a denial of the future, but also from a silent sense of unhappiness. Kaikurussi is a village in the middle of nowhere, where nothing remarkable is to be found, where no great man was ever born, where even the road comes to an end, leading to nowhere. The setting of the novel is metaphor of the emotionally landlocked inhabitants such as Achuthan Nair and Mukundan.

In the first pages of the novel, the reader is directly addressed by Bhasi, the housepainter, speaking in the first person. He is the only character in the novel, whom the readers can connect with immediately, as a direct link to the heart of the narrative, and readers are able to do so, thanks to this intimate relationship that his being an "I" sets from the start.

In fact, Bhasi is the very heart of the plot, the deus ex machina that will set off the many changes. So, he is, right from the start, an off-screen voice, the voice of the village conscience. Yet, he is inside the story, partaking of this double nature: a character and the motive; part of the village and an outsider. And this will be very clear at the end. His profession as a painter is indicative of how he brings colours to other people's dreams.

Bhasi has taken refuge in this far away place, running away from his past as a university lecturer and from a secret and hiding his very self from the world. Nobody knows about his past; to the village he is "One-screw-loose-Bhasi". But he is a healer too. He heals crumbling walls and sore souls, aching bodies and rotting plasters. He knows herbs and techniques, he has his own bizarre methods, mixing fithotherapy, psychology, magic and homeopathy. And his desperate need to be needed, to be loved, to be accepted. This is why, in his obscure life, he feels that something great will happen one day, something that will give him "a reason to exist". He is waiting for it. And destiny will bring that reason to him: Mukundan.

Mukundan Nair is a man with folded wings, like the handkerchiefs he meticulously folds into eight parts. A man oppressed by endless fears and doubts, not well certain of who he is, crushed by a vicious, dictatorial father since he was a child. He is a retired government official and is back to Kaikurussi because has no other place to go. And the meeting of these two men, so different from each other, so necessary to each other, is an extraordinary turn in the plot. The story of a deep healing and of a rebirth, of a spiritual healing and deep transformation, will go through a terrible betrayal: that of Mukundan, who will discover, in the end, that he is not better man than his father. In order to gain his place among the leading people of the small village, he deceives his friend and benefactor; he forces Bhasi to sell his house for almost nothing, so that the pompous and bossy Power House Ramakrishnan will build a useless Community Hall.

The fictitious village of Kaikurussi, with its extraordinary characters, with the ghostly presences, where all the clashes between the old and the new India creates subterranean currents of discontent and uneasiness, with its undercurrent of myths, magic and mystery, is actually all the world. And, the end of the novel is no less surprising, impressive and unexpected than the novel itself. The loosing of that knot, heavier than a boulder, requires a blast – a real one. One can consider this explosion, this destruction of the Community Hall by hand of Mukundan, as a symbolic explosion of a world suspended between past and present. This enables Mukundan to step out of vanities and the false image of respectability. It is true, Mukundan destroys what had been a tangible and symbolic object of Bhasi's betrayal. Mukundan finds eventually the courage to break free from his past, to become a better man than his father.

Anita Nair's language is as light as it is powerful, as evocative as it is full of magic, ironic and humourous and full of drama. It is so limpid that one can see the darkness peeping behind. As mentioned already, at the heart of Anita Nair's first novel, *The Better Man*, there is a haunted house – with ghosts lurching around dark hallways and pushing the living down the staircases. The cursed construction is in Kaikurussi in Kerala, and the protagonist, Mukundan, grew up there with his tyrant father and meek, apologetic mother. As the story opens, this frustrated middle-aged protagonist finds himself returning home, once again taking up residence in his dull, oppressive childhood village. He doesn't want to be there. He drinks rum and fears the dark. Bhasi, a painter of houses and self-proclaimed healer, sees in Mukundan an opportunity for redemption and friendship. In much of the book Bhasi directly addresses his newfound companion:

> Tell me, Mukundan. Tell me what it is that haunts you so. Tell me of the darkness that clouds your life. Tell me why you fold your handkerchief in eight precise squares. Tell me why it is that every strand of coconut fibre has to be heaped in one place when I finish with it. Tell me how it is that you have chained yourself to the clock. (Nair 1998, 23)

Nair explores the primal emotion of fear in Mukundan. However, fear takes many metaphors in the novel– of darkness, Mukundan's obsessive behavior and even his neatly folded handkerchief.

Anita Nair has a great gift for suspense; from the beginning of *The Better Man*, she hints at profound losses in her characters' pasts, losses that are gradually revealed as the novel progresses. Class antagonisms too crop up throughout, threatening to destabilize the village's quiet existence. The novel also mobilizes many metaphors which can be clumsy and strained to bursting, as for instance, "the sun took a deep breath and began its morning chores" (Nair 1998, 4).

The setting of the novel, Kaikurussi, is a microcosm of India that witnesses the drama of the confluence of colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial eras – a site of various ambitions and desires. The very opening of the novel reveals the colonial and neocolonial perspectives by way of the narrator, Bhasi, the painter who introduces himself as an animal, "a human lizard with brushes for claws and a can for a tail" (Nair 1998, 3).as against the suddenly rich, powerful

Power House Ramakrishnan whose house has high brick wall and imposing metal gates in the village of bamboo fences and makeshift gates. The characters like Shankar, the tea club owner, Postman Unni, Barber Nanu, Che Kutty, the toddy seller, Kamban, the Postmaster, and Achuthan Nair – all reveal some colonial traits and tendencies at some point in the novel. Kaikurussi, with its innocent wild scenic beauty of mountains, forests, hills and rivers has been housed by the natives who find it hard to shrug off the colonial imperialistic system of existence. Mukundan, the protagonist of the novel was on a self-imposed exile from his native home in Kaikurussi to erase the ghost of insecurity and guilt of his mother, Parukkuty's mysterious death and his father, Achuthan Nair's high-handedness. His return to the village as an outsider who longs for a firm footing in the village echoes the dream of a dispossessed child. His outsider tag is evident in the way he sells his ancestral paddy fields to Power House Ramakrishnan, to strip himself of his nativity and become the member of elite class, obsessed with rationality, sophistication and civilized life with no native strings. In response to his caretaker Krishnan Nair's criticism, Mukundan opines: "What am I going to do with all this when I die? Can I take it with me? Do I have children to safeguard my heritage and keep it intact for them?" (Nair 1998, 39)

Power House Ramakrishnan raises the ugly head of new capitalism by the acquisition of land and property with his newly acquired wealth to buy position and respect in Kaikurussi. From the fringes of poverty and 'marginalization', he climbs the ladder of money and power to the 'centre' to generate a reversal of the colonial pattern:

> When a lottery ticket changed him into a rich man, perhaps
> the richest man in the village, the first thing he decided to

> do was to acquire land....Moreover, by buying the land that for generations had belonged to Mukundan's family, he would be buying himself a position in the village. (Nair 1998, 38-39)

Anita Nair's introduction of Achuthan Nair as a domineering father who battered and bruised the spirit of his son, Mukundan as a young boy confirms the pattern and image of colonialism taking its first infant step in the four walls of home. On his return from serving the white, imperialists in Burma he takes a leaf from their history of domination and dons the garb of a neocoloniser who treats his son and wife as slaves. This image creates a new pattern of violence and master-slave equation that creates embittered familial relations. Nair describes how the father becomes an emblem of fear:

> The cane swished through the air as Mukundan had known it inevitably would....'Paru Kutty!' he hollered at the top of his voice. 'Look at your wonderful son, sniveling and standing in his own piss. He can't even take a few blows on his skin without piddling in his pants (Nair 1998, 71).

Nair captures, through the auditory images, the fear of Mukundan and unchallenged authority of his father. Further, Achuthan Nair retains the pair of wooden clogs which he had worn in Burma. In Kaikurussi, he wears them as a testimony to who he was – a man who has seen the world, a

man who is to be respected, a man whose authority is not to be questioned and who is on a civilizing mission.

Whenever postcolonial theory queries what Irene Genzier describes as 'the Other-directed nature of the reactions of the colonized and the need to struggle to free himself of this externally determined definition of Self' (Gendzier 1973, 23), it evokes categories which are reminiscent of Hegel's paradigms of the master-slave relationship. Hegel believes that human beings acquire identity or self-consciousness only through the recognition of others. Each self has before it another self in and through which it secures its identity but initially there is an enmity between these two confronting selves. Hegel maintains that the master and slave are locked in a compulsive struggle until the slave accepts his subjection to the victorious, recognizable master. The slave then becomes a dependable 'thing' whose very existence and identity is shaped by the master. Fear that arises out of the threat of consequences is a feeling of the colonized and a slave. Nair traces the effect of this primal feeling in the novel. She also examines the conditioning by in Mukundan by revealing the master-slave equations in the relationship of Achuthan Nair and Mukundan and Achuthan Nair and Krishnan Nair. The tendency of Mukundan to please and be accepted and recognized by his father by way of offering gifts of his liking highlights the slavish identity in Mukundan: "Nothing Mukundan ever did satisfied his father. He accepted the gift in the manner of God accepting homage to his greatness." (Nair 1998, 79). Krishnan Nair's adulation and loyalty to Achuthan Nair and the slavish pleasure he derives on being at his beck and call and pleasing him by cooking his favourite chicken curry also reveal his fear for the master.

A discussion on Postcolonialism is not complete without a discourse on Orientalism. It becomes a discourse at the point at which it starts systematically, to produce stereotypes about the natives and their culture. These stereotypes confirm the necessity and desirability of colonialist by endlessly confirming their superiority over the positional inferiority of the natives and their practices. Philipose, the Postmaster, an outsider posted in Kaikurussi serves as a constant reminder of the historical contents and continuity of oppression, domination and stereotyping of the marginalized. He wears the mantle of a neocolonizer by degrading and demeaning Kamban, the Harijan Postmaster. Philipose emphatically challenges Kamban's efficiency and intelligence and leaves no stones unturned to harass and rebuke him in front of his colleagues and villagers. He strips him of all his dignity by commenting on his low status. He believes that as a representative of the marginalized native, Kamban needs corrective study by the master, Philipose. He considers Kamban and his community as a population of degenerate types on the basis of their lower caste-origin. He takes it upon him the civilizing mission of the native Kamban that involves domination, oppression and humiliation. He barks:

> Why can't you do your duties? Why do I have to do everything....You are lazy and irresponsible, you know, that's what you are. This is what happens when you take useless people and give them responsibilities that they are not qualified to handle. But do the department heads realize all this? No, year after year, they give you promotions, special benefits. (Nair 1998, 162)

Like Mukundan's fear for his father, Kamban is scared of Philipose. By juxtaposing the fears of Mukundan and Kamban, Anita Nair implies that spaces, both familial and professional, reenact

scenes of threat and that like the son's fear of father, the lower caste subject's fear for his upper caste colleague is also primordial.

Apart from stereotyping native servitude, the fantasies of the master demonizing the native find expression as in the horrifying stereotypes of savagery, mystery, exoticism and cruelty. The incident of a cat attacking and terrorizing Philipose and the hammering, rattling sounds in the chilling darkness of the night in and around his house are easily connected to Kamban and his pact with the devil. Philipose tries to identify Kamban with black magic and effectively demonizes the Dalit subject as the white master would do of a native. Philipose's fear too is primal, associated with darkness, cat and animals. Philipose explains these mysterious happenings to Mukundan in language that represents, ironically, his fear of the dalit:

> Last night as the cat sat there staring resentfully, I realized who it reminded me of. Kamban. I tell you, Kamban and the cat are connected in some way. No wonder it hated me so much. (Nair 1998, 166)

If one considers Imperialism and Colonialism as the politics of the constructed binaries, *The Better Man* brings in the images of colonized and colonizer binary sets in the relationship between Bhasi and Power House Ramakrishnan. Power House Ramakrishnan's expedition to acquire Bhasi's land for the community hall, which is a symbol of development for the village and his reputation, is an invasion on the peaceful settlement of Bhasi. This expedition contains in it the story of the neocolonialist trying to control and rule over the less privileged native, using

terror tactics. Further neocolonialism works best with the help of hegemonic and coercive forces which take the mantle of politics, religion, development and class consciousness. When Bhasi resists the colonial attitude by not succumbing to the pressures of selling the land, Power House Ramakrishnan wields the sword of power and influence to warn him. The threat of violence rather than the violence is the tone of his voice:

> Take my advice. Sell me the land. I have the support of all VIPs in the village. The temple board. The masjid committee. The village officer. The political parties. The young Men's Association for Culture. Everyone who is anyone in this village will back me. So if you don't sell me the land, I'll tell them why the community hall can't be built. I don't need to tell you what the consequences will be. All I say is, there will be no more work for you in this village. (Nair 1998, 288)

Even in the so called postcolonial societies one can see the dubious legacy of terrorizing the marginalized natives by the dominant power-hungry coloniser. The faces of colonialism, its terror tactics and the threat of exclusion, become overtly clear in the disillusionment of Bhasi at the lack of support and resistance from the villagers, especially Mukundan with whom he bonds well. He introspects his vulnerability:

> In the final reckoning they were all natives of this village, bonded by birth and banded together. While I was the

outsider. The one who could be dispensed with.(Nair 1998,289).

