

Treatment of the Sufferings of Women in the Select Novels of Anita Nair and Alice Walker

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Abstract: Women are treated as the secondary citizens in the family as well as in the society. Though they have the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight, they are treated badly by man. They are forced to sacrifice their happiness for the wellbeing of others. Often their sufferings are not brought out to the limelight adequately and they are covered by the mask of sacrifice of the womanhood. Women writers have brought out such hidden sufferings of their community by their commendable works. They adeptly portray the critical issues of women in their writings to highlight the sad plight of the women folk in the world. This study aims at an analysis of the select novels of Anita Nair and Alice Walker to bring out their treatment of the sufferings of women in their respective works. The Indian writer Anita Nair's **Ladies Coupe** and the Afro-American Alice Walker's **The Color Purple** are chosen for the analysis. Both the writers have brought out the critical issues related to women in their writings such as the sexual exploitation, motherhood, child-bearing, subjugation and male hegemony and so on in their novels.

Key words: gender, identity, sacrifice, sufferings, womanhood

I. Introduction

Women are treated as the secondary citizens in the family as well as in the society. Though they have the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight, they are treated badly by man. They are forced to sacrifice their happiness for the wellbeing of others. Often their sufferings are not brought out to the limelight adequately and they are covered by the mask of sacrifice of the womanhood. Women writers have brought out such hidden sufferings of their community by their commendable works. They adeptly portray the critical issues of women in their writings to highlight the sad plight of the women folk in the world. This study aims at an analysis of the select novels of Anita Nair and Alice Walker to bring out their treatment of the sufferings of women in their respective works. The Indian writer Anita Nair's **Ladies Coupe** and the Afro-American Alice Walker's **The Color Purple** are chosen for the analysis. Both the writers have brought out the critical issues related to women in their writings such as the sexual exploitation, forced motherhood, premature child-bearing, subjugation, male hegemony and so on. They have brought out the search for identity and independence of women in their works.

Anita Nair focuses upon Indian woman's suffering in the family as well as in the society. Alice Walker highlights the sufferings of the Black woman in the USA. Their women characters have suffered a lot at the hands of their male counterparts. Anita Nair portrays the sufferings of the protagonist Akhila in **Ladies Coupe**. She is forty five years old woman and a single. Apart from Akhila, she has dealt with five other women characters in the novel. Through them she has adeptly shown the callous attitude of man in the conventional Indian society in which women are treated as subservient to man. In the epistolary novel, **The Color Purple**, Alice Walker portrays the suffering of fourteen years old girl Celie who has been raped by her stepfather, "Pa." Alice Walker highlights the importance of unity among the women to come up in their life and assert their self. Celie is ably supported by Shug Avery, the mistress of her husband. The novelist insists that the collective effort of women will help them to overcome their sufferings. Anita Nair and Alice Walker contend that the unity of women will help their empowerment and they can tackle the male hegemony with the assistance of it.

Women fight for their identity for a long time. Their struggle continues for many centuries and they want to discard the roles forced upon them by men. Women are assigned to do the household chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing apart from the biological duty of taking care of the children. Always they are forced to obey the command of somebody like father, brother and husband. They are at the receiving end in many times. In Anita Nair's **Ladies Coupe** and Alice Walker's **The Color Purple**, the readers could see such roles assigned to the women who suffer a lot due to the male hegemony. Women who appeared in these novels have undergone the hardships perpetrated by the men folk in the society.

In **Ladies Coupe**, Akhilandeshwari or Akhila is the protagonist of the novel. She is forty-five years old and single. She is working as a clerk in an income-tax office. Anita Nair portrays the lives of the five women in the novel apart from Akhila. They are different by nature and they belong to different age groups. They discuss

their sufferings related to their gender and their struggle for the dignified identity. Through these characters the author focuses on man's attitude to women as well as the society's traditional notion about them. The women have experienced the sexual exploitation, premature child bearing, forced motherhood, and the subjugation.

Akhila travels in a ladies compartment and talks to fellow women travelers. They share their feelings and get consolation for their problems. Akhila's companions are: Janaki – the pampered wife, Margaret Shanthi – the Chemistry teacher and wife of arrogant Ebenezer Paulraj, Praba Devi the perfect daughter and wife, Sheela – the fourteen years old girl and Marikolanthu – a rape victim. These women suffer from the system of sex–role stereotyping and the oppression by the men folk. Women suffer under the patriarchal social set up. The novel shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society as well as it implies the need of the advent of an alternative society.

