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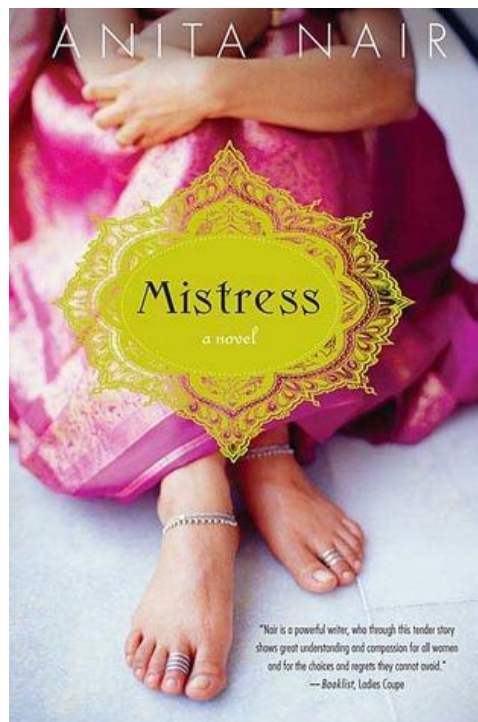
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Social Criticism in the Novels of Anita Nair

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Social Criticism in the Novels of Anita Nair

Abstract

Change is the law of nature. Anita Nair's novels *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005) project women's subjugation and their suppression in contemporary Indian society. It is a matter of great regret that even in this era of the twenty-first century; women are not given the freedom that men enjoy in the male dominated society. The objective of the research paper is to study the feminist literature and to examine the displacement of women through their humiliation. The aim of the research paper is to delineate how the women are no longer in the mood to bear this burden of traditionalism. They are in a mood of revolt against this patriarchal social set up of society. They don't want to follow the trodden path, but know very well how to make their own path. Social, cultural and religious aspects of traditional society are challenged which cause the change in the norms of social institutions. Through these changes, clash between old and new ideologies is clearly noticeable in the research paper.

Social Criticism

Social criticism has been part and parcel of literature. Man as a social being, lives in society; being a part of it, all his activities, directly or indirectly, are related to society. Literature is created by man and cannot exist without society. Society is the environment in which literature breathes. Literary history is divided into different ages because literature of every age has some special characteristics. So, by studying the literature of different ages, some common characteristics of the concerned age can be found and by interpreting those characteristics, a fairly complete picture of the concerned age can be drawn. Literature shows both the good and bad sides of the society, criticizes and appreciates them and this pattern may be termed as social criticism. On this ground, social criticism is the critique of society.

Social Relevance of Literature – Concepts and Ideals

Literature always bears its social relevance. It is a vehicle of presenting the highest ideals and aspirations of mankind. Feminism as a literary theory entered the academic circle in the late 1960's with the advent of Post-structuralism. Patriarchy is the traditional social set up of the male dominated society, in which man enjoys power and freedom, whereas woman is denied such freedom and power. Woman has not been given due importance from ages past. As Simone de Beauvoir remarks: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female

presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir 295).

Anita Nair and Her Novels

Among the emerging writers, Anita Nair is one of the most promising writers. She is the novelist of twenty-first century during which values, traditions and beliefs are changing very speedily. She takes up the cultural, social and economic aspects which mark the mode of contemporary society and provide a perfect example of victimized women in a patriarchal system. Her novels are like social documents.

***Ladies Coupe* – A Feminist Novel**

In *Ladies Coupe* (2001) the novelist tries to depict the picture of an Indian woman who stands by the side of her family despite all the tortures they perpetrate upon her. The novel challenges the concept of patriarchy. The story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Her third novel *Mistress* (2005) displays the picture of contemporary, changing society where the sacred institution, marriage has lost its significance, gone are the days of arranged marriage and the trend of caste exogamy and living-together relationships are coming into being. By portraying these emancipated women, Nair projects a crystal clear picture of contemporary society.

Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* is a feminist novel. Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila is the protagonist. She is forty five. She, after her father’s death, is appointed as an income tax clerk. Now she bails out her family from economic crisis and plays the role of a daughter, sister, aunt and bread runner. This step of Akhila undermines the traditional psyche of the male dominated society regarding woman. By doing this so, she challenges the domain of the male dominated society.

