



Research Paper

## Finding one's Roots: A Reference to Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande

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**ABSTRACT:** *The eminence of a woman in a society varied with each culture, each country and with each age. Of course, in most societies and in most cultures, like in Indian society and culture, the woman is given an eminent position, at least theoretically. However, in practicality, a woman was always regarded as secondary to a man and was forbidden from all centers of power. Naturally, women were oppressed through different means and ways peculiar to each culture and society which gradually led to the rise of the feminist movement. In which, women were authorized to express their opinions against restrictions and patriarchal injustices. Basically, feminism focuses on finding one's own roots in the society. The word 'Feminism' deals with the higher perception of individuality of women and also the female conundrums. The last few decades have noticed this new genre of writing by women, for women, and about women, particularly in Indian English Writing. Needless to say, the Indian women in these writings are a blend of tradition and modernity enduring the trials of the past and yearning for a better destiny. This is the main essence of feminism in Indian Literature.*

*Women's writings have achieved a great deal of prominence all over the world. Many Indian women novelists have probed into female psyche in order to establish individuality. The last three decades have observed the emersion of eminent feminist in Indian literature like Anita Nair, ShashiDeshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, ManjuKapurand Shobha De who dealt with their female protagonists in a more prominent manner. This paper focuses on "Finding one's roots with reference to Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' and ShashiDeshpande's 'Roots and Shadows'.*

**Key Words:** -Patriarchy, tradition, modernity, oppressed, freedom, identity.

Anita Nair and ShashiDeshpande are the contemporary Indian feminist writers. They captivate the readers with their evocative language and narration. They mainly deal with man-woman relationship and move from tender compassion to sensuality and to raging hatred. Both of them refuse to be named as feminist. They depict the qualities and the position of women in the families which created ripples in the patriarchal society. Their struggle to express the dilemmas, fears, predicaments, contradictions and ambitions of their protagonists is noteworthy. They are feminist with a difference. They depict the real women, not the ideal ones. Though writers like Anita Nair and ShashiDeshpande do not want to admit that they are feminist writers but they are featured as feminist writers whose feminist opinions are useful for women engulfed by the contemporary challenges of balancing tradition with modernity. They differ in their opinion towards feminism but their novels are focused on the issues of individuality, questioning their existence in patriarchal society. The prominent thing is that their women realize they are in the dominance of patriarchy in every aspect of life. They present the new image of the Indian women who wants to be a wife, mother, and daughter, and simultaneously desires to achieve her identity.

Anita Nair is a renowned Indian English writer who is resolute and sincere in her writings. Her novels illustrate the real life of her characters and also the social stature of women. She is a writer who insists on woman's need for self-fulfillment, contentment, freedom, identity, and achievement, in her daily life. She successfully brings out in her novels, the protagonist's determination, aspiration, agony and distress in their journey of finding their roots.

In 'Ladies Coupe' Anita Nair exhibits the struggles of the female intellect those often stand as a barrier in seeking their roots. Anita Nair in this novel also depicts the anguish of her women characters, which turned their miseries into their strength and weapon to fight out their inner conflicts. She makes them realize the importance of one's roots. Ladies Coupe is the story of six women who vary in their age, profession, place of living and brought up. They share their inner conflicts with the protagonist, Akhilandeswarito help her perceive the prospects of life. As Anita Nair outlines her protagonist Akhila as

"This is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose- coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" [1].

Akhila shares the friendly ambience of the ladies coupe with five other women, JanakiPrabhakar, satisfied wife and disturbed parent; Margaret Shanti, a chemistry educator married to Ebenezer Paulraj, a heartless disciplinarian too egocentric to understand her desires; Prabha Devi, the ideal daughter and wife, who attained her identity through swimming which gave her self-realization; fourteen year old Sheela, with her talent to capture what others cannot; and Marikolanthu, whose virginity was ruined by one night of lustfulness.

Akhila the protagonist, an individual person of forty-five, an income tax clerk and a woman who never had her own identity – always the daughter, the sibling, the great-aunt, the supplier. Until the day she takes a one-way ticket to the coastal town of Kanyakumari, proudly detached individual for the first time in her life and decided to escape from all that her orthodox Tamil Brahmin life has confined her to.

