

**MATRILINY AND FAMILY:  
A CRITIQUE OF SELECT NOVELS OF ANITA  
NAIR**

**A thesis submitted in June 2019 to the University of Hyderabad in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Matriliny and Family: A Critique of Select Novels of Anita Nair**” submitted by **Varsha K., Reg. No. 11HCPH 03** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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## **DECLARATION**

I, **Varsha K.**, (Regd. No. 11HCPH03), hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Matriliney and Family: A Critique of Select Novels of Anita Nair**” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Sowmya Dechamma C. C. is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/ INFLIBNET.

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# CONTENTS

**Acknowledgements**

**Introduction..... 01**

**Chapter I**

Works of Anita Nair: An Overview..... 53

**Chapter II**

Debates around Nair Matriliney: An Overview..... 88

**Chapter III**

Contentions on Family and Motherhood.....122

**Conclusion.....178**

**Bibliography.....187**

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## Introduction

As an interdisciplinary field, Comparative Literature has to cultivate a high degree of self-reflexivity to reflect on our society and culture. Such informed discussions will invariably lead us to debates around a cluster of ideas and issues -- such as the oral and the written, literacy and literary, tradition as past and presence, the colony and the empire, print and the coming of the book, the empire and the nation, the elite and the popular, homogeneity and plurality, literary history and history of literature, speech genres and literary genres, and so on. The fact that most of these issues emerged in the nineteenth century forces us to revisit the shifts that took place in the nineteenth century with greater care.

(Ramakrishnan *Indigenous* 4)

This Introductory chapter is divided into three sections. It begins by placing the study within the discipline of Comparative Literature followed by a brief discussion on literary historiographies in India. It tries to problematize the novel as a literary genre and its introduction in India with the beginning of English education in the country. The second section of the Introduction critiques the nuances of women writing in order to contextualize contemporary women writing in India with a particular focus on Kerala. The third section provides a brief outline of the chapters that follow. Nineteenth century was a period which witnessed tremendous changes in the social, political, literary, cultural, and economic lives of Indian society. This was a period when India started resisting

the imposition of colonized culture by holding up indigenous traditions and values thereby entrusting women as the bearers of Indian culture. It was also the period when the matrilineal joint family system of Nair community in Kerala was substituted by the patrilineal nuclear family of the colonizer and of the dominant Hindu. As E.V. Ramakrishnan states in the above quoted passage, a comparatist's primary responsibility is to cultivate a self-reflexivity on one's society and culture. Kerala witnessed many socio-political, literary and cultural changes during the nineteenth century which got reflected in the literature of the period. One of the pivotal changes that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the legal abolition of matriliney among the Nair community as a result of Nair Reform movement initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The present study attempts to understand the matrilineal system of Nair community and the nuances of family system in Kerala through the analysis of select novels of contemporary Indian English writer Anita Nair. The selected novels are *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014).

### **Indian Writing in English**

In "The Historical Formation of Indian-English Literature" (2003), Vinay Dharwadker traces the history of Indian English Writing. He studies the zones of interracial contact and acculturation between the Indians and the British and in his opinion "before an author of Indian origin could compose and publish a recognizably literary text in English, the language had to establish itself as a common medium of communication on the subcontinent, had to become

accessible to Indians individually and in groups, had to draw them into its practice of literacy, and had to acculturate them more broadly to the ways of life, thought and expression it represented.” (206) He exemplifies how this acculturation facilitated early writers in English from India. Dharwadker argues that Dean Mahomet who married Jane Daly, an Irish woman, Henry Derozio who was the son of Portuguese-Indian father and an English mother, Michael Madhusudan Dutt who married first a Scottish and later a French woman, all benefitted from their connections with the English in their literary endeavors<sup>1</sup>. He also lists a group of Indian- English poets and prose writers in this context such as Anita Desai, Dom Moraes, Aubrey Menon, Ruskin Bond etc. Dharwadker further argues that besides the historical-cultural diffusion of English in India, conversion and Christian influence also facilitated in the formation of Indian-English literary culture in the twentieth century. For example, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, etc. were educated at English-medium missionary institutions. He adds two more processes which influenced the formation of Indian English writing.

In addition to acculturation in Western-style schools and colleges, however, two general processes contributed directly to the consolidation of Indian-English writing and its epistemological,

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Mahomet is the author of *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honourable The East India Company, Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1794), the first text to be composed in English by an Indian; Henry Derozio is the first poet in Indian English Literature; Michael Madhusudan Dutt is an Indian English poet and a paradigmatic 19<sup>th</sup> century figure in India.

sociopolitical, and aesthetic functions in this period. One was the diffusion of English beyond the early contact zones, leading to the formation of a new political economy of language and class on the subcontinent, and to a lasting association between this language and the modern Indian middle and upper classes. The other was the establishment of Indian print culture within the framework of colonial subjugations, which determined the constraints and freedoms as well as the economic conditions of the market place under which Indian-English literary culture had to sustain itself. These two developments, which need to be described in some detail, affected the conditions that were to give birth to important trends in Indian English writing in the twentieth century. (232)

In his introduction to *A Concise History of Indian Writing in English* (2003), Arvind Krishna Mehrotra observes that

In the resistance to Indian writing in English, however, there has never been any let-up. In each decade new ways are found to marginalize it. If in the 1960's it was likened to 'a blind alley... leading nowhere', in the 1990's it was seen as a phenomenon occurring not here in India, but abroad. 'Writing for export' is how the Kannada novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy, a former chairman of the Sahitya Academi (the National Academy of Letters), reacted on the Amul India Show to the success of

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). The feeling that readers of such novels are mainly in the West and that the writing is essentially being done for them is now common, so much so that any attention a work receives is put down to the changed marketplace, to the large advance a novel occasionally fetches, to the publicity it generates in the Indian media. In the words of the historian Sumit Sarkar, "'Indo-Anglian' writing had to wait for postcolonial times to become a significant literary genre, under conditions of intensified globalization.' (25)

The arrival of English into the multilingual country like India eradicated the inaccessibility of Indian literatures and English started to be identified with modernity. In Mehrotra's observation the position of English in India is still ambiguous as its position and meaning is vague and incomplete. To understand it one has to gain a better knowledge in the regional languages and indigenous culture. With the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) Indian fiction in English was almost synonymously used for Indian literature. Amit Chaudhuri views the use of the word 'Indian' as a taxonomic term in connection with the word 'English' (xix-xx). He argues that the post-colonial Indian English is entangled with the construction of 'Indianness' and post-coloniality. Since the post-colonial or diasporic Indian is a hybrid entity, the language too is hybrid and the accepted standard English seems to be alien and insufficient for 'the hybrid, postcolonial Indian consciousness'. (xxvi) In the essay "Modernity and Vernacular" (2016) Chaudhuri rhetorically asks

Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party, most of whom have published no more than two novels, some of them only one? More importantly, is it possible to assess properly and appreciate the merits of this handful of writers without any recourse to the diverse intellectual traditions to which they do or do not belong? (xvii)

In his view, Indian writing in English is in the midst of some resurgence and the glare of it alone will not ensure the possibility of good writing or its resurgence. While speaking about *Gitanjali* (1910), Rabindranath Tagore's winning the Nobel Prize for literature, Chaudhuri opines that Tagore's reputation soon got damaged in the West. He reasons it to the West's decreasing interest in knowing about the East, about India in particular. In his view, in order to get interested in a canon a nation or a community has to be interested in how it sees itself. In his own words, "you have to be interested not only in what you think is nation's history, but also in how a nation sees its own historical process." (xviii) Chaudhuri observes India's entry to history is through colonialism and the West showed interest in the Western aspect of colonial India. The Indian writers in English write about this colonial past in a subtle rather than as a simple response to colonialism.

In her essay "India in the Mirror of World Fiction" Francesca Orsini asks the question 'what is Indian literature' which is posed towards the Western

expectations of ‘what postcolonial Indian fiction ought to be’. (319) At par with Amit Chaudhuri’s observation on Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Orsini argues that the publication of Rushdie’s novel had created a set of assumptions.

First, the new Indian novel must be written in English, the only language that deemed capable of capturing modern subcontinental realities: Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Urdu and the rest need not apply. Secondly, while eschewing realism, its tone and structure must be relentlessly mimetic: since India was a ‘huge baggy monster’ it’s fiction too must be vast and all-inclusive. Its voice must be ‘robustly extroverted’, clamorously polyphonic, rejecting any nuance or delicacy. Its subject matter must be fantastical, it’s narrative non-linear: Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same. (319)

According to Orsini, literary production in English is triply privileged “drawing on the language’s American-based global ascendancy, on the subcontinental legacy of British colonialism and relatedly, on Indian class divisions: this is the preferred language of the urban middle classes -- in the case of the elite, sometimes the only language.” (327) Novel has been one of the major literary genre which engages with the socio-political and cultural scenarios of the society. Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies the emergence of novel in India as more than a ‘purely literary exercise (*Realism* 3). She notes that along with the social and political scenarios of a colonized country, the indigenous traditions of

various language-cultures also contributed to the growth of novel during the nineteenth century. In *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (2010), Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia observe that the earlier literary histories were more of listing literary works chronologically by detailing its origins, attribution and textual explications whereas the modern literary historiographies rewrite it 'within a wider public debate about national origins, linguistic identities and political entitlements' (2). Through the analysis of textual production of cultural meaning and the socio-political conditions which create the texts, these books supplant the traditional way of writing literary history. Blackburn and Dalmia point out two problems which the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary history had to undergo. The first is the ambiguity arising out of the convergence of courtly literatures of the late medieval period and the modern literature of the twentieth century. The second is the division between colonialism and nationalism. Until late 19<sup>th</sup> century most publishing was carried out by private European enterprises and Christian missionaries. Both these happened to be the reasons for lack of serious scholarship on 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it is an undeniable fact that the literary history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from an encounter between Indian and European cultures within the context of colonialism. As the editors point out, one cannot rely completely on official records for the future studies in the area of nineteenth century literary history. (21) Through these they pointed out the necessity of including the not-so-popular writings for 'they too display the creative impulse of the period'.

## A Sociological Perspective of the Novel

The problem of sociology of the novel has always preoccupied sociologists of literature, though, as yet, no decisive step towards its elucidation has so far been attempted. Basically, the novel, for the first part of its history, was a biography and a social chronicle and so it has always been possible to show that the social chronicle reflected to a greater or lesser degree the society of the period-- and one does not have to be a sociologist to see that. (4)

Lucien Goldmann's essay "Towards a Sociology of the Novel" (1977), from which the above passage has been taken, develops certain hypotheses after reading Georg Lukacs' *The Theory of the Novel* (1971). According to Goldmann, the novel as a genre is characterized by a rupture between the hero and the world which "engender both a *constitutive opposition*, the foundation of this insurmountable rupture, and an *adequate community* to make possible the existence of an epic form" (1). To him, novel is a search for values in a degraded society expressed through the mediatization and the complex structure has its basis in the society. He asserts a 'rigorous homology' between the literary form of the novel and the everyday relation between man and commodities in capitalism. Therefore, the novel form to him is "the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production". (5)

Pierre Macherey, the foremost Althusserian critic approaches literature through the central concepts of Althusser such as production, problematic,

ideology, scientific knowledge etc. and views literary text as a process of production which has no singular point of origin. In his preface to Macherey's work, *A Theory of Literary Production* (2012), Terry Eagleton draws a similar definition to criticism where he defines criticism as an altogether new work upon a literary work which displaces the text.

Like the psychoanalyst listening to his or her patient, it grasps what is uttered in terms of what is not uttered -- in the light of the text's symptomatic repressions, evasions, slippages, self-contradictions and eloquent silences. It is in the 'not-said' of the work, not in what it proclaims or portrays, that its relation to history is most graphically exposed. Criticism 'makes speak' what the work must at all costs repress simply in order to be itself. (viii)

In Macherey's view, no literary text is free from ideology and it is the critic's onus to fix the shapeless ideology in a work. In his own words "literary form gives a shape to the shapeless (ideology); but in doing so it forces it to reveal its discrepancies and ambiguities, in a way which makes the literary work itself 'non-self-identical', shot through with contending signifiers" (x). Eagleton calls Macherey's work a 'scientific notion of criticism' which poses the following questions on the complex relationship between text, ideology and history.

Why is there necessarily dissonance between the work's various lines of meaning? How come that it can 'say' one thing and 'show' another? Why is it that, in attempting to say one thing, it

finds itself speaking of something else? How does it come about that the work is haunted by the presence of words and elements which it cannot quite articulate but which nevertheless refuse to be banished? (xi)

In the chapter “Explanation and Interpretation” Macherey makes this point clear by showing the transformation of criticism from the explanatory way of asking ‘how is the work made’ to the interpretive way of ‘why is the work made’. “Interpretation is repetition, but a strange repetition that *says more by saying less*: a purifying repetition, at the end of which a hidden meaning appears in all its naked truth”. (86) Marxist criticism approaches literature as a product of society and evaluates to what extent a work of art reflects the reality of the society which produced it. In other words, it focuses on “art as a representation of the socio-economic forces and the effects of those forces on human life”. (Schwarz 187) In Anita Nair’s novels there are certain matters or situations left unexplained which can be the ‘symptomatic repressions, evasions, slippages, self-contradictions and eloquent silences’ that Macherey talks about. While analyzing Raymond Williams’s theoretical interventions in framing a ‘Sociology of Culture’ Balakrishnan Kalamullathil (2006) views that

Williams has identified culture as a distinct area of human practice, but one, which has received too little sociological attention. In his scheme of things, the various components of culture, namely, institutions, formations, means of production, cultural identification especially in art and particular forms of art,

cultural reproduction and the organization of culture are all part of general history. But as separate histories, they can put sociological questions to general history and can thus evince potential areas for research. (142)

As novel is a social chronicle it has always reflected the society in varying degrees. Anita Nair herself has admitted in her interviews that her works have originated from her keen observation of people in the society. At par with Goldmann's definition of novel, Anita Nair's novels search for values in a degraded society among the complex structures like family, marriage, motherhood, etc. Even when Anita Nair denies that her works propagate any kind of ideology, as Macherey points out, no work is free from any ideology. Having no ideology itself is an ideological standpoint. While reading Anita Nair one would encounter certain 'self-contradictions' and 'eloquent silences' and it is in these points the work's relation to history is exposed well. Such reading between the lines makes the work possible to speak or what is 'not said'. Matriliney and joint family system was the culture practiced by the Nair communities in Kerala which has undergone changes largely due to colonial interventions. The present study explores on the impact of these changes on women in Kerala, based on its representation in Anita Nair's novels.

Williams sketches how social relations of writing gained momentum through stages of development:

Writing moved from (i) a supporting and recording function, in societies in which oral composition and tradition were still

predominant, through (ii) a stage in which this function was joined by written composition for oral performance and (iii) a further stage in which composition was additionally written only to be read, to (iv) that later and very familiar stage in which most or virtually all composition was written to be silently read, and was at last, for this reason, generalized as 'literature'. (94)

As Balakrishnan points out, the 'emergence of the concept of "author" with a high degree of "authority" attached to it' and the work as cultural reproduction opened up new ways of social investigations. The cultural reproduction or a work of art is a representative of a social continuity which, in Marxian view, is a dichotomy between *essence* (continuity) and *appearance* (change). In the Structuralist perspective this dichotomy is viewed as a continuum between 'depth' and 'surface'. Therefore, to understand the underlying patterns of any cultural phenomenon one needs to read it in terms of this continuum. Balakrishnan further argues that meaning emerges from conventions which in turn reproduces culture. Culture is viewed as a deep conventional practice where cultural symbols and representations form its surface structure and it is contingent upon reproduction. (150) According to this notion Anitha Nair's novel represents the dichotomy of the matrilineal past and its modalities of change. In order to understand the essence or depth of her work one need to go deeper from the appearance or surface. Theorizations on the production and reproduction of culture encapsulate the concept of "everyday life" as conceptualized by Henri Lefebvre which emphasizes upon the forms and

meanings of a common or popular culture, rather than explosive province of an elite. (196) Therefore, to understand the nuances of matriliney and family and their impositions on women one has to go in depth of Anita Nair's works.

To do a social critique of the literary works Williams used two tools of literary analysis- 'structure of feeling' and the 'knowable community'. On the social criticism of the novel he says "the society and the novels -- our general names for those myriad and related primary activities - came from a pressing and varied experience which was not yet history; which had no new forms, no significant moments, until these were made and given by direct human actions". (11) While examining Thomas Hardy's novels, Williams brings in the concept of a 'knowable community' and the 'crisis of the knowable community'. (11) He applies this idea to a specific form of narrative while observing the changes occurring between the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. The variety of social classes and experiences these novelists dealt with had altered the formal structure of the novel and the 'crisis of knowable community' is understood through these socio-economic changes along with certain level of consciousness. Balakrishnan aptly states that as Williams focuses simultaneously on "radical culture" and "anonymous culture", his literary analysis through the instrumentality of texts ends up as an analysis of culture itself. (238) In William's own words "those novels which can attain an effective range of social experience by sufficiently manifest immediate relations possess a 'knowable community'". (247) A deep understanding of a work of art and the lifestyles of the 'knowable community' it possesses expedites an analysis of the community

about which the work is written. By identifying its relationship to changes articulated in the novel, Williams expounds a double correspondence -- an increasing uncertainty about the nature of community being experienced and expressed alongside the changing understanding of society-- which is implicit in the concept. In Anita Nair's works Kerala women constitute this knowable community, a deeper understanding on them leads to the understanding of the social changes that happened as a result of male hegemony and colonial interventions.

In an attempt to situate the writing in particular times and places Williams incorporates a wide range of engagements with literary sources in his seminal work *The Country and the City* (1973). Contrary to the age old labelling of 'country' as innocence and 'city' as corruption, Williams proposes a strong and continuous movement and linkage between the country and the city. This restructuring of 'town-country' analysis implies a social function of literature. He postulates country-houses as a site of exploited labour and plans to unravel the power relations and exploitations there. To him the country-houses with surrounded farm were a "visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe." (106) The country or village symbolizes power and feudalism in Kerala during the pre-independent India. The present study analyses this power structure which existed in Kerala during the nineteenth century based on caste, family lineage, gender etc. The study also investigates how this hegemonic relations function in the family, the basic social unit.

From this analysis, Williams develops an alternative and continuing cultural tradition contrary to the elitist versions and extends his concept of 'knowable community'. In his discussion of the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and others he opines that due to their mobility and education these novelists were aware of the difference between 'knowable community' from the 'known community'. Balakrishnan discerns that city provides an alternative site for Williams for his studies on the more restricted local communities. "The two negative positions to be resisted in this process are -- one the unreal views of the countryside and the other one which projects images of the urban future -- both in fiction and politics". (Balakrishnan 254)

When one attempts to see the kind of structural and cultural transformations that had happened to a 'knowable community' they also have to look at the changes that had happened when it moved from a pastoral to urban setting. The movement of Mukundan in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*, Sethu in *Mistress*, Giri in *Lessons in Forgetting* from their native village to urban and familiarity with colonial/global life overturns their attitude towards indigenous culture and tradition. In the case of matrilineal Nair community of Kerala, it moved from a totalizing structure to disintegration due to colonialization and urban employment opportunities.

In her work *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (1985) Meenakshi Mukherjee points out the factors which contributed to the growth of novel as a genre in India were the byproducts of socio-political situation of a colonized country along with the indigenous narrative traditions of an ancient

culture. Therefore, as Mukherjee puts forward, the study of the emergence of novel in India is not purely a literary exercise. The two main theories regarding the rise of novel in the West are its close connection with the society and its members' awareness about reality. According to Mukherjee,

Stripped of its essence, one theory may be said to attribute the rise of this genre to the growth of bourgeoisie and modern capitalism. That is, the novel is said to be a genre generated and sustained by the middle class in a very broad sense, and to incorporate the values of this class as against the feudal values of the epic or romance. The second theory suggests a link between the emergence of the idea of individualism and the rise of the novel. But this concept of individualism can also be related to the new social mobility that industrialization made possible, displacing man from his secure traditional niche, making him realize the unique potential of each human being, including himself, outside social hierarchy. (4)

Though the origin of novel in India was of Western influence, the cultural and historical context were very different which demands a deeper understanding of the nineteenth century India. The English educated Indians of the period found that the society lived much differently from the society represented in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray etc. Mukherjee opines that in the traditional Indian society marriage was a social institution and girls were married off by their parents before puberty contrary to

the West where marriage was supposedly an individual choice. (8) The tradition bound society like India where social hierarchies were rigid one's profession, marriage and status in society were predetermined by family or the caste was born to. Hence, one of the problems faced by the early Indian novelist was the reconciliation between the values obtained after reading English literature and the ones his society propagates. O Chandu Menon makes it clear in the introduction of his novel *Indulekha* (1889) - "As stated at the outset, my object is to write a novel after the English fashion, and it is evident that no ordinary Malayalie lady can fill the role of the heroine in such a story. My *Indulekha* is not, therefore, an ordinary Malayalie lady". (xx)

According to Udayakumar,

Menon characterized the project of *Indulekha* as an outcome of failed attempts at translating English novels into Malayalam. He felt that it was difficult to make a written translation which would adequately communicate the effect of the original since the translator could not have recourse to the explanatory and expressive resources of oral retelling. Furthermore, the results would not be aesthetically pleasing "if one made a straight translation into Malayalam of those scenes from English novels where *sringara* dominates as *rasa*." This led Chandu Menon to write a "novel book in Malayalam somewhat like the novel books in English." (*Early* 167-168)

But as Mukherjee aptly says, “the determinants of a literary form can be non-literary” and one’s focus must be “to examine the synthesis of a borrowed literary form and indigenous aesthetic-- as well as cultural expectations” (*Realism* 18); because the novel in India, irrespective of the basic incompatibilities between the English and Indian temperaments, have achieved its own distinctive character in the country.

