

NAVIGATING GENDER AND FEMINISM IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA NAIR AND KAVERY NAMBISAN

N. Sivamadhi

Research Scholar, Department of English,
Takshashila University (Tamil Nadu State Private University),
Ongur, Tindivanam, Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu.
sivamadhi23@gmail.com

N. Sathiyarajan

Research Supervisor, Department of English
Takshashila University (Tamil Nadu State Private University),
Ongur, Tindivanam, Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu.
n.sathiyarajan@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/shanlax.9789361632587.ch029>

Abstract

*This study explores a comparative analysis of the gender-based problems faced by female characters presented in Anita Nair's *Mistress* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*. In India, the struggles experienced by women under patriarchal norms are multifaceted in nature. This study explores how these authors portray the role of women and the various factors that influence their personal growth and development. *Mistress* deals with psychological and marital related gender conflicts of Radha within patriarchal system in an urban setting. The novel also explores other characters like Saadiya, Maya, Angela, Lalitha, Devayani. In contrast, *The Hills of Angheri* deals with socio-professional gender barriers which centers on Nalli who strives to achieve professional autonomy amidst objections by family and society within a rural context. Both the novels reflect complex realities of women in contemporary India. By analyzing these characters, this study aims to focus on how societal tradition and norms becomes obstacle for women's growth and identity. This study needs for a critical re-examination of traditional practices and initiates justice for female identity and their self-realization.*

Keywords: *Patriarchy, social conditioning, desires, gender discrimination, exploitation, oppression, self-identity.*

Introduction

Indian English Literature written by women in the postcolonial period has seen a significant shift in their writing about patriarchal norms. It goes beyond criticising the existing patriarchal structures and the societal practices which stops female autonomy. In India, societal and cultural norms shape women's identities. Women are expected to be conservative and submissive with certain boundaries. They are conditioned to obey patriarchal rules. The difference in gender is seen due to social constructs.

Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan are the prominent Indian authors who give voice to women in their writing. They portray the Indian society and the realities behind gender politics which leads to the study of gender dynamics. They talk about male dominance and authority, expectations on women by society, power and opportunity inequalities between two genders. They put forth the point that men treat women as a possession for gaining respect in society, treating them inferior and restriction their freedom.

They start exploring psychological and emotional waves of female protagonist and other women characters. Problem arises between couple is mainly due to breakdown in communication and lack of compatibility both in terms of emotion and behaviour. Women are denied of emotional needs and desires due to male domination. They are expected to act according to societal expectations. They are denied of their identity and freedom.

Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan's work focus on the women's struggles towards self-identity amidst the traditional society. The novel chosen for this research are Anita Nair's *Mistress* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* both published in 2005. Both the novel explores different approaches in challenging the male supremacy. *Mistress* focuses on desire, betrayal, marital complexities and dissatisfaction. *The Hills of Angheri* focuses on ambition, professional accomplishment, career and resilience. This comparative study pictures a different path through restrictions imposed by societal expectations. This paper highlights the varying struggles of women based on gender and searching for their identity in the modern Indian literary landscape. The issues of women's position, their rights, gender equality are addressed by them.

The mix of culture, family and economic dependence trap women within patriarchal society. Women are treated as a possession and a mere extension of family by forcing them to fit into described roles with an unfair treatment. Women are economically dependent on men which routes to subjugation and mistreatment. Women are forced to obey with husband's desires. Despite all these sufferings, they show strength and courage against patriarchy and they reclaim their identity and autonomy by deconstructing traditional gender roles. They initiate and move forward with courage.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the already conducted research and includes scholarly theses, scholarly articles from research journals relevant to the works of Nair and Nambisan.

R. Akila and A. Santhanalakshmi (2021), in their work "The Theme of Flux in Anita Nair's Novel, *Mistress*" conclude that the journey of Radha reflects inner transformation and the novel ends in emotional harmony.

V. Aruna and P. S. Ratnaker (2002), in their work "Woman Perceptions While Re-Reading Anita Nair's *Mistress*" have explored the new kind of relationship between men and women which come out of modern world with mutual understanding and cooperation which results in self-realization.

R. Dhanalakshmi (2024), in her work "The Portrayal of Women in Anita Nair's *Mistress*" figures out that initially women suffer under patriarchy but later they analyze their needs and leads a happy life.

A. Fakrudeen Ali Ahamed and I.P. Remya (2022), in their work "Gender Discrimination and Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*" explore the unfair treatment of women in the society with no love or emotional bonding in marriage and the changes in women in terms of self-respect and freedom.