"This is the way it has always been. The smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape... Akhila has often dreamt of this. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of escaping" [1].

As the train moves forward, Akhila listens to the women's stories which draw her into their secret moments. She tries to search in these stories an answer to her question that has been with her all her life: Can a woman stay alone and be satisfied, or does a woman need a man to feel settled? Hence the train journey literally describes Akhila's journey towards finding her own roots. The novel is about leading life on one's own conditions. It is this power and endurance of the common woman that Nair brings out as a novelist.

JanakiPrabhakar is a satisfied and perplexed mother. She is forty-five years old and has nothing to get distressed about life. She has been fortunate enough to have a friendly husband. Janaki has always been tended from childhood till today. But at this point of life, she discovers that she doesn't have her own roots. She was always ruled and never had a chance to prove her talents. Janaki assumed that home was a woman's domain. Gradually with the passage of time, her interests came to a standstill and says,

"I thought if I were to lose it all, I would cope. If I were to become alone, I would manage perfectly. I was quite confident about that I think I was tired being this fragile creature" [1].

Janaki is complacent of her lifestyle without any self-realization. She identifies herself as

"A woman like me ends up being brittle. Our men treat us like princess" [1].

Janaki lives a satisfied life until her sense of individuality and dignity is threatened in her son's house, she realizes that a woman needs to be powerful and liberated to live one's own life. She understands the emptiness of being a devoted wife and an affectionate mother. In her sixties, Janaki thinks of her own roots, freedom and the long-lost independence.

Anita Nair highlights the truth about how most women think satisfied with the assurance and affection of her husband. With such a false assurance, they fail to realize the pleasure and confidence they would have achieved with their own identity. Janaki is never given a chance to look for something more than her married life. She is in a state of chaos as at first she says Akhila that she could manage confidently without her husband, but immediately says that even if she is allowed to do it, she is not sure how far she could be contented. This shows that Janaki doesn't have an urge to find her own roots. Through the character of Janaki, Anita Nair describes how from ancient age women are prepared for the selfless duty of a wife which robs them of their honor.

The next character depicted is Sheela Vasudevan, the youngest of the six. She is fourteen years of age but has the certainty to sense things which others failed to perceive. She has secured it from her dead grandmother

Ammamma who was gentle and very graceful. She is one among the very few Indian women who believed that the essential thing in a woman is to satisfy her own self. She says,

"You mustn't 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". [1]

For her the first most important thing was to satisfy her own self, she dressed elegantly every night with a lot of gold jewelry. She would dress up so much that even if she were to die in sleep, she wanted to look splendid.

Sheela strongly develops the quest for identity in her only because of her grandmother. She prepares her dead grandmother beautifully as she used to dress up every night by least bothering about her family members.

"Sheela rubbed her aunt's foundation into her grandmother's face, shoulders and chest. She adorned her with costume jewellery" [1].

Sheela performs this act only to satisfy her individuality even though she was disapproved by her family. Anita Nair presents the character of Sheela not only as a strong independent individual who identifies her roots but also as a woman who protects herself against sexual abuse. Sheela felt embarrassed, disturbed and unpleasant at the caress of her friend Hasina's father Naazar. She couldn't vocalize against this misconduct but develops strength and boldness to safeguard herself. Then she takes a strong resolution that she would never go to Hasina's house.

Sheela was more sensible than the girls of her age usually are. Through her character it's evident how in different situations of life, a woman can be more sensible than man. This story of Sheela helps Akhila to become a woman of strength and develop her individuality.

Margaret Shanthi is a Chemistry teacher who imagines herself as water which suppresses, revives, forgives and emerges successfully. At last, she celebrates her success and says "water that also destroys" [1]. All her feelings were suppressed by her rigid husband Ebenezer Paulraj. In the beginning, Shanthi had lived in fantasy under the slogan, "Love separates reason from thought" [1]. Her thoughts were oppressed by her intense love for him. Starting with her trivial satisfactions like having a long hair, eating at roadside stalls and wishing to pursue a doctorate and to have a baby, in everything Ebe stood there to subdue her desires. She was blinded in his love and felt he was right in whatever he does. "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" [1].