...for the emerging discourse of early novels in Malayalam, the encounter with an experience of incoherence remains central. A rupture of spatial imagination schematic and secular spaces, and attempts to articulate and negotiate the distance between them form an integral part of the creative procedure of the novel. These spaces are not separated but brought into situations of mutual contamination, tension or complicity in the novels we discussed, giving rise to a new imaginary of unstable spaces, unreliable objects and uncertain visibilities. This impure spectrum of light which ties the subject to the tasks of seeing and reading is central to the positive discursive possibilities that the early novels in Malayalam produce. (Udayakumar, *Early* 192)

Indian writing in English as an area of study was set up in this period and there were oppositions regarding its authenticity. The critical debate was that whether an authentically Indian literature could be written in an alien language whereas the other side argued that the only truly national literature would be written in English. Behind the hidden agenda of nationhood and citizenship

debate were fumed around the concepts like ‘alienation’, ‘exile’, authenticity’, ‘Indianness’ and ‘form’. While talking about the realism in Indian English fiction Meenakshi Mukkherjee observes that

If placing novels in the past afforded novelist opportunities for fabulation, those who dealt with the present generally attempted to write in the realistic mode. This was not an easy task because when the new genre came into its own in India the last quarter of the nineteenth century, urban life was undergoing changes of several kinds simultaneously. This created tensions and paradoxes unknown before. In the sphere of education alone not only had a new language become available to the Indian elite but English had also uncovered new values and opened up new modes of thought, including the ideal of individualism- an ideal that was not easily reconcilable with the hierarchical and role-oriented structure of traditional Indian society. The novelist who attempted to present this complex period in fiction were themselves products of this tension. (*Realism* 68)

Thus, Indian tradition became the central theme of writing. By the late sixties and early seventies there emerged a new political awakening in which all sections of society began to protest against inequalities. Women worked on gender-related issues and were arrested along with men during emergency. The publication of “Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India” in 1974 was a landmark in the history of women’s movement

in India. It revealed the unequal access to development, education, health and political and economic participation for women in the country. Following this, issues related to women were taken up by various women organizations like Forum Against Oppression of Women in Bombay, Vimochana in Bangalore, Stree Shakti Sanghatana in Hyderabad, Saheli in Delhi etc. They also took up issues like family violence, law, healthcare, education and so on.

In the introduction to *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century* (2012), Susie Tharu and K. Laitha point out that the central female figure of nineteenth century fiction was the young Hindu widow who is either prematurely widowed or sexually constrained and ill-treated by the society which refused remarriage. (1: 8-9) It is quite contrary to the literature of the early period where women are represented as strong, powerful mothers who are the sustainers of the social order and an indispensable resource in the national quest for liberation. In “Shifting Paradigms of Literary Historiography: Malayalam Literary History in the New Millennium” (2017) E. V. Ramakrishnan, observes that the objective of writing literary histories in Malayalam were to project the identity of its people on par with the will of the nation as literature is believed to be the reflection of the society. (255) While discussing various literary histories in Malayalam, Ramakrishnan discusses an essay entitled “Ulloor’s Literary History and Women Writers” (1999), written by Geetha. In the essay, Geetha critiques the five-volume literary history of Ulloor S Parameshwara Iyer, one of the greatest poets of Malayalam Literature, which narrates the history of Malayalam literature between 1760-1947. She points out that the fourteen

women writers mentioned in the five-volume literary history are belong to aristocratic families and they are praised for their ‘family reputation, good conduct, devotion to their husbands, piety and such ‘extra-literary’ factors while their works are hardly discussed. Geetha comments Ulloor using his different way of evaluating women writers provides a distorted view of their social role.

Literary history is shaped by prevailing notions of hegemony. It is clear that Ulloor’s literary history has done nothing to resist the biases rooted in caste, race, gender and class. Only the women of prestigious families from the upper castes, reputed for their good conduct, who abided by the rules of patriarchy, have found a place in this history, even when they have written next to nothing.

(284)

### **Writing Women, Gender, and Caste in Kerala**

The term feminism is almost always associated with a negative connotation and many people find it objectionable which makes them reject its ideologies outright. In fact, feminist literary criticism studies the various ways in which literature and other cultural productions enact oppression on women. To exemplify feminism’s multiple points of view, activists calls it feminisms and oppose the traditional single point of view. Elaine Showalter, the major feminist literary thinker identifies two main obstacles in the articulation of a feminist critical practice. The first obstacle Showalter points out is that the lack of properly articulated theory which makes feminist criticism vulnerable. The second is activists’ themselves are suspicious of theory especially when there

comes questions of clarifications. (270) Both these can be seen in the writings of Anita Nair, though the latter one is prominent. Even when Anita Nair takes up issues which are pertinent to Indian/Kerala women that are mostly on a surface level. Her outright denial of feminism is another point to add here. On asking her opinion on the legal abolition of matriliney, she immediately defended the legislation. (Anita Nair Interview)

In “Literature of the Twentieth Century” (2012) Susie Tharu and K Lalitha give a detailed note on social and political background of Indian Women’s Movement and Women’s Writing. (2: 43-116) The writers assert the point that “women’s texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are best read as the ‘writers’ engagements with the reworking of their worlds that accompanied British rule in India.” (43) It was during the initial years of Indian independence that the country started reconfiguring itself on the basis of the understanding of ‘what India is, and what it means to live in this country or be an Indian’ rather than the popular understanding of our history, tradition and identity. Gender was an intrinsic feature of these imaginations and women writers of all the time dealt with it different ways. Writing between the extremes of radical feminism and conservatism they dealt with the themes of nation, family and tradition and interrogated the existing order for a more egalitarian society. Tharu and Lalitha divide the women’s movement in India into three phases -- the first phase namely the Nehruvian Years from 1947 to 1968, the second phase Widespread Disaffection from 1968 to 1975 and the third and latest phase, which they call A Turning Point in 1977.

In his Independence Day speech, the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru included ‘the guarantee of political and economic self-reliance and a commitment to building a secular, democratic society.’ (45) But the passing of the Hindu Code Bill, ensuring women property rights and succession and equal rights in marriage and divorce, was delayed due to strong opposition. It was eventually passed in 1955. This phase is also noted for the election of independent India was based on universal suffrage. The second phase was the one of contradictions as many of Nehruvian vision posed as threats to progress. Widespread protests and riots against this were enjoined by women who were relatively quiet after independence. They actively participated in these movements and formed separate organizations for demanding women’s questions. All these culminated in the declaration of emergency in 1975 and many activists including women were imprisoned. The third phase of the women’s movement in India emerged during the late seventies which is marked for civil liberties movements. The failure of the Nehruvian project and shock of emergency called for a reimagining of nation. Political theorists like Partha Chatterjee, pointed out that although the nation is an important political unit in today’s world, the terms ‘nation’, ‘nationality’, and ‘nationalism’ lack coherence and difficult to describe and analyze. (*Nationalist 2*) Tharu and Laitha observe that the making of the nation involves the shaping of a Self and the Other. The geography of a nation is as much imaginative as it is territorial for it deals “with the spaces whose laws we know and understand, as against alien ones that disorient or terrorize” (2: 51). This new imaginative geography helped in

mapping the feminist literary history of India as they were written as addressing the world. The stories and poems concerned with an existential agony or spiritual endurance show their politics of the age in which it is written and allows us to understand what it meant to be a woman in each historical moment. (2: 70)

The early twentieth century women raised their voice against social practices like dowry, child marriage, purdah and the prohibition of widow remarriage. Women's organizations started working for their demand for equal rights and education and in 1927 All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was formed. They established branches all over the country to work upon the tasks like rural reconstruction, national education, social service, women's health and employment, untouchability and literacy. They also ensured their representation in all official bodies which are concerned with taking decisions that affect women. But still they felt that their interests are sometimes subsumed to the periphery over the interests of men. The writers of the period especially women had questioned such authorities.

There exists a sense of ambivalence in terms of caste identity and formulation of gender identities as one tries to redefine femininity in domestic space. Appu Nedungadi, the author of the early Malayalam novel *Kundalatha* (1987), states his objective behind writing the novels was "to provide harmless entertainment to people who did not know English, as well as to women who did not have much work and found it difficult to while away their time." (v) While Chandu Menon shares a similar purpose for his writing of *Indulekha* (1965), it is also aimed at "entertaining the mind of the common man and imparting

knowledge.” Udayakumar points out that as the characterization of the early Malayalam novel come both from the English novel of the nineteenth century and from Malayalam or Sanskrit poetry, its discourse seems to be complex and inconsistent. (*Early* 326) Even when there is a disavowal towards the traditional practices like *sambandham*<sup>2</sup> they expressed themselves in the language of new patriarchy. He identifies three thematic strands in early Malayalam novels as the liberal novel of ideas-novels which came from Malabar written mostly by Nair writers about education, reform, issues raised by English education, and legitimacy of their caste practices in colonial world etc. and which have the theme of romantic love and choice of marital partners; historical romances of C.V. Raman Pillai which places kingship as the centre of political universe; and novels about conversion-- written mainly by lower caste Christian converts and Christian missionaries which has the theme of English education and transformation of the subject. (36-37). During the nineteenth century the construction of woman as an object of reform and education has been developed parallel with the emergence of nationalism, novel forms of patriarchy and domesticity, and to new senses of the community and tradition. In Kerala many writings by women were on female education and freedom as they wrote about “domestic life, everyday activities in the lives of couples and families, and a new tone of worldly experience, alongside aspirations for participation in professional and public arenas which had been the preserve of men.” (119)

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<sup>2</sup> *Sambandham* is the conjugal relationship Nair women had with Nair and other upper-caste men in matriliney.

In “Disciplining’ India: Literature, Region, Modernity” (2017), E.V. Ramakrishnan reads *Indulekha* as a text where two opposing hegemonic powers-- Sanskrit and English-- contest each other to structure Malayalam within North Kerala thereby inscribing it into the discourse of modernity. (3-23) He views novel as an ideological form to mark these ‘social imaginaries’, as prose as a genre was emerged resisting against Brahmanical control. According to him

Literature is an echo-chamber where the resonances of words from the past come back to the present, modifying their meanings. The challenge is to retrieve the layers of meaning that are inherent in a text through an informed reading--- Literature is the site where ‘social imaginaries’ manifest themselves. The history of literary movements, literary forms and the production and reception of literary texts will have to be examined to see how social imaginaries inform and shape their trajectories. However, at present, comparative studies of literature hardly emphasize the constitutive and constructive role of social imagination in the shaping of literary texts. Moving away from an individual-centred view of the text towards a community-centred view of literature will liberate the very idea of comparative literature in India. (18)

In “A Place Elsewhere: Lower-caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century” (2010), Dilip M. Menon observes that the early novels in Indian languages addressed the chaotic present by questioning the self, community and society as they were influenced by the social and religious movements of the

period which are closely associated with the status of women. This is the reason why almost all the novels of the nineteenth century were women centered. They were mainly concerned with creating a modern self and new forms of community by locating themselves within family.

The primary question for the novels written by upper caste Nairs is the *reconstitution* of the matrilineal family to a modern, nuclear, virilocal one. Falling in love and the consent of individuals is also a question of consenting to a new Nair identity; it is as much about caste as about individual affect. For to fall in love is also to fall out with the traditional system of *sambandham* or liaisons which Nambudiri Brahmins used to contract with Nair women of upper-class families. Desire becomes an ambivalent marker of a modern, nevertheless, caste identity. The ambiguities, tensions and delays in the consummation of desire are as much part of the narrative artifice as about the constitution of the new self. (502)

### **Women Writing in Kerala**

In “Womanwriting = Manreading” (2013), J Devika problematizes the introduction written by K. Sachidanandan for the collection of short stories written by Sarah Joseph where he coined the term *pennethuthu* in Malayalam which is the equivalent to *écriture féminine* by Helene Cixous<sup>3</sup>. Sachidanandan finds these stories as fulfilling the two vital tasks of feminism “the

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph, Sarah. *Papathara*. Current Books, 1990.

deconstruction of the structures of patriarchy that inhere in thought and discourse and the reconstruction of feminine experience hidden, repressed, or ignored in the past". (50) Though his introduction invoked much furor among the Malayali critical community, it is momentous in the history of women writing in Kerala. On the line of Elaine Showalter's classification of women's writing into 'feminine', 'feminist' and 'female', he classifies women's writing in Malayalam into three categories. The first category is of 'women's writing that has accepted masculine ideologies'- where comes the romantic novels written by women in popular magazines; the second is 'the writing that responsibly articulates social and community issues' which includes women's issues as well; and the third, is 'the writing that only women can write and which displays the sense of freedom in various ways' where comes the writings of Sara Joseph and others. There were differences to such kind of categorization even from women writers like Chandramathy and Gracy who rejected the term *pennezhuthu* outright. To place Anita Nair in any one of these three categories would be difficult for her writings fall into the first two categories, but definitely not the third. While reading Anita Nair one could identify certain contexts where she speaks from a masculine ideology whereas there are situations where she tries to bring in the serious social issues. Her latest novel *Eating Wasps* (2018) has the influence of the late Malayalam writer Rajalakshmy<sup>4</sup>. On asking her, Rajalakshmy being the inspiration behind the novel, Anita Nair's reply was quite appalling. As she

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<sup>4</sup> Rajalakshmy is a famous Malayalam writer, who wrote about women and their space in society, which invited many problems for her. She had to withdraw her novel from being serialized from *Mathrubhumi* Weekly. She taught Physics at NSS College, Ottappalam. Interestingly, it was from the same college Anita Nair graduated many years later.

wanted to write a novel about a writer who commits suicide, she plotted it around Rajalakshmy but has taken nothing from her life or from her writing except the way she committed suicide (Anita Nair Interview). To say it in public that except Rajalakshmy's death nothing interested her is an insult on the late-writer. In a way, the patriarchal society which gave so much importance to morality and ethics was responsible for Rajalakshmy's death. When Anita Nair says nothing in Rajalakshmy interested her one should doubt her as a spokesperson of patriarchy. One has to critically look at the simplification of the death of a writer who strongly expressed her stand through her writing. She committed suicide not because she was afraid of the society but because she could not bear the pain of her family after each controversy created after the publication of her works. She wrote in a letter to her sister "I tried two years without writing anything. I can't do that anymore. I will write more if I am alive and am afraid who all will be hurt by that. So let me go". (Prof. Mayu 83) There might be some unknown reason for the death of Rajalakshmy but definitely it is not due to any love break-up as Anita Nair sidelines through her novel. The way Anita Nair speaks about Rajalakshmy, that she finds herself not much interested in what Rajalakshmy wrote, is mere hypocrisy. However, when one reads Anita Nair's novels, one can find that she always dealt with societal issues like – familial issues, child trafficking, gender, rape, independence of women, and so on. But when asked her opinion on any social issues, her readymade reply is always "whatever I have to say, I have said through my novels" (Anita Nair Interview).

During the initial years of twenty-first century, Malayalam literature witnessed women's anti-patriarchal writing which are often explicitly feminist and the poet-critic Satchidanandan referred to it as "the most powerful avant-garde in contemporary Malayalam literature". (723) After viewing the increase in the number of women authors in India, J. Devika opines that this rise of women authors writing against patriarchy is a promising development. (*Woman 7*) She adds that the only field where feminist studies could make a steady growth, though a slow one, is in literature. These women writers have produced their works in all major genres to win literary prizes and to become bestselling authors. She critiques the privileged man's claim of authority over women and their matters and expresses her confidence in the changes which can be brought in through feminist scholarship.

It appears to me that to challenge the male literary elite, we need feminist writing that is not only devoted to locating foremothers, but will also unearth and question the sources of masculine privilege in the literary field. Given the fact that the literary public in Kerala is a site of most intense and audible debate within the Malayalee public sphere, the gains made within the former have a considerable bearing on feminist gains in the latter. And securing a public voice for feminisms that puncture the hegemony of state-centric liberal feminism is crucial to the larger project of gender democratization. (*Woman 8*)

Devika mentions about the male ‘homoaesthetic circles’-- the informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication of Malayalam literature -- and how the women writers especially the four major writers like Lalitambika Antherjanam, K. Saraswati Amma, Madhavikutty and Sarah Joseph had a troubled relationship with this circle. These women writers complicated the public and literary spaces by rejecting the dominant circles of their time and through their anti-patriarchal writings.

In Kerala, caste and community centered institution of marriage works as a social force to upset a woman’s life. J Devika says, “young women in Kerala have no right to a ‘private’ — as distinguished from the ‘domestic’ which is open to community, family, and state surveillance. And women’s social membership does depend on their induction into the ‘domestic’”. (*Pouriyude* 78) Along with feminism, Devika calls for ‘counter-communities’ to fight against the hegemonic forces in a woman’s life.

In a society which is ‘casteist and patriarchal by other means’ we do need more and more counter-caste and counter-patriarchal communities — that are not just yet another round of caste-based interest-groups (these have their unique political significance in our context but do not suffice to be the base of resistance to community-patriarchal pressures), that will not demand ontological passports of caste or gender. Precisely because secularised brahmanical patriarchy ensures that all those who are born upper-caste do not enjoy power available to those in its

upper echelons, and because heteronormativity involves, equally, the fear of miscegenation. (*Pouriyude* 81)

While discussing the after effects of moral policing in Kerala, Devika brings in the male anxiety in contemporary patriarchy. (*Pouriyude* 82-89) She vehemently states that moral policing is not a new way of subjugation and goes back to the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century to trace its history. It was during the 1930's due to the severe economic distress that the educated women started doing paid jobs.

The panic that upper and even middle caste women may be 'contaminated' by their traversal of spaces in which the traditional dress-codes that signified difference and deference of the traditional caste order were increasingly abandoned, started right then. No doubt, many viewed this contamination as primarily sexual, which threatened to upset precisely the system of alliances which was an important route through which caste would be transformed and secularized, rendered invisible among the upper castes and projected on the lower castes. A female dress-code that would match with this imperative soon became dominant among women who stepped out of the house regularly: the modern 'Indian' sari-blouse combination. Not that access to this new dressing option was universal and easy: lower caste women, especially Dalit women, who tried to access this new dress-code, found it not easily available. The panic did not cease then (it

would never, really) as is clear from the anxiety-ridden discussions how the sari was liable to be wrongly worn, in ways that sexualise the female body. (89)

Devika says the general assumption around the employed women especially those who work in IT sector is that they are ‘loose’ and ‘disobedient’. It is the same male anxiety which caused the shift from matriliney to patriliney which works in the case of IT girls as well. For they as educated women who are economically independent are capable to challenge and demand property and other rights from their male counterparts. Thus moral policing becomes an instrument to discipline women by curbing their freedom of mobility and to stabilize male hegemony. Devika calls for ‘counter communities’ or ‘negative communities’ to fight against such practices.

In the essay “Swimming Against Many Tides” (2013) Devika discusses the works of four women authors in Malayalam-- Lalithambika Antherjanam, K. Saraswathiyamma, Madhavikkutty and Sarah Joseph-- through a historical lens in order to produce “a non-teleological historical understanding of the specific challenges faced by these writers who put themselves forth in to the public as women, speaking and acting for ‘Women’ as a group.” (85) She States that during the nineteenth century the study and appreciation of literature was an instrument of ‘modern self-building whereas in modern literature it is a ‘practice of the self, of shaping the modern self’. (85).

Madhavikkutty, Kamala Das for her English readers, happened to write to Merrily Weisbord that “I speak for women’s freedom and for which I attack the

orthodox morality. I expect completeness from traditional value systems". (284)

This may be found quite contradictory when Das tells Weisbord her belief in love based on morality! In her conversation with Purnendu Chatterjee she says 'I don't wish to be one among the cattle who follow the moralities of Nalappatu Tharavad. Whereas I still carry in me the orthodox seeds sown by my mother and grandmother. I couldn't liberate myself from my family. I had relationships. Not everything was imaginary. But they all had to be stopped due to certain limitations.' (284) Anita Nair comes as the latest generation of women writers from Kerala who choose to write in English. She shares the historical past of these writers as the themes of their works are woven around the same topic i.e. women of their time. The following section explains how Anita Nair is placed alongside other women writers from Kerala.

### **Placing Anita Nair in Contemporary Kerala**

Considering the theoretical formulations of Goldmann, Willams and Macherey, mainly on the sociology of culture, and the conditions under which works are produced, i.e., the actual act of 'writing in society', and taking potential cues from their insights, there is ground enough to analyze the works of Anita Nair, whose fiction is quite rooted in a particular socio-- cultural context on similar terms. It is these aspects of the particular sociology of fiction, and the historical conditions of their very being as milieu which impart a special critical flavor to these works in the transitional context of Kerala culture and society, both as documentary and fictional. The way in which this feature acts upon and the factors involved in their structure and texture- home, family, domesticity,

environment, relations, kinship, control, power and hierarchy -- form the subject of inquiry in the subsequent chapters as reflected/documentated in each work.

The marital practices of the matrilineal Nairs, *sambandham*, was condemned by the colonial administration as sexual exploitation of Nair women by the Nambuthiri Brahmins. Chandu Menon opposed this view as it is offensive to the customs of the community for he felt the native customs were in harmony with Western conceptions of matrimony. His heroine Indulekha makes an argument 'for the autonomy customarily enjoyed by Nair women, and claims that her community's matrilineal practices actually resulted in an enhancement and not a weakening of the respect for chastity among Nair women'(xx). Udayakumar adds

The new styles that Nayar novels proposed for their heroines had two important consequences. Firstly, they produced an effect of the possession of autonomy among female protagonists, manifest in the reorientation of their desires through restraining interior agency. Secondly, this very sense of autonomy caused anxiety among male suitors, who perceived the inner self of the desired woman as obscure and inaccessible. (*Writing* 155)

During the transition period of matriliney to patriarchy, the major decisions related to a woman's life was taken by the men in the family while women kept themselves as onlookers. Women's lack of knowledge and skills to engage with these changes in male dominated spaces have been systematically discouraged by state and community by reducing them in the domestic spaces.

Divya Susan Solomon and Nitya Rao observe that economic success and financial provisioning are an important conjugal expectation from men in patriarchal rural societies, who in turn expect their wives to meticulously perform familial and mothering roles. (38) The patriarchal norms and practices are formulated from the male dominated public space to be carried forward to the domestic sphere. Patricia Uberoi observes that modern India's social reforms consist of two movements the one against caste and untouchability and the second emancipation of women. (*Social ix*) Both these were based on the progressive ideals like individualism, egalitarianism and humanism along with a desire to restore values of Indian civilization. She problematizes the social reforms by questioning whether 'they are processes of betterment which continue to the present or very limited movements prior to the First World War?' (x) As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid points out in the work *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (2010),

A kind of segregation is imposed on women; whose identity is now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata. This process is not dissimilar to the one which pushed the middle class woman into the seclusion of the private sphere as a mark of class status and superiority in Victorian England - - It is also at the same time implicated in the new formation of the home as the insulated private sphere which is to be free from even temporary challenges to the middle class public sphere as both reformed women and as women reformers. (11-12)

Drawing the foundation based on the questions put forward by Sharmila Sreekumar in her work *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'Dominant Women' in Kerala* (2009) this study attempts to ask the following questions. “What are the self-perceptions and the self-projections that present-day Kerala assumes? What are the contexts for imagining the gendered self? How do these play out in the self-representations of women in contemporary Kerala?” (20) The study also tries to problematize the image of ‘empowered Kerala woman’<sup>5</sup> by unravelling the hegemonic discourse behind such constructions. Though Kerala had legally abolished the system of matriliney long ago, its women are always identified with it outside Kerala along with the high literacy rate, the Kerala model of development etc. It is widely perceived that Kerala/Malayalee women are independent and they equally take part in decision makings along with men in matters of family. As Sreekumar points out:

The far-reaching changes in the socio-economic structures also altered the smaller unit of organization- the family. The *marumakkathayam* or the matrilineal system was prevalent among various castes like nairs, ezhavas, najnanad vellalas and Malabar mappillas had come in for much internal contestation and had been overhauled in the course of the reform movements. In the regions of what today constitute Kerala, episodes of articulating the woman’s question were often perceptibly different. A

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<sup>5</sup> Kerala with its high literacy rate and progressive ideas about women’s freedom is supposed to have its women empowered in every sense. This thesis, through a close reading of matriliney and family, tries to unravel the validity of such claims.