After some time, Akhila is not allowed to live a life of her own. Generally, it is considered that a woman cannot live alone. She is considered merely a follower of her male counterpart. Her duty is to get married and to be a good wife and mother. So traditionally, a woman, without man, is considered incomplete. But when Akhila wants her mother to take music lessons, just as Karpagam’s mother teaches dance, she disapproves of it saying, “I don’t

approve of what Karpagam's mother is doing" (LC 13). She reminds Akhila what her father has told her when they were first married, "I want my wife to take care of my children and me. I don't want her so caught up with her job that she has no time for the house or for taking care of my needs" (LC 14).

Revolt against Patriarchy

But Akhila thinks differently. After spending the golden period of her life for the good of her family, she is not given her due reward. When she seeks permission from her mother to go to Mysore with an office group, her mother finds herself helpless and asks her to get permission from her brothers, but she being an elder sister, thinks it is not fair to get permission from them and declares her revolt against patriarchy saying, "for heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent? Look at me, I'm forty-five years old. And older than all of you. I will do exactly as I please and I don't give a damn about what you or anyone else thinks..." (LC 204).

So after sometime, Akhila, without getting permission, decides to go to Kanyakumari and undermines the myth that "a woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (LC 16). She is not the woman of traditional society, but she is the image of the new woman. She remains unmarried and does not want to be the follower of this male dominated society. As she remarks, "women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" (LC 209-210).

Image of a New Woman

In this way Akhila is the image of a new woman who sets aside the traditional psyche regarding woman. This new woman is a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive. She lives with a heightened sense of dignity. This new being has been projected in the context of the contemporary world.

Anita Nair's Women Characters - Saadiya

Anita Nair's women characters rebel against the patriarchal set up in order to explore their own potential or to live on their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a

rebellion may have on other lives. By portraying her as emancipated woman, Nair projects the crystal clear picture of contemporary society.

In *Mistress* through Saadiya, Nair points to a kind of feminist emancipation that is based upon not limiting women to their traditional roles, but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities. Through Radha and Maya, the novelist highlights the problem of disloyalty and portrays how even the sacred institution of marriage has lost its significance. Emotions and feelings are no more significant in the present scenario; so the writer depicts how the social aspects of contemporary society are being challenged.

Saadiya Mehruunnisa is the second most important female character of the novel. She belongs to Muslim community, where women follow the traditional pattern of society. It is expected that she may remain follow and obey the social norms of traditional society and no matter what her own wishes are she must behave as her other sisters. Her father wishes to marry her to a boy of his own community.

Birds in a Cage

But Saadiya is quite the opposite. More about her nature can be understood with the help of the following remark: “But I have heard an occasional comment about how cruel it is to keep birds in a cage. Then I ask the person who made the comment, ‘How different is it from keeping your wife and daughters at home? Isn’t that a cage, too?’ ” (*Mistress* 74) This spirit takes her to another path where she falls in love with a Hindu boy, Sethu, who is an orphan boy and for this boy, she disobeys her father’s wish to marry a Muslim boy. For this she is punished. In spite of the severe punishment, she remains resolute to her decision and goes on crossing one taboo of her community after another. She prefers to go with a man who has no proper education, no proper job and no means to support his family, without a family of his own and most importantly without the right faith. She talks differently, in a language which bears the sense of freedom. As she elaborates “A house with windows that could be flung open and a little terrace on the roof with a wall that stood just waist high. The sky over the house had no boundaries. I felt my heart flower. I wanted to spread to my arms and gather the world to me” (*Mistress* 137).

The Trend of Exogamy

This sense of freedom drives her to Sethu. It highlights that the time of arranged and endogamous marriage has gone. This trend of exogamy – caste exogamy and religion exogamy – points towards a particular aspect of society which marks the mode of contemporary society.

Freedom-seeking Youngsters of Twenty-first Century

Here Saadiya stands for the youngsters of the twenty-first century, who by challenging the cultural and social aspects of society, disobey their parents and follow their self-made path. Presently our society is passing through a crucial phase as never before. She, by crossing the limits of the external laws, tries to find a different path, which may offer her some satisfaction. She wants to spend her life freely unlike other Muslim girls. If we look at this development, the relationship of Saadiya and Sethu, they cross religious boundaries.