In **The Color Purple**, Celie is under the pressure to follow the traditional responsibilities of women. Celie is the protagonist of the novel and she is an uneducated woman. Her stepfather abuses her. Alice Walker through the character of Celie highlights the enduring power and the spirit of self sacrifice among the black women. Celie suffers from sexual, physical and emotional abuses to save her mother and sister Nettie. She is forced to take care of her family after the death of her mother. Consequently, this position forces Celie out of school and leaves her with very little education. When she goes to school with her stepfather 'Pa,' he has insisted her not to open her mouth to others needlessly since she is a woman.

In the past, women were not allowed to get education. They were asked to do the supportive role to the men. Like that in **The Color Purple**, Celie is ordered to take care of Albert's children and household affairs when she got married to this old man. Her stepfather 'Pa' rapes Celie frequently. He plans to rape her sister Nettie also but Celie protects her from the danger. Celie and Nettie have good relationship and they care for each other. Celie cannot turn to anyone for help because the guardian himself has violated her virtue and her mother is ailing. She is only fourteen years old when her stepfather rapes her at first. She is unable to realize what is happening to her. The sexual exploitation is the cruel injustice and heinous crime committed against womanhood. The young girl undergoes severe trauma and she is suffering from the abuse both at mental and physical levels. There is no one to help her and she does not want to tell it anybody. She feels insecure in the world. She is left in the position in which even she could not pray to God. She becomes pregnant due to the repeated raping of her stepfather and she does not understand what actually has happened to her. In her first letter to God, she writes: "May be you (God) can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1). She is completely powerless and clueless to understand her position. It is pathetic to see the plight of the young black woman and Alice walker has brought out adeptly her suffering.

Celie does not have any companion except her sister Nettie. She wants to protect her sister from the sinister design of her stepfather. When her mother dies, her stepfather after the fulfillment of his lust for Celie arranges marriage. Celie marries a person of her stepfather's age. Celie is forced to take care of the four children of her husband called Mr. Albert. Before her marriage, Celie has delivered two children due to the repeated raping of her step father. 'Pa' has taken away these two children from her and entrusted them to Rev. Samuel and his wife Corrine. They have left to Africa to do spiritual duty along with the children. Nettie also accompanies them as a nanny. Celie does not know about the whereabouts of her children. Alice walker has presented skillfully the moving tale of Celie and she is a better example for exploited woman in the American society. She is illiterate, voiceless, deprived and abused by her own family. Women are sexually exploited by the men folk in the same family and it is a world wide phenomenon. This type of exploitation occurs universally irrespective of nation and other affinities.

Women are forced to do the household chores. Working women also are not exempted from the household duties. After her office work, when she returns to the home, she has to do the domestic works. She works without rest and the practice is going on even today. Generally man is considered to be the head of the family and a decision making person. Hence man thinks that he is superior to woman. Both men and women are equal by law. In reality it does not occur. In **Ladies Coupe**, Anita Nair has brought out the injustice. Akhila is the eldest daughter in the family and she has two brothers Narayan and Narsi, one sister, Padma. Akhila has studied B.A., History. Akhila's father is a common man with a family to feed and he is not happy about his job. He earns meager amount. He suffers from prolonged illness and dies unexpectedly.

At this time Narsi is eight, Padma is six, Narayan is fifteen and Akhila is nineteen. All her relatives assemble at her house. She takes care of the household works. A horrible ritual happens in the house in the name of tradition. Some widows gather around her mother and remove her marks of marriage. Only the woman is subjected to such a horrible ritual when her husband died. Man is exempted from any such ritual when his wife died. The removal of kumkum (Tilak in the forehead), the breaking of bangles and other ornaments, dressing the white sari are the part of the ritual. The woman has to sacrifice all these for her dead husband. The traditional society imposes such restrictions on women. Conventions are against women and they have to undergo a lot of pain and suffering. The widow's ritual makes women suffer emotionally and physically. Anita

Nair brings out the agony of the woman: "When Amma dressed as a bride before dawn broke on the tenth day and the other widows gathered around her and stripped her of her marks of marriage, Akhila cried because she knew that this was what it meant to be a woman" (59). The widow's ritual is a cruel one and not only the woman involved in it undergoes the trauma but also the onlookers especially the girl children experience more trouble at their emotional level on seeing the development. Anita Nair has brought out skillfully the suffering of the mother of Akhila as well as her own in this passage.