The transformation of Mukundan from an 'outsider' to the recognizable 'centred' self of a native indicates his negotiation of fear. Mukundan is elated at his inclusion in the community hall construction committee, a symbol of recognition among the native neocapitalists. This is where he wants so much to belong to, to feel important and to be appreciated. He wants to prove to his father that he had an identity of his own and that too an identity his father had cherished for him – of being dominant and successful. But this new identity of Mukundan corrupts the healed, uninhibited, peaceful self that he had attained with the help of Bhasi's alternative medicine, spiritual and psychological healing. He had risen from the deep chasm of a nervous wreck to that of a positive natural self with Bhasi's native wisdom and medicine. By transforming himself to a neocapitalist, he has not only disrespected the native wisdom and healing process but acts as a link in the coercive force that tries to unsettle and displace Bhasi, the subaltern subject who guides him towards a liberated and guilt-free life. He argues with Bhasi: "But you are just a settler....If I were you I would accept the offer as quickly as possible and scout for some land to buy somewhere around"(Nair 1998, 311-312). But his new identity in liaison with the hegemonic capitalists freezes and cripples his natural native identity. This forces him to keep his love affair with Anjana, a married woman on the brink of divorce, under wraps from society. His patriarchal-colonial attitude silences their healthy and progressive non-dualistic relationship. Anita Nair here echoes Gayatri Spivak's notion of speaking out against patriarchy's silencing and that of the colonizer. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak elaborates contexts

wherein contesting representational systems violently displace/silence the figure of the 'gendered subaltern'. She states:

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of a woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak 1998, 306)

Anita Nair uses the language of the colonizer and of her own traditional and cultural background in new combinations in order to problematise the condition of silence attributed to the colonial subaltern female subject. Anjana's matriarchal background allows her to make choices regarding her life as a form of indigenous resistance and subversion of the capitalist patriarchal attitude. Her subtle resistance by distancing herself from Mukundan for his cowardly act of sacrificing her on the altar of his quest for self-worth speaks volumes of the agency of cultural authenticity and native wisdom. Her matrifocal culture helps her choose her subversive act of resistance. She tells Mukundan, exposing his hypocrisy:

> You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it. What a great trick that is! To admit to your frailty so no one will condemn you later on. You disgust me. Please leave. (Nair 1998,323)

Mukundan's greed for recognition, acceptance, importance and adulation blinds him to everything around him, even to his very identity. When realization dawns on him, he makes amends by embracing activism – by gifting a part of his property to Bhasi. He reverses capitalist/colonizer urge of people like Power House Ramakrishnan by donating land instead of acquiring it. Thus, he transforms himself to a better man, by rupturing the class line of Kaikurussi, and by conquering his fear:

> All my life I wanted to be my father's equal. But now I want more. I want to know what it is to love and to give. And, in turn, be loved. I don't want to wake up one morning and discover that I have frittered away my life chasing after ephemeral dreams....But nothing would make me happier than to have you living alongside me. I will wait for you, Bhasi. (Nair 1998,354)

In his acceptance of Anjana wholeheartedly and without the fear of sanction of the villagers, he makes his choice and does what his conscience tells him. Nair captures Mukundan's transformation in a piece of free direct discourse "I shall let everyone see that I love Anjana, he told himself. But, more important, he would no longer allow his past to dam his passions." (Nair 1998, 356). Further, his self-realization and self identity sparks in the form of resistance backed with ideological thought and courage when he feels that he should do something against the community hall, a symbol of capitalism, vanity and a statement of his cowardice. But the new Mukundan wants no remnants of his past feudalistic identity. So, he decides to show his

resistance by deciding to blow up the symbol of capitalism, the community hall, thereby changing the face of life:

> Within everything rests a power to ignite, to explode, and to change the face of life. All that was necessary was to kindle and set it alright. (Nair: 357)....The edifice to the man he had been would no longer exist. This was the moment that had eluded him all his life. When he would become a man. A better man than he ever had been (Nair 1998,361).

Mukundan, through his psychological resistance, cures the symptoms of a feudalistic unwholesome alliance between power and money and the residual traces and memories of subordination.

Anita Nair's women in *The Better Man* assert their individuality and try to liberate themselves from the clutches of man. Valsala, the wife of the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran is entangled in her daily household chores, the maintenance of the compound and watching television every evening. She is the lonely person in her house and there are no astonishments in her life. Even the coconut, cashew and pepper which grow in her garden cease to fill her with wonder. Like her, they also plainly go behind the track of nature and yield revenue in quantity to their numbers. Valsala's marriage does not appear to be the realization of a well-cherished dream, but seems to have been resorted to because of lack of pleasures in her marital life. She had never known an awakening of her senses. Not once in her life had an odd and exotic flower bloomed in

her yard, filled the air with its overwhelming fragrance. Her existence and her senses suddenly blossom due to the fragrance of the flowers of the *pala* tree. She thinks about the words uttered by hermother when she was young. The scent of the *pala* flower is the enticing fragrance for the Gandharvas who always look for virgins to seduce. They will make the virgins slave for them and no mortal, subsequently, can satisfy her sexual desires. Nair explains in a metaphorical style, Valsala's sensuality:

> All night, for the first time in many years, Valsala tossed and turned in her bed, breathing in the scent of the pala flowers. Strange sensations coursed through her. Her nostrils flared, her lips parted, her eyes became a little less murky, every pore in her body opened, greedily seeking to fill their depths with this unique fragrance. (Nair1998, 129)

Thus, the world of her desires tempts her initially after the blooming aroma of *pala* flowers to taste the pleasures in her life. She attains a high level of female autonomy. For the first time after many years of her married life she believes that she needs a perfect man to satisfy her sensual pleasures. She falls in love with Sridharan, who first appears in her life as a neighbour and then becomes her lover. Soon after the realization of her inner self she decides to free herself from her husband. She enters into a sexual relationship with Sridharan as a natural pinnacle to her emotional involvement; she decides to be the mistress of him. As Prabakaran Master goes to school they enjoy unrestrained intimacy emotionally and physically. She sets her heart on enjoying her life with Sridharan, as her gandharva. Sridharan admires her and flatters her beauty completely and consequently, she starts taking care of her body.

This narrative presents the feminist attitude of Valsala in the light of new morality of chick-lit. Of course this brings into the focus her soul and psyche, for she expects friendly attitude from the male. She is aware of the fact that every woman needs the energizer of love, freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that is quite impossible from hostile men. Accordingly she is willing to trap the new system against the backdrop of traditional concept of Indian womanhood. She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude, and puts forth the new issues of woman's sexuality and gender. She justifies herself: "I am just forty years old. I don't want to be pushed into old age before it is time. I want to live. I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself, night after night." (Nair 1998,130)As a consequence, Valsala's quest emerges as a battle, of course, the battle of female psyche. When she gets dissatisfied, the result is that she rebels against the existing system and seeks to be indifferent to the relationship. As a rebel her first sign of change is her cooking. She revives all the old modes of cooking like she replaces oil with ghee. Valsala's quest overlaps with a conflict against the tradition. When Prabhakaran raises alarm about his indigestion, she ignores it. It is projected that Sridharan and Valsala have partners. In spite of her frustration with her spouse, Valsala sustains the marriage for practical reasons:

> There was the land she had slaved over the house she was mistress of – both of which her husband's. Then there were the retirement benefits he would get when he retired from the Lower Primary School in Pannamanna three years from now. And then there was the sizeable LIC policy..... After twenty-three years of marriage, she thought she deserved to

> have it all. She didn't want to give it up just like that. Nor did she want to give up Sridharan. (Nair 1998, 133)

In a sudden development, Prabhakaran goes missing and later he is found dead. Though the Police Inspector interrogates Valsala about the death of her husband, at the core she preserves silence. Valsala wails and bangs her forehead against the wooden pillar. There is also a great deal of sympathy for her as a widow. But everything changes when it is revealed that she with Sridharan had assassinated Prabhakaran Master and his body was chopped into twelve fragments.

In this novel, the readers come across Valsala, who does not feel guilty of her crime because she wants to escape from the male domination, a mercenary, loveless marriage and to lead her life as she had dreamt. Valsala is that "New Woman" of chick- lit who breaks the traditional framework of Indian femininity and violates the rules of the patriarchal society. Anita Nair presents through her the emotional life along with the desires of a woman in an assertive way. She sets out the twenty first century woman, for whom sex is a new religion. She also casts light on female psyche, as she brings into open that a woman should be treated as human being and should not be ignored or suppressed. Though Valsala is unable to voice her emotions directly, her unwillingness to comply with the routine chores is her revolt. She also finds a certain degree of happiness in her affair with Sridharan.

The Better Man also depicts every individual's attempt to find a degree of inner peace and happiness. Throughout the narrative, there is an underlying message about how to accomplish

one's own dreams and strive hard to fulfill the same. In patriarchy, marriage is a matter that worries the society as a whole, not just the two persons who are conjugally involved. Anjana's marriage is another study of the crippling effect of patriarchy on a woman's life. Anjana is brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her parents. She is happy in her world of independence which gives her a profound sense of self fulfillment. When she turns twenty seven, she sacrifices her independence in the name of marriage. In her married life, she endures several injustices perpetrated by her husband. In the days of her early married life she tries a lot to impress her husband, Ravindran but she fails. She wants to give the best to him but he is cold to her. Anjana consciously or unintentionally imitates the image of a perfect woman because of her conventional upbringing. From her early childhood, she was trained to remain content in her married life. This patriarchal expectation of absolute compliance from a woman conditions her psyche. Whenever Anjana is ready for a casual conversation with Ravindran, he feels irritated and leaves the place in a hurry. In spite of such insensitive actions she is ready to perform her duty and all that she wants to know about is the likes and dislikes of her husband. Her husband's home becomes a trap where she feels a stranger in the bed. She is eager to lead a healthy life with him but it is mere a dream for her to achieve. She longs for freedom and love in marriage, but it breeds pain, misery and fury. She develops hatred to all the things around her, even to herself. She feels that she has been victimized in the name of customs and practices. Apparently the Indian marriage brings together man and woman under one roof, but they hardly communicate. Though Anjana knows the fact that every relationship, including sexual relationship is incomplete without the emotional relationship, she accepts her fate. Her marital relation with her husband is marked by loneliness and inadequate gestures. Ravindran's business fails and decides to start a new one and he becomes more selfish in his mindless ambition. Rarely

does he think about her and his visits to her reduce. Their relationship is affected adversely by their incapability to understand each other. Due to the growing 'silence' between them, their marital life gets unsteady and dismal. For his lack of confidence and success he violently attacks Anjana. On watching this terrifying behaviour her father admonishes him:

> "When I gave you my daughter's hand in marriage, it was with the hope that you would love her. Cherish and protect her for the rest of her life. If all you intend to do is hurt her, and made her unhappy, then there is no need for such a relationship. My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you. If you ever hurt my daughter again, I'll throw you out of this house. Do you understand?" (Nair 1998, 232)

Even then Ravindran continues with the abuse and in order to save her from the brutality of her husband, her father finds a suitable teacher job. She enjoys her job and makes many friends. She prefers to read magazines, books and carried the transistor radio along with her like a baby. She tries to come out from the married life which she considers it as a disaster.

The reader is given adequate hint that she is going to break her passivity. Having realized her position, Anjana would not accept the earlier image of a pair of bullocks yoked together, signaling a loveless couple. She comes to realize that life can always be made possible. The earlier impulsive Anjana becomes a mature woman, and with her realization, shadow that befalls between wife and husband tends to disappear. Anjana, like many women, is a victim and

subjugated woman but not a passive silent sufferer. Yet she does not question the man; her oppressor because she is more concerned in getting on her life and in finding her meaningful existence. She accomplishes selfhood through self-assessment and self criticism.