“degenerate” matriliney, home among other evils to a ribald female sexuality, was dismantled. Yet, matriliney is given nostalgic recall every time women’s historically superior positioning in Malayali society needs to be demonstrated. Empowered women, it would seem, have a continuous and unbroken lineage in the state. The generalizations made in *the* name of the Malayali woman pretend that the conditions of this iconic woman are the conditions of all women in Kerala. *Hence, to read the “authentic” Malayali woman is, I argue, to unmask multiple imbalances of power.* (4-12)

Considering all these perceptions, the present study problematizes the constructions around ‘empowered woman’ by unravelling the women in matriliney and in the smallest social unit, family. The present study is initiated on the following thoughts: How do I feel about being a woman from Kerala? Why and how did I reach on a topic like woman, gender and sexuality in Kerala? What women need is not a law which will permit non-heteronormative sexuality or one which allow a temple entry, for these two can wait on the more necessary needs<sup>6</sup>. Is there anything more that a comparatist could do in her research? How does the present study incorporate within the academic discipline of Comparative Literature? What is the relevance of the present study? Why Anita Nair? What is

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<sup>6</sup> The Supreme Court recently passed two laws proclaiming it to be for the empowerment of Indian women. The first verdict legalized ‘live-in-relationships’ which allows an adult couple to live together without marriage. The second verdict granting permission to enter women devotees of all age group to the famous shrine of lord Ayyappa of Sabarimala aroused much furor. Women of menstrual age were not allowed entry for ages as it is considered impure since the Lord is a brahmachari (celibate).

there in Anita Nair of contemporary relevance? What is Nair matriliney today? How does Anita Nair construct matriliney? Why/why do I not agree with Anita Nair on certain contexts? How does Nair matriliney construct woman/gender identity in Kerala? How does this matrilineal identity serve to be the model of Kerala woman outside Kerala/India?

Kerala has witnessed various women's resistance movements against dominance where they demand minimal rights as individuals in a democratic country. The strike by the nursing staff for fixed minimum pay, the sales women's strike for the right to sit in the work place, the protest led by a few Christian nuns against sexual assaults by a Bishop, the alter wing Women in Cinema Collective's protest against the male patriarchy in Malayalam film industry, the very many experiences shared by women through public platforms under the #Metoo, the few women who fought to get entry pass for women to Agasthyaarkoodam, the Women Wall created to support women entry into Sabarimala Temple, the movement called Arppo Arthavam which celebrates menstruation are certain examples to cite that Kerala women starts voicing against issues which are previously been accepted without any resistance<sup>7</sup>. The

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<sup>7</sup> 1) Nurses' Strike -- From June 2017 onwards brought more than 100 nurses from private hospital at Alapuzha who initiated an indefinite strike demanding better working conditions under the banner UNA (United Nurses' Association), which was taken over by nursing staff from many other private hospitals in Kerala. It went on more than 200 days as the government was negligent to their demands. Even the media didn't give much coverage to this issue as they were busy behind a 'superstar' who was the prime accused of a sexual assault against a young actress; 2) Irippu Samaram (the strike for the right to sit at the workplace)- women working in sales outlet in Kerala had to stand for long hours as they are permitted to sit during working hours. They were even denied the basic rights like using washrooms or drinking water. Due to this many women fall sick but continue work under such circumstances for their livelihood. P. Viji, a tailor turned activist who hails from Kozhikode raised her voice against these issues and formed an association 'Penkootu' 2009 and Asanghatida Meghala THozhilali Union (AMTU). Their strike became successful through a government notification amending the Kerala Shops and

discomfort and dismay it created among the dominant male society is an indicative to where stands Kerala in its pronounced Kerala Model of Development and how long it has to go in women empowerment and gender justice.

Anita Nair's writings always emphasize the essential dignity of human beings despite their weaknesses and create a feeling of empathy in the readers. She writes about popular socialite experience which many English readers can relate to one or the other way. But as in the case of most other women writers, her writings are often labeled as women centric or feminist writings, which disturb the author. It is quite interesting to view that a woman's writing is almost

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Commercial Establishments Act. Later, P. Viji has been selected as one of the 100 women in the BBC list of inspiring and influential women in the world in 2018; 3) Strike by Christian Nuns- a group of Christian nuns started a rare protest against a Bishop named Franco, for sexual assault and they demanded justice as even their life is under threat at the hands of some clergymen. Women from all walks of life came in support to these few nuns conveying their solidarity. Though Bishop Franco was arrested later, he was given bail; 4) Women in Cinema Collective (WCC)- the alter wing women association in Malayalam Film Industry was began to support the young actress who was sexually assaulted by a well-known superstar. The superstar was later arrested and was in remand for more than two months before getting bail. WCC also started working on the issues faced by women in film industry, in particular the male dominated workings of A.M.M.A (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists); 5)#Metoo- Tarana Burke, the African-American Civil Right Activist founded the movement #Metoo in 2006 to help the survivors of sexual violence, which shook the world in 2018. Many women from different parts of the world started sharing their experiences through social media and other public platforms; 6) Agasthyarkoodam- is the second highest peak in Kerala which is known as bird-watcher's paradise. It is a legendary herbal mountain where the Sage Agasthya, a celibate, lives and considered to be a sacred mountain where women have no entry. It is a popular trekking spot and a few women after fighting many legal battles got legal permission to enter the mountain; 7) Women Wall- lakhs of women lined from southern end of Kerala from Thiruvananthapuram to the northern, Kasargod, making a 620 Km wall to pledge to protect the renaissance values on the backdrop of the Supreme court verdict on Sabarimala; 8) Arppo Arthavam (Hail Menstruation)- After the Sabarimala Entry Verdict by the Supreme Court menstruation came in the discussion never before. It has been considered as something impure and to debunk this myth many women started sharing their first menstrual experience through Facebook under #Arppoarthavam. The death of a 12 years old girl in Tamilnadu, who was forced to sleep outside the home during the cyclone since she was in her first menstrual period triggered the movement further. An event with the same title was held at Cochin with its motto "Arthava Ayitham Thulayatte" (Let Menstruation Untouchability Be Eliminated). The event gain further attention by the entrance of the venue was modelled after vagina. Many Kerala women who took it as an insult filed case against its organizers.

always branded as feminist writing while if it is a man writing from the point of view of a woman, it is accepted as a general observation. There are many voices raised against such gender parochialisms in women writing. While surveying the trends in contemporary fiction, Mohan Ramanan opines that even though writings of contemporary women have considerable merits, they have limitations and he feels “it is not inappropriate to wonder if this kind of gendered consciousness does not lose something in the way of wider appeal, because of its single-mindedness, and narrowness”. (64) This clearly points to how male critics even today see male writing as not gendered or biased but as broad!

But it is after centuries long submission to dominant powers that women started marking their own voices in history which so cannot be anything other than their self-assertion as individuals. Her constant search for self-autonomy makes her suffer from loneliness more than her predecessors ever did. This feeling of seclusion or meaninglessness of life is very much a part of modern man’s existential dilemma which Nair writes from a woman’s perspective. Woman is the central object of her fiction and even when she tries to narrate from a man’s point of view it is the women in it gets a vivid portrayal. She rejects any feminist ideologies and tries to give her own assessment on the predicament of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity, family and career, culture and nature, assertion and confrontation, freedom and loneliness, embellishment and self-realization. The more the quest for independence, the more she gets alienated from the society and this self-delusion of modern man is what fictionalized in Nair’s novels. Her protagonists are

middle class Indian women trying to mend the disharmony in their marital, sexual and cultural roles. They are educated, intelligent, sophisticated, married, bold women who are familiar with the problems of changing world and life. For example, for Radha in *Mistress*, it is a quest for identity and independence and the novel is significant for its exploration of the inner psyche.

In volume 1 of *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (2012), Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha view translating a regional language into English as an act of representing a regional culture to a more powerful national and international reader. If this is taken as true, what Anita Nair, who has an international readership, writes in her novels about Kerala and its women would widely be accepted as a valid representation of the state and its women. Since what Anita Nair writes is from her perspective and, as there exists diverse views on Nair women and their matrilineal past, what I attempt here is to discuss some of them in the light of Anita Nair's novels. Given the reasons for working on Anita Nair, the novels I have chosen for discussion are *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Mistress* (2005) and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014). The following chapters analyse the concepts of matriliney and family in the select novels of Anita Nair within contemporary context.

Chapter I "The Works of Anita Nair: An Overview" is divided into two parts-- the first part gives a short biography of the writer followed by a listing of her works and an analysis of major themes in the novels. The second part problematizes Anita Nair's standpoint on feminism and the feminist values as

represented in her novels. Given the above framework, the chapter poses the following questions which concern around gender and caste issues. What are the gender and caste issues expressed in the selected novels? What is the manner these issues are addressed by the author? How is Anita Nair's approach to gender and caste different from contemporary writers of Kerala say for example, Arundhati Roy and Sara Joseph? How are Kerala and its women represented in her novels? What are the ideas of feminism proposed by her both as a writer and as an individual? What are the feminist values incorporated in her novels?

As a writer who has a large readership outside India with her works translated into more than thirty languages, Anita Nair has to exhibit India in a particular manner. May be she is well aware of the anger some express when the image of India is not projected in a desired manner. The writer's major concern is to project India and its culture in a desired manner. Though Nair's women step out from their male dominant domestic life, at the end they all conform to the existing power hierarchy, be it Anjana in *The Better Man*, Radha in *Mistress*, Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* or Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting*. The image of an Indian woman who gladly embraces the ideals of patriarchy was an emergent nationalist agenda combined with upper caste Hindu values posited against the British concept of Indian women. But this has been carried over to the present so well that it becomes a part of our life.

Till date, Anita Nair has written seven novels, two detective fiction featuring Inspector Gowda, one collection of short stories and poetry, two travelogues, one edited volume on the writings of Kerala, two collected

travelogues, two children's fiction, three retellings for children and one translation from Malayalam to English. Her forthcoming work is a translation of Unnayi Varrier's *Nalacharitham Attakkatha*<sup>8</sup>. To encourage aspiring writers, Nair conducts a comprehensive creative writing and mentorship program called Anita's Attic. She has won many accolades for her contributions to literature which include the Central and State Sahitya Akademi award.

Anita Nair's writings are mostly on Nair women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. The socio-cultural modes and values which mould the image of an Indian Hindu woman and their set roles are depicted in minute ways in her novels. The chief contribution of Nair's fiction is their exploratory nature of the moral and psychic dilemmas and ramifications of the women characters along with their efforts to cope with challenges to achieve a new harmony in relationship with themselves and their surroundings. They often work as testimonies of women, the obstacles they faced and the disadvantages they suffered in the orthodox Hindu family. They were drawn between the modern value adaptation and the attachment with the traditional ideologies of family and home. The crises met by working women, marital adjustment, quest for individuality, concepts of motherhood etc., have been taken up for fuller treatment in these novels. She deals with the middle class Indian woman who represents the majority of educated Indian women who struggle to adjust in the traditional world rather than completely rejecting it.

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<sup>8</sup> *Nalacharitham Attakkatha* is a play based on *Mahabharata* written during the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Unnayi Varrier. The work consists of four parts which tells the story of Nala and Damayanti as narrated in the *Mahabharata*.

Anita Nair is a writer who never wanted to be called a feminist or her work to be tagged as feminist writing. When the novel *The Better Man* was praised for its feminist values she openly expressed her discomfort. However, it seems time and experience has changed her perceptions and now she finds it quite acceptable to call her work a feminist one. Her two crime thrillers discuss varied issues like gender inequality and child trafficking: *Cut Like wound* (2012) is about transgender issues and *Chain of Custody* (2016) on Child trafficking. Even though she never responded to any social issues until recently, of late she shows some social commitment as seen in the case of the recent controversy over the publication of a novel in Malayalam<sup>9</sup>. But at the same time she is reluctant to comment on atrocities against young girls and made a very sweeping comment on #Metoo movement. However, when her latest novel *Eating Wasps* (2018) was reviewed as a feminist work she appears to be welcoming it contrary to the way she reacted to feminism earlier. Nonetheless, I argue that her works portray strong feminist values as far as contemporary Indian society is concerned. Anjana and Paraukkutty in *The Better Man*, Marikolanthu, Karpagam and Margaret in *Ladies Coupe*, Kala in *Lessons in Forgetting* and Radha and Maya in *Mistress* are women who dare to resist male hegemony in marriage and family even when they had to wage a lonely battle. Feminism is not an abstract concept to be debated upon, it is something which is expressed in million ways by ordinary women while they resist/question/challenge/respond to/engage

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<sup>9</sup> When the Malayalam novel *Meesha* (2018) was attacked by the ‘cultural elites’ in the state of Kerala, Anita Nair supported the writer’s the freedom of expression. Hareesh, S. *Meesha*. DC Books, 2018.

with/negotiate patriarchy in their everyday life of existence. Anita Nair is a writer who echoes these struggles of ordinary women in her novels.

Chapter II “Debates Around Nair matriliney: An Overview” focuses on the matrilineal past of the Nair women in Kerala. Scholars have varied opinions on the matrilineal past of Nair community in Kerala. Scholars like K. Saradhamoni consider it as one of the best age women had ever lived<sup>10</sup>. However, historian Kesavan Veluthat finds nothing empowering for Nair women under matriliney<sup>11</sup>. Other scholars like G. Arunima and Praveena Kodoth view matriliney from an ambiguous position<sup>12</sup>. Niveditha Menon shares memories of the matrilineal past of her great-grand mother, who holds power over her *tharavad*<sup>13</sup>. The popular commercial films in Malayalam generally portray Nair matriliney and *sambandham* as an inglorious past both for the community and for its women. There are certain films like *Ozhimuri* (2012) which portrays the powerful Nair woman who rules her *tharavad*<sup>14</sup>, may not fall under the category of popular commercial films. Most of Malayalam literature also creates matriliney as something ignominious, in particular the novels of M.T Vasudevan Nair. His first novel *Nalukettu* (1958) ends with the demolition of nalukettu (another name

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<sup>10</sup>Saradhamoni, K. *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*. Sage Publications, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Veluthat, Kesavan. *Notes of Dissent: Essays on Indian History*. Ratna Sagar, 2018.

<sup>12</sup>Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c.1850-1940*. Orient Longman, 2003.

Kodoth, Praveena. “Was Matriliney ever any Different? Resisting the Binary. Powerful Karanavan/Dependent Women.” *Samyukta. A Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. I, (2001), pp. 21-33.

<sup>13</sup> Menon, Niveditha. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> *Tharavad* is the matrilineal joint family.

for the traditional Nair *tharavad*), which indicated the renaissance of the community and the novel marked a new beginning in the history of Malayalam fiction. His novel *Asuravithu* (1962) is another example which portrays the masculine anxiety under matriliney during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Considering the varied opinions on matriliney, what the present chapter intends to do is an analysis of how Anita Nair approaches matriliney and related concerns through her novels. For the present analysis I have chosen three novels *Idris: Keeper of the Light, Mistress, The Better Man*. The kind of matrilineal past that Anita Nair portrays in her novels are borne out of the contentions during 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism and Nair reform movements. There were constant and conscious attempts from the part of Indians to prove to the British the superiority of India's culture, tradition, ethics and morality. As part of that, *sambandham* relation and matriliney (tracing of lineage through mother) became matters of shame for the men in the family, for it stood in stark contrast against the patrilineal values of the British. As Partha Chatterjee, Susie Tharu, Tanika Sarkar etc., point out, there was a conscious attempt to model the family/home/domestic space as an embodiment of Indian culture and ethos. Therefore, women's 'chastity' became of foremost importance and women became the bearers of Indian culture. Family as understood by the patrilineal society became the basic unit of the society, the values and ethics reaffirmed in the domestic space gave comfort to Indian men among the many turmoils of the outside world; where they were treated as *babus*, the others, the uncivilized Indian. This yearning for home we see in the male characters of Anita Nair's novels. Jak in *Lessons in*

*Forgetting*, Sethu in *Mistress*, Mukundan in *The Better Man* are some examples. Kandavar's missing of a father in *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is also born out of this question of masculine power and nationalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When they proclaimed women as the embodiment of chastity and culture, they forcefully took away her power to take decisions, her rights over property and more importantly her space in the family by drawing strict gender roles. The kind of education and the opportunities to visit faraway places, his knowledge about nationalism makes Sethu despise *sambandham* and matrilineal culture. It was a period when, along with western education and lifestyles, aversion towards certain traditions was also viewed as something progressive. This dislike towards traditional *sambandham* and matriliney was initiated by the British as they failed to understand the varied practices of India. In order to administer the country in an easier way they imposed on the natives certain other practices considered valid. The English educated negotiated with these values and impositions by refashioning them in particular ways. This was fulfilled by looking down at indigenous cultures and traditions like matriliney. The English educated, government employed carried forward these concerns in the name of reforms until the legal abolition of matriliney.

Chapter III Contentions on Family and Motherhood examines the inner layers of spaces like family, domesticity and motherhood. The first part discusses the concept of home as a gendered space and the second part examines how the ideal of motherhood is worked in this gendered space as an instrument of patriarchy. The novels taken for discussion in this chapter are *Lessons in*

*Forgetting, Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man*. In these three novels by Anita Nair the themes of family, motherhood and childhood are intertwined with the plot of the novel.

Drawing upon Foucault's concept of power, an attempt is made here to analyze how patriarchy enjoys power over home -- its women and children. Foucault looks at power as something which is beyond the state or the class of people to that of something which is exercised at a 'microcosmic level'. Family or home is this microcosmic level where the members and their relationships are formed through power relations. The domestic space has been one of the most oppressive spaces where women and children are subordinated to patriarchal power. The home in Nair's novel is a male dominated space where most women try to fit themselves into the umpteen numbers of norms which are there to restrict them. Though at the outset they seem to be gender equal spaces her home and its inmates are the byproducts of patriarchy. A house gets a meaning of a home by the way the members feel about it. This transforms the meaning of a physical house that of an emotional home. The concept of a home varies from person to person in the way one imagines about it. Thus the meaning of a home is attributive.

Birthing has been constructed into a gendered social relation in the name of motherhood with an association of affection, emotion and bonding which are the real life experiences of women. Maithreyi Krishnaraj calls this an ambivalence between 'power' and 'powerlessness'. Motherhood and mothering is not matter to be treated as something natural, on the contrary it is the most

politicized realm in a woman's life that need to deconstructed. Motherhood has many contexts and as Krishnaraj aptly states, women need "public provision of adequate care and nourishment, of respite from onerous work, of workplaces to treat motherhood as not just an individual responsibility but the responsibility of society, of families and partners to offer a caring hand" (xix). This will remain a farfetched dream so long as we eliminate poverty that hinder human dignity; eliminate inequality and mitigate patriarchal power.

The kind of home Anita Nair encourages through her novels are patriarchal nuclear families where husband and wife live along with their children in a semi-urban or urban setting. Her families are met with issues in single-parenting, extra-marital relations, isolated childhood, complex emotional bindings, work-life imbalance etc. Anita Nair favours modern nuclear families against the traditional matrilineal family system.

The chapter argues that the home is a traditionally accepted space where women are defined in terms of domesticity and the feminine roles assigned to them. The 'ideal home' is a mere illusion which, is espoused and acts as a model to encourage prescribed modes of behaviour for women in the patriarchal framework to maintain its solidity. Even in the context of the advent of modernity, women find it difficult to transcend their home-bound life pattern and so get fixed in an inescapable situation.

In Conclusion the study posits that in order to recognize the inner-politics of contemporary family as a social institution, women and children try to make spaces of their own. I understand Anita Nair's work as a conscious attempt on re-

visioning the ideologies behind the institution of family and marriage as one traces from her novels from *The Better Man* to *Eating Wasps* (which projects the lives of varied women from a child of 12 years of age to a 70 years old woman in order to point out what family and its inner sanctum means to each one of them). She makes conscious attempts to portray matriliney as an undesirable past by creating unhappy women characters who complain about autonomy of *Karanavan* and inconsistency of *sambandham* relations, children longing for their fathers and men for their parental identity, educated and progressive men despise certain traditions in order to embrace new changes on the line of Nair Reform Movements etc., Hence, an understanding of contemporary patrilineal/patriarchal family system in Kerala is always incomplete without a detailed understanding of the matrilineal past of the state, in this case, through a study of Anita Nair's novels.

## Chapter I

### The Works of Anita Nair: An Overview

The silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could be finally abolished. We must distinguish the necessity of this silence. For example, it can be shown that it is a juxtaposition and conflict of several meanings which produces the radical otherness which shapes the work: this conflict is not resolved or absorbed, but simply displayed. Thus, the work cannot speak of more or less complex opposition which structures it; though it is its expression and embodiment. In its every particle, the work manifests, uncovers, what it cannot say. This silence gives it life. (Macherey 93-94)

The above quoted passage is from *A Theory of Literary Production* by Pierre Macherey where he speaks about things which the author cannot / does not want to express but how they remain as visible entities for the reader to understand. He further states that “what is important in the work is what it does not say... a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged... what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to the silence.” (97) What Macherey has pointed out is applicable in reading Anita Nair’s novels when there are many ellipses, conscious as many may appear, for the reader’s interpretation. The present chapter tries to explore

these gaps through a detailed analysis of selected novels written by her such as *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe*, *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting* and *Idris: Keeper of the Light*. This chapter is divided into two parts -- the first part gives a short biography of the writer followed by a listing her works and the analysis of major themes in the novels. The second part traces the feminist literary scholarship in India followed by an analysis of Dalit and Black feminisms. The study of gender is closely linked with the study of caste in India. Feminism works against all kinds of domination in society whereas Dalit feminism is about dual subjugation -- by both gender and caste. An understanding of feminism in India will be incomplete without knowing what Dalit feminism is. Parallel to Dalit feminist movement in India what goes on in other part of the world is Black feminism where the dual subjugation is based on the race and gender. This part also problematizes Anita Nair's standpoint on feminism and feminist values as represented in her novels. Given the above framework, the chapter poses following the questions which concerns around gender and caste issues. What are the gender and caste issues represented in the selected novels? What is the manner these issues are addressed by the author? How is Anita Nair's approach to gender and caste different from contemporary writers of Kerala say for example, Sara Joseph? How are Kerala and its women represented in her novels? What are the ideas of feminism proposed by her both as a writer and as an individual? What are the feminist values incorporated in her novels?