Basically Saadiya is a Muslim girl, while Sethu comes from a Hindu community. For them, these religious teachings seem to be not practicable in their lives: “I thought we told each other that we don’t need religion or religious teaching. This has nothing to do with religions” (*Mistress* 194). This development projects cultural change. She takes this step so that she can live the life of her own choosing.

Radha, Independent Woman of Contemporary Society – Turning Back to Tradition

Radha is the protagonist of the novel and is the embodiment of the women of the twenty-first century. She comes from the middle class family. She is well educated and well aware of the world outside. Having a good job and a lover also, she thinks herself to be an independent young woman of contemporary society, who can decide about her own life. Now by leaving her new found life behind, she goes back to her family where she is married to Shyam.

Though she is married to Shyam, yet she develops extra-marital relationship with Chris. But this development puts her into a fix where she cannot differentiate between right and wrong. She remarks: “I do not understand what is happening to me, a married woman, a wife. When I married Shyam, I swore never to flout the rules of custom again. How have I become so disdainful of honour, so contemptuous of convention?” (*Mistress* 54)

Feeling the Burden of Institution

The patriarchal decision pushes her on to the path of traditional society, where Shyam is unable to recognize and understand female sensibility. At the beginning of her marriage, she takes the decision “never to flout the rules of custom again.” (*Mistress* 54) But she still feels the burden of the institution, marriage. It is the path from which she used to dream of escaping, but now she again finds herself in the same trap. This step takes her on to a disaster where she finds herself on a two-edged-sword. First of all, she has to play the traditional role in which she is married to Shyam; on the other hand, she plays the role of an adulterous lover with Chris. Here she seems to feel ambivalent about this development.

Conduct and Wish to Pursue Love

On the one hand, Shyam feels proud of being the husband of a modern woman who knows what she wants to achieve in her life. On the other hand, he does not wish her to follow that rebellious path, so he puts problems on her way of achieving it. Shyam loves her very much, but she looks down upon him and develops extra-marital relations with a foreigner, Chris. Shyam is aware of this attraction; in spite of that, he does not do anything, but watches helplessly when his wife Radha embraces Chris passionately.

Shyam and Chris

Her personal conduct and wish to pursue love compels her to violate the first rule of the society. This pursuance takes her away from the patriarchal set of society and points towards the revolt against traditional society. This dilemma of the protagonist makes the title relevant. Chris embodies the modern and new life, while Shyam stands for traditional life. Radha is the girl of the new generation who wants to avoid the traditional life that is stereotype completely. Shyam also has some expectations from her. “Does she ever consider that such silly acts have repercussions? Besides, what will my friends and their wives say if they find out? We have a place in society, a standing that Radha has always treated rather carelessly”. (*Mistress* 71)

Lust and Adultery

Radha’s lust is not the only thing responsible for her attraction to Chris. Chris is the man who provides her everything such as love, sex care, etc. She is aware of how the world would respond about her adultery. As she admits: “I know, Uncle. Very well, I know the

world would think it is wrong. There is no justification for adultery, I will be told. But I love him. He is a fire in my blood,' I say". (*Mistress* 207) Radha is not a traditional women, but a modern one who is the product of the twenty-first century and has her own emotions and feelings too. Here she does not bother about family disgrace, but knows that she has right to live of her own accord. As she elaborates: "that isn't right. Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman, a bloody mistress, to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights". (*Mistress* 73)

Misguided Path to Freedom

By developing illicit relationship with Chris outside of marriage, Radha violates the social rule. In the novel, "Radha rejects her husband's oppressive environment and she rebels against the false materialism and vulgarity of society. She even virtually rejects her marriage. She distrusts love as a form of male possessiveness and does not want love to be an aspect of male domination". (Naik 21) This affair is an attempt to project her as a misguided modern woman which takes her on a path of freedom, where she is appreciated and allowed to breathe freely unlike her traditional life. This is the second major violation of the rules that is supposed to help her in becoming a modern woman just like the women she reads about, whom she watches on television and others about whom she hears about in her life.