N. Gunasekaran and S. Revathi (2015), in their work "Anita Nair's Mistress - A Grand Saga Of Relationships" analyzed the relationship between Sethu, Saadiya, Devayani, Koman, Angela, Lalitha, Maya, Radha, Shyam and Chris.

R. Kaliswari and K. M. Sumathi (2014), in their work "Dream Vs Reality: A Thematic Analysis of Kavery Nambisan's The Hills of Angheri" discuss the rural girl's dream to become a doctor and the struggles she face in the reality to achieve the same.

Raj Kumar Verma (2024), in his work "Voicing the Unheard: Kavery Nambisan's Creative Expressions as a Platform for Women's Empowerment in Marginalized Communities" exposes that with strong determination and perseverance, women can challenge the dominant patriarchal society which suppressed many women's voices earlier.

Ajay Kumarsaxena and Pushpa Rawat (2023), in their work "Representation of Women in Anita Nair's 'Mistress' and 'The Better Man'" focuses on how the author represents the women who not only suffers from oppression but also capable of fighting and owning their rights to achieve self-realisation.

Arun Malik, in his work "Unveiling Radha's Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's Mistress" examines the character Radha focusing on identity and self-discovery by portraying her journey in search of freedom and self-fulfilment.

K. Sathiyakala and K. N. Sharmila, in their work "Contextualising Environmental Virtue and Struggling Woman in Kavery Nambisan's The Hills Of Angheri" analyze ecofeminism and the interconnectedness with women and shows Nambisan's concern for non-human things.

Subhash Singh (2023), in his work "Feminine helplessness in Anita Nair's Mistress" addresses the gender discrimination, social conditioning and women's suffering in a male-dominated society, highlighting their pain, struggles, and the unfair treatment they face.

G. Vijay and A. D. Sudha (2025), in their work "Revolutionary Culture of Women Against Gender Norms in Kavery Nambisan's The Hills of Angheri" discuss the revolutionary behavior of Nalli to reach her goal to become a doctor and a frontrunner for liberating many women who chases dream.

Though there are many scholars focused on gender issues, there is still a need to focus as it reflects the existing problem of our society. This research focuses on two Indian women writers' view of feminism, which gives better idea on how discrimination exists in various forms. This research delves deep into each women character of their novel as they undergo struggle because of male dominance. This research is a writer's concern as it is important to focus on women to overcome the injustices by not following age-old myths and to rise up for themselves.

Methodology

This research paper aims to analyse the gender related bias and complications on women's lives in the novels Mistress and The Hills of Angheri by Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan. So the methodology used for this research would be analytical and qualitative approach. It involves close reading of the text and interpreting the characters.

Discussions

Mistress

Anita Nair's *Mistress* highlights the women's emotional and physical trauma, abuse, dependency on men and denying their own identity. It revolves around the protagonist Radha and her unhappy marriage life with dominant husband. The novel mirrors the harsh reality of society where women should focus on household duties and take care of family. Radha is a well-educated and financially independent woman. She is cheated by her senior manager and gets pregnant. Radha's father forces her to marry Shyam by aborting a baby in order to protect the family's reputation. She too agrees as Beauvoir says, "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (Beauvoir 452). She undergoes tough life and suppresses her own desires. Shyam agrees to marry her for wealth. According to him, she is just a possession and his stereotypical authority is evident when she says, "Shyam is asleep. His arms pin me to the bed. His bed. I think that for Shyam, I am a possession. A much-cherished possession. That is my role in his life. He doesn't want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles." (Nair 53)

Radha tries to embrace her marriage even though she doesn't like Shyam. He dominates and controls her in all possible ways. He doesn't encourage her to go to parlor. He doesn't like her going to factory and talking to workers. He doesn't allow her to begin tuition. He doesn't want her to start crutches for kids. He doesn't want her to be independent and self-sufficient. He discourages her because she is educated and has work experience in corporation. He limits her and treats her as a puppet doing household responsibilities being a stereotypical housewife. Shyam's sister blames Radha for not having baby in eight years. Shyam believes that he has no fertility problem as he is a man. He controls her by sexual objectification, neglecting her emotions, denying her ambitions, monitors her and dictates how to spend time. She confronts him by asking, "Why are you like this, Shyam? You seem to want to rule me. You won't let me breath. It isn't right." (Nair 203) This is the perfect example of unequal power dynamics. Beauvoir says that affections were "transforming freely given feelings into mandatory duties and shrilly asserted rights" (Beauvoir 3). The novel title *Mistress* shows the status of women which is fragile and doubtful in the society and family. The expectations on Radha after her marriage as a wife clearly pictures the societal rules confined to women in patriarchal world.