Margaret realizes her agony for the first time when Ebe humiliates her in the party. "Frankly, if you want my opinion, when I think of it, it is the odor of rotten eggs" [1]. Then she realizes how he had crushed her dreams of freedom and her own identity. Finally, she discovers how she had been deceived all these years in her love towards him which he had returned it with humiliation and indignity. Instead of breaking her marriage, she quests for her authority and energy to take revenge against an oppressive husband. So she stays in a marital relationship and very skillfully crushes the egoist nature of Ebe by making him a fat man. Margaret finally conquered her inner conflicts and identified her roots of individuality. She has become an independent woman who always kept Ebe dependent on her. She attempts to take out the pessimism and apprehensions from Akhila's mind who is in search of her identity.

As Sunita Sinha says, "she tries to shatter the slogan of a woman needing a man to be complete, by relating the story of Ebenezer Paulraj and herself" [2].

The next character is Prabha Devi who had grown up as her mother had expected of her. She is married to Jagdeesh who offers all the comforts and delights. She always felt as the luckiest person on earth.

"Prabha Devi always made herself believe 'how lucky I am to be me', but each time she tells herself this, she is tormented by the memory of an experience that is hard to obliterate" [2].

Prabha Devi regrets with a sense of guilt as she had lost herself in the charm of the glamorous world of New York. She had completely changed her way of life and reasoning. She felt quite confident in projecting her beauty. Unlike Sheela's grandmother she dressed herself to charm and attract others. When people admired her looks, she feigned not to observe. But she knew that wherever she went she charmed people with her looks. And she enjoyed it, "I am young. I am beautiful" [1]. All this ended painfully when Pramod her husband's friend got

allured by her beauty and progressed towards her. That day she realized the distress caused by this glamorous life of beauty and charm. She renounced herself from life and she became a woman beyond disgrace and doubt.

Prabha Devi was a virtuous wife and a lovely mother who had destroyed herself due to the guilt of past. She realized that she was not pleased with her life as she was not having her own identity. However, she never thought she would seek her identity through swimming which would give her self-realization. As she plunges into the pool of water and keeps herself floating she admits that

“This body had been the cause of much unhappiness, first with its excessive demands for ratification and then with an abrupt deadening of nerve ends now melted. Life would never be the same again. That nothing else that happened would ever measure up to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had stayed afloat [1].

Ever since Pramod made her life bitter, she was broken by horror and shame but then she had conquered them and described herself as

"I am afloat. I am afloat. My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear "[1].

Varalakshmi makes a comment on Prabha Devi as

“She triumphs over her innate timidity and gains ‘peak experience’ of supreme content bringing tremendous happiness to her husband as well” [2].

She had attained her roots as she experienced a self-agreement, self-realization, and self-satisfaction.

Among all the five women, Akhila considers Prabha Devi the closest due to her age and manner. Akhila felt that if Prabha Devi could conquer over her inborn fear and overcome customs then even she could achieve her own identity. Through the character of Prabha Devi in *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair portrays the inner struggles that arise in a woman and how she alters on her own. By portraying the childhood of Prabha Devi, Nair features the gender discrimination that triumphs in Indian society. Anita Nair here clearly depicts how Indian women do not step out of customs but live a self-satisfied and self-realized life within it.

The last woman left out in the coupe with Akhila was Marikolanthu. Her life was different from that of the rest of the women. According to her, when compared to her miserable life, the other women's stories were nothing but they were making a lot of fuss over petty things. But all these tragic events had helped her to arise as an independent woman.

"Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that the strength in herself "[2].

Marikolanthu had to struggle to find her own ‘self’. She was a pitiable creature who had been abused cruelly of her mind, body, and soul. She was raped in her youth by a relative of Chettiar who left her with unjustness as she was born poor and distressed. Her life was filled with disgrace, hatred, enrage, failure and dejection. She had been trying to find happiness under the shadow of the foreign sisters or Sujata who were her favorite. She hardly had any feelings for her son Muthu who was born successfully after many attempts of abortion. She was a merciless mother who lent her son for two years in return for five thousand rupees to meet her needs.