Brings in Frustration – Elements of Revolt against Patriarchy

This violation does not bring her the satisfaction she is looking for. This step takes her towards frustration where she finds herself in a fix and later on, she realizes her fault and feels that "I need time. And I fear that I am not going to have enough. Someone will be hurt, Shyam or Chris. How do I choose? What am I going to do?" (*Mistress* 253) By doing so, she gets the courage to revolt against the social set up of contemporary society. She, due to this, becomes a neglected woman in the eyes of tradition. On the one hand, the novelist portrays how the sacred institution of marriage has lost its significance. By highlighting the fact, the novelist wants to convey a message that gone are the days of loyalty when couples used to remain satisfied within their lives. It projects how the social and cultural aspects are being challenged. This development projects the revolt against patriarchy.

Polyandrous Maya

Maya is not a major character in the novel, but by committing polyandry, she makes herself one of the most controversial characters. Due to this step, she falls in the category of Radha and Saadiya. Radha is shown to be in a fix, where she feels suffocated between two kinds of relationships; her moral responsibility to Shyam and love affair with Chris. Saadiya is torn between her love to Sethu and loyalty to her family. Maya stands between Koman and her husband. She is not a virtuous wife, who, on the side, has an extra-marital affair with Koman. Now she does not feel any problem in adjusting with them. When she goes to Koman she plays the role of a lover very well.

Maya - More Complex, Controversial and Different

This development is not the product of sudden emotions, but of well considered thought. On being proposed to by Koman, she commits bigamy/polyandry. As follows: “Maya, do you want to get married...I asked if you wanted to get married...she started laughing. I would be committing bigamy” (*Mistress* 256). Now she does not feel any kind of guilt. This step reflects her attitude towards this sacred institution. Her decision is purely whimsical. It does not project any logical suggestion at all. This decision makes her more complex, controversial and different to others.

This decision makes her more controversial as compared to Radha and Saadiya. Though she is fully aware that she is committing adultery, yet she goes on crossing the lines. This step does not affect her on any level. However, this decision does not cause problem to anyone whatever it may be her first husband or second husband. But this relationship is beyond justification. This step reflects her attitude towards this sacred institution, marriage. Her decision is purely whimsical. Here Maya stands for a particular aspect of society which points towards changing modes of contemporary society.

Women are Projected in Varied Ways

Through these characters, women are projected in varied ways. They are projected flaunting the norms of traditional society. As Radha develops extra-marital relationship with Chris, Saadiya, by ignoring her father’s wish, prefers exogamy, and Maya commits polyandry with Koman. Thus, these characters point towards a particular aspect of society. When they flaunt rules and follow another path, then they are not under any kind of social, moral and legal pressure. They seem to willingly follow this path. With the help of these characters, the

novelist projects the mode of contemporary society, conveying a message on how the norms of social institutions are being changed. Being part of the new generation, they lean heavily towards cultural changes. Anita Nair's characters rebel against the traditional set up of society in order to explore their own potential, or to live on their own terms. There is a clear tone of resentment, but as human beings with a will of their own, it is a new dimension that the young generation of contemporary society is taking, which indicates rebellion towards the general current of patriarchal society.

The Past, the Present and the Future

The woman in the past was completely traditional, uneducated, superstitious and confined. Having lived in such an atmosphere for ages, women had become narrow-minded, controlling and controlled. They could never think that there could be a different world outside the four walls of their houses, or there could be some more roles for them to play. Women were completely cut off from such a varied and dynamic world. It was so because the men of the traditional society wished to keep them within cage, the enclosure. They too were ruled by the age old philosophy which was thoroughly anti-woman.

Psychological Exploration of Feminist Writers

The feminist writers focus primarily on the psychological exploration of the inner mind of women. These feminist writers penetrate deep into the inner mind of depressed, disillusioned women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight. By doing so, they bring to light many of their issues, which are the outcome of the traditionally oppressed woman's psychological and emotional imbalances in a male dominated society. Male dominated society and its anti-woman ideology are the root cause of their backwardness, suffering and victimization.

So the writers raise the issues of contemporary woman like dilution of relationships, pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, and sterility of life, man-woman relationship, their inner fears, oppression and suppression faced by them inside and outside the home. The writers try to depict the picture of contemporary woman who stands by the side of her family, despite of all their torture.

Generally female characters are fixed as gender stereotypes so that their attempts to transcend this position are often questioned. In general, female characters are silenced in the face of their oppression under a strong patriarchal system. It is an undeniable fact that women have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, physically and mentally; not allowed to perform on an equal footing with men, but they are also denied the opportunity to give expression to their feelings and distress.