The members of older generation in the novel are silent to the power of patriarchy and are complicit to gender discrimination whereas the younger generation is drastic and revolutionary. Anjana seeks healthy relationships that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows what she deserves. Nair traces how she transforms into near celibacy:

> "She gave away her colourful saris and took to wearing starched cottons in shades as insipid and dull as her life. She locked up all her jewellery in a safe deposit box at the bank and swept all her fripperies away into the waste basket". (Nair 1998,234)

Finally, Anjana breaks the traditional Indian custom and creates the world of her own. Anjana's emergence from her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to liveas a free individual, is an assertion of her personal freedom. She meets Mukundan and falls inlove with him. She finds in Mukundan everything which she had been searching for in Ravindran. Mukundan does not ignore her presence or over ride her thoughts, but instead helps her to regain her freedom of herself as an individual, a human being with her own identity. In Mukundan's company she realizes that she has to free herself from her unhappy married life. When Anjana, proposes her

wish to Mukundan, a dialogue ensues which articulates their inhibition, fear and desire to redeem themselves in each other's company:

> 'Anjana', Mukundan said. 'You must listen to me. I know you think I am a good man. A gentle man. Someone you can depend on completely. I don't know if I am that man you make me out to be. My mother begged me to rescue her and take her away. But Ididn't. I was afraid of my father, and so I made excuses. If I had done as she askedme, perhaps she might be still alive. That is the kind of man I am. A weak and undependable creature. Do you want to be part of such a man's life?'
>
> 'All of us have our weakness, but we seldom have the courage to accept them. Or even declare it as you have done now. To me, that makes you braver than anyone else. I Love You. My love tells me that this is right; you are right for me.' (Nair1998, 244-245)

Anjana is a blend of both traditional and modern elements and she wants uniqueness and autonomy. Unable to get recognition of her identity from Ravindran, she shapes out anew lane for herself. Love from Mukundan charts out for her a new life as in the case of Valsala.

Anita Nair seems to be deeply concerned with women's freedom of choice as Anjana has a clear idea of her love-life. It is Anjana's longing for gratification and peace that urges her to get a

divorce from her husband. After a long struggle, Anjana turns out to be a woman who can make choices, take decisions and makes up her mind to start life anew with Mukundan from whom she can get what she longs for – love, care, affection and understanding.

Anjana's positive attitude towards life, work, financial independence, and self-identity help her to go ahead in her life with hope and optimism and she proves that women can achieve autonomy. Anjana finds her voice and establish her identity. She has alsoc reated her gender identity and found a significant way of life with Mukundan. It also shows that the novel does not end in depression but ends on a note of hope.

Thus Anita Nair, in this novel, examines the inner and emotional lives of women such as Valsala and Anjana. Her fictional specialty appears to be the exploration of the psyche of her women characters of all age groups. Not only does she voice the message of emancipation but also attempts to map out the real processes by which women attain selfhood. She does so by exposing the evident and hidden means of women's bondage and by recording women's feelings against the principles, stereotypes and patriarchy.

Anita Nair, like many other contemporary Indian women writers, has chosen to break the patriarchal dictates by establishing self identity as the central theme in *The Better Man*. The stimulation of self-understanding is an essential part of Indian philosophical and theological systems. Self-esteem, as presented in Anita Nair's novels, however, is different from the religious self-realization. Self-discovery here is more a tool for assertion and realization of one's own interests, certainly not egocentric in the narrow sense. The language, theme,

characterization, narration and the plot reveal Anita Nair's craft and her ability to deal with finer human feelings.

Chapter Three:

A Train Journey of Emotions in *Ladies Coupe*

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* ends with the line, "Hello. This is Akhila. Akhilandeshweri." This line marks the culmination of an emotional journey wherein each word radiates confidence of a woman who has realized the need for a life of her own and a man of her own. Akhila is forty-five but she realizes that she is still a woman, a woman who is still in search of an unknown emotion. She also realizes that she is a bag of biological and emotional complexities bundled meticulously into a unique weave of life.

Ladies Coupe is not merely a story of a forty-five year old single woman going through an express journey of emotions, but the reflection on the subtle intricate yet powerful emotions that women undergo as they play out the multitude of roles – A child, a wife, a sister, a colleague and a mother. The narrative traces the emotional journeys of a handful of women who travel in the *Ladies Coupe* of a train. Their journey together becomes the setting for opening up their emotional lives to one another. Akhila's story is at the focal point of this novel in parts – A telling narrative of the thought process of a woman when she is a kid, the puzzling emotions of puberty, the first yearning for a man's presence, the intricate blend of love, lust and fear when she lets her man beyond intimacy levels, the bipolar role of a young woman, pleasing her parents and for yearning for man.

The story in *Ladies Coupe* revolves around a group of women with varied life and background, but bound by the common thread of being desirous to make changes in lives. Their stories send Akhila recollecting her own life, the decisions she made and would be making. Janaki , an elderly lady, the typical Indian wife who had an arranged marriage, her husband believes that it

is fine if he undresses her on the first night without even talking and that it is the duty of every woman to please her husband and keep silent. Janaki evolves from a wife to a mother and to a grandmother .Despite all these changes, her life revolves around the care of her husband. She is a victim of a loveless marriage and fails to come out of this trap.

Margaret Shanti, who swings between a blinded love for her man instead of his self gratifying outlook on her and her identity, has to go through the emotional turmoils of taking the orders of her husband from cooking to abort their offspring. Eventually, she tames him to her whims. She emerges in the novel as a strong Indian woman in her rebellious mind and she also has to bury her emotions and in her effort to gratify a dictating husband.

Prabhadevi is another complex emotional sketch. Born in a rich family and with an understanding husband, life could not have been better. However, things move into very routines and it becomes difficult for her to accept that life which is controlled by her husband. She feels suffocated in playing out the roles of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. She realizes that her world has been reduced to cooking rice or chapattis for lunch, frying okras or aubergine, loading the washing machine with cotton whites or cotton coloured – all these appear routines of life.

Sheela and Marikolantthu have slightly different stories to tell, deviating from the middle class emotions invested on family. Their emotions range from a kid's reaction to molestation to lesbianism. Even with these unusual emotions they are womanish.

Even while listening to all these stories Akhila, contemplates her own life. She remembers how she was burdened with the responsibility of a man of her house with a sudden demise of her father. Her family assumes her to think and act and be just as responsible for everything including finance and taking up a job as a man. They almost forget that she is still young and that she is a woman. She wonders if the members of a family would ever realize that she has a need for having life of her own. In an eventual transformation, she decides to spend the rest of her life for her own sake with a man younger to her, Hari.

The title,*Ladies Coupe,* symbolizes the journey of a woman from birth to death. It also stands for a compartment reserved exclusively for women which can be compared to their familial compact world where, they share their smiles, their tears, their marital life and love. The common factor in all these women who travel together is that they are very strong and that they are in a search for a real meaning of life. Their stories also impart hope and courage for the readers.

Out of the six women, Akhila is not only the protagonist, but also the consciousness through which the events and stories are filtered to the readers. Akhila takes a one way ticket to Kanyakumari, the southern tip of the sub-continent. Her destination is metaphorical of some sort of an end or finality in her life's journey. Born in a conservative lower middle class family and still unmarried at the age of forty-five, she bears the responsibility of the entire family and as the only earning member she takes up financial burden too. Even then, she has to take permission from her younger brother if she has to come late. Akhila's mother is compliant to this double

standards of patriarchy as she is used to be completely devoted to her husband and considered him to be the superior most. She also tries to pass on to Akhila the notion of a perfect wife:

> A good wife learns to put her husband's interest before anyone else's, even her father's. A good wife listened to her husband and did as he said. There is no such thing as equal marriage, Amma said. It is best to accept wife is inferior to husband. (Nair| 2001, 23)

Though Akhila is irritated by this sermon of her mother, she has to support her family and sacrifice all her personal pursuits of happiness. In her hind sight, she also realizes, her father was not only not superior but also had made her mother dependent and ineffective. Akhila is also caught between her intense dislike for the patriarchal expectations of a woman and her compulsion to work as a clerk in the tax department. Akhila's emotions and desires are largely muted. Not even her mother thinks about her daughter's need for a companion. Akhila also feels imprisoned and trapped because of her indifference of her family members. From this frustration, she starts thinking as a rebel and she starts liking everything which is against the narrow minded Brahmin culture. Her revolt begins with an instance of eating egg at her non-Brahmin friend's house. She also falls in love with a boy much younger to her and shares intense physical relationship with him. What she does is to re discover the pleasure of being a woman through due to the fear of societal pressure she maintains a distance from him for a while. The whole novel is about how Akhila finds outlets for her bottled emotions and transgressing the norms dictated by patriarchy and caste.

As a child Akhila watched her father lionized by her mother while she and the other children were marginalized. Akhila remembers her mother's pampering of her father with her exclusive cooking and the rhythmic movement of the swing on which her father spent the afternoons with his head cushioned in his wife's lap. Akhila's father is a born loser and could never get the promotion due to him mainly due to the manipulation of superiors who black marked his confidential files Akhila's father has a perennial air of suffering about him and Akhila compares him unfavourably with Subramanyam Iyer, a counterfoil and also a neighbour and family friend. He is the husband of Sarasa Mami for whom Akhila has a soft corner. Iyer is just a peon and has a growing daughter and a dependent blind son. But he is full of the joy de vivre of life and has none of the aura of suffering around him, which Akhila's father has. The negation of life seems to be the lot of Akhila's father. His death too has an element of mystery. Did he deliberately plunge into his death by stepping in front of the bus? Anger fills Akhila's heart and tears dry in her eyes so she takes on the mantle of the provider, her sole inheritance from her father.

After her father's death, Akhila as the eldest child, at the tender age of nineteen takes her father's place as the bread winner of the family. She is not given the same sort of importance. She must have got equal pay for equal work but she certainly has not received equal respect even though the family survives only because Akhila brings home a decent pay packet. "Amma had her Akhila. Akhilandeswari mistress of the worlds. Master of none"(Nair 2000, 85).

In comparison, Nair shows a parallel situation. It is Akhila's neighbour Mr. Iyer's family. When the man of the house dies, the widow Sarasa Mami is forced to put her eldest daughter on the street as a prostitute. Both the families are Brahamins and have lost the man of the family. The difference is that the neighbour's family makes their survival in an undignified way. Akhila's family's situation could have been similar but as Akhila's mother says; "I had you" (85) Akhila again feels her identity being lost in the role, she's expected to play. "Young as she is, she hopes that one day she will have a home and family her own" (Nair 2000, 85). But Akhila's great contribution to the dignified survival of her family is certainly not appreciated by its members and they never repay her in any way. She remains instrumental in arranging the marriage of her two brothers – one elder and the other younger the same day, but no one ever thinks if she also wants a husband, children, or a house of her own. "In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster." (Nair 2000, 77) So at the age of thirty four, Akhila is expected to marry off her youngest sibling Padma by amassing a sizeable dowry.She is reminded often of a Tamil film whose heroine is just like Akhila – a work horse and a woman who gives up her life and hope of her marriage.: "....When Akhila thought of the film, she felt darkness lick at her. Would her life end like the life of the woman in the film?" (Nair 2000, 77)

It begins more as a lazy and misty blur of self-confusing thoughts but soon Akhila's resilient self begins to take form and shape. At long last her "entombed desires" surface and she decides to carve out a life of her own. She lists out her own problems with clarity and arrives at the conclusion that she is in need of an education which could give her a sense of firm footing. She begins to take care of herself. "On her thirty-fifth birthday, she decided to get herself an

education. She enrolled in the Open University for a Bachelor of Arts degree. Akhila chose history as her main subject." (Nair 2000, 85)Her decision to get enrolled in the Open University is a step towards asserting her own being. Akhila's yearnings for tenderness, tough and erotic fulfillment are never vocalized. They exist only in her dreams and her unexpressed sub-consciousness. The quest for the recognition of her womanhood is expressed through her dream. Akhila's longings are beautifully revealed through the dream where she experienced the touch of male fingers. The personal warmth through this touch in this dreamy sensation in a strange way soothed her though it is insubstantial. She is now emboldened to seek out emotional nutrients in order to satisfy to her sensation-starved body. The passion in her catches fire when she meets Hari. She then experiences the flow of life, as she yields herself to the finger-tingling of Hari. Thus the encounter with Hari marks the first phase of her transition to fulfilment and freedom. Contrary to the social norm, she goes to Mahabalipuram and spends some good time with him. Satisfying the call of her innermost being even at the cost of lying to her mother speaks volumes about the pulsating urge of her being and reminds us of the fact that she is not an object but a woman who has a free will. Her mother asks her to seek her brothers' permission before she steps out but she reacts vehemently: "Amma, I'm their elder sister. Why should I ask them for permission to go on an office tour?" (Nair 2000, 150)

Akhila also enjoys sensual pleasure unknown to her so far for a small period of time and realizes a fullness, a flowering of her personality: "Akhila felt a warm rush over her... she had never known anything like this before. An unfurling. Beads of sweat. A rasping edge to her muted breadth. A quite flowering." (Nair, 2000, 139)

Later in her trip to Mahabalipuram she makes love with Hari for the first time and she feels overjoyed. This proper adult love was different from 'all those tentative fumblings that had been the sum total of their lovemaking before.' (Nair 2000, 152) She enjoys Hari's company but this relationship has a very short life span. This relation dies very soon partly because of her social awareness of any such relationship being a considered taboo and also because Hari is younger to her. Thus Akhila's transition into another stage of her evolution occurs when she decides to call off her friendship with Hari. In other sense, Akhila's decision to call off her relationship with Hari marks yet another important milestone in her evolution as an autonomous woman who is in search of "self".