Saadiya is another female protagonist, a young teen Arab Muslim girl from a conservative family. Her father, being a chief of village, the family follows strict orthodox patriarchal cultural rules and traditions. In that village, they deny freedom for Arab girls. Saadiya is put inside four walls of her home with many restrictions and even denial of freedom of interacting with outside men in the society. Therefore she grows curiosity about sea and seashore activities. She falls in love with Hindu boy named Sethu. She calls him as Malik. Her father Vapa Haji Najib Masood Ahmed punishes her with heated iron rod when he gets to know about her affection with Hindu boy. Her family is against Saadiya's relationship with Sethu.

She flees from home and marries Sethu seeking freedom from her family. She wishes to follow authentic Islamic customs affirmed in Kuran for her child which Sethu agrees. She named her child Omar Masood.

She faces issue based on interreligious marriage and her religious identity. Sethu refuses doing circumcision for their baby as it could harm the baby. Saadiya is not convinced and quit her life at the sea. This is the perfect example of our society which follows men's ancestors' ritual and not women's ritual which is gender discrimination. Her mental sufferings make her to take suicidal decision.

Maya is a lonely voluptuous woman residing in Madras. She meets Koman during his visit to Delhi. After a month, Koman goes to Madras to meet her taking advantage of her loneliness. They become lovers and gets into sexual relationship. They spend time together and he finds peace of mind with her. He values her only based on that but not emotionally connected. She lacks social recognition and will not accept by Koman's family. Koman considers Maya as subordinate to him. This is the perfect example of women's struggles in male-dominated society.

Angela is a Kathakali student doing dissertation work under Koman. She is a blend of German and Spanish. She gets attracted to him as he is an affectionate and generous by nature. Meanwhile, Koman starts an affair with her. She is progressive in nature whereas Koman is a follower of traditional practice. She gets into relationship expecting for a genuine partnership with Koman. They start living together. Angela wants to go west for getting international recognition. But his male ego hits. Both moves to London and leads happy life. After that, problem arises slowly as Koman depends both financially and emotionally on Anjela. He leaves Anjela's house because of male ego. Angela loses individual identity and is recognized based on her relationship. Koman's breakup with Angela is a typical patriarchal mindset.

Lalitha meets Koman on his return to his dance school as a teacher. Lalitha is Koman's longtime mistress and he proposes her. Lalitha denies his marriage proposal because of his high-class status and fear of social rejection. She knows that Koman's family and the society will never accept her as his wife. She fears that she will always remain and treated as Koman's mistress which is considered to be inferior social status. The society will judge only women but men are free to have many relationships without any consequences.

Devayani is a second wife of Sethu, Koman's father. Sethu migrates to Shoranur where he marries Devayani and has children through her. She is expected to be a good wife and good mother is evident when Sethu says that she is a "perfect wife". Perfect wife is referred as "loving and considerate, and not given to emotional excesses. She smiled easily and seldom lost her temper. She ate well, slept well and loved well" (Nair 238). This description serves as the example of what is expected from a desirable traditional wife. Devayani is also considered as a mere possession and not a partner. She is forced to live as a societal ideal of a good wife. She lacks autonomy.

Hills of Angheri

Gender discrimination is widely seen in Indian society. This novel is the journey of the young protagonist Nalli who becomes surgeon from a village against society's tradition, gender bias and discrimination.

Kavery Nambisan, in her novel *The Hills of Angheri* portrays the existing social conditions of women facing the harsh reality of oppression. She sets the novel in the place named Angheri.

It's a South Indian village located at the foot of the hills which is twenty miles away from Mysore. Nalli is the protagonist of the novel. She, along with her friend Jai aspires to become doctor and serve their village. The society appreciates Jai's decision while expects Nalli to get married at the correct age. The society shows gender biased opinion and criticize Nalli is evident from the statement, "Our Jayanth has brought honour to the village by deciding to become a doctor. He will come back to Angheri and start a hospital. We must help him with the land, the building and all those important things... the news of Nalli's going to medical college, however, only puzzled the village. The Maestru was letting his daughter study in a college with boys? That meant problems, surely. It would not be easy to find her a husband afterwards". (Nambisan 37)