Place of Marriage

Marriage is a legal relationship between a husband and wife. It is a social necessity where the woman seeks security and man demands respect. It is a socially acknowledged and approved relationship. There are many forms of marriage that are prevalent, such as arranged marriage, love marriage, court marriage, inter-caste marriage, live-in-relationship, and so on. Presently, India is passing through a crucial time of change as never before. If an assessment is made of the last three decades, it can be seen that industrialization, demographic changes, social mobility, modernization, advancement of information technology, globalization, capitalist production, consumerism, extent of urbanization, are factors which mark the standards of social criticism. So boys and girls are coming forward to select or reject their life partners.

Marriage in the Novels of Anita Nair

Marriage in the novels of Anita Nair plays a key role in exposing this trend of contemporary society.

Radha

Radha in *Mistress* is one of the most important characters who develops a pre-marital affair and plans to get in to a love marriage. But her father comes to know about this development and he finds immediately a husband for her, so that he may avoid further damage to his social status. And she has to bow before her father's decision. But after marriage, she, by developing an extra-marital relationship deliberately with a foreigner, undermines the sanctity of this sacred institution and projects the mood of revolt of the new generation. Though her husband is aware of this development, he keeps watching helplessly. She's supposed to do what he wishes, but she does not pay attention to him at all. When Shyam objects over her misdeeds, she upbraids him in one of their arguments: "Don't I have a

right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman, a bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights". (*Mistress* 73)

Sadiya

Saadiya in the same novel is the second most important female character. She does not want to be the follower of tradition society. She is a modern girl who knows very well how to make her own path. Her decision to go with the Hindu boy Sethu indicates that the norms of this institution are changing very speedily. Here the novelist wants to convey a message that gone are the days of endogamy and arranged marriage and coming the days of caste exogamy, religion exogamy, love marriage, court marriage, etc. that is totally based on love marriage.

Maya

Maya in *Mistress* is a married woman who lives a happy life. She does not only develop extra marital relationship with Koman, but commits polyandry also. Angela in *Mistress* is also one of the most important characters who without being married, has a live-in-relationship with Koman. By doing so, Maya and Angela challenge the cultural and social aspects of traditional society. They take these steps deliberately. These forms of marriage warn us that some serious changes are taking place in contemporary society and these changes take our society towards cultural transformation.

Akhila

Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* is a forty five years old spinster, who takes on the various roles of daughter, sister, aunt and the bread runner. Despite doing so much for others of her family, she is not given her due. Hence, she does not want to follow the trodden path of marriage which is the root cause of oppression and suppression. By doing so she undermines the traditional concept that "a woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (*LC* 16). She completely undermines the significance of this sacred institution and openly revolts against the patriarchal set up of society. She wants to get rid of the life she had lived so long for others; she desires to live a life of her own, so she takes the decision to get reunited and connected with Hari over the phone. Finally she succeeds in her defiance against patriarchy. In this way, Akhila conveys a message that a woman can have a happy life without being married. It is not a social a necessity, rather it seems a burden.

Love, Sex and Morality

In this fast changing world, the issue of morality attracts our attention more urgently and readily. Love and sex play a vital role in the novels of Anita Nair. It is love and sexual desire which take Radha (*Mistress*) to adultery. Her husband tries to prevent her from taking this shameful path, but she does not heed him. She, by committing adultery, brings disgrace to her family. Though, later on, she expresses regret over a lot of her doings.

Saadiya (*Mistress*) comes from the Muslim community and it is expected that she may obey the social norms of traditional society. Her father wishes her to marry a boy of his own community. But she opposes the decision of her father who is the embodiment of a patriarchal society. This spirit of the new generation takes her to another path where she falls in love with a Hindu boy, Sethu, who is an orphan and has no proper education and for this she disobeys her father's wish to marry a Muslim boy. In spite of the severe punishment, she remains resolute to her decision and goes on crossing one taboo of her community after another. Her own wishes are more important to her than her fathers'.