In the essay "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature" (2006), Susie Tharu points out that the

universal values and morals that many critics have upheld are precisely the values that upheld European society since the renaissance. (257) Since Indian English literature had emerged as a byproduct of English education in India, these values and morals are very much visible in its literature too. Most of Anita Nair's women characters try to revolutionize but falls into the stereotypes may be because she addresses the foreign readers and not necessarily the Indians. What Tharu tells of Sarojini Naidu is very much applicable to Anita Nair too in this sense. While talking about Naidu's poetry Tharu says that:

Naidu's poems paint the land of Romance and Mystery, the India of the common western imagination, with its colourful bangle sellers, graceful palanquin bearers, and princely Rajput lovers. The definitive taste is British, although the subjects, ostensibly at least, are Indian. Significantly, the hub of Naidu's world is a cultured, refined upper class... Naidu's burden is to project, to explain, to justify, just as much as to show around. That this makes for a distortion of the landscape and of those who inhabit it is evident. But it also makes for the peculiar formation of the Indian intellectual engaged in this relation... As accomplished poet, Naidu is not only an exhibit herself; she becomes, through her subject matter, also exhibiter. Our country is the spectacle, and the poet must strain to keep it so (261).

A writer who has a large readership outside India and whose works have been translated into more than thirty languages, Anita Nair has the pressure

probably to exhibit India in a positive way. May be she is well aware of the anger some express when the image of India is not projected in a desired manner. Though Anita Nair's women step out from their male dominant domestic life at the end they all conform to the existing power hierarchy whether it is Anjana in *The Better Man*, Radha in *Mistress*, Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* or Meera in *Lesssons in Forgetting*.

The image of Indian woman who gladly embraces the re-newed ideals of patriarchy was an emergent nationalist agenda against the British concept of Indian women. But it has been carried over to the present so well that it becomes a part of our life. From the beginning as in Toru Dutt, who in her attempt to present an uncorrupt India acquiesced to Victorian virtues to Sarojini Naidu who composed a land and its people as per the western imagination, Susie Tharu observes that this gave way to conceptualize the patriarchal forces as 'surprisingly accommodative and reinforcing of each other' (261). Interestingly, though the pattern of Indian English Writing is more or less same in the present, it has acquired another distinction today by depicting traditional crafts and the taste of the ethnic. In Tharu's own words "we have succeeded in recovering an almost unbearably tasteful past and an exquisite tradition. But what, we must necessarily ask, is the effect of these inert decorative recreations of formerly fertile institutions?" (262) The nationalist construction of a woman was on a "sacrificial complex that involves humility, passivity, suffering; the recognition of the mystic strength of tradition together with a strictness of moral purpose; and the establishment of a psycho-spiritual as against a material plane for

confrontation” (263). Thus, for those women are not people who are alive or growing but sculpted by the requirement of power, woman was an imaginative construct in the literature of the emerging nationalism and it remains unchanged. In her work *The Second Sex* (1949), Simon De Beauvoir states that the woman is a social construct. Women are expected to be a woman in her thought, action and behavior and anyone who moves away from these are tagged as not being the ‘real woman’. The nationalist tendency of glorifying women who fulfill their domestic chores dutifully burdened the women. She was expected to be the embodiment of commitment, purity, sacrifice and the one who ensure moral and spiritual power of the nation. As literature reflects the society it critically exposes the struggles and counter struggles of patriarchal forces in a society. So to understand the present system of power play one has to critically view its literature.

The general perception about Kerala is its educated and emancipated woman who is quite outgoing. It is also assumed that Kerala women enjoy greater freedom compared to women in other parts of the country. One among the many reasons for this is how they have been portrayed to the outside world through popular media and films and also in the discourse on Kerala’s development model. The kind of perception I have received when I first entered into a university outside Kerala was its woman being the epitome of Malayali culture. Some even say women enjoy an equal or greater freedom compared to their male counterparts. I believe such a perception has come from the matrilineal past of certain communities of the state where women supposed to

have ruled their ancestral home called *tharavad*. Among the contemporary Indian English novelists Anita Nair holds a distinguished position through her writings about Kerala and its women. As a Keralite I was personally intrigued to go deeper into her works in order to understand how Nair and her works represent Kerala, its women and culture. Anita Nair's novels have a wide range of readership as they are translated into more than thirty languages. So it is significant in formulating various perspectives on Kerala, and its women based on her characters.

### **Anita Nair: The Author**

Anita Nair was born in Mundakkottukurissi, Shoranur in Kerala and educated in Chennai and Ottappalam. She started writing at a very early age with the influence of her friend's father. Her writings are characterized by a subtle style of narration and crisp language. She published her first collection of short stories while working in an advertising company which won her a scholarship to the *Virginia Centre for Creative Arts, USA*. Anita Nair is a widely read author today. She never associated with any particular group of writers. She is self-taught in Malayalam and an admirer of writers like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, M. Mukundan and Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Vadakke Kootala Narayanan Nair (popularly known as VKN) etc. She claims to recognize other contemporary novelists with an open mind even though she never felt a kinship with any of them<sup>1</sup>. Once asked about the contemporary Indian writers in English she

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<sup>1</sup> Ajith Kumar, P.K. "Nice to See English Writing in India Getting Acceptance". *The Hindu*, 11 Feb. 2018, Kochi, p.12.

appreciated the works of Kiran Nagarkar and others, shared her beginnings as a writer at a time when there were not many publishing houses and the readership for Indian writing in English was not so wide. She reveals the extensive research she does to write a novel in order to be certain about whatever she writes. She feels writing poems are less laborious than writing fiction. While researching for her third novel *Mistress* she came across Unnayi Varrier's *Nalacharitham Attakkatha* (18<sup>th</sup> CE) and believes she is destined to translate it to English. Her latest novel is titled *Eating Wasps* (2018) which shares its setting and a few characters with *Mistress*.

Till date she has written seven novels, two detective fiction featuring Inspector Gowda, one collection of short stories and poetry, two travelogues, one edited volume on the writings of Kerala, two collected travelogues, two children's fiction, three retellings for children and one translation from Malayalam to English. Her forthcoming work is translation of Unnayi Varrier's *Nalacharitham Attakkatha*. To encourage aspiring writers, Anita Nair conducts a comprehensive creative writing and mentorship program called Anita's Attic. She has won many accolades for her contributions to literature which include the Central and State Sahitya Akademi award. Regardless of most of her writings, except some travel writings, written in English Anita Nair can be considered as a writer from Kerala because she writes primarily about Kerala. The themes of her novels include culture and traditions of the state, women's issues, matriliney, problems in the family etc.

Anita Nair is a careful and conscientious writer, who has cultivated a habit of writing every day, makes notes on interesting thoughts and experiences and makes a list of words, phrases and brief thoughts which attract her attention. Even when she writes about women's thirst for independence she insists women to live within relationships. One can hardly see Anita Nair valorizing motherhood or to talk about it with a sentimental note but she conspicuously considers it as a part of woman's life. Meanwhile she claims to be very particular in providing correct information on the facts she writes about even though writers of fiction have a certain liberty in dealing with them. What is correct in one's perspective may differ from person to person and her perspectives and observations open up vistas for further thinking. She is concerned with expressing herself in English as clearly and effectively as possible, the nuances of Kerala for she hardly received any formal education in Malayalam. She finds English as the most convenient mode of expression and is capable of using it felicitously. What position did Anita Nair take on the question of woman in the various novels she has written as most of them have women protagonists? Though a writer of many genres she is primarily known for her novels. Does this particular genre called fiction make it possible for her a particular kind of discourse? How can one understand Nair's position from her personal statements of compliance to dominant culture to that of her novels advocating the subversion of the same through the representation of the new liberated womanhood?

Anita Nair's collection of writings about Kerala is titled *Where the Rain is Born: Writings about Kerala* (2002). The book contains writings from many notable personalities including Kamala Das, Shashi Tharoor, O.V. Vijayan, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Arundhati Roy, Lalithambika Antherjanam, Ramachandra Guha, and so on. In the introduction to the book Anita Nair says;

Kerala when offered to the world is a package wrought of colour, traditions, dainty foods, coconut lined lagoons and marvelous beaches, where green and light, 100% literacy and ayurveda, boats and elephants, all find their place. God's own country, the brochures tell you. If you've been there, you've been to paradise, they cajole. What of the total lack of industry, high unemployment, a competitive and conspicuous consumerism, bureaucracy, corruption, or the stifling conservative attitude, the average Malayali asks. Does the world really know what Kerala is all about? (ix)

As a writer of international acclaim it would be of interest to analyze Anita Nair's works from this perspective. How India, especially Kerala and its women, are being portrayed in Anita Nair's works? She shares her expectation from a reader of this work, to probe beyond the surface to see Kerala beyond its usual description. In this chapter an attempt has been made to understand how Kerala and its people are beyond the self-proclaimed or otherwise popular aspects of the state. In one of the essays in *Where the Rain is Born*, Ammu Joseph compares women's life in Kerala and Meghalaya in the context of

Matriliny (87-95). Among the various communities which follow matrilineal system in India the Nairs of Kerala and Khasis of Meghalaya are notable ones. Joseph points out the fact that although in both these communities, lineage is followed through the mother and women enjoyed property rights to a certain extent, the public life is always controlled by men. Women were not allowed to participate in traditional institutions of local governance. Joseph remembers one of her unnamed journalists from Shillong who clearly states that ‘freedom and empowerment are different things’. (90) The author says that women in the north-east enjoy greater freedom when compared to the women in Kerala. Another unnamed woman journalist from Kerala raises the issue by saying ‘Equality and freedom are elusive to women in Kerala’. (90) From childhood onwards girls enjoy far less freedom of movement when compared to the boys. Another issue faced by Kerala women is the question of ‘character’ and ‘reputation’. The most desirable attribute a girl could ever possess is a ‘good character’ which is demonstrated at its best by socially acceptable behavior. Even the women writers who are well established in their chosen field are not free from these expectations of a good conduct. In the essay Joseph shares what a woman writer from Kerala pointed out ‘people look for personal elements in whatever women write.’ (90) When the well-known Indian English poet and short story writer Kamala Das published her *Ente Katha (My Story 2012)* it shook the orthodox Kerala society upside down and eventually forced the author to call it a ‘fantasy’ from an initial autobiography<sup>2</sup>. Even today there are people

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<sup>2</sup> Madhavikkutty. *Ente Katha*. 47<sup>th</sup> ed. DC Books, 2012.

who probe deep into the work to drag it to her personal life. As Joseph pointed out,

Women writers are accepted and even feted as long as their writing conformed to socially accepted norms... 'Writing by women which reinforces or is, at least, uncritical about the prevailing societal norms is praised, while works by women that critique patriarchal values and promote the concept of women's identity as individuals provoke censure. Men who write differently are honored, but women who dare to do so are isolated- either by ignoring them or by singling out for negative criticism. (90)

Thus, Joseph concludes her article by calling matriliney and freedom of women in Kerala a myth. Another article in the same collection "Mundu, meesha, kumba, koda: The sartorial splendor of the Malayali male" written by Geeta Doctor, details a Malayali male, particularly a matrilineal male, his appearance, mannerism and conduct in society in an amusing way (289-296). At one point she suggests that the rather tenuous position of the male in his house directs him to take up a sartorial splendor. Men in Matriliney are always unsure of their position as to the extent that 'husbands who returned home to their temporarily linked partners, only to find, another man's spear, sword, or pair of slippers outside the door' (294). Nair women practiced *sambandham*, partnership entered through accepting a set of clothes from the man. As the author pointed out 'it's not so much a question of infidelity as availability, an excess of males in

a closely guarded society of family members who cross-pollinated until very recently, only within a carefully observed hierarchy of available females, controlled by an implacable matriarchy' (294). Women had the right to end a *sambandham* for a new one when they wanted and the message was conveyed to the man by keeping his personal things outside the entrance. This makes a matrilineal man insecure in his relation and the fear of someone else taking his place forces him to take up a very masculine appearance and actions. *Ozhimuri*,(2012) a recent Malayalam movie which traces the matrilineal system of post-independent Travancore society makes a statement that this insecurity often leads to domestic violence<sup>3</sup>. As men's insecurity urge them to overpower the women by using their physical power.

*The Better Man* (1999), the first novel by Anita Nair, is an exploration of the nuances that run beneath a seemingly serene rural existence set in a village named Kaikurussi in northern part of Kerala. Mukundan, the protagonist of the novel is a retired government employee who was forced by circumstances to return to his village which he fled when he was eighteen. Back in his ancestral house, he is tormented by the memory of his mother Parukutty, whom his father Achuthan Nair had left for another woman. He is also obsessed with the idea that he had failed to live up to his father's expectations. Discontented with the life he lives Mukundan yearns to go back to the city he worked. His life took a sudden shift when Bhasi the painter, whom the villagers call one-screw-loose Bhasi for his unconventional

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<sup>3</sup> *Ozhimuri: A Document of Separation*. Dir. Madhupal. Prod. P.N Venugopal, Aan Mega Media Release, 2012.

behaviour, enters to renovate his ancestral house. The painter took the responsibility to renovate Mukundan's life too. Bhasi took the mission of healing Mukundan through a symbolic return to his mother's womb and rebirth. Mukundan seems to be revived by Bhasi's counseling, but what the counselor fails to notice is Mukundan's longing for recognition through any means. Mukundan betrays Bhasi and Anjana with whom he falls in love with, to become a committee member of the upcoming project in the village and to please the supposedly elite people over there. Mukundan thought this was the way he will be hailed to a status which his father had enjoyed in that village. His childhood dreams had been crushed by his tyrannical father and more than half a century of his life had gone by his vain attempts to please his father. Achuthan Nair's death brings forth the tangible redemption in Mukundan and he repents for what he had done to his friend and love. Drawing from a village in Palakkad as its setting, the novel discusses larger issues of caste, community and gender, myths and superstitions, migration, idea of home and exile, insider-outsider and urban versus rural entities.

*Ladies Coupe* (2001) can be considered as the masterpiece of Anita Nair for its craftsmanship and wide popularity among her readers. The setting of the novel is the ladies compartment of the train where six women discuss their life. Akhilandeshwari or Akhila, is forty-five years old, single and works in the Income Tax department, the job she got after her father's death when she was nineteen. Since then she had been taking care of her mother, two brothers and a sister. Her siblings set up their own family and her mother's death forces her to

live with her sister Padma where she lives quite an uncomfortable life. It is then she boards a train to Kanyakumari to escape from her confined life. In the coupe which is meant only for women, she meets five other women and each of them share their personal stories in response to Akhila's question, "Can a woman live by herself?" (22). The fact that they need not to meet again in life gives them the courage to speak out their stories. The pluralistic responses, anxieties and concerns of women of different ages and social classes facilitate Akhila to take up a new vision on life. While critiquing *Ladies Coupe*, C.V. Abraham argues that the author uses its central character Akhilandeshwari as a textual metaphor to stand for all women who are forced to be stereotyped role players as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers, who live their lives subscribing to social strictures and sacrificing their desires on the altar of conjugal obligations (135). As Abraham says, 'the train journey turns out to be a journey from the state of passive self-sacrifice to defiant self-assertion; from ignorance to enlightenment; from thought to action'. (136) The signboard in front of the ticket counter at the railway station which says: "Ladies, senior citizens and handicapped persons" -- has multiple significance in the novel. Associating women with senior citizens and handicapped persons suggests the dominant theory of power structures in Indian society. Women are less powerful and therefore not equal to men but to older men and handicapped persons in terms of their inefficiencies is the idea conveyed by this.

*Mistress* (2005) is one of the much celebrated novels of Anita Nair which is set in Kerala. Kathakali, the traditional art form of Kerala is the underlying

theme of the novel which unfolds through the navarasas. The nine chapters in the book are titled as Sringaram, Haasyam, Karunam, Raudram, Veeram, Bhayanakam, Beebhalsam, Adbhutam and Shaantam which means love, contempt, sorrow, fury, courage, fear, disgust, wonder and peace respectively<sup>4</sup>. Koman, the Kathakali artist in Kerala is visited by a travel writer Christopher Stewart from England who urges him to narrate his life story. Koman unfolds his past to his niece Radha and Chris which turns out to be a story of three generations. He agreed to interpret his life along with all others who are involved in his life. In Kathakali, before the actual story unfolds the scene has to be explained in detail in order to make the audience understand why a character behaves in a particular way. Being a maestro in Kathakali he draws his narrative in the same manner and begins with his father's story. Sethu, one of the protagonists of the novel, who ran away from home in his younger days, was taken to Colombo by an elderly couple who educated him. Nair uses the cinematic technique of flashback for narration and the novel begins with the life of the unhappy couple Radha and Shyam, members of a prestigious Nair family. Radha finds her husband very domineering and a hindrance to her freedom. Besides he never shares her sensibility towards art and literature and he is more business minded. When Koman, veteran Kathakali dancer and her uncle, was visited by the English Christopher she is delighted to meet somebody who shares her literary passions. Chris comes to Kerala to find his own roots, and forces

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<sup>4</sup> Bharata's *Natyashstha* has nine types of human states of mind described as nava (nine) rasa (essence). It is about what mind feels and its expression thereafter. Nandan, Anjali. *Online Bharatanatyam*. March 2008. <http://onlinebharatanatyam.com/2008/03/10/navarasa-the-nine-moods/>. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018.

Koman to tell his life story. He begins by narrating his father Sethu's younger days and struggles, his life with Saadiya, an orthodox Muslim girl and their son Koman himself. Following Saadiya's death, Sethu moves to his own *tharavad* to start a new business and thereby a new life. Contrary to his father's wishes, Koman showed little interest in business and wanted to become a Kathakali artist. During his struggles to establish himself as a Kathakali artist, he met Angela, a European woman who comes to learn Kathakali in Kerala and moved to England for a short period of time. The relationship ended in a few months and he returned to Kerala to practice Kathakali, and became a renowned artist in the field. Radha's closeness to Chris disturbs Shyam but he feels helpless when Koman nods silent approval. Radha feels bereft after Chris returns to England and the novel ends with a hint of Radha's return to Shyam and to her traditional role. Radha's rebellious actions in the beginning of the novel and her compromise with tradition towards the end are typical existential dilemma faced by most Indian women. Her mental trauma, conflict and anguish can be ascribed to any woman in the society and this portrayal of inner psyche makes the novel noteworthy.

*Eating Wasps* (2018) is the latest novel written by Anita Nair. The plot is unfolded through the ghost of Sreelakshmi, an emerging writer who had committed suicide in the year 1965. Her lover had cut her index finger off before her cremation and kept it in a wooden shelf in his house. After fifty years, the shelf reached a river front resort in Shoranur where a girl gets hold of this skeletal remains of a finger, "bleached and brittle, looking more like an ivory

relic from some bygone time". (203) As the plastic stick, more than the remains of a finger, is carried away from one person to another, Sreelakshmi, a lover of stories, gets to read their life stories. In this way the story of various women from a child of six who had undergone sexual abuse, to a woman in her seventies who takes care of her autistic son, has been told. Through Sreelakshmi, Nair unravels the lives of Megha, a school kid who was abused by the school van driver; Najma, the school teacher and acid attack victim for refusing an unwanted marriage proposal; Theresa and Molly, the two widowed sisters who nurture hatred for each other from childhood; Brinda Patil, the National ranking badminton player who put an abrupt end to her career; Rupa, the wife of a diplomat who is friends with a man who happens to be a member of ISIS; Liliana, the Italian girl who visits Kerala to learn traditional dance; and Urvashi, the journalist who tries to put an end to an extramarital affair which she no longer wants. Finally, the story of Sreelakshmi, professor of Zoology and award winning novelist, who commits suicide unable to bear the brunt of society's anger against her writings.

Anita Nair's writings are mostly on Nair women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. The socio-cultural modes and values which mould the image of an Indian woman and their set roles are depicted in minute way in her novels. The chief contribution of Anita Nair's fiction is their exploratory nature of the moral and psychic dilemmas and ramifications of the women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges to achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their

surroundings. They often work as testimonies of women, the obstacles they faced and the disadvantages they suffered in the orthodox Hindu family. They were drawn between the modern value adaptation and the attachment with the traditional ideologies of family and home. The crises met by working women, marital adjustment, quest for individuality, concepts of motherhood etc. are taken up for fuller treatment in these novels. She deals with the middle class Indian woman who represents a majority of educated Indian women who struggle to adjust in the traditional world rather than completely rejecting it.

In India, marriage has been viewed as an inevitable part in a woman's life which often works as an instrument at the hands of the patriarchy to silence women. In a male dominated society women are expected to be passive or unresponsive and anything contrary from this notion disrupts the whole institution of family. Sometimes women are fettered by the natural functions of the body such as menstruation, pregnancy, etc. By remaining within the ethos of Indian middle class Anita Nair has raised some significant questions related to the position of women in society and gender issues. The contemporary anxieties have been portrayed in an existential manner in her novels where towards the end the characters arrive at a compromise to find a sense of balance in life. Her women try their best to conform to their roles and the novels end with a positive note which the readers can interpret in various ways.

### **Feminisms**

Some of the finest works of Indian feminist historians have been those that disturb ahistorical constructions of a unified female

subject. The lapse into any kind of “moralism” within the academy could itself undermine the seriousness of the feminist project to reconstitute the categories of the discipline. Feminist historiography must, in other words, be unafraid to develop critiques and produce knowledge that are at odds with its politically coherent goals --- it must be admitted that Indian feminism’s capacity for self-critique, and its ability to take on and address new challenges to the unitary subject may find few parallels among its counterparts. Every effort must be made to reenter the practice of the discipline armed with new questions, and disturb the new boundaries that have been placed around feminist historiography. (Janaki Nair 64)

In her article “The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History” (2008) Janaki Nair asks, ‘Is all history that turns its attention to women necessarily feminist history? Is there a feminist history that may not focus on women? Is gender an appropriate category of analysis in all instances where women are present? Can feminist scholars engage with historical issues even when there is likelihood that historical conjectures that have temporarily revealed the possibility of a new politics, before compromise once more shuts that door?’ (63) In “Introduction- Revisiting Gender: Pedagogies, Histories, Practices” (2016), Uma Chakravarti observes feminists’ engagement with history as an attempt to rewrite history from a gender sensitive perspective (xi-xiv). She

affirms literatures' close affinity with feminism because textual readings constitute an important scholarship for feminists.