Akhila's discerning mind helps her to recognize when to abide by rules and when to flout them to the winds. She is in the process of becoming more genuine and truer to her inner self. Akhila's interior growth is also marked by her ability to take risks. When Akhila comes out with a proposal of living alone and Padma remarks that she needs her brothers' permission, Akhila retorts: "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent.... I will do exactly as I please and I don't give a damn about what you or anyone else thinks." (Nair, 2000, 204)

Akhila asserts herself in one of the conversations with Narayan, her elder brother: "For twenty-six years, I gave all of myself to this family. I asked for nothing in return. And now when I wish to make a life of my own, do anyone of you come forward and say... You deserve to have a life of your own." (Nair 2000, 206)

It may be concluded with some reservations that Akhila's free will has been curtailed to a large

extent, by her own family and society, but she is courageous enough to listen to the voice of her own being and at times reacts to the dictates of her family and society. Besides, sometimes she is bold enough to take some drastic steps to please her own being. She has found the strength to break out from the prison-house of her old self as symbolized by the stiffness of the cotton saris she always wore to work. She can at least go back to her old life where perhaps nothing may have changed on the surface but on a mental plane a sure process of empowerment has taken place.

Though all the women portrayed in the novel belong to different age groups, cultural and economic backgrounds, they share the common experiences of being repressed, oppressed and humiliated by their respective families and male counterparts. Their experiences make a work of fiction which can be seen as a collective women's psyche which is not only rooted in a culture but also that which binds women to one another. Janaki, the oldest of these women, despite being overprotected realizes that she is fragile and strong that makes Anita Nair's novel fascinating. Janaki articulates an emotional complex of being hopelessly attached to man though she also likes being his wife:

> I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then by husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left. Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves.(Nair2000, 202)

Janaki, married for forty years is stuck to the conventional role of a woman and tries to make her husband's home, her kingdom. Her craving for love and recognition is the desire amongst all the women in the world.

Sheela, the youngest of the six women is also the most sensitive. Even at a tender age, she becomes a victim of child abuse and gender discrimination. Her father's friend tries to seduce her and she decides never to go to her home anymore. She shares strong bonding with her grandmother and her grandmother articulates the spirit that uplifts Sheela:

> You must not become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself when you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy. (Nair 2001:123)

What Sheela's grandmother implies is that women who prefer their happiness and gratification of desires will alone give her an identity. Her grandmother also emphasizes women's need to be loved.

Prabhadevi too is a victim of gender discrimination though she belongs to a rich class.She gets married to Jagdish, a rich man. She is an image of the new woman who is conscious of her looks and sexuality and who likes to enjoy freedom and mobility. She goes to the extent of asserting her freedom by telling her husband to use contraceptive as she does not want to get pregnant at that point of time. The lifestyles of Sheela and Prabhadevi are at two extremes though both these

woman and resigns to the monotonous life. She also takes up swimming as a hobby to get over her frustrations. The portrait of Prabhadevi is that of a woman in her real self who has the weaknesses of mind and body along with their strengths.

The case of Margaret Shanti is the one of the desire for revenge. Being abused and humiliated by her husband, Ebenzer Paulraj, she decides to take revenge on him by overfeeding him and making him a fat man. Being a chemistry teacher, she filters her experiences and classifies people in terms of different chemicals. The link between different chemicals and the characteristics of different people is the aesthetic device that Anita Nair uses to depict a rare sensibility of an intelligent yet revengeful woman. Margaret identifies herself, water – an element which is not only strong but also a solvent of many things. Like water, she dissolves and buffers the pressures around her. Though she is made to sacrifice her scholarly desire to settle down as a wife she realizes that her husband is authoritative. Ebenezer is also insensitive and self-obsessed and convinces Shanti to terminate her first pregnancy. Tormented by a sense of guilt after abortion, she starts keeping an emotional distance from her husband. He continues to dominate and forces her to cut her long hair short. She feels trapped and suffocated but she also knows that her parents and the society would never approve of getting separated from her husband. Eventually, she overcomes the situation by puncturing his self esteem by using her culinary skills. She seduces him to give up his diet conscious lifestyle. He drops his guard and the results become visible after a year. As he puts on weight, he becomes a slow moving creature

that cannot control even his school as its principal. He also becomes a quiet man, an easy man and as Shanti is the one to appease his appetite, he seeks her more and more. Thus Shanti reverses the gender roles of a conventional marriage and in due course of time she takes control of her own life and fulfills her desire for becoming a mother by giving birth to a girl. Here is a story of incredible inner strength though the idiom of the story is in terms of chemistry and culinary skills.

Marikolanthu represents a woman of lower caste and her sufferings send shudders through the bodies of the readers. Her employer's relative Murugesan forces himself upon her and she tries to wash away the guilt and the bruises of this rape but she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy whom she hates as he reminds her of her cruel rape. Her case indicates how the violation of a woman's modesty and forced sex create a deep emotional chasm between a woman's soul and her body. Later she becomes a mistress of her employer and by now, both her body and her soul have scratches beyond repair. The real irony in her situation is that she has to sell her son Muthu to his own rapist father Murugesan when she needs money. By doing so, she feels she has avenged Murugesan. Marikolanthu is thus trapped in another kind of womanhood – the existential trap of a Dalit woman. However, she too has change oriented mindset and gains some degree of voice by forcing Murugesan to take care of Mutthu. After listening to the stories of her female co passengers, Akhila realizes her own need to define her happiness, excitement and life. She also realizes that there is no perfect solvent for all dilemmas which woman face though she understands that she has the right to be happy. She knows that all her sacrifices for the family were at the cost of denying happiness for herself and comes to the awareness that her physical needs, emotional need and her dreams are real and cannot be denied. She starts

respecting her own sexual need which is manifested when she enters a physical relation with a stranger in a hotel Kanyakumari. She doesn't bother to ask the strangers name but she realizes that she has come to terms with her own sexuality independent of her society's approval of the same. The women in the novel also make Akhila realize that if there are many inhibitions and restrictions there are also many ways of overcoming them in an effort to begin a new emancipated life.

Anita Nair's ploy of making her characters to tell tales to each other is similar to that of Geoffrey Chaucer. The only difference in *Ladies Coupe* is that the tales make the characters more life-affirming. The stories have the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek new destinations. For instance, the story of Marikolanthu articulates the tone that she is no longer a victim and she has destination in life. For Akhila, these stories are extensions of her own personality. She realizes that her women co-passengers have common experiences of self denial. Akhila's personality with all its self negation is suggested in her appearance. She is encased in stiffly starched cotton sarees and like the creases of her sarees she holds herself in strict control. However, towards the end of the journey, she realizes that there is a rebel in her – a woman who wants to express herself in terms of her desires, dreams and love. Akhila's stiff exterior shows signs of crumbling when she discovers for the first time, herself responding to the anonymous groping of a man's hand in a crowded bus. This is the beginning of her sexual awakening and from this point she has to attend to the needs of her body. Akhila is also a woman who stands for her emotional needs. Her liking for Hari is more emotional than physical. When she realizes that her mother and siblings have only expectations from her and have no real warmth, she turns to Hari though she feels guilty for being in love with a younger man. Janaki's friendly love with her

husband is also a manifestations if a woman's need for companionship. She expects from her husband friendship warmth and emotional security.

The stories of six women depicted in the novel have the common thematic structure of these characters trying to liberate themselves from the unrealistic expectations from the family and the society. This structure leads the readers to the point of realization that women may come from different social and religious backgrounds but they have in common a desire to affirm themselves in all their relations and interaction. This structure also inverts the traditional gender politics propagated by patriarchy. For instance, Margaret by making Ebenezer dependent on her shows how a woman can gain strength even without rejecting the institution of marriage. Janaki, Prabha, Akhila and Margaret believe that their liberation is not in rejecting men altogether but in sharing an emotional and spiritual life with them.

Anita Nair also uses a number of interesting metaphors in *Ladies Coupe* to reveal the ideological and emotional positions of her characters. Margaret's use of chemistry to classify people, Akhila's cotton sarees and the coupe itself are metaphorical. Margaret by evoking the elements and chemical, designs a strategy of coping for herself, rejecting certain elements and accepting certain others. She filters the behavior of people's through chemistry, a strategy which helps her to simplify human behavior and to insulate herself from the expectations and statements made by others. The coupe also becomes a metaphor in the novel – a metaphor for a utopian world, an exclusive woman's space wherein women speak without being conscious of the men. This space also enables them to rediscover the needs of their bodies and mind. Margaret, for instance,

reveals the point that her body has to come to its fulfillment by bearing a child. Her sense of incompletion is both physical and emotional with their need for both giving birth and loving a baby. These metaphors also capture the opposition between the ideology and appearance that plagues the women in the novel. Akhila, for instance, has a true self that she yearns for love, sex and warmth, while her appearance, conditioned by the social norms is that of a stiff spinster. In her case, she is also conditioned to interpret her own life through the filters of myths such as Rama and Sita due to her Brahmin upbringing. These myths also act as taboos in her thoughts. Margaret on the other hand is more conditioned by the world of chemistry. She uses it to interpret the world of reality or to create a metaphysical understanding of the material world. Both Akhila and Margaret are trapped in the conventions of the material world which make a woman a prison house of her own self. In Akhila's case her other reiterates the compulsions of the material world and makes her daughter a victim of that Margaret redefines the material world through her own consciousness; she accepts only those things that fit into her mindset. In this sense Akhila and Margaret represent two different metaphysical understandings of the society. Akhila's understanding is that the world is full of prohibitions for a woman. While Margaret's understanding is that a world should be redefines through personal sensibility.

The title of the novel, *Ladies Coupe* as already discussed, is very suggestive as it stands for a combination of the confined space and assurance of anonymity as the passengers are strangers to each others in the beginning. Gradually the coupe turns into a confessional box wherein they reveal the ways in which their subversive strategies, subtle strength and courage take the ahead in life. Akhilas entry into this compartment is an accident as she wants a ticket to AC sleeper-but due to the unavailability she chooses to travel in a ladies coupe which is the second best option.

As it turns out in the novel, it becomes the best option as Akhila also begins her journey of self discovery. In literature, the journey is often taken as a metaphor for discovery. The characters in this novel take Akhila and the readers through a series of mental, physical and emotional events in their lives and their recollection is also a negotiation of their past. In the beginning, Akhila is a bit circumspect but before long she realizes that " it didn't matter...she could tell these women whatever she chooses to; her secrets desires and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted. They would never each other again."(Nair 2000, 21)Akhila is confident that this can be a perfect setting for the unburdening of memories and experiences.

The structure of the novel also has a bearing on its theme with each chapter devoted to one of the women's stories, stylistically the structure enables Akhila to reflect upon what she has heard from others and to place herself in the context of that story. Interestingly, Akhila's chapters initially don't have titles though the others stories have titles. Towards the end of the novel, however, Anita Nair gives Akhila's last chapter a name – "Akhila Speaks". This title indicates that Akhila has gained a voice in the process of welding her life's story with that of her co-passengers.

Nair also alters the traditional formula of a 'journey novel' by shifting the focus from the physical aspect to the intellectual and emotional. Though the women are confined to a coupe, their minds go beyond the boundaries exploring some vital dimensions of human relations. Their experiences serve as a guide for Akhila who gains in the process of listening to them some insights into her needs. The journey metaphor is also significant from another perspective.

Akhila decides to go on this journey when realizes that she has reached the saturation point where her life has been controlled by the needs of her mother and siblings. She wants to get away from the crippling responsibilities atleast for a while and to be a woman of flesh and blood. Further, Kanyakumari, where she heads to is also very symbolic. The name of the place evokes the myth of the virgin Goddess who like Akhila had put her life on hold, held to an eternal waiting. It is also interestingly a place where Vivekanand had the joy of wisdom and discovered his true self. By bringing together the myths of Kanyakmari and Vivekanand into Akhila's story, Nair provides objective correlatives for Akhila's condition – the faces of her predicament.