Murugesan destroyed her life and his life also came to an end by next year. The dead Murugesan's burial was supervised by Muthu, a caretaker of graves, not knowing that it was his own father. As the fire burnt his dead body, Marikolanthu felt the painful moments of Murugesan in her life were also ashen. At this moment, she realized her mistake of using Muthu for her own needs. She finally decided to live a blessed life as a mother for Muthu. For so long now, she had been satisfied as a sister to the real thing, substitute housewife, alternate mother and surrogate lover. At last, she had identified her individuality and just wanted to be the real woman, not the ideal one.

All these days she used to surrender her happiness to make others happy. But she finally realizes her roots of happiness and satisfaction along with her son Muthu. Marikolanthu feels as

Kahake says, “If I detach love from myself, life becomes empty and without substance. I lose my own self-hood”[2].

She is a transformed woman who finds her individuality and does not bother about having a son with a nameless father. She has now emerged as a powerful independent woman who inspires Akhila to search for her identity.

Through the life stories of five other women characters, Akhila understands the desires of married women, the decisions they make and the judgments made for them. The life story of all the five women made Akhila powerful and independent.

As Kanna Muthiah says "In Ladies Coupe, the real life experience of other women characters produce a sort of psychological treatment to Akhila and helps her to take the right decision which enhances her to be a powerful individual" [2].

She became aware of her roots and had overcome her fears. She had been oppressed for so many years by her family but now she would no longer allow them to rule her. She will live for own self-fulfillment.

As Sunita Sinha says, "She is empowered to reclaim her lost love and releases herself from the hold of conventions and family expectations" [2].

Akhila's questions are finally answered, she clearly understands what she needs out of her life and where her happiness lies. Akhila is released mentally from the hold of tradition and family responsibilities. By the end of the journey, she asserts her identity and independence.

"I am the woman you think you have wondered about. For within me is a woman I have discovered" [1].

Anita Nair through her novel 'Ladies Coupe' has presented different characters exposing their darker and brighter side of life. She depicts a clear picture of their inner conflicts, their wounded dreams, and their struggle for identity and how they are lost in the social dilemma. In the end, she reveals how an individual grows, develops and slowly seeks the individuality.

Shashi Deshpande, an author, and a short story writer, acquires a sovereign place among Indian English Women Writers. Her novel 'Roots and Shadows' has achieved the Thirumathi Rangamal honor for the best Indian novel of 1982-1983. In this novel Shashi Deshpande lays emphasis on female world and experience. The novel deals with a woman's struggle to maintain her identity and acquire her independence. She vividly describes how the protagonist confronts with family, with the male world and the society in search of her individuality.

Shashi Deshpande is fortunate in creating powerful women protagonists who deny getting crushed under the burden of their personal problems and face life with great strength and courageousness. She presents the modern Indian woman of middle class who is educated and more realistic. Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* reveal the endeavor of the protagonist, Indu, an educated middle-class woman, in a patriarchal society. Indu represents the New Woman, who is educated and lives in close relation with society brushing sideways all its restricted customs. The novel also considers the unrealized hopes and disturbed marriages of women in a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household.

The novel starts with Indu's return to her paternal home. She arrives to attend the burial ritual of Akka, the person who dictated the family. The whole family is on the verge of a transformation in the hands of Indu, though everybody is ignorant of it. Indu understands the difference between her roots as an independent woman and shadows as a daughter in this ancestral house. Indu's aunt Akka is a childless widow who has acquired her wealth through loyalty to her old husband in a distinct marriage. She has endured the marital relationship as if a penalty, but in the end, has acquired her identity of a powerful woman from it.

Indu inherits Akka's house and has to divide it among the family, a decision which liberates the whole family. Shashi Deshpande has notably depicted the women as dependent in the male dominated family by giving us knowledge of the married lives of Indu's aunt and other relations. The oppressed condition of Indian women is revealed through Indu's kakis and atyas in the novel. Though Indu is educated and has an open attitude, she realizes that she is no different from her village bred aunts and she too is oppressed like them in the patriarchal society.