It is now widely recognized in social science scholarship that the women's movement worldwide, as in India, has had an impact on every field of knowledge and practice in the past four decades, regardless of whether such an impact is formally acknowledged by the academia. Apart from the social sciences, the humanities and the arts too have been reshaped by the questions raised by feminists. Questions of women's relationship to 'culture', understood loosely as a body of ideas and practices that span from religion, traditions to beliefs, and which shapes the everyday lives of communities and individuals, have been central to the women's movement in India. Yet, it remains less central to the concerns of feminist scholarship, especially on the violence experienced by women, had made culture the central plank of its discussions. Perhaps this was so because culture was understood primarily as oppressive to women, under whose rubric patriarchy sought to mask its most repressive practices. (xxiii)

Sara Joseph in her article "Kudumbabandhangal" (Family Relationships, 2010) problematizes the family system in India by asking 'What is a happy family?' (21-33). She finds family is a place of various inner conflicts based on differences. More than a healthy emotional bonding what there exist is unhealthy forced emotional intricacies which parodies the inferior-superior complexities of

the society. It insists of having a family unit where the superior male controls the inferior-- women, children and old people. Joseph asserts that these complexities arise mostly due to the way family is formed in our society. In most cases the marriage happens based on various factors like religion, caste, family and economic status etc. without paying any attention to individual aptitude. She envisages a family to be a place without any kind of supremacy, which is based on man-woman equality, mutual trust and respect and that which portrays the value of human love. Joseph observes that in a colonized country like India the commercial industry is based on the family units and therefore the global market insists on to sustain the traditional family units with all its plurality based on religion and spirituality. (22) In the novels of Anita Nair family is one of the repeated themes and I would like to problematize the contemporary family as portrayed in her novel from a feminist point of view.

Nivedita Menon makes a distinction between sex and gender the two intrinsic features of feminism. She traces the initial use of the term 'sex' to differentiate between men and women to assigning strict gender roles based on certain cultural meanings (*Seeing* 51-90). Menon argues that since the subordination of women has been grounded on this biological difference, the distinction between men and women is the first thing that has to be addressed in feminism.

This kind of philosophical reasoning which legitimizes various forms of subordination as natural and inescapable, because it is based on supposedly natural and, therefore, unchangeable factors-

called biological determinism-- biological determinism has also been one of the most important legitimizing mechanism of women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is, therefore, crucial for feminist politics. (61)

Along with this gender difference various other identities such as race, class, caste, religious community etc. are relevant in understanding particular issues related to women. As Judith Butler argues in her seminal work *Bodies that Matter* (1993) 'biological bodies are forcibly materialized overtime by the reiterative, repeated practices of gender performance' (12). Feminism focuses on modern discourse of gender which produce human beings as 'men' or 'women'. Therefore, feminism is not exclusively about 'women', rather it problematizes the complicated relation of gender to that of class, caste and queer politics in terms of both time period and geographical location.

'Woman' then, is not a natural and self-evident identity, the obvious subject of feminist politics. The subject of feminist politics has to be brought into being by political practice. There is no pre-existing 'women' who may be Hindu or Muslim, upper-caste or Dalit, white or black; rather, there are 'people' who may respond to different kinds of political challenges, as 'Dalit' or 'Muslim' or as 'women'. The success of feminism lies precisely in its capacity to motivate 'people' to affirm themselves *as* feminists in different kinds of contexts. (Menon, *Seeing* 171)

The paradox of the concept of gender is that in India, the term is used synonymously for 'women' whereas in feminism 'gender is meant to destabilize the idea of 'women' or 'men' more importantly. (215)

Feminism is not about that moment of final triumph, but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that old markers shift forever. This shift is what enables many young women today to say, 'I believe in equal rights for women, but I am not a (shudder!) feminist'. Feminist struggle have made much that they fought for yesterday, the baseline beyond challenge today. In effect, those privileged young women who float through their empowered lives in the wake of over a century of feminist struggles are simply disowning their own heritage. (222-223)

In the introduction of their book *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (2010) Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid asserts the need to focus on regulation and reproduction of patriarchy in order to understand the historical processes which reconstitute patriarchy in colonial India. They state that the implications of the reconstitution of patriarchy during colonial period are upon the present and view the introduction of middle class sexual morality overlaid women who were involved in the production process (22). They found locating patriarchy as the primary contradiction in society very problematic.

To put it crudely, patriarchy becomes an ahistorical category within an originating myth of male coercion. The strength of this position, however, lies, in the fact that it foregrounds patriarchal

oppression as existing within all historically known modes of production and as a socio-cultural system cutting across class divisions. Its weakness lies in treating women as a 'class' by themselves, leading to a disregard of the fact that women of the exploited class may indeed have closer group interests with men of their own classes than with women belonging to the dominant classes. (23)

While observing the problematic relation between nationalism and the women's question Partha Chatterjee points out the sudden disappearance of women's issues from the agenda of the public debate towards end of the nineteenth century (233). In accordance with Sumit Sarkar, Chatterjee shows the absence of any significant autonomous struggle by women to change relations within and or outside the family. The sudden visibility of women in the public sphere-in political protests, popular media, development planning etc. make Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana to contemplate on the question of gender in the contemporary India (93-117). While all these were supposed to empower Indian women Tharu and Niranjana found it problematic as it excludes the marginal sections and feminists often found blocked by the dominant culture. Feminist scholarship, over the years, worked to establish gender as a category which was laid invisible among various universalisms, to draft laws against restriction of family as a private space which curbed protection against domestic violence, to include women and gender issues in Marxist labour production hitherto highlight the marginality and vulnerability of women workforce, to

critique history and literature in order to create alternative narratives, to understand the pervasive mechanisms of patriarchal ideologies and othering of women work in subjugating women. They show how contradictions arise as a result of the hidden gender, caste, class and community compose the dominant culture. As Tharu and Niranjana put it “the history and structuring of this subject in civil society and its reworking in the public domain today are naturalized by a ‘humanism’ that puts this subject into circulation as politically neutral” (95).

In her essay, “Memory as Ritual, Memory as Renewal: Some thoughts on Feminist History-writing”, V. Geetha ratifies the relevance of personal memory or experience as it makes aware the possibilities of history (144-164). She argues that one has to question how ‘past moments of historical possibility’ have received in history so far as women are concerned. She brings in the instances of self-respect and Dravidian movement here. She observes that the former though radical in practice was disinterested in women’s question whereas the latter while remaining populist provided a democratic platform to challenge social domination and injustice. In the opening of the essay Geetha states that for the majority of people thinking about everyday politics of women’s movement is not an easy task and they address it in different ways through activism, academics, participatory research and actions research and so on.

It becomes important to not only make these memories speak to each other, but also to mark the different trajectories that each of these has effected. Feminist memory, in this instance, say of the breast-cloth controversy, is firmly tied up with a past that was

redeemed by conversion. The injunctions to domesticity that accompanied the assertion of Nadar women to cover their breasts have passed into history as important reminders of a previous time of oppression, but their mutation into rules for female self-making have not been sufficiently studied or critically examined. Caste memory, on the other hand, has updated itself, and the breast-cloth issue marks a moment in an abjured past that has been successfully left behind, as Nadars grew into educational and industrial modernity. Clearly, the life-worlds of women, as they move through time, are not deemed as central to caste history.

(152)

As Geetha firmly states “doing history in a public context, seeking to renew rather than commemorate the past, one realizes the need to go beyond contemporary certainties, even of these are radical and enabling.” (153)

Anita Nair’s women characters are not fixed entities who possess feminine essence. On the other hand, they are women who question their existence in a male dominated family structure while at the same time they also assimilate the patriarchal values. All her women emerge through the fabric of family life where they have to wait for the male authority for approval for their actions. Shyam in the novel *Mistress* is a man who lives a disciplined life which he expects his wife Radha to follow.

Sharmila Rege observes how the British were anxious in consolidating the brahmans as a class in Western India (1-8). They incorporated customs

related to caste, marital norms and caste purity as matters of religion and executed these through caste panchayats. In establishing one's caste status in society purity of women was considered to be more important than any Vedic rituals and gender played an indispensable role in bringing social changes in that period. Till 20<sup>th</sup> century the public sphere was largely women-centered though they were segregated to domestic sphere and in the understanding of gender roles the two spheres constitute as crucial sites of debates. Towards the end of the nineteenth century educated women started questioning segregation of women's issues as private and they challenged matters related to education, marriage, dowry and widowhood through their writings. The middle class, upper caste woman turned out to be the symbol of all Indian women and Hindu culture thereby completely neglecting the women from lower social classes. Rege argues that the marginalization of the non-brahmanical perspectives and experience in the institutionalized scholarship on caste have barred one from understanding the deep social and structural changes of Indian society. Dalit feminism always challenged the concepts of 'genderless caste' and 'casteless gender', and the invisibility and distortion of gender has been the focus of scholarship in women's studies in India over the decades. In Rege's words "the theory and practice of women's studies has, from its inception, underscored the relation between knowing and transforming; Dalit feminism qualifies this relation further. It places at the centre of knowing, not the unmarked category of 'woman' but dalit women who have an interest in overthrowing the system and not rising within it." (67) In her article "Opening up to Research: A Personal Narrative" Jenny

Rowena vehemently states that she finds any discussion on issues which neglects caste as ‘abstract, unreal and elitist’. (34)

As Charu Gupta rightly pointed out in India ‘the propertied, high-caste, heterosexual Hindu male is at the top of religious and caste hierarchies which is considered as normal, natural and beyond reproach’. (111) Sara Joseph describes the Dalit and Feminist discourses in the following

Women’s writing questions the man/ woman disparities that exist within Brahmanical supremacy. In a literary world that has sealed off the voice, sight and the experience of woman, it is a significant event that she gets a tongue and also determines her position. Gauging the likes of women’s and Dalit writings as abominable compartmentalisations is tantamount to dismissing the possibilities of writings against communalism.<sup>5</sup> (20)

### **Anita Nair and the Label/Idea of Feminism**

Anita Nair’s characterization is of a narrow range for most of them are typical middle class, urbanized, educated Nair women who urges to find one’s self and to create a space of their own. Her novels centre on family relationships, their dilemmas and inner conflicts which are responsible for human bondages. Her characters try to preserve their identity as daughter, wife, mother and above all as a respectable human being in a tradition bound, hegemonic Indian society.

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<sup>5</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned.

Her portrayal of middle-class women and their issues, issues pertaining to parent-child relationship, marriage and sex, and their exploitation and disillusionment, she has been called a feminist which she vehemently negates. She strongly asserts that no amount of theorizing would solve women's problems in India and discards any such categorizations. This needs to be questioned because feminism as a theory emerged out of women's experience, not from empty theorization. On being asked about her denial to have a feminist stand, Anita Nair explains that

Our women are mentally strong. Law gives us equality, security and other rights. As a woman one should be able to enjoy autonomy. In *Ladies Coupe*, there are issues faced by women in a male dominated society. As *Lessons in Forgetting* is about female foeticide, it has all the situations a woman goes through in her life time. But because I wrote about these issues I can't be labelled as feminist. Feminism and activism are not for writers. It's not the writer's duty to make the world better. Writers should be the mirrors to reflect the society we live in and its surroundings to the readers. I don't believe in writing activism. (6)

Anita Nair's understanding of feminism and the freedom of movement that women have in society is very different. If she had attempted to explain what her notion of feminism is, that would have clarified things. But she doesn't. She belongs to the elite section of the Indian society who cannot be compared with the majority of Indian women. Considering the kind of society in which we live

where writers have to undergo various ordeals, it may also be possible that she denies calling herself a feminist to avoid controversies. Recently Kerala witnessed its own Perumal Murugan withdrawing his novel due to some protest. S Hareesh who writes in a popular Malayalam Weekly was forced to withdraw his novel as the protestors attacked his family for his writing. Anita Nair expressed her solidarity with the writer in this context.

It is heartbreaking to see a writer is forced to withdraw his novel due to threatening. It is indeed a setback not only to literature but also to the progressive values we all uphold. What future democracy and humanism have without freedom of expression?

(5)

As she herself had said in one of her lectures, there are autobiographical traces in her novels although the characters and incidents are not directly related to her own life. She makes creative use of her experiences and memory especially in her early writings. Her narratives keep on moving back and forth in time and memory plays a significant role in it. It is the non-linear structure of her novels which gives them integrative structure they possess. She even uses some devices like stream of consciousness, interior monologue etc. to probe into the psyche of her characters.

Feminism is a concept everyone thinks they know well that giving a definition seems to be impossible at times. It is not quite uncommon to hear someone passing a joke as “I am a feminist, for I hate men” or some say “I deny feminism for I believe in equality”. I wonder how can there ever be equality

without a conscious feminist action. Feminism haven't escaped from the blame of 'men-haters' and the term humanism is preferred by many as a better substitute for feminism. Feminism is a movement which focuses on the power hierarchy between the sexes. As Elizabeth Jackson opines "it takes on different forms in different contexts, based as it is on various critical analyses of male privilege and women's subordination within different societies." (1) Recently when Pratibha Rai, a Jnanpeeth award winning Odiya writer visited Kerala she responded to the query of her being a feminist, for her writings indicate so, thus

"Not at all. I am a humanist. When one stands for humanism there is space/place in his/her mind for male, female, other beings, world and sky. Isn't humanity which must fly above everything else? Isn't it this way of understanding which will help us to appreciate that great Creator, that boundless Architect, that great Scientist? For we all are His children." (5)

Anita Nair repeatedly says she is not a feminist writer. Although she deals with gender, social domination and other issues as discussed in the previous section on feminism, she denies herself as a feminist. She is more adherent to "tradition" than to any other ideologies. In "The Dilemma of the Woman Writer" (1998), Shashi Deshpande says that she feels isolated as a woman who writes in English in India. (229-231) She asserts that the dilemma of the woman writer is too vast for the term itself. She openly questions the term woman writer and the act of judging them as a separate class. Deshpande

expresses her anger in labeling women writing as feminist writing and calling them propagandist. She says:

It is a curious fact that serious writing by women is invariably regarded as feminist writing. A woman who writes of women's experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings. I don't see why this has to be labeled feminist fiction. A (male) critic said about a novel of mine: 'she can be quite brilliant when she is not raising her banners of protest.' Any woman who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist; if the protagonist is a woman she shows the world as it looks to a woman. This view, I have realized, makes a man quite uncomfortable. But to present this viewpoint is not necessarily to be a feminist. It seems that it is, on the whole, difficult for a woman to be judged purely as a writer. To the critics one is a woman writer. I know literature has to be valued in the social context; but to apply the tag of feminist is one way, I've realized, of dismissing the serious concerns of the novel by labeling them, by calling the work propagandist (230).

In their "Introduction: Embodying the New Woman" (2006) the editors G. S. Jayasree and Sreedevi K. Nair, define 'feminism as an attitude which embodies the new woman (the one who affirms self-esteem and spurns subservience) who is capable of seeing through the constructs of society by cross-examining the concepts of ideal womanhood in order to create an identity

of her own with her lived experiences'. (vii) They argue that the stories in their collection portray women with an unconquerable will to selfhood through which the women writers challenge the representation of the female body in mainstream literature. For them writing is an act of rebellion by subverting conventional narratives where female bodies are reduced to an object of male gaze. Since the very idea of purity and pollution are centered around female sexuality and female body it becomes the locus of many caste-based practices and in order to affirm one's identity in society she has to start by critiquing gender and caste identities.

### **Feminist Values in Anita Nair's Novels**

Women novelists in India write novels which aim at destabilizing the existing power structures and depoliticizing the cultural positions of the dominant man. One could see such feminist deliberations in Anita Nair's novels too even when she refuses to be called a feminist. Raymond Williams in his work *Marxism and Literature* (1977) brings in the concept of 'commitment' and 'alignment'. (199-206) He quotes Karl Marx's view of Balzac and Tolstoy's work. Though both Balzac and Tolstoy belong to the aristocracy, their writings were a critique of aristocracy and they were sympathetic towards the toiling masses.

In her interview, Anita Nair underlines that she doesn't subscribe to feminist ideologies. (Anita Nair Personal Interview) Anita Nair foregrounded problems concerning present-day middle class Indian women and attempts to subvert the conventional notions of dominant man and submissive woman. The reading of a text doesn't stop at the borders or at its intertextual level, rather it

moves from the text to the context bringing to the light the culture and the society which instigated the production of the text thereby gaining social, political and gender implications.

Given Anita Nair's disposition never to be called as a feminist or her work never to be tagged as feminist writing, the novel *The Better Man* was praised for its feminist values and she openly expressed her discomfort. However, it seems time and experience has changed her perceptions and now she finds it quite acceptable to call her work a feminist one<sup>6</sup>. Her two crime thrillers discuss varied social issues like gender inequality and child trafficking- *Cut Like wound* is about transgender issues and *Chain of Custody* on Child trafficking. But at the same time she is reluctant to comment on atrocities on young girls and made a very sweeping comment on #Metoo movement. (Anita Nair Interview) However, when her latest novel *Eating Wasps* was reviewed as a feminist work she appears to be welcoming it contrary to the way she reacted to feminism earlier. Nonetheless, I argue that her works portray strong upper-caste feminist values as far as contemporary Indian society is concerned. Anjana and Paraukkutty in *The Better Man*, Marikolanthu, Karpagam and Margaret in *Ladies Coupe*, Kala in *Lessons in Forgetting* and Radha and Maya in *Mistress*, Anjana, Meenakshi and Paraukkutty in *The Better Man* are women who dare to resist male hegemony in marriage and family even when they had to wage a lonely battle. Feminism is not an abstract concept to be debated upon. It is something which is expressed in million ways by ordinary women while they

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<sup>6</sup> Nair, Anita. "On Feminism, Metaphors, *Ladies Coupe*, Social Media and *Eating Wasps*." Facebook, 19 Nov. 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/AnitaNair.Official/>.

resist/question/challenge/respond to patriarchy in their everyday life of existence. Anita Nair is a writer who echoes these struggles of ordinary women in her novels.

Feminism is expressed through these women characters in Anita Nair's novels. Kala belongs to a traditional brahmin family from where she dares to move out in search of her individuality. Her father and after marriage, her husband adore her beautiful knee-length hair whereas she longs to get rid of its weight. Just by cutting it off a foot length made them aggressive which made Kala to think about her position as an individual in the family. She no longer wishes to be a 'plaything' to anyone and dares to go in search of an independent life. Maya is a mother of an autistic child whose husband left her for a better life. In the same way all other women characters in Anita Nair's novels are women who dare to struggle against male hegemony in the society. The following chapters on matriliney and family gives a detailed analysis on this.

Anita Nair attains prominence in Indian English fiction on account of her treatment of a variety of life experiences, transparency of language and spontaneity in portraying the trials and tribulations of the middle class Nair families in particular and the educated urbanized women in general. She deliberately keeps a moderate stance between the lived experiences of Indian women and from an ardent feminism which blames male hegemony. At the same time, she chronicles human relationships, the interplay of tradition and modernity, and tensions generated by it.

## Chapter II

### Debates around Nair Matriliney: An Overview

The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman, especially conspicuous among the Greeks of the heroic and still more of the classical age, has gradually been palliated and glozed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished. (Engels 30-31)

To Frederick Engels the historian, the overthrow of the mother-right is the most important event in the fall of women. Scholars have varied opinions on the matrilineal past of Nair community in Kerala. Scholars like K. Saradamoni consider it as one of the best age women ever lived (*Matriliney* 58). However, historian Kesavan Veluthat finds nothing empowering for Nair women under matriliney (97). Other scholars like G. Arunima and Praveena Kodoth view matriliney from an ambivalent position (*There Comes* 22; *Was Matriliney* 7). Whereas Nivedita Menon shares memories of the matrilineal past of her great-grand mother, who holds the power of the *tharavad* (*Seeing* 23). The popular commercial films in Malayalam generally portray Nair matriliney and *sambandham* as an inglorious past both for the community and for its women. Certain films like *Ozhimuri* (2012) which portrays the powerful Nair woman

who rules her *tharavad*, may not fall under the category of popular commercial films. Most contemporary Malayalam literature also creates matriliney as something ignominious, in particular the novels of M. T. Vasudevan Nair. His first novel *Nalukettu* (*Naalukettu: The House Around the Courtyard*, 1958) ends with the demolition of *nalukettu* (the traditional Nair *tharavad*), which indicated the renaissance of the community and the novel marked a new beginning in the history of Malayalam fiction. His novel *Asuravithu* (*The Demon Seed*, 1962) is another example which portrays the masculine anxiety under matriliney during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the novel, *Asuravithu*, Kumaran, the member of a deteriorated Nair *tharavad* has *sambandham* with a Nair woman of a wealthy family and he struggles to maintain the relationship by observing all the customs which are beyond his means. After a point the woman ends the relation and he has to return to his *tharavad* humiliated by the *karanavar*<sup>1</sup> of her family. Kumaran's mother helps him maintain the status of their *tharavad* by observing all the customs in his son's *sambandham-tharavad* even when she and her daughter are struggling to make both ends meet. For her, maintaining their *tharavad* status through fulfilling appropriate customs are more important though she struggles for a day's meal. This is the pride associated with erstwhile members of a prestigious *tharavad*. Though they were reduced to nothingness her dignity as a powerful Nair woman is evident from the extremes she goes to help Kumaran in fulfilling his duties in a *sambandham*. She argues with her younger son Govindan that 'if Kumaran takes money from there (the *sambandham* family) that would be shameful for our *tharavad*. We must not let others know about our poor

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<sup>1</sup> The eldest male member in the matrilineal *tharavad*.

surroundings.’ (21) Though Govindan is the one who meets the expenses of the *tharavad* he dares not question his mother’s decisions knowing how powerful she used to be once. The whole novel is about these two brothers’ anxiety living in a matrilineal *tharavad* which parallels with the anxiety of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Nair men who called for Nair reform movements.

Considering the varied opinions on matriliney what the present chapter intends to do is an analysis of how Anita Nair approaches matriliney and related concerns through her novels. For the present analysis I have chosen three novels *Idris: Keeper of the Light, Mistress, The Better Man*. Literature, movies, history, -- all represented the matrilineal past from different perspectives. The present chapter attempts to critique Anita Nair’s representation of Nair matriliney through an analysis of her selected novels. It begins with an understanding of culture and how it becomes hegemonic in traditional Indian families/ societies barring individual mobility and freedom. The chapter analyses how matriliney, being an indigenous culture of a community, was abolished legally. The second section of the chapter develops its argument on how Anita Nair represents matriliney in her novels and how it parallels with the mainstream patriarchal version of matriliney.