The voices of the characters are also suggestive of their agencies and personalities. Akhila is given a soft voice in the narrative, suggesting her self-censoring and self-conscious personality. Maragaret, in contrast, is given a voice of her own. Her story is in the first person narrative, different from the omniscient point of view that the rest of the novel has. It starts with a strong statement which is assertive of Margarets control over her life, "God didn't make Ebnezer Paulraj a fat man. I did. I, Margaret Shanti did it with the sole desire for revenge"(Nair 2000, 103).

These statements indicate the spirit of Margaret and they act as performatives. Margaret's revenge is as much in words as much it is in deeds. Her voice, revealed in her ability to speak well, is a revenge on her husband's self-esteem. Her voice is also marked with wit that shows strength of characters and her verbal tactics. She states that she wants to "rid this world of a

creature who if allowed to remain the way he was slim, lithe and arrogant and would contrive to harvest sorrow with single minded joy".(Nair2000, 139)

Margaret's subversion of the patriarchal power is both verbal and physical. Her wit and intellectual sharpness indicate her control over language. She assumes the role of a manipulative woman to inhibit the domination her husband. She states "I classify myself as water. Water that moistens, water that heals... forgets ...accepts...flows tirelessly. Water that also destroys"(Nair 2001, 103).

The image of water here is something that drowns the binaries of gender roles. It also suggests a soft control over the patriarchal world and a voice which she has found for herself. This image is also suggestive of Margarets rebirth into an assertive woman. Akhila too has a symbolic rebirth towards the end of the novel. She sleeps with a man and this act is both a death and a birth for Akhila – a rebirth of self in union with another human being.

Akhila is initially a victim of the prescriptions of her own caste. These prescriptions have control over her mind deciding what she eats and how she interacts with men. But deeply within herself,is the real woman who subdues the spinster in her. Though she is respected in the family she in the family she begins to feel that she has lost her identity as a woman. Suganya explains this crisis in terms of Akhila craving to listen to her own name called out:

> Akhila becomes stiff and starchy. The house is in order but the members have forgotten about Akhila's emotion and her emotional needs. Akhila handles all burdensome tasks delicately and she's allowed a bigger identity. Not called by her name,she gets the treatment of akka, elder or older sisiter, the customary respectful address reserved to women either inside or outside the family group. Even her mother used to call her Ammadi. She feels at a conflict with her emotions. The surge in her inner nook tries to kindle her she suffers an identity crises.(Suganya 2012, 03)

In contrast to this identity crises is Akhila's self awakening that is depicted in terms of sensual images. She asks herself a series of questions, expressing her desire to lead a life of emotions and excitement: "So who was Akhilandesweri? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when she saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? She did feel of rain on her bare skin send a line of goose bumps down her spine…?"(Nair 2000, 84)These questions are contours of her sensuality, desires and pleasures. They merge into physical acts of asserting herself. At thirty-four, she transgresses with her body for the first time by eating eggs. Then she reminds herself that she is not a being without desires. Then she falls in love with Hari and gets involved with him physically. She discovers, in this act, the pleasure if being a woman.

Akhila's liking for Catherine, her Anglo-Indian friend also has a subversive reason. Catherine lives independently without thinking about the neighbours and the society. Akhila desires this

kind of a life. Karpagam is another interesting woman in the novel. She is one of Akhila's old friends who is now a widow. Despite being born in a traditional Hindu Brahmin society, Karpagam emerges as a new woman who keeps wearing colourful dresses and her wedding jewellery even in her status as a widow, thus defying the norms of her caste. Karpagam reminds Akhila that it is normal for a female to be feminine and desirable. Both Catherine and Karpagam help Akhila indirectly to accept her own individuality to come to a position, "Nobody's daughter, Nobody's sister, Nobody's wife, Nobody's mother."(Nair2000, 207)

Akhila's emotional journey reaches its destination when she realizes that she needs a companion in the rest of her journey of her life. After listening to the stories of her fine co-passengers she decides that has a right to seek her lover and begin a new life. She also learns that life is attractive and full of wonders. Her journey along with other five women brings her in touch with lucid expressions of women's experiences, desires, revolt and love.

Ladies Coupe, thus leads the readers through words of six women that radiate vibrancy and confidence to their emotional intelligence. These women, despite their biological and emotional complexities are involved in a metaphorical journey in search of an unknown emotion. The expressions of their desires, revolt and emotions can be best equated to that of water, be it that of Margaret's powerful torrent revenge or that of Akhila's soft ripples of self awakening through love.

Chapter Four:

Emotions, Gestures of Transgression and Rasas in *Mistress*

With her first two novels, *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair signaled the arrival of a sensitive writer, who could delve deep into people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful journey. Her novel *Mistress* too is a brilliant blend of imaginative story telling and deeply moving explorations into the search for meaning in both art and life.

Two stories unfold in *Mistress*. The first is the story of Radha and Shyam and of the travel writer Chris who comes to their riverside resort in Kerala to meet Radha's uncle Koman, a famous Kathakali dancer. While Koman and Radha both find themselves strangely drawn to Chris, Shyam becomes a helpless observer as Radha embraces Chris with a passion and recklessness he cannot comprehend. This brings in an element of hybridity. Shumona Dasgupta points out that hybridity is "a subversive concept that resists homogenization and stagnation." (Dasgupta 2003, 76)

Since hybridity contains different types of mixing, the cultural formation of India is inevitably a process of transculturation. In this regard, the transgression between Radha and Chris sheds light on the hybrid and complex relationship between India and England. Firstly, it opens up the possibility that there can be conspiracy; intercourse and collusion between the colonizer and the colonized. By desiring each other, both India and England reach a mutual consensus and reach out for deculturation, assimilation or cooperation. Hybridization not only involves fusion but the creation of a new form, which can be set against the old form and regime.

The author depicts Koman as both an observer and participant in this novel, making no judgments, except those that he reveals to the readers. The second story that unfolds is that which Koman tells Radha and Chris, the story of his own convoluted past and his parents. The tale takes the readers all over Kerala and Tamil Nadu to the unique town of Arabipatnam and to various other places; and it brings the reader to kathakali, with fascinating insights into the training and performance of this traditional dance form, which incorporates drama as well as dance. Though the book is in the first person, it does not have a single narrator; as in a dance-drama, and allows each player to speak for oneself. Thus, *Mistress* follows but also transgresses the norms of the genre to which belongs.

The fact that constraint of and the dissatisfaction with the prevailing situation pave the way to transgression becomes evident when the reader finds Shyam voicing his thoughts and Radha voicing hers; and the reader spots them hurting each other, the misunderstandings deepening through the trickery of words. As Nair goes further into their past, the reader senses the complexities of their relationship and comprehends the injustice of it all.

Koman, with his knowledge of kathakali, an art entirely based on the epics, looks upon mankind with a wisdom drawn from the heroes, princes and villains of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. He identifies every nuance of emotion as one he has experienced, as part of a *vesham*, or a role in kathakali.

In minor gestures and fleeting expressions, the minds of all are revealed to an artist who is trained to interpret emotions with a finesse and perfection. In Anita Nair's novel, the tension between traditionally defined gender identity and individually actualized selfhood gets represented through the dance form of kathakali, which the author uses as her metaphor of life. The author divides the book into nine parts, each termed after one of the *navrasas*, the nine emotions or the nine faces of the heart – love, sorrow, contempt, fury, valor, fear, disgust, wonder and attachment. Each section commences with a beautiful piece on that particular *rasa,* in the voice of the teacher, giving examples from nature to teach his students how to bring the expressions onto their faces.

The book progresses from *Shringaram* to *Shantam,* and each time the reader gets an inkling of what is to follow. The language and structure used by the author are unique. The plot is full of twists and the author empowers the book by the colorful complexities of several characters. Embedded in all the incidents is Nair's search for deeper meanings in art and life.

With its poetic prose and grand subject matter, Anita Nair's *Mistress* is reminiscent of the age-old Indian epic such as the *Mahabharata*. In *Mistress,* there ensues a clash between love and history when cello-playing travel writer Chris arrives at the holiday retreat in Kerala to interview the famed traditional actor-cum-dancer, Koman. There, Chris falls for Koman's niece, Radha, whom, the author portrays to be trapped in a loveless marriage to Near-the-Nila's possessive and scheming owner, Shyam. Nair cleverly compares and contrasts the complex web of deceit that

ensues with a series of flashbacks to a youthful dalliance Koman indulged in with Anglo-German artist, Angela.in 70s London.

Anita Nair, by building her novel on the structure of a kathakali performance, takes her own performance beyond the limits of her initial promise. Nair breaks the stereotype with emotions not listed in the glossary of the art she seeks as a form to display her imagination. The richness of Koman's back story – whose emotional texture, sensuous as well as sorrowful, is accentuated by the thrills and tribulations of racial overstretch and migratory woes. This emotional texture makes the author a novelist who stretches the geographical boundaries of imagination to accommodate the wayward orphans who dominate everyone's history. The novelty lies not in reducing the distance between the art of the novel and the art of kathakali, and it is not in interpreting a classical form to suit the emotional or cerebral expediencies of the novelist either. Nair makes art a living experience. When the performers in *Mistress* realize that they need to discard the costume to regain their humanity, it is too late. The art of Anita Nair does it for them, stylistically.

Anita Nair categorizes *Mistress* into three books, each containing three *rasas*, culminating in the ninth rasa – *Shantam*. Even this has a role to play as the characters express a kaleidoscope of emotions associated with the art form – right from the strong sentiment like love to detachment, thus reaching a state of philosophical sublimity. In fact, even the story-telling technique has overtones of kathakali, which enacts the drama of life.

Anita Nair's *Mistress* progresses to explore the depths of relationships while, in a parallel strand, it unravels the skeins that weave together a life in art. As the turbulent eddies of life surround the protagonists, the readers are plunged into a multi-pronged narrative – where the *navarasas* dictate the mood of each segment, where the main characters offer first person slants on the evolving plot; where myths are vigorously retold with local color, where the artist and his art tussle for an equitable balance. Nair's narrative powers and mastery of minutiae are par excellence.

Kathakali emerges a complete art wherein one finds everything that is there in life. As a true Kathakali spectacle performed by master *veshakaras* that lasts all night, Nair evokes in her readers wonder, delight and grief. She writes about man-woman relationships and complex Kathakali aesthetics with equal felicity.

The structure of the novel *Mistress* sets the extraordinary tone for the novel. The inclusion of kathakali in the novels is much more than an exotic add-on. Its admission of how characters have varying shades of grey, of the past's impact on the present, is vital to the storyline. *Mistress* is a mature take on the factors that compel the characters to transgress. It sets up and resolves questions not through one grand metanarrative, but through little narratives. Each tale compounds the force of the one before it.

Transgression is evident in the very pattern that the author adopts. The narrative follows a unique pattern. Opening with a prologue and wrapped up with an epilogue, and in between the main body broken up into three books with three sections in each, each titled with the *navarasas* as found in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, it has each character speaking in the first person – long soliloquies, or dramatic monologues, reminiscent of long narrative sequences from a kathakali performance. The author expounding directly on each of the *navarasas*, at the beginning of the sections produces a choric effect.

In the background of the traditional dance form flow the lives of several characters who venture out in search of their true identities. Anita Nair in *Mistress* charts Radha's loveless marriage. Radha is emotionally distanced and more than a bit contemptuous of her husband Shyam. With the coming of Chris into the storyline, both Koman and Radha feel an immediate connection to him. The young woman now must choose from whether to stay in her marriage or to flaunt custom and risk the shunning of her society to find what she perceives as true love. The true richness of the story, however, belongs to Koman and his pursuit of excellence as a kathakali performer. His protector is his parakeet, Malini, who watches over him like a jealous lover. The reader finds that Koman, even in his old age pursues his own mistress, finding comfort and no less passion than that of Radha and Chris, but perhaps one more comfortable with human failings. Even while sticking to the form of the novel, the reader finds the author transgressing the form by way of moving from one form to another, that is, she narrates the entire plot using the art form kathakali in the backdrop. As in a conventional novel, *Mistress* comprises of 'plot', 'character', 'description', etc. but through Koman's narration of his life events, she also squeezes in the form of autobiography. Anita Nair moves about these various genres with great felicity

and remarkable ease. *Mistress* emerges as a beautiful blend of imaginative storytelling and deeply moving explorations into the quest for meaning in both art and life. Allon White's views stand relevant here. According to Allon White, transgression is an inversion or subversion of some existing socially valued norm, rule, structure or contract. It often operates through a systemic inversion of hierarchical oppositions. It mixes conventionally separated things.