Though education is the most important factor for the development of culture and village, the society neglects women's education. Men who follow orthodox patriarchal values believe that if women get educated, they will not fulfill their traditional roles in society. Nalli doesn't want to follow patriarchal value system and wants to pursue medical profession. Opposition starts from her family itself. Nalli's sister Sujju gets into conventional marriage at a proper age. They want Nalli also to get into married life and tell that career would ruin family as she can't fulfill her responsibility as wife. Gender bias is clearly evident from her Grandfather saying, "If God wanted you to be a doctor, you would have been a boy". After so much effort, she decides to go to Madras for her education. Later she studies surgery in England. She is always connected to her village and values. Though Jai starts his career in Mumbai and not willing to do service to his village, she wants to serve for her village. Angheri people are not ready to accept her as a surgeon to run a hospital just because lack of trust in women. The society is not ready to accept her to set up a hospital. It has taken lot of time to become a doctor. She endures many objections and gender based biases for being a woman to sculpt her identity as a doctor. Nambisan conveys the importance of pursuing one's dream and discovering self-will through the character Nalli. Nalli discovers a new life with her profession by not focusing on the demands of her family.

Conclusion

This research works on the comparative analysis of Anita Nair's *Mistress* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* on gender and feminism within the context of contemporary Indian society. Both the novels highlight the struggles and sufferings of women against a patriarchal society. In both the novels, women are trapped by societal and familial expectations imposed on them.

Anita Nair portrays the psychological and emotional sufferings based on marriage filled with no love, submissive and caregiving expectations, etc. She explores on feminine helplessness through her female characters. Kavery Nambisan explores the barriers encounter by a woman for being female gender that runs behind professional achievement and creating own identity.

Women are often portrayed as oppressed and submissive, but these authors present a different perspective where woman are able to achieve by voicing out and standing up for their dreams and throwing societal stereotypes. Both the novels shows the journey which destines to feminine self-realization.

The struggle for gender equality and female agency takes different forms based on person's environment. This research gives the complexity of Indian women and the different forms of gender based struggles.

Works Cited

1. Akila, R and Santhanalakshmi, A. "The Theme of Flux in Anita Nair's Novel, *Mistress*". *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, vol. 17, no.4, 2021, pp. 3374-76.
2. Aruna, V and P. S. Ratnaker. "Woman Perceptions While Re-Reading Anita Nair's *Mistress*". *International Journal of Health Sciences*, vol. 6, no. S3, June 2022, pp. 12099-05, doi:10.53730/ijhs.v6nS3.9120.
3. Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2014.
4. Dhanalakshmi, R. "The Portrayal of Women in Anita Nair's *Mistress*". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 12, no. 8, August 2024, pp. 166-73.
5. Fakrudeen Ali Ahamed, A and Remya, I. P. "Gender Discrimination and Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*". *NIU International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2022, pp. 141-44.
6. Gunasekaran, N and Revathi, S. "Anita Nair's *Mistress* - A Grand Saga of Relationships". *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 9, November 2015, pp. 494-99.
7. Kaliswari, R and Sumathi, K. M. "Dream Vs Reality: A Thematic Analysis of Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*". *Literary Quest*, vol. 1, no. 4, September 2014, pp. 7-12.
8. Kumar Verma, Raj. "Voicing the Unheard: Kavery Nambisan's Creative Expressions as a Platform for Women's Empowerment in Marginalized Communities". *International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends*, vol. 1, no. 2, October - December 2024, pp. 104-9.
9. Kumarsaxena, Ajay and Rawat, Pushpa. "Representation of Women in Anita Nair's '*Mistress*' and '*The Better Man*'. *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*, vol. 5, no.3, March 2023, pp. 4478-79.
10. Malik, Arun. "Unveiling Radha's Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*". *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Technology*, vol. 4, no. 6, pp. 26-32.
11. Nair, Anita. *Mistress*. India. Penguin Books, 2001.

12. Nambisan, Kavery. *The Hills of Angheri*. Penguin Books, 2005.
13. Sathiyakala, K and Sharmila, K. N. "Contextualising Environmental Virtue and Struggling Woman in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*". *The Seybold Report*, vol. 17, no. 11, pp. 2342-2348. doi:10.5281/zenodo.7399977.
14. Singh, Subhash. "Feminine helplessness in Anita Nair's *Mistress*". *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 9, no. 1, February 2023, pp. 49-50.
15. Vijay, G and Sudha, A. D. "Revolutionary Culture of Women Against Gender Norms in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*". *Journal of Foreign Languages, Cultures & Civilizations*, vol. 13, September 2025, pp. 83-91.
<https://doi.org/10.15640/jflcc.vol13p9>.