### **Understanding Culture**

The changing significance of culture and its relationship to community, caste, class and gender and its implications on women opens up new debates between feminisms and patriarchies. Studies on culture facilitate the analysis of gender roles and power dynamics in a society. In *Critical Terms for Literary Studies* (1995) Stephen Greenblatt locates the analysis of culture within history

and explains the relationship between them in terms of the opposite pulls of 'constraint' and mobility (225-232). He argues that even when culture enforces boundaries to human interactions by exercising certain constraints there are some forces of mobility which pushes these boundaries of culture for 'improvisation, experiment, and exchange' and creates new boundaries. These two forces of constraint and mobility help to understand the patriarchal power in relation to race, class, religion, caste and ethnicity. In Greenblatt's own words

If culture functions as a structure of limits, it also functions as the regulator and guarantor of movement. Indeed, the limits are virtually meaningless without movement; it is only through improvisation, experiment and exchange that cultural boundaries can be established. Obviously, among different cultures there will be a great diversity in the ratio between mobility and constraint. Some cultures dream of imposing an absolute order, a perfect stasis, but even these, if they are to reproduce themselves from one generation to the next, will have to commit themselves however tentatively or unwillingly, to some minimal measure of movement; conversely, some cultures dream of an absolute mobility, a perfect freedom, but these too have always been compelled, in the interest of survival, to accept some limits. (227)

Raymond Williams defines culture as a 'process of spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic development and a particular way of life of an individual, or group or even humanity at large' (49). In his insights into the workings of culture

Williams shows how material practices signifies symbolic systems. In his view culture is the converging point of materiality and signification and provides an understanding of the real, material and changing relations of women's life and exploitation to throw insight on to the hegemonic patriarchal forms. Hence, Kavita Punjabi and Paromita Chakravarti state that, "the ideal for feminist scholarship is a merged practice capable of articulating the interrelationship between concrete, material, historical 'experience' and the 'representation' of this materiality in cultural forms that disseminate the symbolic language of power of patriarchal hegemonies as well as provide a key to their effect." (xviii) This undoubtedly states interdisciplinarity as the cornerstone of feminist scholarship. In feminist studies culture functions as a site of a complex convergence of literary, anthropological, historical, political, philosophical, economic and psychological processes and provides ground to understand not only the interrelationships but also the challenges to feminism.

The study of culture provides insights on to how power functions through beliefs and practices which in turn give rise to establishing hegemonic forces in a society. Culture is the perpetual site of the working of dominant ideologies where symbolic systems are present in material realities and the working of power is concealed through aestheticizing cultural practices. The internal dynamics of culture gives way to investigate the relationships of power, impacts of patriarchal hegemonies and the counter struggles of women against these. The issues pertaining to matriliney in the works of Anita Nair can fruitfully be analyzed with reference to the levels of culture, viz., the dominant, the

residual and the emergent and, the related hierarchies as operational in particular social systems. In historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system.

The three concepts -- ideology, hegemony and organic intellectual are the important components of Antonio Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" and represent the earliest elaborations on the foundations of class power (41-44). His concept of the dictatorship of the bourgeois revolves around the concepts of ideology, hegemony, power and organic intellectuals. For Gramsci power depends not only on the economic level but on the legitimacy gained from the subordinate classes of civil society through effective ideology. Gramsci defines ideology as a "terrain" of practices, principles and dogmas possessing a material and institutional nature which constitute individual subjects once they were "inserted" into such a terrain. Ideology has a significant role to play in the overall structure of the society as it constitutes individuals as subjects and social agents in society. There is an organic arrangement of all ideological elements into a unified system arranged in terms of a system of rule, i.e. hegemony and Gramsci calls it organic ideology. This ideology is disseminated in the society through social institutions such as family, religion, media, educational institutions, law, government and other such organizations and associations by virtue of varied

classes and practices into a unified system. How women in Anita Nair's novels conform to the hegemonic values is what interests me in this study.

### **Matriliny and Nair Culture**

The matrilineal system in Kerala is said to have developed around the 11<sup>th</sup> century and widely practiced until the initial decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. It got legally abolished in 1976 when Kerala government passed the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System Act. Some critics and social scientists in Kerala consider matriliney as the glorious past of Nair women. In Kerala matriliney existed not only among the Nair caste but among other religious and tribal groups as well. Concentrating on the dominant Nair caste and their matriliney has contributed to view that Kerala was predominantly a matrilineal society though it was not restricted to the Nair community. While matriliney was followed by many Hindu caste groups, some tribal, Muslim and Christian groups, the rest of Muslim, Christian and the Nambutiris followed the patrilineal system. Even within each caste and religious groups, different norms and customs were followed which make it difficult to understand the family structure of Kerala.

There have been a lot of debates around the subject of matriliney and the status women had enjoyed in the system. While many of them, including Nair reformers, argue that women hadn't gained anything in particular in matriliney, K.Saradmoni and G.Arunima view matrilineal period as the golden age of Nair

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<sup>2</sup> Saradmoni, K. *Matriliny Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore*.

Arunima, G. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940*; Augustine, Dr.Celine. *Matriliny in Transition: A Comparative Analysis* etc.

women and its abolition through a series of legislation as a well-planned patriarchal move.

In spite of many complexities one fact which is visible in the family structure of Kerala is the move towards a patrilineal system in almost all the communities which practiced matrilineal family norms earlier. Depending on the region and caste its customs and practices vary. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 15 to 20 percentage of the total population of Kerala were Nairs who practiced matriliney (Sharadamoni, *Matriliny* 62). The aspiring lower-status groups in the society followed matriliney though not in the same terms as Nair's. The matrilineal system in Kerala, particularly among the Nair caste, ensured that women were the inheritors of family property and lineage. In this system women continued to live in their own house even after their marriage or *sambandham*. Unlike in patriarchy, this gave women a sense of identity. As the famous social scientist K Saradamoni says, an identity with one's natal home which lasted throughout life was the main feature of matriliney.

Kesavan Veluthat points out how matriliney did not really empower women and many of their rights existed only notionally (98). Though families were based on mother's home and organized through female line, in reality, *karanavar* or the eldest male member of the family controlled the house. But K. Saradamoni, strongly argues that the abolition of matriliney was a serious blow to gender equity in Kerala. Easy divorce, absence of stigma attached to the remarriage of widows and divorcees, flexibility in residence-- in many cases husband, wife and children living together-- and a widow with a young children

managing her own affairs with confidence and taking decisions by herself were all part of matriliney which ensured better status for women. She also talks about children and adult women having strong ties both with their matrilineal and patrilineal kin. Identity with one's natal home throughout her life and the right to residence and maintenance in her *tharavad* gave a woman security and certain independence. She asserts that in matriliney women had the freedom of movement and they were free to pursue higher education and to get employment (59).

Robin Jeffrey in his study on matriliney is of the opinion that the greater freedom women enjoyed in matriliney enabled them to access salaried employment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in this way they were considered as the potential earning members the same way men were (98). He says, "matriliney created conditions in which some high status girls, in some parts of Kerala, learned to read and write, had more freedom of movement than most high status women of their time elsewhere in India, and some of these women went to work in salaried jobs." (98)

Praveena Kodoth, on the other hand, comments that only some quarter women who belong to privileged social background were employed and had access to public places (*Was Matriliney* 5). Saradmoni deals with three fundamental features of matriliney such as the *tharavad*, the marriage system and the inheritance with the descent through the female line. She draws attention to the following points emphasized by K P Padmanabha Menon: simple and complex *tharavads*, depending on their composition; women forming the stock of descent and kinship; *tharavad* estates being held in trust for the support of the

women and their descendants in the female line, with no individual partition; and control and management by the *karanavan*. Saradmoni had studied the matrilineal system in the Travancore region in Kerala and applies the same throughout the state. What she misses to point out is the status divisions among the Nair caste itself. There are many families among the Nairs who follow *makkathayam* or patrilineal system (43-48).

It was in central Kerala -- Cochin, Calicut and the south of Malabar -- which had the typical pattern of matriliney which includes strong matrilineal descent groups, property groups as residential and common households constituted of matrilineal kin, duolocal residence with visiting marriage, the absence of institutionalized conjugal family, inter-caste hypergamy, and some non-fraternal polyandry. With respect to marriage, the following points are emphasized by Saradmoni.

Women entered into *sambandham* with men of their own caste or castes above. It was a simple affair. Children belong to the mother's *tharavad* and had rights of maintenance there. Dissolution of *sambandham* was easy and was not looked down upon. Remarriage of divorcees or widows were not considered inauspicious, nor were they subjected to inhuman treatment as often happened in the upper caste of matrilineal India. Women continued to be the members of their natal *tharavads* throughout life, with rights of residence and maintenance there. A man was not considered legally responsible for protecting or maintaining

his wife and children, although men doing that were not lacking.

*(Matriliny 65)*

All these had created a derogatory attitude among the high caste patrilineal Hindus and people of other religions towards Nair *sambandham*. This caused embarrassment to Nair men with new education and exposed to western ideas and values. This hurt their masculinity, when women enjoy life long rights and lived with a sense of independence and self-worth. Thus, all these led to Nair reform movements and men became the protector and supporter of women and children, converting women as their dependent.

There is a direct link between the form of kinship and the nature of social development, and the study of matriliney puts the restructuring of family to the centre which generally taken as a natural unit by neglecting gender differences. G. Arunima's study on matriliney *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850-1940* historicize the changing family structures and the power relations within it. She dismisses both the popular characterization of matrilineal families by mother right or women's power and the contention of matrilineal communities as an avuncular form of patriarchy where the uncle is replaced by the husband/ brother as untenable. The demand for a legal reform of matriliney came at first within the family itself draws attention to discourses centered in the concept of family. The attack on *sambandham* relations as immoral in extant was an attack on mother-centred family form and *tharavad* centred system of production (72-105).

Arunima quotes the words of Linschoten, a Dutch Traveller to Malabar, on Nair as “most lecherous and unchaste nation in all the orient” (157-167). The Europeans were alarmed to see the practice of *sambandham* and the absence of “chastity” among the Nair women. Colonial rule had played a great role in formulating marriage law for Nair community and in restructuring their family system which culminated in the abolition of matrilineal system. By the late nineteenth century Nair men voiced for monogamous marriages and for legitimizing *sambandham* marriages as this would resolve the existing property issues and questions of morality. The state policy and community’s desire to civilize itself from a state of barbarism to modernity led to the destruction of the very foundation of Nair family system. Even today Kerala is popular for its matrilineal past and female power and the developments the state had achieved is often viewed as a result of this past. Arunima observes two divergent positions regarding Kerala’s matrilineal past. While the first one disdains matriliney as a relic of unjust feudal age, the second relishes the glorious Nair past with landowning *tharavad* and female power. The colonial government transformed matrilineal law and cultural practices and abolished matriliney and Nair *tharavad* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by validating patrilineal nuclear families as the legitimate form of family system. In this chapter I attempt to position Nair women in these reconstructions and try to understand how they have been portrayed in the novels of Anita Nair.

To understand and place these various arguments on matriliney, one has to contemplate the following questions which Saradamoni had proposed “What did

matriliny offer women? How did it change? What was the reaction of women to the changes? Were women aware of the changes?” (*Matriliny* 116) Around 1970s she took up a study of land relations and women in Palakkad, an area known for Nair matriliney, to understand the issues of Nair women. She found that the land legislations had relatively affected women’s situation. She wanted to reveal the story of changes in the Nair community which were initiated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and materialized through legislations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These changes were looked at as progressive measures and the demands for reforms came from Nair men. Saradmoni asks “Who were these men? What influences worked upon them? What did they have against the traditional institutions, customs and practices? What shape did their efforts take?” (117)

*Marumakkathayam*, as Matriliny is called in Kerala, got its name after the close relationship that existed between the uncle (mother’s brother) and his nephews and nieces. As Celine Augustine points out ‘the *tharavad* or *marumakkathayam* joint family consists of all persons who can trace their descent in the female line from a single ancestress.’ (68) In short *marumakkathayam* or matrilineal joint family ‘consists of a mother and her children living together with their maternal uncle, that is, mother’s brother as *karanavan*, or the senior male member of the family.’ (69) In the absence of male adult members, *karanavathi* the senior adult female member takes over the management of the *tharavad*. The *karanavan* has mainly two functions to do. Apart from managing the family property and acting as the mouthpiece of the *tharavad*; he presides over all family ceremonies and performs all the religious

duties as representative of his family. Augustine observes that ‘the relationship between the *karanavan* and other members of the *tharavad* are quite formal and determined by principles of respect for seniority. He commanded great authority in the management of *tharavad* matters. In effect he might be called an absolute ruler.’ (71) Often the *karanavan* is blamed for misusing the *tharavad* property and accumulating individual property with it quarrels related to this matter was also not so rare on this regard. A *karanavan* is supposed to be the one who breaks off his marital ties in his old age and spends his energy and time exclusively to his sister and her children. Contrary to Celine Augustine’s observation on *tharavad* and the status enjoyed by the *karanavan*, Saradmoni strongly argues that matrilineal *tharavad* was the best example of women’s supreme power. She disapproves of the supreme power of *karanavan* and blames the film and other popular media for such depictions. Instead she vehemently argues that the matrilineal *tharavad* was the realm of *karanavathis* or senior female member.

To understand Nair matriliney in a better way one has to have a knowledge about the marriage system of the two dominant castes; the Nambuthiri and the Nair. The Nambuthiris who follow a patrilineal and patriarchal joint family system, in order to protect the family property, permitted only the eldest son to marry within the caste. The younger sons were prohibited from marrying women of their caste which force them to enter relation with the women of matrilineal Nair caste. Many social scientists blamed the Nambuthiris for exploiting the Nair women and even the younger generation of Nair men was ashamed of such a

relationship existed between their biological parents. The *tharavad* the Nair joint family was based on the principle of matrilineal descent and managed by the eldest male member called *karanavan*. Among the Nair community the marriage ties were comparatively lesser and the affinity it created between the married couple was feeble. As mentioned earlier, in Nair matriliney, children follow their mother's lineage and were not regarded as the legitimate heirs of the father. Due to this many Nair children did not have the necessity to know the name of their father.

An important legislation which affected matrilineal family system was the Madras Nambuthiri Act of 1933. Contrary to the age old custom of permitting only the eldest son to marry within the community, the act gave the right to all Nambuthiri males to marry from their own community and the children born there on became the legal heirs. The act also insisted that all members in the Nambuthiri *Illam*<sup>3</sup>, irrespective of their gender, could get an equal share in the family property. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 made monogamous marriages compulsory for all classes of Hindus. The Act also provides equal right to man and woman in familial property which includes matrilineal joint families as well. With the passing of the Kerala Hindu Joint Family System Abolition Act of 1975, which ensured the disintegration of traditional matrilineal system of inheritance and ushered the patrilineal system, the matrilineal joint family system among the Nair caste was abolished permanently. As a consequence of the above legislations vast sections of Nair

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<sup>3</sup> Conventional Brahmin household

community got converted to patrilineal families. With the regulations implemented there under the imperturbability of the *tharavad* and its single management by the *Karanavan* ceased to exist. The guardianship of wife and children has become the duty of husband or father which marked the shift from *marumakkathayam* to *makkathayam*.

### **Women in Nair Matriliney: Reading Anita Nair's Novels**

In the article “Was Matriliney ever any different? Resisting the Binary-Powerful *Karanavan*/ Dependent women”, Praveena Kodoth interrogates the popular image of Nair women under matrilineal joint families (1-13). She contemplates on the popular notion of independence of Nair women under Matriliney drawing a comparison between the ‘contemporary, when matriliney as a legal framework is no more’, and the historical experiences of matriliney (1). On par with Kodoth’s argument the present chapter will address the following points based on the selected narratives.

Is it then the legal system that made the *Karanavan* so powerful or did the legal picture only mirror the ‘real’? And swiftly on its heels, was matriliney ever any different i.e., did women have rights to property and decision making power in the *tharavad*, at least in some distant past? Though not quite in the same vein, there is a third question that troubles the interested, one that could constitute some sort of baseline defence of matriliney. That is despite how it worked in matters of property and power, did

matriliny confer women with a 'status' or with the possible basis for 'empowerment'? (1)

Kodoth proposes that the two sets of issues- the heightened power of the *karanavan* and women's substantial rights to property are not mutually exclusive. She further argues that even under the autocracy of *karanavan* women were in a more favorable position compared to the women in patrilineal families. As the 'matrilineal *tharavad* was located in a hierarchical mode of and relations involving, landlords, tenants, cultivators and labour in different combinations, varying with the region and history it is also plausible that these changes resonated on property relations in the *tharavad*. Here I attempt to read the three novels of Anita Nair-- *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, *The Better Man* and *Mistress* on the light of the arguments on matriliney. The present chapter analyses these novels depicting two different time periods of Nair matriliney in Kerala especially in Palakkad which is known for Nair matriliney. The first period is the life of Nair women during matriliney and the second being the life of Nair women after the legal abolition of matriliney. *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is set during the matrilineal past of the Nair community whereas *The Better Man* and *Mistress* is set after its legal abolition. Three different context of Nair Matriliney is visible in these novels -- *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is set in a period when matriliney held strong position in society, *Mistress* depicts life of Nair women during the legislations on matriliney and *The Better Man* is after the abolition of matriliney and joint family in Kerala.

*Idris: Keeper of the Light*, is located in a momentous period of India's national life, *Mistress* which flows through three generations is contextualized during the transition period of matriliney and *The Better Man* portrays the Nair family after the legal abolition of matriliney. The diabolic treatment meted out to women in the male-dominated society, the situation of Nair women over a period of many decades and the protest and resentment of the new woman to the socio-cultural norms and practices can be traced through these fictional narratives.

*Idris: Keeper of the Light* explores the general context of the social milieu of 17<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. Kuttimalu is a young woman who belongs to a matriarchal *tharavad* in Malabar. She is governed by the rigid morality of the social system but she shows a rare spirit to procure education and is home tutored in various subjects. Her resolution and standpoints within the *tharavad* make her a rare woman. At the same time her spirit of independence and courage are themselves conditioned by her total acceptance of the social system against which she rebels partially. One point to be noted here is that Kuttimalu could enjoy this independence and freedom of education only because of her economic status. Her *tharavad* is one of the prominent ones in Malabar at the time and as a Nair woman she holds certain property rights too. She is a strong defender of the matrilineal system and never swerves from the rigid social and moral principles of conduct expected of a lady of her status. This is evident from her refusal to go along with Idris. She loves him ardently but social ties held her back. The life she seeks to achieve is to be achieved without breaking morality of the matrilineal system. Idris understands this very well and never accompanied Kandanar on his

return to his matrilineal *tharavad*. He respects Kuttimalu's persona and informs his son where he can be found in case of necessity. Kuttimalu, therefore, represents both the strengths and limitations of new woman.

Anjana, in *The Better Man*, is a woman who insisted on her independence and the right to choose liberty and self-choice as against the traditional values. She is the characteristic creation of a society that was on the threshold of modernization. This intricate relationship between history and the writer makes her novels a critique of the society. The author's subjective views give way to the intensity and power of her realistic creativity, often unconsciously. Parukkuty, the woman who suffers endlessly as a wife and mother is deep rooted in Nair moral and traditional codes. In the beginning of the novel she elicits readers' sympathy as a woman forsaken by her husband and son but later she rises to be an independent woman though as an abstraction. Her circumstances force her to find solace in her inner consciousness where she meets her dead foremothers who demand her to leave her docile nature which could only make her more and more submissive to her husband and son. They remind her of the kind of matrilineal past she shares with them and the wealth Achuthan Nair, her husband, enjoys is her own. This enables her to take up a daring stand against her husband. She forbids Achuthan Nair's attempt to accommodate his liaison along with her and this urged him to build a new house for them adjacent to Parukkuty's *tharavad*. Though broken to see this it couldn't scatter her inner spirits and she continues to make her own decisions in life. Her relationship with her inefficient son Mukundan also runs parallel to that of her husband's.

Unbearable with a married life Parukkuty pleads her son to take her along to his work place. But the meek Mukundan couldn't chance to his father's wrath even though he feels pity on her.

Radha in *Mistress* is the grand-daughter of Sethu. She is well-educated and independent woman who happened to marry a very conventional and tradition-oriented person like Shyam. Her unhappy marriage leads her to enter an extra-marital relation with Chris, the foreigner who came to Kerala to write a book about Koman, the Kathakali artist, who is also the uncle of Radha. Radha dislikes Shyam as he lacks all literary tastes and his only interest lies in making money. Chris' interest in art and literature drew the two of them together with the silent approval of Koman. After a few months, Chris leaves for England and Radha has to go back to her earlier life of being Shyam's wife. In the novel though Radha appears to be a woman longing for her individuality and independence, more often than not, she ends up being the stereotypical woman who is regulated by traditions and societal norms.

The contemporary Indian writer is faced with a dilemma as the reality which they deal with is so complicated that they find it difficult to look at the question of woman in its totality. This crisis is very much visible in Anita Nair as well. Her women are adherents of moral codes which the social system demands and as they go along they realize that the same codes are the barriers to their liberation and ventures to break away from all those. Each woman does it differently but eventually, they have found little escape from the same.

Anita Nair's women embody in different ways the expanding frontiers of feminist consciousness in the process of discovering the woman's identity. They reveal the inevitable limitations inherent in their path to independence. They also point, to borrow the words of P.K. Rajan, "to a more significant possibility that the logic of reality has grown so intricate over the years that it has become extremely difficult for the writer of today to present woman in the totality of her organic relationships..." (118).

Saradhamoni and Robin Jeffrey argue that matriliney provides for the education of women and this enabled them to carry out salaried employment. But the fact is that this provision is not extended to all women in the Nair community-- only a few were privileged to enjoy the opportunity due to different reasons. In the novel *Idris: The Keeper of the Light*, the female protagonist Kuttimalu had to hide herself among the many boys to attend the classes and when discovered by her mother she was scolded for doing things which girls are not supposed to do. Her mother says "Why do you do things to annoy my brother? Why can't you be like other girls? Why do you always have to be different?" (29) The mother was more worried that her daughter's education may displease her brother who is the *karanavan* of the *tharavad*. But the *karanavar* let her continue education thinking that she may continue 'to fill her head with this and that for some more time'. (29) Kuttimalu was eleven years old then and about to reach puberty. The *karanavan* thought that soon the girl may become 'old' enough to start a *sambandham* and until then she may find some entertainment in education.