The very title of the novel features at its transgressive limit. Koman's mistress is art as in the novel he voices the author's words, "Art can be a very demanding mistress." (Nair 2005, 35) The need to have a mistress is in itself transgressive. Artists face more problems with the normative society. The artist and the man wade through reality as well as imagination at times. The artist imagines as well as interprets not only his own life, but also that of all others, who have played an important role in his life. Through Koman, the author leaves it to the readers to decide ultimately that who rules – the man (artist) or the mistress (art). The very manner in which Koman starts narrating his life seems very unconventional. He commences by saying, "in the beginning was an ocean." (Nair 2005, 36) The novel then glides from Koman to his father Sethu trapped in a tragic condition and shows how he emerges victoriously from this situation. The reader also encounters the 14-year-old Sethu's transgression by running away from home in order to escape the humiliation of not being able to rise up to the expectations of his uncle. By escaping, Sethu seeks release and frees himself from the otherwise constraining circumstance. A new Sethu emerges as the one who requires a new identity; hence, the author names the character Seth.

The author through Koman and Seth exposes the reader to a plenty of places as well as art. Mobility forms the central motif in *Mistress* as in the other novels of Anita Nair. The land of Arabipatnam, verily represents the land of subjugation, restraints and constraints being imposed on people of that land with such norms being practiced as no stranger is allowed to stay there after sunset, and where people trust strangers with much difficulty. This town, Arabipatnam, houses a village of orthodox Brahmins that symbolically represents conservatism, and exposes the hypocrisies of the people in the village. This place also introduces the reader to the character Saadiya, daughter of the leader of Arabipatnam. She finds herself wrapped in constraining circumstances; with limitations symbolically expressed by the author in terms of measures, as 'the measure of her sky was twenty feet by thirty feet,' the wall, which she could hardly overlook to see beyond, represents confinement. No doubt, she yearns to see and know what lies beyond the restricting 'walls'. The gender injustice meted out rings through her expressions "it isn't fair that you men get to go wherever you want, see and do whatever you like, and I am expected to be content with this patch of blue and this maze of alleys," (Nair 2005, 99). Saadiya fails to voice this injustice to her father owing to his respectful status and position in their society. Ironically, the very conservative father Haji Najib Masood Ahmed feeds his daughter with the fire of imagination of the 'other' world through his stories, which kindle Saadiya's desire and make her curious to move beyond her constraints and thereby to transgress. The more are the restrictions, the more the longing to break out of it and attain freedom. Saadiya too manages to get what she aims, "a lungful of life" by trespassing the boundaries and limits laid by her community, thereby having a face-to-face encounter with life and being visible to a man's eyes for the first time. Saadiya for this transgressive act of hers receives heavy punishment from her father. However, this incident charts the beginning for Sethu and Saadiya to meet and come close to each other for

their lives. Even the basic human need such as the need to inhale fresh air, to inhale the vastness of the sky, the sea and the greenery around was denied to the women folk; whereas all these were permitted to their male counterparts. These subtle descriptions by the author only heighten the magnitude of transgression that is to follow later. Saadiya finds herself trapped in a dilemma – on the one hand, she has to be a 'good' girl and keep up the name of her ancestry by not entertaining any feeling for any stranger and on the other hand, her intense desire to unite with her dream-lover Sethu. Thus, Saadiya is portrayed to be in a conflicting situation that of obedience and resistance.

All the characters in the novel have their own limitations. The same is the case with Saadiya too. The burden of upholding her ancestry, her father's status and walk along the stereotyped ways and roles that are expected of women of their community weighs her down; until there comes the time when she has to choose between the weight of her ancestry and the miracle of her love to Sethu. She chooses with bravery to transgress the tenets of their law and thereby, follow her heart's call. Saadiya's quest involves a transgression of the status quo and the search for her own space. For this, she leaves everything behind, her home, her father, her sisters and her ancestry.

Early on Foucault believed that transgression held immense promise as a transformative agent and opined in theological terms: "Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred – is this not more or less what we may call transgression? In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its

empty form, its absence." (Wolfreys 2008, 23) Identifying the crucial concepts of boundary and limit, Foucault recognizes that "Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage."(Wolfreys 2008, 36)Foucault concludes that "the limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess – a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows."(Wolfreys 2008, 37)Thus, one witnesses that the characters in the novel like Saadiya, Sethu, Koman, Radha, Chris and others transgress by crossing the limitations and boundaries that come before them. Emphasizing the essential reciprocity, Foucault discerns that without recognized principles, accepted "laws" there can be no violation. As Bonnie and Hans Braendlin put it, "systems that limit and acts that transgress limits necessitate, 'authorize', each other," and not only could the 'transgressive' be a potent agency of revolutionary change, its detection could also be harnessed as a powerful lens by which to detect the hegemonic interests of the dominant culture(Wolfreys 2008, 39). Saadiya's transgression only helps in highlighting the extremely constricting, conservative and dominating nature of the community and its practices to which she belongs.

Most characters in the novel face the dichotomy of what the society expects from them and what they themselves desire to be. This dilemma paves the way for transgression and releases the characters from entanglements to liberty. The material surroundings of Radha portrayed by Anita Nair emit patriarchal resonance. She detests being treated as a possession by her husband. Torn and dissatisfied with her role in Shyam's life Radha cries out, "he doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress, someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles" (Nair 2005, 53). To describe Radha's situation, Anita Nair provides the striking example of a biology

project where the butterfly is caught and pinned to a board. Radha equates herself to this butterfly with her wings of freedom being pinned by strong patriarchal rulings. Anita Nair's definition of *haasyam* as 'contempt for convention' is what is echoed through the dialogues of Radha too when she says expressing her guilt for harboring a soft corner for Chris in her mind, being already a married woman. She wonders, "How have I become so disdainful of honor, so contemptuous of convention?"(Nair 2005, 54) One finds the character undergoing extreme guilt when she voices her thoughts saying, "I lie here in my bed in my husband's arms and think of another man. What kind of woman am I? I feel contempt for myself."(Nair 2005, 59) In fact, Shyam's insensitivity towards Radha and his interference into each matter concerning his wife robs her of her identity. She, here, becomes victim of gender injustice. The failure on Shyam's part to view his wife as an individual possessing her own wishes, desires, requirements and anxieties and treating her as an object which could be easily moulded according to his own fancies is what gets on to the nerves of Radha and badly irritates her. This attitude towards her and her strong desire to revive her true self from this mire is what readies a ground for her to transgress in search of a better alternative. The reader notices Radha affecting a kind of revolt through her private moments. She finds herself no place in Shyam's business endeavors. She tries hard to break this stereotype of a mere decorative status of being the owner's wife and seeks active involvement in his business. And by visiting Shyam's factory and closely involving herself with the workers there, having lunch with the women there and updating them with pieces of literature, Radha registers a strong revolt and rebellion against the dictatorial interventions and thereby seeks to create her own distinct identity. Her act of involvement once again meets the disapproval of her husband when he barks at her with "You are my wife and you have a place in society." (Nair 2005, 72) The role of being a wife is neatly defined and woman is

expected to fit into this role. Those who flaunt the watertight compartmentalization of roles are type casted as the 'other'.

Contrary to Shyam's possessiveness of Radha, stands Koman's attitude towards his niece. Koman expresses his liberal attitude after noticing the growing bond between Radha and Chris. He says, "She was unhappy in her marriage and if she found happiness in adultery, so be it." (Nair, 2005, 78) As a kathakali artist Koman is able to read the expressions and feelings that gather on Radha's face for Chris. *Mistress,* then, no doubt stands out as an excellent novel depicting different emotions through the nine *rasas*. With kathakali in the background one realizes that art is enticing and it camouflages the truth that it is very close to one's life and yet not near. It is an escape route and artists like Koman who perform because they have nothing to which they may cling. Real art is a misnomer for humans who consider them to have a palpable design. An artist lives in and out of the society. Artists face more problems with the normative society. They entertain others at the cost of their own eternal damnation.

The artist, as in the case of Koman unfolds his own identity through the characters he portrays through his art. Koman too, as his father Sethu, faces an identity crisis and struggles throughout to come out of his predicament. Sethu, under unavoidable circumstances becomes Seth that is, a Christian and who, later, reveals to his wife Saadiya, "I am Sethu, not Seth. Not Malik. I have had enough of play-acting. You must think of me as Sethu." (Nair 2005, 185) He turns a prey to *Maash*'s manipulations and allows *Maash* to use him for he had nowhere else to go than the *Maash*'s shelter. Sethu is guilty for having turned so weak and acted like a coward. This leads

him to the act of transgression, that of stabbing *Maash*. As Sethu narrates his past to Saadiya, the reader notices that Sethu is too haunted by his past. In Sethu, one finds a character who keeps on struggling throughout his life to arrive at some sort of certainty about his self. Through his various endeavors, he seeks to know himself. He escapes from his uncle's place, very unsure about his future life until he falls into the custody of the doctor, who, again fails to stand by him and understand his feelings for the 'good girl, descendant of the Sahabbakal, with the purest of Arab blood' (Nair 2005,129), Saadiya. This brings him to Nazareth and to James Raj, from whom he learns the art of making money. Sethu's insecurity and instability instill similar feelings in Saadiya too, and she repents her brave act of leaving everything for her love. Now, her thoughts rest on her child, of whom, she says, "I want my child to belong." She thoroughly dreads the thought of creating an identity crisis for her child. She wants to give it an identity right from its birth. Thus Koman initially acquires his identity as Omar Masood only to be transformed into Koman later. Even as a child, a few minutes old, Koman had to balance the two gods (Allah and Narayana) that resided in him. Even after her transgression and attainment of her heart's desire to live with her love – Sethu, Saadiya finds herself torn between her ancestry and her present life with Sethu. Now she aspires for the eternal rest, which drives her to the second transgressive step, that is, she attempts suicide. With her death, Omar Masood gets his new identity, that of Koman. Henceforth begins the quest for selfhood; which takes him a long way ahead, introduces him to various religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Christianity and varied people too; ultimately to rest with the art of kathakali. Just like his father Sethu, who initially escapes from home in search of an identity for himself, Koman too seeks self-knowledge in various aspects. In *Mistress*, the reader also encounters transgression in time. Anita Nair moves

backward and forward in time, thereby establishing the transgressive mode, which she deals with dexterity and ease.

In this novel both art and myth become forms of transgression. Both the characters Koman and Radha feel that art that gives freedom and space. A boy uncertain about his family and his parents, when meets his father addresses himself in the third person, as "Koman would like to know the name of the river." (Nair 2005, 239) This astonishes his father. Koman seems to be a stranger to himself until his father acquaints him to himself saying, "You must stop addressing yourself in the third person. Say I. I want to know the name of the river." (Nair 2005, 239) In this manner, Koman is introduced to himself. With this identity arises the conflict in him as he expresses – "I has this 'I' to battle with." (Nair 2005, 262) He was comfortable with his existence as Koman and easily understood Koman as a boy whose mother was dead and whose father lived elsewhere in order to earn livelihood. However, now he feels the urge to know this 'I'. He expresses in the novel, "so I gathered bits of myself" in order to shape the 'I'. This brings the reader to another aspect of transgression that, for the writer, as for any other artist, transgression may not merely be a matter of subject, but of form. The transgressive subject abhors that which is self-enclosed and rejoices in openness. It rejects the notion of purity and instead revels in mongrelization. It is the art of the hybrid of broken things. Thus, Koman collects bits and pieces from his new surroundings in a bid to discover himself. In him, one spots a character struggling to attain self-awareness wading through the uncertainties to which life subjects him. A feeling of being powerless grips him and he overpowers this feeling when coincidentally Koman happens to view a kathakali performance. As a boy, the grand and majestic appearance of the artists grips and engages his attention; and the artists seem to be

extremely powerful beings possessing the ability to conquer worlds, vanquish foes and bestow blessings. His ardent desire for self-definition paves the way for his entering the world of the art of kathakali and he fervently tells his father his heart's desire as "When I am a *veshakaran*, I will know who I am."(Nair 2005, 269) His intense wish to know himself makes him arrive at the decision of becoming an artist despite resistance and oppositions. Here, one sees that the instruction to obey carries with it the potential for disobedience. What is his son's disobedience to Sethu becomes the living force for Koman. Hence, transgression prevents stagnation by forcing one constantly to reassess the rules governing one's society, while simultaneously reaffirming the necessity of those rules. It may lead to reordering, but not to the absence of order at all. Sethu fails in his attempt to typecast his son into tailor-made roles as expected by society, as the caretaker of his father's business, and be a family man by the staunch decision of Koman to pursue kathakali. His very aim in pursuing this art is to transform himself and thereby, seek an identity for himself. The art of kathakali imparts multiple personalities to Koman. He can be anybody now. At times, he can be god, or demon, prince or pauper. Now he has a face he can recognize. In the process of mastering the art of Kathakali, Koman discovers the various aspects of being a wearer of guises. He also masters the nine faces of being- love, contempt, sorrow, fury, courage, fear, disgust, wonder and peace. Through Koman, the author opines, "In that congress of body and mind, beat and word, I knew myself. I learnt to live the character I was to be. I learnt that beneath the guise, I was the character."(Nair 2005, 273) Thus, the protagonist, Koman, transgresses from art to life and vice-versa until he reaches a clear vision of his self.