To the older generation, a woman's life is nothing "but to get married, to bear children, to have sons and the grand children" [3].



Indu, since her childhood, desired to be independent and wanted to attain her own identity. Being a motherless child, she was given love and affection by the elder members of the joint family but now she finds Akka's authority as an obstacle in acquiring her own identity and freedom. She feels suppressed in the family where women don't have any preferences except accepting the norms. She offends

As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat with grace because you are a girl they had said, it is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. [4]

The quiet, modest and submissive Indu finally develops as a brave, challenging, defiant and independent woman. She, at last, identifies her own roots in Akka's house.

Yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now, I felt clear, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary/uneven edges of me. [4]

Indu in her quest for identity opposes her family to marry a man against her aunt's wishes. Here Deshpande tries to present women as rebellious and also shows that women can confront their family to fulfill their desires – if it is the case of marriage or career selection. Every individual should be given the right to take her own decisions in life. Indu marries Jayant against the wishes of the joint family and moves into a nuclear family. She imagines that her marriage with Jayant would entitle her to freely reveal her real self to the world. After a rebellious love marriage, she does the role of a perfect housewife where she finds her growth restrained. She falls into the traditional way of life and expresses her feelings of loneliness,

“I had rejected the family, tried to draw a magic circle around Jayant and myself. I had pulled in my boundaries and the poorer for it. Alienation, I know now, is not the answer... 'I am alone' they seem to me to be the most poignant words in any language.” [5]

Indu feels her individuality is lost when she starts living according to her husband's requirements. It is usually noticed that women are left with no options in their lives. They are controlled by the patriarchal society in every possible manner which obstructs their progress. Women serve the whole household and take care of their requirements physically as well as emotionally but their own desires are overlooked and they are undervalued. They are distressed and their desires are concealed in their hearts forever. Probably marriage has taught Indu to pretend and deceit. As she realizes

“I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see .... I hid my response as if they were bits of garbage” [4].

Indu leaves Jayant when she felt that her individuality is at risk. In the beginning of her married life, she could not understand the growing complications in their relationship. She feels that her possibilities, certainty, and courage are being crushed in this relationship. Later she realizes and decides to liberate herself from the marital tensions by leaving Jayant. But she is again in a confused state, as she feels it's better to be distressed than to strike back. In the end, instead of leaving Jayant, she goes back to him expecting that things will change.

Lastly, Indu evolves as confident and independent in taking decisions. She uses Akka's money according to her conscience and does not yield to any kind of influence from anyone. She makes a decision to get Mini married to a better man and not to a man who was chosen by Akka and pay for her wedding. She also resigns her job; where she has previously worked only to avoid annoying her husband and settles down to pursue her career in writing. She comes to a realization that the independence which she has acquired must be within the parameters of marriage. Indu eventually returns to Jayant whom she loves very much. She would live with Jayant and try to rectify their hindering relationship. She finally realizes that she has been following shadows leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant. While searching for her roots she even gets into an illicit love affair with Naren, whom she considers nothing more than a shadow. Indu believes that she has discovered the truth of life in her journey to identity. She says,

“How can I live without knowing what I want? I must know. To live without fear... fear of being unloved, misunderstood, displeasing, without the fear of failure...” [4]

Towards the end, Indu attains her independence and refuses to be controlled by Kaka, Atya or even her husband Jayant, in achieving what she feels is correct. She gathers enough courage to stand by her beliefs. Shashi Deshpande through Indu's plight represents the difficulties faced by women in modern India in their quest for transforming the thinking of the society. The novel ends with Indu attaining her identity as well as restoring her family ties.

In 'Roots and Shadows', Indu realizes that family relationships are the roots of one's being and they keep on reflecting like shadows. It is a representation of power struggle, where 'Roots' stand for tradition and 'Shadows' indicate the marginal enlightenment. Also, it suggests that these roots are shadows that one cannot escape from.

Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande reveal the journey of Indian women from real to ideal. Anita Nair's women characters are the real women who take their own decisions and live to fulfill their desires whereas Deshpande's protagonists never deny the family relations and struggle to achieve their rights within the parameters of the family frame.

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