Another point which is often cited about matriliney is the freedom women had to choose and to reject their conjugal partner in *sambandham*. The *sambandham* relation is always talked about to show how much freedom women enjoyed in matriliney. It is a relation a man begins with a Nair woman through a simple ritual--by giving her a piece of cloth in the presence of a lighted lamp in the presence of the *karanavan*. Nair women engage in *sambandham* with other Nair men or with men from other higher castes, especially Brahmins. It is a matter of pride for a *karanavan* when men from well-known *tharavad* start a *sambandham* with his *tharavad*. In such cases women may not have a choice to begin a *sambandham* with a man whom she likes. If the *sambandham* is from a higher caste, the men observed certain customs to not to lose their caste purity. For example, they would not eat from or stay overnight in the Nair *tharavad*. Therefore, the argument in favour of sexual freedom is contestable. In many cases, especially when it comes to the case of a man from the high castes, especially the Nambuthiris, it is the arbitrary choice of the man on the strength of his position and power to choose or leave a *sambandham*. In effect it was the freedom of men to make choices. This experiential aspect of matrilineal existence was quite often bypassed by historians and social analysts. It is the creative works of writers like Anita Nair which has delved into the actual rubrics of the life of Nair women in the matrilineal system. And precisely herein lies the significance of the works of Anita Nair--betraying the seamy side of the apparently obvious--a truly sociological excurses. It is thus a brilliant case in

point in Indian Writing in English where the comingling of literary creativity and sociological insights yield place to aesthetical perception of reality.

The woman continues to stay at her place and her consort is an occasional visitor to her *tharavad*. It is said that the woman could end the *sambandham* if she wanted by keeping his things outside the house when he came to visit her next. But in many of the cases women remained waiting for their men to come home. All these leave the women in utter desperation and helplessness. Another argument regarding matriliney is that Nair women had the freedom of movement while women from upper-castes were not allowed to step out of their houses. But many a times this freedom of movement was present themselves to men of higher castes to begin a *sambandham*. The novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, shares a strange custom which existed in Kerala. During the Month of Karkitakam (the name of a month as per Malayalam calendar), if a man from untouchable caste happened to see a young Nair woman outside her *tharavad*, he would throw a twig or stone at her. If that touched her, she was excommunicated from her caste and she had to make home with that untouchable man. Fearing this no Nair woman would step out of their house during that time. Idris wonders what made Kuttimalu so desperate to come to the pond on that particular night when they met for the first time. If a woman had any relation with men who do not belong to the accepted caste, she would be killed by her own family members or would be sold as a slave. That rigid was the caste laws in Kerala. (*Idris* 92)

In matriliney women were supposed to be active participants in decision making. The instance from the novel tells a different story. When the *karanavan*

requests Idris to take Kandavar along with him, Idris had asked him whether the kid's mother had agreed to. For which the answer was "She will not question my decision" (148). Kuttimalu listens to this conversation through a small window which would be there in any *tharavad*. It is through this window, women listened to any important discussion men had. The window was made in such a way that the women could see the men while they remain unseen to them. (148)

The marital life of Shyam and Radha in the novel *Mistress* exemplifies the man-woman relationship within a family. The educated, young, strong-willed Radha could never sever the unhappy life of a wife even though she always wanted to live an independent life. She is equally drawn between the wide world of freedom which lies outside the institution called marriage as she is drawn towards the security one imagines to have within marriage. She succumbs to Shyam's wishes and she remained silent as if nothing had happened even after the forced sex by him, even after realizing it is marital rape. Educated Nair men were unhappy about certain customs and practices of matriliney. *Sambandham* became a question of morality in the eyes of colonial rulers and Nair men found it as a problem on their fatherhood. Besides, as the lineage and inheritance of property was through the mother, the men felt a kind of worthlessness and insecurity. The colonial powers who followed patriliney and monogamy upheld their values and looked down upon the indigenous system of matriliney as barbarous and immoral. All these challenged the dignity of Western educated Nair men in colonial society as they posed questions on their identity and led to Nair reform movements which legally abolished matriliney and *sambandham*

thereby eliminating women's right to property and their sexuality. Sethu in the novel *Mistress* is a representative of such supporters of Nair reform movements as he lived through the transition of matriliney to patriliney. Sethu was born to a *sambandham* relation and as educated and much travelled young Nair man, he detested the practice. So when it comes to his marriage, without a second thought he volunteered to marry the niece of an uncle who believed "none of these *sambandhams* that result in nothing but a handful of kids." (235) He believed such an alliance would bring progress in his life.

Sethu was a result of a *sambandham*. His father was from northern Malabar. He had come visiting and fallen in love with Sethu's mother, whom he saw at a temple festival. He had asked for her hand and she became his wife.

His mother had never been a wife. She shared nothing of her husband's life, except his bed. The word *sambandham* was perfect to describe marriage of this nature, Sethu thought. A bond, a sexual bond, and no more. Sethu had grown up not knowing who his father was. He had moved on, and another man had taken his place. It was considered perfectly normal for a woman to change her husband, if it didn't suit either of them to continue with the relationship. A boy grew up looking up to his maternal uncle rather than his father, who was little more than a casual visitor, and the women sitting on the steps of the bathing pond talked

about their *sambandhams* as if they were discussing glass bangles... It has made his teeth grit then and it did now. (235)

Here Sethu's views on *sambandham* and matriliney is informed from colonial education and interventions. The colonial system of patrilineal family was set as a normal standardized family against the indigenous tradition of matriliney and the English educated young generation started looking down upon one's own culture. He finds nothing dignified in one's culture on the other hand finds *sambandham*-- comparatively flexible man-woman relationship convenient for Nair women as something indecent. To him it is nothing more than a sexual bond which leaves the child fatherless. This missing of father, a recurring theme in Anita Nair's novels, I argue, is a conscious attempt to reiterate the importance of patriliney over matriliney. Anita Nair always dismisses any importance attached to matriliney and stands for a modern patrilineal family system. Even in patriliney, the basis of a man-woman relationship is the sexual bond between the two whereas *sambandham* was more of a flexible bond. In patriliney, this bond between man and woman is more complex because power becomes an important element here. In most patrilineal families, man is the master of the family who rules over his wife and children. It won't be an exaggeration to conclude that in patrilineal families too, marriage is a sexual bond.

In matriliney lineage is traced through the mother and a child is identified through his/her mother and uncle, as the father is mostly a visiting person in the *tharavad* in *sambandham*. In the beginning of the novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, Kandavar introduces himself to Idris as "I am Vattoli Kandavar Menavan,

the son of Kuttimalu, and the nephew of Vattoli Chandu Nair.” (21) In matrilineal system one’s status in society was determined by the *tharavad* he belongs to and through the *karanavan*, eldest maternal uncle. This is obvious in Kandanar’s reply to Idris on his query about father “Father! I never had one. He was my mother’s consort but when her belly swelled with me, he stopped coming. He died soon after. She has a new sambandhakaaran now. A fair soft worm who doesn’t know one end of a spear from the other.” (37)

Kuttimalu was educated at home along with other boys in the *tharavad* as the *karanavan* approved the girl’s desire for knowledge. Despite her mother’s disapproval the *karanavan* allowed the girl to pass time by attending classes till she reaches the marriageable age. He has strict codes of behavior for women in the *tharavad*. As Kuttimalu remembers “Ammavan didn’t approve of girls making noise. You don’t laugh; you smile. You don’t speak in your natural voice; you whisper. You don’t meet a man’s gaze; you peer at a point beneath his chin.” (28) She was trained as any other “well brought-up” girl in *tharavad* and entered a *sambandham* alliance when she was spotted by a man from a well-known *tharavad* spotted her at a temple festival. As he was a powerful man in whose veins ran a warrior blood the *karanavan* thought of the alliance as a prestigious matter for his niece and the *tharavad*. Though Kuttimalu was quite unhappy with him she had to continue the relationship till he left it in order to keep up the esteem of the *tharavad*. Her first *sambandham* makes her to think about the system and the lives of women in a matrilineal *tharavad* as this:

It is a strange life we lead, she told herself as she floated on her back. Our husbands are not really our husbands; they are merely sambandhakarans-- consorts with whom we share some nights and the call of the flesh; they fill our wombs but seldom our hearts; they come and go while we wait; when one leaves another takes his place. For a piece of cloth, he will buy the tenure to my body and if my soul craves for more, I will tell myself as my mother did and hers before that: Still you tongue and desires, girl, we Nair women keep our names and homes, isn't that enough? Shouldn't that do? Your destiny is not hitched to that of a man's. any man's. learn to accept what you receive and no more. The Nair woman's heart should never ache with expectation. Leave that to others in whom the warrior spirit has no place.

All very well to proclaim, but what do you do when you get lonely? What do you do when your man leaves and you dare not ask, when will you visit me next? This eternal waiting, that's what made you shrivel within. (31)

Her next *sambandham* was with a Brahmin of high position in society with whom she delivered a girl child to maintain the ancestry of her *tharavad*. Though the caste system allowed Nair women to enter into *sambandham* relationship with many men, the alliance was permitted only with certain communities. A woman of Nair caste could have *sambandham* with a man from Brahmin, Warrior or from Nair caste itself but strictly prohibited alliance with

any other caste and breaking of any caste laws would end up in excommunication from the community. Idris had heard much about Nair women earlier-- their freedom to move outside, their presence at the temple festivals adorned in jewelry inviting attention of men-- all were quite unimaginable for a woman of other castes in Hinduism. Manickan the gate keeper of Kuttimalu's *tharavad* describes Idris about stringent caste system.

In the month of Karkitakam, when the rain falls like a sheet all morning and night, the untouchables-- the parayan and pulayan-- will hover by these *tharavads*. If they spot a Nair woman, they hurl a stone or a twig at her. And if, heaven forbid, the stick or stone touches her, she will be excommunicated and will have to make a home with those untouchables. So which young woman, unless she is desperate or foolish, will step away from the shadow of the *tharavad*? It may not be Karkitakam but the fact is you are not one of them and what if you accidentally crossed her path? (92)

Idris, a foreign trader with whom Kuttimalu had a son Kandavar, wonders at what made Kuttimalu come out of the *tharavad* during midnight, challenging the caste laws. In her one could see the urge to break away from the regulatory caste norms while at the same time the fear of excommunication prevented her from her desired life. She had been helped by her old caretaker to hide the truth behind the fatherhood of Kandavar because an alliance with a foreign Muslim would have led to losing of her caste. She doesn't dare to go along with Idris as she is well informed about the caste laws.

Once I may have gone with you, but now there is too much at stake. They will hunt us down and slaughter us. And they will turn us into a cautionary tale. Don't trust a foreigner. Don't take him home. Don't let the women of your house anywhere near one. Don't let the children of such a cursed union survive. I cannot bear the thought of losing my child. Can you? For one night we were just us. Now there is Kandavar. Now there is only him. (96)

Anita Nair attacks *sambandham* from various points. She charges Nair women of changing men as per their whims and fancies. In the novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light* she portrays a Nair woman in Kuttimalu who was unhappy in *sambandham* and enters into a sexual act with a stranger in darkness. Through these kinds of portrayals of *sambandham* what Anita Nair wants to point out is three things. Firstly, *sambandham* is nothing more than a sexual bond. Secondly, it is an inconsistent relationship. Thirdly and most importantly, women and children were unhappy in this relationship. All these seem to point out to a modern, 'normal' and better family system called patriliney is the future.

### **Critiquing Anita Nair's Representation of Matriliney**

The kind of matrilineal past that Anita Nair portrays in her novels are born out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, colonial modernity and Nair reform movements. There were constant conscious attempts from the part of Indians to prove to the British about India's culture, tradition, ethics and morality. As part of that, *sambandham* relation and matriliney became matters of shame for the men in the family, for it is against the patrilineal values of the dominant. As Partha

Chatterjee, Susie Tharu, Tanika Sarkar, etc. point out, there was a conscious attempt to model the family/home/domestic space as an embodiment of Indian culture and ethos. As part of that, women's 'chastity' became foremost important and women became the bearers of Indian culture. As family is the basic unit of the society, the values and ethics reaffirmed in the domestic space gave a kind of comfort to Indian men among the many turmoils of the outside world where they were treated as babus, the others, the uncivilized Indian. This yearning for home we see in the male characters of Anita Nair's novels -- Sethu in *Mistress*, Mukundan in *The Better Man* are some examples. Kandavar's missing of a father in *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is also born out of this question of masculine power and nationalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When they proclaimed women as the embodiment of chastity and culture, they forcefully took away her power to take decisions, her rights over property and more importantly her space in the family by drawing strict gender roles.

The kind of education and the opportunities to visit faraway places, his knowledge about nationalism makes Sethu to despise *sambandham* and matrilineal culture. It was a period when, along with western education and lifestyles, aversion towards "undesirable" tradition was also viewed as something progressive. This dislike towards traditional *sambandham* and matriliney was initiated by the British as they failed to understand the varied cultures of India and in order to administer the country in an easier way they forced the natives to follow their ways of living. This was fulfilled by looking down at indigenous cultures and traditions like matriliney. The English educated, government

employed Nair men continued the reforms until the legal abolition of matriliney. Even though matriliney is thus eradicated legally, even now in certain parts of Kerala the matrilineal system is followed.

On being asked about the legal abolishment of matriliney Anita Nair responded that it is one good result of Nair Reform Movement. Answering a question about her opinion on women's status in matriliney she shared a story which she listened to as a child in her *tharavad*.

I don't think matriliney provided any power to women. In my childhood I listened to a story of matriliney. It is like this. A servant maid in a *tharavad* was preparing curd rice and the *Karanavan* happened to see this. Thinking it is for his sisters' children he got angry and enquired 'for whom are you heaping this much rice?' The maid replied that it is for the *Karanavan*'s own children as they, along with their mother have visited the *tharavad*. To this he replied 'put some more rice, because if added with curd the rice will be reduced to a mall ball.' Smiling mischievously Anita Nair stopped her response confirming this is the matrilineal past she is acquainted of. (Anita Nair Interview)

Hers is an adherence to colonialism and dominant Hindu patriarchy. As a student of English literature pays reverence to Lord Macaulay for initiating English education in India, Anita Nair pays gratitude to Nair Reformers and colonial government for the abolition of matriliney. The student may be forgiven for a lack of understanding about the country's colonial past but a widely read

novelist of international acclaim is expected to know her past and should position her standpoints accordingly, especially when her novels are about the same past.

Nivedita Menon shares her experience of matriliney in the following

Here's a story my mother tells from our own matrilineal past: her brother, my maternal uncle, at the age of eight, in the early 1940's, sat studying his English primer, rocking back and forth, muttering loudly, 'Family means wife and children, family means wife and children'. Their grandmother, hearing him was appalled. She raged up and down the house: 'Is this the Western nonsense they're teaching children in school now? But family means sisters and *their* children... no wonder *tharavadus* are collapsing one by one...' Bleakly, she faced a world in which brothers would abandon their families, their sisters, their nieces and nephews; a world in which a woman had nothing unless she was a wife. For her, the *tharavadu* was the natural situation; it was the patriarchal nuclear family that was a bizarre Western practice. (*Seeing* 31)

Observing the various arguments which support, oppose and critically examine the matrilineal joint family system and the status of women under that system one can conclude that matriliney is a product of social changes that came into being due to various socio-political and economic reasons. As many have assumed it did not offer any absolute power to its women although in the matriliney women enjoyed a greater freedom of mobility as compared to their equals in patriliney, given the actual condition and their consequences in the

fabric of life of times. The kind of matriliney represented in the novels of Anita Nair are the ones which assert that women and children were unhappy in matriliney. As *sambandham* relations were inconsistent (from a normative patrilineal perspective), women were made to wait for their men to visit them, their lives were spent in eternal longings and more importantly *sambandham* relation is a mere sexual bond. Anita Nair supports patrilineal modern family system and doesn't see any merit attached to indigenous matrilineal system. While the historians and sociologists who work on matriliney hold altogether a different position about matriliney Anita Nair doesn't seem to approve of matriliney at all as she thinks women and children suffered in it. For her, matriliney is a complex cultural practice that existed in the past. There is no single truth behind the history of matriliney in Kerala and multiple readings of it are always possible. What seems to be more intriguing is Anita Nair's seemingly emotional bonding to the notion of a new "normal" family, the normal being the patrilineal or patriarchal male-headed modern nuclear families. The next chapter critically examines family in Anita Nair's novels and how women and children are positioned in it.

## **Chapter III**

### **Contentions of Family and Motherhood**

The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules. In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. In the industrial world, the specific character of the economic oppression burdening the proletariat is visible in all its sharpness only when all special legal privileges of the capitalist class have been abolished and complete legal equality of both classes established. The democratic republic does not do away with the opposition of the two classes; on the contrary, it provides the clear field on which the fight can be fought out. And in the same way, the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them, and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights. Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public

industry, and that this in turn demands the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society. (Engels 39)

Frederick Engels' work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* written in 1884 is a foundation stone in understanding the modern family system in the world. Engels confirms that the study of primitive history reveals the practice of polygamy by men and polyandry by women at the same time and their common children as common to all. As society changed, these systems also have undergone changes ultimately to reach monogamy, one single pair, which is the dominant form of marriage today. The momentous feature of monogamous marriage was that it transformed the basic unit of society into nuclear family where a woman and her children became dependent upon a man; women were deteriorated to an oppressed state which is persistent even today; the descent was changed from "mother right" (matriliny) to "father right" and father power (patriarchy). Engels argues that the position of women deteriorated relatively to men as it turned to class based patriarchal society. A change in this is dependent on the abolition of private ownership. "With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases Engels writes that an appraisal of the supremacy of the husband over his wife can only be done if both possess "legally complete equality of rights" (Leacock 27) albeit it affords any solution.

Just as the legal equality of capitalist and proletarian is an evidence of economic oppression burdened on the proletariat, the legal equality between man and woman call for a fundamental change needed for the liberation of women.

Here Engels makes a revolutionary statement that in order to liberate women, one needs to bring the whole female sex into public industry which in turn, is possible only through the abolition of monogamous families. As long as family stands for private ownership of property which entails the basic economic unit in the society such a change is impossible. Engels mentions the Nair community of Kerala to evidence how the status of women deteriorated as a result of the transition from matriliney to patriliney that happened in community. The colonial administration along with Nair Reform Movements led to the division of property among other social and economic change, owned by all members of the *tharavad*, into individual properties which resulted in the formation of nuclear family units comprising husband, wife and their children.

While talking about the politics behind the concept of family Judith Stacey observes that in classic patriarchy women accept subordination in exchange for protection and secure social status. Whereas the “modern patriarchy sugarcoats this exchange by wrapping it in an ideology of separate spheres and romantic love” (91). According to Stacey the concept of contemporary family construes marital commitment as a product of the free will and passions of two equal individuals who are drawn to each other by romantic attraction and complementary emotional needs. But the domestic division of labour makes women subordinate to men quite apart from their individual desires (93). In her words:

Under the guise of a separate but equal division of labour between male breadwinners and female homemakers, women and children

became increasingly dependent upon the earnings of men. The nineteenth century gave rise to cults of “true womanhood,” celebrating womanhood and maternalism. This generated conceptions of femininity that continue to infuse Western family ideology. The development of analogous doctrines about the “tender years” of young children who need a specifically maternal form of love and care began to undermine earlier legal doctrines, which had treated children as patriarchal property. (92)

She argues that a clear perspective of a contemporary family turmoil will be possible only by recognizing contradictions inherent in the ideology, principles and practices of the modern family system. While considering different forms of patriarchies and how women have dealt with them sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti observes that women strategize within a set of concrete constraints and she terms it patriarchal bargain. She explains that she coined the term to convey the complex and difficult compromise that works out in patriarchy. As she puts it “it is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated” (148). She uses the word bargain to show the asymmetrical exchange where women bargain from a weaker position.

In her article “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space” Mary Douglas defines home as “so a home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has

aesthetic and moral dimensions (289). The domain of home is often overburdened by social definitions especially that of a female space. The notion home is generally preceded by the adjective 'sweet'. This chapter tries to analyze how sweet these homes are for women and children by examining the works of Anita Nair. The chapter poses the question what makes a home? Or what is a home? A home conceived to be an embryonic community where our body and mind are protected and nurtured, where one can expect loyal support and inner sources of strength, where children are loved and nurtured with care, prepares them for better job markets and as ideal citizens. Thus it is believed/expected to be a place/space where people are living in harmony whereas this harmony is achieved through the politics of power. I refer to Foucault's concept of power to substantiate this argument. Through this chapter I try to analyze how the discourse of power works through the medium of home and how women and children succumb, respond, engage with or challenge this power. I examine how the stereotypical notions of home are acted out to achieve the so called solidarity it symbolizes and how social identities are formed out of it. I also try to understand the gender and power relations as played in the micro space of home.

Michael Foucault who was interested in the knowledge and the power that acts on human beings argues that the discourse of knowledge/power works through language. He says when a child learns to speak she picks up the basic knowledge and rules of her culture at the same time. On his idea of power Foucault contemplates that "power is possessed; it flows from a centralized source from top to bottom and, it is repressive in its exercise (a prohibition

backed by sanctions)” (28). Foucault argued that process of gendering and power begins from the very beginning of a child who learns to speak a language. In the same manner, Luce Irigaray argues against the patriarchal set up of a home and demands that women should develop an *écriture feminine* to express their views outside the prevalent language constructed by men. Drawing upon Foucault’s concept of power, an attempt is made here to analyze how patriarchy enjoys power over home- its women and children. Foucault looks at power as something which is beyond the state or the class of people to that of something which is exercised at a ‘microcosmic level’. Family or home is this microcosmic level where the members and their relationships formed through power relations. The domestic space has been one of the most oppressive space where women and children are subordinated to patriarchal power.

Given the above framework the present chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the concept of home as a gendered space and the second part examines how the ideal of motherhood is worked in this gendered space as an instrument of patriarchy. The novels taken for discussion in this chapter are *Lessons in Forgetting*, *Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man*. These three novels by Anita Nair have the themes of family, motherhood and childhood intertwined with the plot of the novel. For ages it has been an internalized fact that women are house-keepers and nurturers to children whereas men are breadwinners. As Linda Jones puts it in her dissertation,

In spite of years of feminist consciousness, I assert that the hierarchal relation between genders has not changed significantly.