Artists have more problems with the normative society. While representing epic heroes they transfer themselves to another, more exalted space than the one they inhabit and as men, they

know they are nothing. Koman, as an artist, can neither engage in ordinary, mundane feelings, nor can he remain in the world of grandeur and magnificence forever. The author presents a sharp contrast to this world of an artist by presenting the normative world represented by Koman's family members – his Achan, Amma, Mani and Balu; and penetration into each other's world becomes almost impossible; as each has its own limitations. The difference between the two worlds, that of an artist and that of the normative society itself proves to be the strongest bondage between Koman and his family, as there has to be no cause for rivalry or enmity.

A sense of insecurity makes Koman cling to his chosen profession, that of, a Kathakali artist; and any threat he faces as an artist brings back to him a feeling of insecurity and powerlessness. It is this feeling that makes him swallow his pride and fall at the feet of the organizer who was about to cancel the performance. This hurt to his self-esteem makes Koman wonder, "Would my art always be a burden, making me humble myself merely so that I could keep it alive?"(Nair 2005, 280) One finds the protagonist wrestling through the ups and downs in his life as an artist, facing challenges that pose before him, braving conflicting situations and emerging out of the dilemma of being an artist and being his self. Koman's *aashan* neatly delineates the distinction between an artist and a performer that betters Koman's vision of an artist. The *aashan* opines, "An artist is a slave to his art. It rules him. It determines his life. It is his conscience. A performer? People who go through the motions of exercising what they think is art. They are not artists"(Nair 2005, 281) Thus Kathakali becomes an art of knowing and being and not playing or enacting. For Koman, kathakali becomes a means of articulating transgression. Through this art he sees himself, that is, seeks his identity and the world around him. His art detaches him from his self when he becomes a character and again reunites him to his self when he removes his mask. Koman tries to regain

his lost identity through the art he pursues and masters gradually. The art of kathakali allows transformation of the artist from one character to the other, whether it is a hero like Dharmaputran or a villain like Keechakan. Through the cross-section of characters he portrays he finds these two extremes – the heroic aspect and the villainous side, embedded in him. Koman seeks his self in the pursuit of the art of kathakali. At times, the artist and the character he portrays merge in such a manner that it becomes very difficult for the artist to detach himself from the character. Then he has to make a conscious, deliberate attempt to severe his ties with the character he portrays. One finds in the novel, Koman saying, after a performance, "I have to be me. I have to be the man Koman. I was Keechakan. Now I am me."(Nair 2005, 315) Koman's expertise in invoking emotions and feelings and creating and enacting a *vesham* comes handy, though temporarily, in dealing with the ups and downs in his life. For instance, after a performance, the biting criticism of a critic weighs him down and threatens Koman's self-worth. In this condition of extreme dejection and disappointment, he is able to mask these feelings with that of seeming valor before his brother and father. Koman opines that in such a situation he merely has to invoke a *vesham.* However, when left alone he hardly has any disguise to hide behind. Anita Nair here finely portrays the dilemma faced by an artist. Art gives an identity to the artist, while at the same time, reduces him to nothing when he/she is not performing.

The normative society represented by the critic, Nanu Menon again instills a sense of powerlessness into Koman through his discouraging, demeaning criticism of Koman's performance. This factor leads to Koman's transgression now from the arena of art to that of mundane life; and he starts taking pleasure in such activities as shooting and fucking. He realizes another facet of his personality through such activities and he opines, "I am not just a

veshakaaran. In me is the power to maim, kill and destroy. This is me." (Nair 2005, 324) Koman's transgression leads him to the realization of his identity as one capable of not only creating but also destroying. However, he soon discovers that the past dies hard. Even in the company of Lalitha, he visualises his role in his performance as Bheema and sees the woman as a demoness parading as a young woman.

Koman soon realizes that art and life are inseparable and that art needs life to sustain it. This realization brings him back to his pursuit of kathakali. He uproots himself and leaves for Madras. When back to his land, he is shocked to find the institute unchanged, whereas change was evident everywhere else. The author says through Koman, "change was nullified by the souls of the characters they wrapped themselves in. How could he move on in life if the life he had chosen did not recognize the passage of time?" (Nair 2005, 330)

Anita Nair portrays the artists as belonging to a different platitude than that of the people in normative society. Koman's *aashan*,who, though actively involved in his work, is capable of being detached from it and opines, "How can I be a *veshakaaran* unless I have demons jostling within me?" (p.331). In his endeavor to evoke these very demons he consumes toddy and remains drunk; thereby resorting to transgression. However, he arrives at a point of time in his life when the *aashan* discovers that his demons have failed to respond to the drink. However, this does not make him guilt-ridden. Instead, the artist in him revels in the fact that art allows the joy of creation and the opportunity to transgress beyond mortal existence. He imparts the same spirit in his disciple, Koman, too.

The reader finds Koman in such situations that demand transgression from his part. His relationship with art, his relationship with the women he meets via the art of kathakali, all represent transgression on Koman's part in an attempt to gain a clearer vision of his self. Sundaran, Koman's batch-mate stands in sharp contrast to Koman himself. He represents the normative society and is in a less conflicting situation due to his tendency to compromise with the ways of the society. Koman, finds himself caught in conflicting situations, which even uproots him from his native land, due to his acute attachment to the art of kathakali and his denial to tread on the path charted out for him by the normative society. His desperate attempt to wade through the conflicting circumstances takes him to various places and people and enables him to identify more of himself and his art. The author effectively brings out the dilemma and conflicts faced by an artist by way of imparting plenty of mobility through art, places and people, thereby establishing the fact that an artist lives both in and out of the society.

Koman, though finds himself in the mire of guilt over his relation with his student Angela, after much struggle with his self the teacher, Koman ultimately falls for his student probably as he sees a reflection of himself (as a student) in Angela. He sees to seek his identity in Angela as the author puts it, "to seek in someone a mirror image of one's own hopes and dreams, one's own soul."(Nair 2005, 363) The author portrays Koman as a product of the culture and tradition passed on from one generation to the other in the normative society, when his innermost self keeps warning him against teacher-student relationship. However, the strings of attraction

him towards his student.

Koman understands that an artist is nothing without his art. The author establishes this fact through the *aashan*. He transgresses to the extent of committing suicide after his retirement as a Kathakali dancer. Koman finds that his *aashan* upholds transgression to loss of dignity. In other words, the *aashan* does not mind dying than remaining without any *vesham* to perform. Anita Nair remarkably portrays the close tie between the artist and his art. In addition, through *aashan*, the author deftly portrays the artist's struggles to belong to his art and to come down to the level of the mundane reality of day-to-day life.

Boundaries and limits – legal, moral, national, aesthetic, sexual, racial and physical still exist, but the fact that they pose challenge at an ever-accelerating rate is a facet of the modern or even post-modern world. However, those challenges are not very negative in their connotations; rather in all the three novels of Anita Nair, the author depicts these as an effort to establish the nature and extent of those limitations. Thus, acts of transgression are not necessarily, destructive by nature. To approach them in this conventional way is to misunderstand them, for their relationship to the society that gives rise to them is far more complex than might appear at first. The word 'transgression' entered the English language for the first time in the 16th century, but it comes weighted with negative spiritual meaning. Perhaps the first great art of transgression is the decision by Adam and Eve to eat forbidden fruit, thereby violating their agreement with God. Yet with this act comes certain liberation, though at considerable cost. The Church fathers failed

to see it in this way, and so transgression becomes associated with evil, with St.John telling, "Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God." (2 John 1:9). Eve is found to bear the primary burden for disobeying God's will, and subsequently tempting her partner. This sows the seed for an abiding distrust of women and the demonic associations that go along with feminine qualities. Thus, it was that the female body, by the time of Renaissance, was the subject of constant surveillance and regarded, in a way, grotesque. It was a body, which potentially exceeded any boundary or limit, and hence regarded transgressive by its very nature.

With the passage of time though some of those earlier spiritual connotations fall away, "to transgress" becomes more general in its meaning, covering any kind of deviation from the norm, as well as physical acts of aggression against the person. Finally, it begins to refer to the crossing of boundaries, whether moral, legal or artistic and aesthetic. Creative and artistic endeavors provide an apt proving ground for notions of transgression. As bell hooks puts it, "Art, was for me a realm where every imposed boundary could be transgressed."(hooks1984, 15) The word 'imposed' raises the question – are constraints entirely imposed from the outside? If we transgress, do we do so purely against some external authority, whether human or divine? However, it is not necessarily so. There is a personal element in one's responses to moral imperatives, an element of subjectivity that brings with it a desire to transgress, even a necessity to do so. It is largely the personal element that one sees functioning in the case of Sethu, Koman, and his *aashan*, Angela, Chris and Radha to some extent. Societies find a way to channel and express this desire. Mythologies are one such channel, acts of mockery another or what Bakhtin

described as 'the laughter of the carnival.' Such laughter is collective, universal and ambivalent, but it is not destructive.

Undoubtedly, in *Mistress*, myth becomes a means of transgression. Anita Nair, through Kathakali presents various mythical characters such as Nala, Damayanti, Bheema and Keechaka who resort to transgression at one or the other point of time in their lives. Interestingly, the reader notices the author's transgression in form. The story telling overlaps with kathakali. This the author does with great dexterity. Repeatedly, Koman identifies himself with the artist he portrays, thereby becoming the character he depicts as he says in the novel, "I was Nala. And my love was Damayanti, not a blue-eyed Madaama." (Nair 2005, 367) At the very next moment, his necessity to break open his heart to Angela makes him say, "it would be I, not Nala, who stood there and wooed her." (Nair 2005, 367) The identification of the self in the other also becomes a cause for transgression. Though undesirous of getting into a relation with Koman, Angela finds it extremely difficult to overlook her attraction towards Koman; and she starts seeing the shaping of her desire in him. At times, she looks at Koman not as a person but as the character he portrays when she says "this magnificent being was mine' (Nair 2005, 369). The author portrays transgression through imagination, when Angela imagines herself to be the female counterpart of the role enacted by Koman. She says, "When he was Arjuna, I was Subhadra" (Nair 2005,369).

The reader finds transgression revisiting in the case of Koman. Sethu by marrying a girl from the conservative Muslim community commits an act of transgression. However, Sethu conveniently becomes a part of the normative society when it comes to his son Koman and reminds him about

the ritual of marriage with Angela, without which their relation would remain incomplete and unsanctioned by the society. Here one finds the son reminding his father about his transgression and says, "Sometimes relationships don't need rituals to sanctify them. Have you forgotten about you and Saadiya?" (Nair 2005, 371), thereby flaunting the norms of the society for self-satisfaction.

Here, the reader witnesses transgression as the desire that lies within each person to breach the constraints imposed upon his/her behavior, and glimpses for a moment the possibility of the infinite. Transgression emerges as a basic human urge. However, Angela's transgression costs her to severe her ties with the art form of kathakali and Koman his homeland. The very art form that unites them now is the cause of their separation. Angela's desperation at her inability to do something with her life compels her to move to London and she manages to change Koman's mind to accompany her to her land, by instilling ambition in him.

Koman in an attempt to discover his self conquers new worlds, to appease the stirrings of ambition and to avail an excellent opportunity to display his artistry to the world. He decides to expand his horizons and move his roots to an alien land with his beloved – Angela. The author remarkably overlaps Kathakali with story-telling. Koman identifies his new role, that of being an ambitious man from that of a person of contentment and satisfaction, with the character of Bahukan from mythology, who was an ugly dwarf with uncertainties shrouding him.