In the name of tradition and conventional beliefs, Indian women are subjected to a lot of tortures. Widows are not allowed to wear colourful dresses and they are prevented to take part in auspicious occasions. They are treated as ill omen and obnoxious. In those days, before the rule of Britishers, "Sati" was practiced and the women were forced to sacrifice their lives at the funeral fire of their husbands. Fortunately, the erstwhile British-Indian government has banned this cruel ritual due to the insistence of the reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. At the same time, the victimization of widows is continued even now. They are subjected to a lot of difficulties and it is very difficult for them to lead a normal life in the hostile society.

Sofia is the stepdaughter-in-law of Celie and the wife of Harpo, her eldest stepson. Sofia rejects the typical roles assigned to the black women such as cooking, cleaning and obeying the orders of her husband. She fights for her own identity and wants to improve her position in life. Sofia does not like to bow down to her husband and she does not depend upon him economically. She wants to assert herself and she is independent in nature. Celie silently suffers from the abuses and beatings of her stepfather and later by her husband Mr. Albert. On the contrary, Sofia acts as a courageous woman who likes to oppose any type of domination from the men folk. She insists self-respect and never allows any body to abuse her physically and mentally. Even she asks her husband Harpo to share the household works. She loves her husband so much, at the same time, she never wants her husband to beat her. She says: "But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me" (94). It clearly presents her assertion of self and self-respect.

Just like Celie, Lucy Stone is another character in **The Color Purple** who suffers the physical abuse of her father that is severe beating every now and then. He beats the daughter for not removing the mud from the horse shoes. It shows the high-handedness of men folk against the women. Men beat the women at will when they refuse to obey their orders. Especially, women suffer a lot at the hands of their father and husband very often. It displays the male hegemony vividly. Albert beats Celie repeatedly for no reason. He enforces his power and domination on her. He treats her rudely and does not give respect as a human.

In **Ladies Coupe**, Marikolanthu belongs to a poor family. When she was a child, her father died. She lives with the care of her mother. Both of them work in the house of Chettiar. It is one of the richest families in the village. Her mother works as a cook. From the beginning, as a child Marikolanthu is the victim of the social and economic repression. She loses her education due to poverty. She takes care of the child of Sujata, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. Marikolanthu's child Muthu is the result of rape by Murugesan, the nephew of Chettiar and the brother of Rani, the eldest daughter-in-law of Chettiar. The sexual exploitation of the poor women by the rich men is the common occurrence in the society. Poor women are vulnerable at the hands of their rich masters. There are many incidents related to this type of exploitation occurred everyday in India. The rich men use these women as their object of pleasure but fail to honour their relationship. Subsequently, they discard the women as well as their children who are born as the result of such relationships. Women undergo a lot of pain due to this and they are branded as immoral in the society. Marikolanthu does not want the child, because he is born as the result of the rape. Hence Marikolanthu's mother takes care of her child. Marikolanthu takes care of the household of Chettiar's family. When Sujata comes to know about the relationship between Sridhar and Marikolanthu, she has punished Marikolanthu, instead of taking action against her husband. In fact, Sridhar has seduced Marikolanthu and made her a victim of circumstances. In Indian society, the men who have committed such mistakes escape easily without any severe punishment. At the same time, the women become victim of such actions and face subsequent hardships. She pushes Marikolanthu out of her house. Anita Nair portrays Marikolanthu as a voiceless victim of forced motherhood and lesbianism. She skillfully portrays the story of Marikolanthu to highlight the sexual exploitation of Indian women from the rural background.

Marikolanthu is exploited physically not only by Murugesan but also by Sujata and Sridhar, the members of Chettiar family. During the day time, Sujata needs the company of Marikolanthu to quench her unfulfilled sexual desire and at night time, Sridhar craves for her to satisfy his physical hunger. The poor woman, who takes care of the household chores of Chettiar family, is exploited by the rich Chettiar family members. The powerless and innocent Marikolanthu is in a position to yield to their pleasures. She knows very well that both Sujata and Sridhar do not love her but they need the body of her to satisfy their lust. She says:

Sometimes I thought of the irony of it all and smiled to myself. By day I gathered with Sujata Akka lilies by a giant lake where herons fished and a gentle breeze blew, ruffling the brown heads of the bulrushes. And by night, Sridhar Anna drove me to the centre of the earth, where molten lava clutched at my feet as I heaved,

panted and burnt in the crush of his embrace. Neither of them loved me. But they needed me. Those who can't have love have to settle for need. What is love if not a need disguised? (262)