This step of Saadiya indicates a particular aspect of society. It warns us how personal wishes compel the young people to move away from their age-old traditions. Love and sex play a major role. Due to this revolt, parents find themselves helpless. Privatization, social mobility, westernization, modernization, advancement of information technology, globalization, etc. play a decisive role in shaping the standards of the twenty-first century. So it is clearly visible that the old traditions are dying out and new trends of contemporary society are emerging. Her new sense of self-awareness empowers her with an understanding of her feminine quality. When she resolves her inner conflicts, she is able to conquer self-identity.

Changing Focus on Marriage

Love /sex play a vital role in the life of Akhila also. After spending some nights with Hari at Kanyakumari, she, without unfolding her identity, takes a decision to get reunited and connected with Hari over the phone. Here Saadiya and Akhila stand for a particular aspect of society where the "Many young Indians from the urban middle class are beginning to believe

that love and sex are the only things that matter in relationships, particularly marriage” (Trivedi).

Impact of Modernity

Indian society still relies on many conventional norms and values of tradition which the women have to follow the tradition. However, in present times, at least for a number of young people, caste and religion are not as rigid as in earlier centuries. They are losing their ground rapidly because of Modernity and Globalization. The impact of these factors is clearly discernible in the novels of Anita Nair. Being the part of new generation, mostly all her major characters are not away from its influence.

Parent-Child Relationship

Parent-child relationship plays an important role in the novels of Anita Nair. Anita Nair employs certain characters like Akhila’s mother who expresses how women are strong conservatives, because of the patriarchal structure that has framed strict social, political and economic limitations on them. Akhila’s mother is a highly conservative woman. She is a devoted wife with her own theory who considers herself inferior to her husband. She is a sort of woman who never takes decisions on her own, but leaves all decisions to her husband for she believes, “He knows best”. (LC14) According to her, “A good wife learnt to put her husband’s interests before anyone else’s, even her father’s. A good wife listened to her husband and did as she said...it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband”. (LC 14) This supposedly leads to a harmonious life. This marks the absolute mode of traditional society. So, Akhila’s mother wants that her daughter should imbibe such values so that she may live a happy life in the future.

But Akhila is a modern girl who knows very well how to follow her own path. She is not given much attention regarding her marriage. Due to this, she decides to leave her family and live alone, her siblings do not approve that. So she gets furious and wants to be nobody’s daughter, nobody’s sister, Nobody’s aunt, Nobody’s mother, nobody’s well - wisher and nobody’s family member.

Second most important character is Haji Najib (*Mistress*) who is the father of Saadiya. He wants to arrange a marriage for his daughter in his own community, so that he can avoid public disgrace. He, by nature, is highly conservative. But Saadiya is quite the opposite; she

bluntly denies “Vaapa, I do not wish to marry Akbar Shah’s second son’ ...I am not willing to marry the man you have chosen for me”. (*Mistress* 144)

When Radha falls in love with a boy in city and wants to get married to him, her father comes to know about this development; he arranges her marriage with Shyam, so that he may avoid public disgrace. Here the clash between love marriage and arranged marriage is clearly noticeable. Here Radha is not asked about her choice.

These developments project the clash between two ideologies. Parents want to push their daughters on to the traditional path while the girls do not want to follow the trodden path. In this way, parent-child and child-parent relationships portray the clash between two ideologies – the ideology of the old generation as opposed to the ideology of new generation.

“Today, India is at the first stage of a major social revolution. This was catalysed by the explosive economic changes of the past few decades that accelerated the slow cultural change that was already in the making. Now our country is entering uncharted territory. Arranged marriages are shattering, divorce rates soaring and new paradigms of sex and relationship – queer, open, and live in – are being tested and explored. New values are feverishly in the making, and we live in a state of molten confusion” (Trivedi)

Akhila (*Ladies Coupe*) is a bank employee. She does her duty very efficiently. She is little suffering there. By doing so, she plays the role of a bread runner. She spends all of her salary on her family. She is the only single character in the novels of Nair, who remains unmarried and sacrifices the golden phase of life for the welfare of the family. For this contribution, she is given nothing. Thus, with the help of the above mentioned characters, a complete picture of contemporary changing society can be drawn.

To Conclude

Thus the social, moral and religious aspects of changing society have been studied. The characters challenge the traditional way of life. Parents-child and child-parents relationships, norms of the social marriage, awareness regarding love and sex and so on, are

changing. In this manner, Anita Nair has been successful in highlighting the trend of contemporary changing society that is the basis of social criticism.

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