Though crowded by uncertainties in their new life, both Koman and Angela lead their life as Damayanti and Nala. Anita Nair brings about physical transgression through the mythical character of Bahukan; and this transformation of Nala brings to light the ugliness that entered Koman's life after 12 years of happy life with Angela. The story passes through mythology; and just as Kali hits Nala to transform into Bahukan, Koman fails to realize when the Kali of ambition entered him and wrought chaos in him. Now he yearns for his peaceful and content life in his little house by the river back in his homeland. Like Bahukan, Koman too experiences a complete corrosion of self-worth. At such a moment the *aashan*'s words wring in his ears which say that though kathakali is life for an artist, others have a right to live their lives as they see fit; and that he ought to remember that there is life beyond kathakali . The author draws several similarities in the lives of Bahukan and Koman. Like Bahukan who undergoes a physical transformation, Koman has to undergo transgression in his profession. Since the situation demands, and as he has to regain his self-esteem and stop feeling like a parasite living on Angela's income, Koman also has to change his profession from that of a dancer to that of a cook. Though an expert in culinary skills and also satisfied of having secured a job to be occupied with, Koman experiences the draining out of his self-worth for having not attained what he had set forth to achieve, that is, name and fame in the field of Kathakali. Both Koman and Angela need a change or transformation from the long drawn pretence between them, Angela pretending that Koman would dance and Koman pretending that all was well between them. Koman experiences extreme unhappiness and guilt. Like Damayanti for Bahukan, Angela for Koman becomes reminder of his worthlessness. The sense of guilt, unhappiness, extreme dejection and the sense of helplessness cause yet another act of transgression from Koman, which is, going back to his little house by the river in his hometown. An urge to retrieve the lost

identity, dance again and to become who he is, he comes to his hometown leaving his ladylove, Angela. The over-ambitious Koman comes back to become a man of contentment and pledges "I would never again expect my art to propitiate my ego. It was enough that I be allowed to give expression to what I understood of a *vesham*. All else was immaterial."(Nair 2005, 408) Though back home, Koman is torn off all his self-worth and the only succor for him is his art. Anita Nair here presents the instance of a lunatic for whom even within his insanity, art proves his sole means of sanity. The instance that Koman had heard during his student days immediately crosses his mind and he decides, "Hence forth my life would be led through my art. It was the only way I would be able to retrieve some of my self-worth." (Nair 2005, 409)

In this novel, the author takes the readers into the private lives of the characters. Transgressive urge is very personal. The title of the novel, pregnant with the notion of transgression, gains its meaning in the private life of Koman who, in various situations in his life, encounter his 'mistresses' in the form of Angela, Lalitha and Maya. However, in his public life he is exalted as an exceptional being whose lover, wife and mistress are dance.

Lalitha is deprived identity and is named by man (Koman) who represents the dominant lot and this projects the kind of treatment meted out to the section of people who are compelled to take up the trade as the author puts it, "to fulfill needs of iniquity."(Nair 2005, 412) Her role in the novel finds elevation when she plays pivotal part in Koman's life and succeeds in "making him whole again" (p.413); and it is through his pet – the dog, again suggestively kept unnamed by the author, and Lalitha, the whore that Koman seeks self-realisation.

classical dance form into something trivial and making Kathakali a means to an end. Both Koman and Sundaran transgress in their life – one, to seek one's identity, and the other, in search of wealth and authority. The author's view on art is worth quoting. Anita Nair opines that many view art as "a filler of time and space, a point of diversion and no more. If it is to satiate this meager need that we slave and reach into ourselves, what chance is there of ever knowing fulfillment? We seek strange pleasures and subversive mocks, we thrust away what is there before us and look beyond and there is no knowing whether this quest will mean anything to anyone but us." (Nair 2005,419) This is the very attitude that Koman develops towards the end, that is, a sense of confidence in his work with total disregard to the criticisms heaped upon him or his art.

Maya emerges as the character who craves companionship, though married and with a family; and she spots an apt companion in Koman. Both Koman and Maya once again, flaunt the marriage laws and become lovers. Maya evokes the last rasa, that is, *Shaantam* in Koman, which indicates peace with one's self. The peace that is an outcome of having sought and understood one's self. The mandatory aspect to reach this destination is transgression, transgression of the boundaries of conventional moral codes ultimately to see light. Thus, transgression becomes a way out of an artist's dilemma. Koman crosses all doubts and uncertainties and seeks self-awareness. His very first transgressive step to pursue the art form of kathakali and nothing else that suits the expectations of the normative society sees him through his quest for self-awareness, self-definition and self-assertion.

As for Koman, so for Radha, his niece, who feels that it is art that gives freedom and space. Radha is bound by the limits of a housewife. She finds herself amidst a society ruled by a male-dominated power structure, largely represented by Shyam, her insensitive and possessive husband. Radha's transgression is in the quest for individual identity and the demystification of male chauvinism. The material surrounding in which Radha resides, emit patriarchal resonance and she irritatingly voices, "It irritates me to see Shyam as he goes about regulating his universe and mine."(Nair 2005, 59) Radha revolts against being trivialized as an object as she discovers, "he prefers a glossy silly wife to a homely, practical one. Glossy silly wives are malleable."(Nair 2005, 61) Radha, through her private moments, affects a kind of revolt.

Thus, transgression in *Mistress* overlaps with personal choices that defy the societal expectations. Radha opts for Chris even while she is married to Shyam. Koman, asserts his trangresssive self by opting for katahakali instead of pursuing any conventional profession. In both the cases, transgression upholds the sanctity of personal choices. While Koman accomplishes trangressive self-definition through katahakali, Radha's journey is that of love. While Koman's story imparts *karuna* as its aesthetic experience, Radha's story evokes *sringar*.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

A close reading of Anita Nair's novels such as *Ladies Coupe*, *The Better Man* and *Mistress* reveals the point that the novelist is a masterful story teller who interprets human emotions, man-woman relationship and the dilemmas of the characters in terms of metaphors. While *Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man* probe the insular worlds of characters, *Mistress* creates a closed realm of a kathakali performer through which the life of a cloistered Muslim village, Arabipatnam, is interpreted. Nair's novels also signals the arrival of a novelist who could delve deep into people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful emotional journey that reaches certain rasas such as *karuna, shingar* and *atbhut*. *Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man* provide the readers the rasa of karuna– lasting sympathy for Bhasi, Mukundan, Anjana in *The Better Man* and for Akhila, Prabha and Marikolanthu in the *Ladies Coupe*. Perhaps *Mistress* is Anita Nair's most nuanced narrative wherein the expressions in kathakali provide a range of Rasas, alternating between shringar and karuna. Radha and Koman in the novel enact love and sorrow, attachment and isolation respectively. Kathakali lends this novel its structure and an intense emotional drama in a rich setting of myth and ritual. The mythical characters such as Nalan, Bahukan, Bhim, Krishna and Arjun that Koman brings alive become the metaphysical filters for him to understand the changing condition in Kerala. Radha, who evokes the mythical figure of Krishna's devoted wife, is ironically caught in a loveless marriage. She redeems herself with the love of a foreigner and with the help of Koman and his views on life.

Ladies Coupe, *The Better Man* and *Mistress* trace the progress of protagonists who journey from self denial to self realization. Akhila's self denial is her duty-bound life while Mukundan denies his self by selling it to vanity. Radha runs away from her true self by playing out the socially approved role of the wife of a business magnet. Towards the end of the novels, these protagonists

find love and life. Akhila decides to live with Hari, Mukundan with Anjana and Radha with Christopher.

Ladies Coupe is also about the suppressed desires of a woman whose voice is as soft as the slop of the water in a tender coconut, having being caught in the compulsions of the curves of the Brahmanical shell. Her awakening happens when she comes in touch with a series of self-assertive woman. She is at once a listener and the redeemed in their narratives. The stories in this novel establish a brilliant evocation of sisterhood on the move. The women who narrate their lives' experiences bring alive their thoughts desires and doubts. Perhaps these narratives are like the water imagery evoked by Margaret – something that is fluid, soft yet life-changing. This imagery connects itself to the lapping sound of tender coconut water, which is enclosed in the shell. The women in *Ladies Coupe* are like the sound of tender coconut water – they have to be taken close to the ears and shaken gently to listen to their stories, dreams, doubts and desire. Their lives are contained in a shell of expectation of married Indian woman – a crust of prohibition and the choices made for them.

The *Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man* are also the narratives that take the readers through a number of emotional upheavals and social asides, though Nair tones downs and sentimentality with the help of imagery and metaphors. She places her tone somewhere between the complex craft of highbrow literature and the mindless prattle of Chick-lit with which she narrates judicious stories of ordinary people. She helps the readers to look into the lives people lead in the

contemporary India. She also makes a statement or two as in *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress* about the fragility of the modern Indian marriage.

Love, sorrow, fury, valour, fear, disgust, wonder and detachment expressed indirectly through metaphors are at the centre of every novel written by Anita Nair. They are best manifested in *Mistress* which is almost a narrative of the *navarasa* – the main facial expressions in kathakali, an ancient form of expressive dance drama which combines face painting, stylized acting and dance to convey the greatest Hindu myths. When visited by Christopher, an English musician and writer, Komnan the actor of kathakali gets a context to narrate his life story. The story is woven intricately into the situation and characters of Indian myths, making it very natural to deal with Navrasas. The novel is literally divided into Navrasas, each new chapter starting with a lyrical explanation of the emotions, the expressions and the rasa that they entail (bhava, anubhava and rasa). The underlying rasa of Koman's life story is *karuna*. However, Koman as a seasoned *vesham* (actor) learned to mask him private emotions and to live in the realm of *Shantam*. His grief is audible only for the sensitive ones such as Christopher and Radha who form *sahrudaya* (the kindered minds). His feelings are also muted like the lapping sound of the tender coconut water. His grief slops gently between the curves of the inner flesh of the tender coconut and the shell made up of the actor's exterior and the mythical roles he plays. Equally subtle is the emotion of love in this novel. The romance of Chris and Radha finds an expression through music as Koman's grief is expressed through kathakali. Katakalali and music thus provide platforms for emotions, expressions and their repressions and make a case for using art as a median to disseminate life into understandable expression. In a complex drama of human conflict, foibles and resolutions Nair makes Koman recollect magically infused memories that

enable his niece to come to terms with her own self and to make the **final decision to leave** Shyam, her boorish and arrogant husband. Nair juxtaposes the dramatic descriptions of **kathakali** dance with subtle shades of real life emotions. Kathakali also gives an epic stature for **the novel**. The expressive extravagance of kathakali and its offstage anecdotes indicate **the two faces of** Koman's life – the expected one and the real one. With his slow retirement from kathakali, **he** takes his tentative steps into his real skin. The painted faces, which he wears, give way to the real face of a man who had denied his true self for a long time. However, Koman's story tells Radha what she should not do, that is, denial of a true spirit.

Anita Nair's later novels such as *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) and *Cut like Wound* (2013) too reveal her fascination with metaphors and the art of masking the emotions of characters with the help of images drawn from myths and other domains. In *Lessons in Forgetting* that narrates a story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances, Meera a single mother and a cook book writer and JAK who is a cyclone study expert find their lives twisting together. They meet interact and like each other in the sheer inevitability of a cyclone. Meera has the habit of interpreting her situation and the people around her in terms of Greek myths and recipes as Margaret would use chemistry in *Ladies Coupe*. JAK is obsessed with the overlap of the unpredictability of human life and the unpredictability of cyclones. Crafted to replicate the different stages of a cyclone, Nair's novels take the readers into the heart of an emotional cyclone. At the heart of it is the still point – what is called the eye of a storm. Love, dependency, betrayal and desires form the cyclone in the narrative. The storm however, cleanses the traumatic past of Meera who was deserted by her husband and JAK who feels guilty for his teenage daughter Smriti. The storm for Meera begins when her husband walks out of their marriage,

leaving her to bring up their two growing children are caring for her ageing mother and grandmother. JAK is desperate to seek a closure on a gruesome incident affecting his daughter. Fate brings these two searching souls together and eventually they get redeemed with the help of each other.

Cut like Wound has the conventions of a detective novel and is set in Bangalore. Inspector Borei Gowda who is investigating the murder of a young male prostitute has to chase a serial killer on the prowl. Even as he has to recognize a pattern on these killings, he has to negotiate his own midlife crises– problems with his wife and son and an affair with an ex-girlfriend and official apathy and ridicule. The lanes and atmosphere of Bangalore become the sitting for this brutal psychological thriller. Like Koman in *Mistress* who alternates between the world of dance and the real world, and like JAK in *Lessons in Forgetting* is caught between the real cyclone and emotional cyclone, Gowda too faces a dilemma of being trapped between his personal crimes and the more threatening crimes of the serial killer.

Thus, all the novels of Anita Nair are metaphorically rich and they mobilize myths, ritual, recipes and the types of human beings. The metaphors which Anita Nair's characters use, such as Margret's chemistry, Koman's kathakali and JAK's cyclone studies are their own respective coping strategies. They also become the characters' philosophical and metaphysical trappings besides being the techniques of ironising and thus desentimentalising the loud emotions into fluid, subtle expressions.

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