Anita Nair has brought out the sad plight of Marikolanthu in this passage. Both the rich man and woman physically abuse her and she does not show any reluctance to their advance. She yields herself to their temptations. Unfortunately, when Sujata comes to know about her relationship with her husband, she has forced her to quit the house. This is an irony in which the exploiter after exploiting the young girl has sent away the victim on the basis of lame excuse. She goes to the extent of calling her a wicked creature: "Shut up, shut up, will you? Sujata Akka's voice rose to a scream. You are a wicked creature" (263). It clearly presents the sad plight of Marikolanthu. Women are always vulnerable in the society where the patriarchal system exists. Often their virtue is outraged by the lust of men folk. Male wants to quench his lust and seeks the vulnerable woman to fulfill his desire. When women are seduced, they become pregnant and deliver illegitimate children. In the case of Marikolanthu, it is highlighted by Anita Nair. Further she presents the men's advantage in exploiting women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. On the whole Marikolanthu has gone through a deep psychological struggle. The writer adeptly brings out her suffering at the hands of men.

In **The Color Purple**, Shug Avery is a singer and mistress of Celie's husband Mr. Albert. Initially, she has behaved rudely towards Celie and later they become close friends. Shug acts as a catalyst to Celie. Celie is completely defunct in the physical act of sex. She becomes a "wood" and she does not like the act of sex due to the over-exploitation of her stepfather "Pa" and her husband. It makes her sterile and disinterested in the act of sex. Shug Avery teaches her the noble aspects of sex and they develop physical intimacy. Celie gets comfort from Shug Avery in every respect such as financial, emotional and sexual. They help each other and forget their distress. Celie's relationship with Shug provides her the much needed consolation from the painful scars of the abuses of her stepfather "Pa" and her aged husband, Albert. Through their relationship, Alice Walker highlights the much important unity among the women folk to overcome their sufferings caused by the men folk. Her message to the world of women is an eye-opener to all. Women should unite themselves and help each other in all possible ways to surpass the domination of men in the world.

In **The Ladies Coupe**, Margaret Shanthi is one of the fellow travelers of Akhila. She got married to Ebenezer Paulraj. He is a principal in a school. Margaret is a Chemistry teacher. He behaves like a knight with his wife. He destroys Margaret's self-confidence by bullying her to abort her first pregnancy. He treats her as a housekeeper and cook. Though he is educated as well as works as a principal, he does not respect his wife and care for her. He treats her merely a slave. Before the marriage, she has maintained a brilliant academic career and she has vibrant personality, but Ebenezer reduces her as an average girl. He behaves very cruelly to his school children as well as to his wife. Whenever she happily reveals her pregnancy, he forces her to abort the baby. It makes her to feel confusion, anger, sorrow, pain and self-pity. On the whole she suffers from physical, mental and spiritual crisis throughout her life. He craves only for her flesh. He is not ready to accept her individuality and her dreams and aims. Margaret is younger than her husband and she only says "yes" whatever her husband says. He dominates her in every aspect. Margaret loves to do PhD, but her husband has forced her to do B.Ed. She has become a puppet in the hands of him. Anita Nair has rightly pointed out the male domination in the Indian society with the help of the husband of Margaret Shanthi. She hates her husband and she says: "I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZER PAULRAJ. HATE HIM. HATE HIM" (98). The usage of bold and capital letters obviously reveals her strong dislike for her husband. In Indian society, it is too difficult for the woman to escape from the male hegemony and Margaret is no exemption from this ordeal. She suffers at the hands of her husband and she could not come out from his clutches. She struggles for dignity and identity. By the name of heritage and tradition, the society does not allow her to come out from the relationship. Ebenezer uses her as a toy for pleasure and he does not allow her to develop an identity. He overrules her notions about life and occupies absolutely her deeds and desires. This can be applied to many women in the Indian society and they quietly accept their fate, the domination of men folk.

II. Conclusion

Both Anita Nair and Alice Walker highlight the sufferings of the women. Predominantly, they suffer due to the physical abuse especially the sexual exploitation. Sex is used as a tool to control the woman's legitimate aspirations. The physical abuse of women by the men folk makes them suffer a lot mentally and it further leads to various complications such as social, economical and cultural ones. Celie and Marikolanthu are the better examples for the sexual exploitation, forced motherhood, premature child-bearing, subjugation and male hegemony. Anita Nair and Alice Walker have shown that women are suffering in the world irrespective of their region, religion, language and culture. If they want to overcome from the suffering, they should unite together, maintain bonhomie like Celie and Shug Avery and share their feelings and subsequently get consolation like Akhila and her fellow travelers.

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