The notion persists that home and family belong to a woman's sphere, rather than being a joint responsibility. Some societal attitudes that currently prevail are that women marry and lead conventional home-centered lives, the home being the terrain where the woman's traditional roles of domesticity, nurturance and subservience are still expected to be fulfilled as a natural function of her womanhood. (9)

Generally, patriarchy refers to the rule of the male head of a family where the eldest male member enjoys control over every other member in the family. During the twentieth century patriarchy became fundamentally important concept in gender studies and it has been theorized to understand male subordination over women. In radical feminism family is identified as a key for patriarchal power. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan refer to S. Walby's views on patriarchy as:

a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Walby identifies six structures of patriarchy (household production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, culture) that together are argued to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of women's subordination. Her theory of patriarchy also allows for change over historical time. Walby argues that, in Britain during the twentieth century, patriarchy changed from the 'private' form to the 'public' form. Private patriarchy is based around the family

and the household and involves individual men exploiting the labour of individual women. Women are largely confined to the household sphere and have limited participation in public life. In public patriarchy, women are not excluded from public life but face inequality and discrimination within it, for example, in paid work. For Walby, the feminist movement was a key factor in bringing about the change from private to public patriarchy, via the struggle for the vote, for access to education and to the professions, to have legal rights of property ownership, rights in marriage and divorce and so on. However, patriarchy itself was and is not defeated. Walby says that it has merely changed its form so that now, as she puts it, rather than being restricted to the household, women have ‘the whole of society in which to roam and be exploited’. (95)

The chapter, taking up Walby’s observation on private patriarchy, aims at a critique on home and its occupants. How the concepts of home, motherhood and childhood function in a patriarchal set up to enforce power over women and children. It tries to expose the idea of a father, somebody who protects the women and children from the outside world, mother who is an embodiment of unconditional love and care and children who are to be loved and protected from all sorts of exploitation and has to be nurtured to be successful in their life, which is possible only with the help of a ‘sweet home.’ One of the questions this chapter asks is this- how this make-believe home and its relationships produce a

male dominated place by restricting the women's and children's spaces? The chapter analyses how homes have shaped women's and children's identities as per the needs of patriarchy. Barbara Welter in her *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, proposes that assigning qualities to women such as the embodiment of unconditional love towards their children alleviated the anxiety of men. For they could travel long and stay away from home peacefully by keeping women at home to take care of the children.

Until the 1970s the word 'gender' was used to demarcate between the biological sex difference and to assign the behavior either as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. The purpose behind such assignment of gender roles was patriarchy's agenda to create a consciousness among women to internalize the idea of domesticity as their primary choice. In *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), Ann Oakley proposes that 'Western culture exaggerates gender differences and gender roles, centers around women as housewife and mother and warns that anybody who moves away from such roles is actually hampering one's happiness. She further opines that 'gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and being a contested political term'. (2) As Simon de Beauvoir's famous statement goes 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman', (8) the hierarchical opposition between the sexes were consciously drawn out to favour the masculine principle where the feminine becomes the 'other' or the 'second sex'. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) suggests that:

patriarchy exploits women's biological capacity to reproduce as their essential weakness. The only way for women to break away from the oppression, she argues, is to use technological advances to free themselves from the burden of childbirth. Moreover, she advocates breaking down the biological bond between mothers and children and establishing communes where monogamy and the nuclear family are things of the past. (57)

Home is a physical and a mental space where one finds shelter to both the body and the mind. As T. Chapman puts it 'home can be defined as a secure, private, physical retreat from the world; as a representation of identity; as a relationship and as a cultural object'. (19) Thus home is something which we imagine as a place of our dreams and a refuge from the outer reality. In this sense it protects one from the public gaze. If the physical home is constructed by bricks and concrete the mental imagination of a home is constructed by the relationship between its members. Thus home is more what we imagine than what actually it is. If one imagines it in terms of a secure place so it is. In the same way if one imagines it as a threat to one's identity that is also right. A home need not necessarily fulfill the ideal of 'a safe haven' all the time. It can be as horrifying or frightening place as one imagines of a Nazi Concentration Camp. Binarism and overriding power of patriarchy at home has been a major focus of this research. It is an attempt to disturb the time long concept of man the provider, woman the housewife and children the dependent trio in order to understand its

inner mechanisms. While talking about the equal rights for members of a family Patricia Oberoi opines that

Indeed, few realistic observers of contemporary family life would anticipate that policies that 'aim at fostering equality between men and women within families and to bring about the fuller sharing of domestic responsibilities and employment opportunities' will make the family a more stable institution—at least not in the short run—for the furtherance of welfare functions and state policy objectives. On the contrary, under present conditions in many societies, such restructuring is likely to make the family a site of conflict and contestation, rather than of cooperation and conciliation. (141)

She adds that the sexual inequality that exists within the family is the basic reason for the inequality in the society in India. Therefore, a change from authoritative to democratic society would be possible only through the abolition of patriarchal families. Sharmila Sreekumar in her work *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'Dominant' Women in Kerala* opines that

Family and domesticity have been endlessly put into social discourse. The overruling fear, often bluntly expressed, is that combative and competitive domestic women would detrimentally affect the balance of power within domesticity. Their constant battle, it is feared, would erode and exhaust man's power to define terms, thus leading to inevitable collapse and destruction. If a

century earlier, anxious energies were being expended on the break-up of the joint family, today what generates comparable trauma is the perceived breaking up of monogamous nuclear domesticity. There are chat shows on television, scholarly documentation and studies, magazine reports and articles that discuss the catastrophic increase in rates of divorce, in the numbers of unmarried women and in incidence of splintered households. The domestic woman gets summoned in these discourses as both cause and cure of the present predicament. Her ideality turns out to be at once a durable commonsense that requires no elaboration and a beleaguered one that needs to be endlessly constituted, corrected and fortified. Discourses of contemporary domesticity therefore, expend tremendous space and obsessive energy on the renewed construction of the ordinary woman. (235-236)

J. Giles asserts that the homologies of the modern meanings of 'home' are organized around key oppositions--home/away, stasis/movement, everyday/exceptional, private/public, traditional/modern, dependence/independence, feminine/masculine' (37). These binaries got more complicated when new structures and relationships were enacted at home. It shifted from a heterosexual relationship with their dependent children to same-sex associations and at times children living with single parent. In such situations cultural norms pressurize these individuals to conform to the societal

rules, barring them from being different from the majority. In resisting such conventions, one finds them to be at the displeasure of the guardians of conventions. 'In view of these changes, the home for many has again been re-established as a haven of self-displacement and expression - a safe haven in which expectations are no longer anticipated and the home is redefined as largely conflict-free.'" (39) The two instances from the novels shows how this moving away from norms by individuals in a society is treated by the society and how the individuals respond to it differently.

In the novel *Ladies Coupe*, the family of Sarasa is excommunicated by the Brahmin community as they deviated from the societal norms after her husband's death. The sudden demise of Subramanya Iyer left the family poor and in order to meet both the ends Sarasa had to send her eldest daughter Jaya took to work as a prostitute. Soon the Brahmin community who were unwilling to extend any kind of help excommunicated them from their circle and they had to leave the place. Akhila, who was a childhood friend of Jaya, questions her own mother for not helping Sarasa's family and she held the Brahmin community including herself and her mother responsible for Sarasa's present condition. To this her mother replies that "I wish it weren't so. But when one lives in a society, one has to conform to its expectations. I am not one of those revolutionaries who can stand up to the world. I am a simple woman. A widow. And I need to belong to the society we live in." (83) This is the common response of the society to the so called 'aberrant' behaviors. Sarasa had searched for all other kinds of jobs before

sending her daughter to this profession in order to feed the younger ones and she replies to the neighbor who came to advise her

You tell me now. I am willing to work. Do any kind of work to earn a living. I went to each one of the houses in the neighborhood and asked if anyone wanted a maid. And everyone behaved just like you did. Giving me a handful of rice as though I were a beggar woman and then shooing me away. If I was younger, I would have sold myself to keep my family fed and clothed. But this is tired flesh. No man has any use for it. (82)

Taking another instance from the same novel, the story of Karpagam is another moving away from such kind of binaries. Karpagam is Akhila's childhood friend who was looked after by her mother. It's she who motivates Akhila to live a life of her own without being afraid of society's concerns. At first Akhila thought of Karpagam as a woman who 'radiated content' (199). To her Karpagam represented happiness, content and all other familial happiness because she is married and she has a family of her own and Akhila failed to have a family of her own even though she is working. Later she realized that happiness is not something one can have after possessing all one wants but being able to be happy in what one has. And Karpagam too has her own share of miseries to tell irrespective of her ability to be happy. Karpagam is a woman who dares to live life as she pleases rather than how the society expects a widow to live and she asks Akhila to choose to live a life of her own. To Akhila,

Karpagam's words give much inspiration and courage to make many decisions in life.

You are wondering how is it I still wear the kumkum and these colourful clothes? Would you rather that I dressed in white and went about looking like a corpse ready for the funeral pyre? I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me, didn't we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewelry and bottu? It isn't a privilege that marriage sanctions. The way I look at it, it is natural for a woman to want to be feminine. It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men. (202)

In both these stories women move away from patriarchal societal norm in order to find their own ways of living independently rather than choosing what the society has expected them to do. This moving away from the set binaries makes the society more complicated and difficult to deal with for the patriarchal powers. Both these women are not informed of any kind of theories of enlightenment but they chose to live a life of their own rather than the one of despair and inconsideration.

In order to understand what a home is, one has to get an idea about homelessness. The contrast is between the privileged people who have a home

and the homeless- dispossessed, outcast or exiled who are left without a place to situate themselves or any sense of belonging. Despite being constrained by home; one has a feeling of homelessness, nowhere to base or place oneself. This happens because there exist multiple identities within the micro space of home. There are the expected, desirable and fulfilled roles of a daughter, wife and mother and there is one's own search to own an individuality and identity. This will reconstruct the whole stereotypical notions of a home. Home is not just a shelter for food and accommodation but it is the place where one's personal and cultural identities took shape. 'The term homeless means the absence of a sense of place.' (78). In Indian families children are educated both formally and informally about their roles as grownups in the family. While a girl is trained to become a good homemaker, a boy is educated to find a livelihood. Though there have been changes over these years, even a highly educated working woman's primary responsibility is expected to be a good mother and a wife. In a society where marriage and child bearing are given as the first priority for a woman home plays a vital role.

In Marie-Anne Casselot's "Dwelling Trouble: A Feminist Critique of Heidegger's Concept of the Home", she discusses Iris Marion Young's essay home and the two different approaches taken by the feminists on the concept of home. One stand point views home and homemaking as something negative which controlled women's movement in the society. Women's work has been made invisible or devalued in a male dominated society. Housekeeping and other familial duties takes away women's self as an individual in the society. On the

other hand, Young also presents feminists who advocate for a “critical acceptance of homemaking as a milieu to develop agency and one’s sense of identity”. (11) In such a situation Young proposes her idea about home as:

The appropriate response to this fact of privilege is not to reject the values of home, but instead to claim those values for everyone. Feminists should criticize the nostalgic use of home that offers a permanent respite from politics and conflict, and which continues to require of women that they make men and children comfortable. But at the same time, feminist politics calls for conceptualizing the positive values of home and criticizing a global society that is unable or unwilling to extend those values to everyone. (11)

The home in Anita Nair’s novel is a male dominated space where most women try to fit themselves into an umpteen numbers of norms which are there to restrict women. Though at the outset there seem to be gender equal spaces her home and its inmates are the byproducts of patriarchy. A house gets a meaning of a home by the way the members feel about it. This gives meaning to a physical house that of a mental home. The concept of a home varies from person to person in the way one imagines about it. Thus the meaning of a home is attributive. In the case of Giri in *Lessons in Forgetting*, a home is the lilac house and the material prospects attached to it. To a small town born Giri the lilac house-the huge, old house at the heart of the city and its inmates are an embodiment of aristocracy, culture, wealth and elegance. For that matter, to him

marrying the young girl of the lilac house was the first step in the social ladder to reach the aristocracy. For Meera, home is that perfect place which assures peace, safety, love and care. Giri turns this as a tool to exert his power over the family by providing economic and emotional security. Thus the studious and ambitious Meera is entangled in the spell of patriarchy to become an ideal society lady who will match up to her corporate husband. For him wife is someone who is fragile and delicate so that needs to be well taken care of. She remains as the 'pet goose' or 'goose girl of the Lilac house' who plays around with her two children protected by her husband. Her life seems to be perfect and she flaunts away her roles of the cook book writer and that of an ideal wife until Giri leaves her for another relationship. Here Meera reminds one of Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* where a crisis leads her to undertake a search for a space of her own. Through marriage Giri has got control over the Lilac house and over Meera's body, the two things which he believed will make him successful in life. He considers both his property and, when he realized he had no say on the selling of the house he walked out of their marriage too. This crisis faced by the Malayali men can be read in connection with the life of men in the erstwhile matrilineal system prevailed among the Nair community in Kerala. Historian Praveena Kodoth observes that the legal abolition of matriliney was beneficial for the Nair men who were facing a crisis of authority and control. Kodoth claims that 'the reform in matriliney was also an attempt to produce 'men' out of those who lived as useless entities under matrilineal system.' (*Shifting* 6) Ratheesh

Radhakrishnan in his doctoral thesis exemplifies this by citing O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* which is widely thought as the first novel in Malayalam.

O Chandu Menon's much discussed novel *Indulekha* (1889) is an example of a narrative that demonstrates how the social reform context during the turn of the century in Malabar was also a period of radical refashioning of Nair male identity. Madhavan, the hero of the novel, is pitted against the decadent Suri Nambudiripad, a Brahmin, whose 'unacceptable' sexual advances are facilitated by matriliney. It is worth noting, as an aside, that even the mobility that Nair men seem to have developed over the years is modelled on Madhavan's experiences outside Kerala. Madhavan could be seen as the prototype of the Nair man as represented in later writings in Kerala. (219)

Radhakrishnan adds that men were not completely at disadvantage in matriliney as the *karanavan* or the male head of the *tharavad* and some nephews enjoyed certain powers. Matriliney had a very complicated structure and power relations and it can't be said that the shift from matriliney to patriliney or patriarchy is a parallel shift of power from women to men. Both men and women had certain benefits and disadvantages being in matriliney. To Giri, who belonged to a deteriorated Nair family, Meera was a stepping-stone to climb the social ladder.

He thought of the riches laid out before him. A bride with social graces and a beautiful old home. A grandmother who referred to

Sir Richard Attenborough and Satyajit Ray in the same breath. A mother who breathed finesse. Giri had never known such people before. He thought of his father in his yellowing banian and dhothi in Palakkad. He thought of the old decrepit house and relatives as stringy and penurious as his father. Giri had made careful plans about where he would be by the time he was thirty, forty, forty-five... thereafter would be the playing fields of his life. To accomplish this, he needed to round off the edges that still clung to him from the small town, lower middle class boy he was. Meera would make this possible, he knew with certainty. Meera, who exuded upper-class dom like the L'iar du temps she wore. Discreet, elegant, and old money. (Anita Nair, *Lessons* 40-41)

He eyed the Lilac house, the ancient mansion symbolizing past glory, which is situated at the heart of the city with three generations of women staying there. By marrying Meera he takes the ownership of not only the house but the inmates too thus duplicating the role of the *karanavan* in a Nair *tharavad*. "All I could think of was, how am I going to get my foot into this door? I was the prince inching around the enchanted house, seeking to find a way in." (36) All his hopes vanished as the three women disagreed to sell the house to move to an apartment and Giri's dream of starting a business of his own remain unfulfilled. This made him walk out of the marriage all of a sudden in an evening to move to a new city with a new and younger wife. This male anxiety can be read as a reminiscent of old matrilineal male anxiety and as Radhakrishnan pointed out the

mobility and experiences with which Giri goes through are modelled upon the prototype of Madhavan in *Indulekha*.

Henrik Ibsen, considered to be the father of modern drama, attacks the stereotypical notions about a woman through his masterpiece, *The Doll's House* (1902), through the character of Nora Helmer. The plot revolves around the house of Mr Torvald Helmer and his family where he is the master and his wife is yet another child for him to be taken care of. She is expected to look after the children and family while he handles more serious things like financial matters. These role-plays are necessary to keep up any family life "successful" and any small deviation from this line breaks the tension of patriarchy. Later to an angry Helmer Nora reveals that she can no longer play around him as his doll and walks out of the home leaving the door open. In the novel *Lessons in Forgetting*, one could see the same Nora in Meera who plays the role of a wife in the society circle and that of a goose girl to her husband so long as he was there at the lilac house. According to Cheryl Walker, in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa* (1990), one of the means by which men control women in a male dominated society is by giving them a well-defined but circumscribed position within society to which some honour and respectability are attached. (121)

Family is an institution with a legal identity, and the State recognizes as a family, only a specific set of people related in a specific way. It is not only the law that defines 'family'- extra-legally too, you are forced into being part of a family which is strictly defined in this narrow way. A 'family' can only be a

patriarchal, heterosexual family: a man, his wife, 'his' children. The family, as it exists, is based on clearly-established hierarchies of gender and age, with gender trumping age; that is, an adult male is generally more powerful than an older female. Thus the family, as an institution, is based on inequality; its function is to perpetuate particular forms of private property ownership and lineage- that is, patrilineal forms of property and descent, where the property and the family 'name' flow from father to sons. (Menon, *Seeing* 5-6)

The above quoted passage shows what is a family in modern sense. Even after a long period of feminist consciousness the hierarchical relation between genders has not changed much. The everlasting notion of home is that it belongs to a woman's field rather than a joint responsibility. Women are brought up as future wives by her parents and after marriage she is expected to lead a home-centred life revolving around domesticity, nurturance and subservience. In *Lessons in Forgetting* Jak, the scientist who moved to USA from Tamil Nadu remembers his childhood with his mother after father's departure for sanyasa. He saw his mother feeling guilty for not being a good wife to satisfy his father's wishes while Jak felt he failed as a good son. The structure of family is thus drawn around the actions of the man in the family while the women and children succumb to their given roles. Jak's mother later regrets:

I clung to him. I shouldn't have. When people stop loving each other, they shouldn't stay together. It doesn't do any good. I

should have understood his unhappiness. I should have let him go when he first wanted to. A year after you were born. But how could I? the child needs a father, I pleaded. I need a husband, I wanted to say but didn't. Your father wouldn't have let that hold him back. But you... I bought time with you. And I did everything I could to please him, but it only seemed to make him resent me more. (169)

One's idea of a home is how she/he imagines it and time plays a major role in it. Time makes one feel nostalgic about things which one did not care much. When there is no home to depend upon one tends to nurture ideal memories about one's past home. The things/places which were quite unimportant once, gains prominence and certain omissions are made to fix the romantic ideal about one's past home. In the novel *Lessons in Forgetting* Jak and Nina met in the United States. They wanted to get married soon as they were likeminded people who missed India, their homeland, amidst their professional life. The marriage soon ended in divorce as the well accomplished professionals could not get along well with their ego and their two daughters are deeply hurt by this. Smriti, the eldest one who stayed with her father was brought up a with carefully edited version of his childhood back in Minjikapuram, a village in Tamilnadu. It is this imaginary home of Jak that his daughter goes in search. The divorce of their parents affected them so much that his children never trusted them anymore. She chooses to study in India to experience the life she had heard from her father as if to compensate the void she felt after her parent's separation.

Later Jak helplessly realizes that he and his daughter had gone through the same void after their parent's separation.

This was a Nina quick to anger. With every day the rift widened, until they lived strangers to each other's dreams and bodies.

He wouldn't cling as his mother had. He wouldn't wait till she left like Appa had. He wouldn't make his daughters ever wonder, 'Is it our fault?' He only wanted for them what he couldn't have. Stability. In whatever form he could provide.

But as he sought consolation, Smriti too sought hers. In a faux family, to compensate for the one that Nina and he weren't able to provide. (170)

Here both Jak and his elder daughter feel for home as a refuge and go in search of it. Whereas Nina, his wife and Shruti, the younger daughter, seem to be getting along with their new ways of life. The way Jak chooses to remember his past and how he presents it to Smriti is what led to the ultimate shift in their lives. Whenever Jak faces frictions with Nina he goes back to his village life for solace which he alters in his own way before telling it to Smriti. While the father makes peace with his present through this romanticizing of his past, the daughter goes in search of her father's village to escape from the present familial problems. After reaching India Smriti realized the family and the village life in India doesn't match with the way her father created in her mind. One of the acquaintance she made on her visit to the village government hospital made her

grow suspicions about the working of the hospital. Her secret inquiries on the women in the neighboring villages made her to see the appalling rate of illegal female foeticide conducted in the hospital, which showed her the shocking reality within the families in that village.

Jancy James observes that certain sections of women in Kerala had received a long period of informal tutoring even when they were not given any formal education. Many of them were trained in Sanskrit, Classics and Classical music (98). But these accomplishments were not expected to be expressed in public and were considered as male possession. Tanika Sarkar in her work *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation* (2003) identifies that towards the end of the nineteenth century the focus of the Hindu nationalist agenda shifted from human relationships to social service and patriotism. In order to understand the political sphere of the nationalism one need to understand the politics of relationships within the family. As Sarkar points out, the home then had to substitute for the world outside and the head of the family ruled the home as the king ruled his kingdom.

‘Just as the King reigns over his dominion, so the head of the household (karta) rules over his household’ (Narayan Ray, *Bangamahila*). The karta, therefore, becomes within the home what he can never aspire to be outside it-- a ruler, an administrator, a legislator or a chief justice, a general marshalling his troops. Apart from compensatory functions, the strategic placement of the home assumes other functions as well. The

management of household relations becomes a political and administrative capability, providing training in governance that one no longer attains in the political sphere. The intention is to establish a claim to a share of power in the world, a political role that the Hindu is entitled to, via successful governance of the household...If home was not merely an escape from this world but its critique and an alternative order in itself, then love and affect had to be the organizing principle of this inner, hidden nation, and the exercise of power needed to be replaced with the notion of self-surrender and general self-fulfillment. Household relations had to be shown as supra-political ones, relations of power represented as purely emotional states. (38-39)

The governance of the household through various powers rendered the household relations into political ones. Anita Nair does this in her novels like *Mistress*, *Lessons in Forgetting* etc. Relationships in the family in these novels are based on power though they may appear as emotional bondings.

Through an examination of Anita Nair's novels, we see how stereotypical notions of home are continued to be enacted through role-play and how social identities are formed out of it. Meera, Jak's mother and many women in the world were forced to accept the family they live in for they never moved away from the societal norms. It's been tuned that women have no life without their husbands. I have seen many men claim proudly as to how their mother never stepped out of the house without their father! It's been internalized in the minds

of women that they have no existence without a husband. Their only connection to the society is through the identity as someone's wife and even a modern, urban woman like Meera is not free from this.

A woman alone is an awkward creature, or so it appears. A bedside table missing its companion. A lone kitchen glove. You could make do, but it really isn't seemly. Where do you seat her if it is a sit-down meal? If she has come with an escort, that's all right then. But if she is alone, you alternate between having to watch out for her and watching for her so that she doesn't sink her predatory claws into your spouse. Pity is one thing. And yes, sisterhood is key. Women have to be there for women. So you have her over for a coffee morning or drinks... but for a whole evening, she is best avoided.  
(Anita Nair: 206)

Home is a space where all issues regarding one's individuality and identity get shaped and formulated in course of time within the larger institution of family. A conjugal relationship is the one where women are subordinate to men to fulfill their duties as a wife. Kala Chithi, Jak's aunt, who dared to sever the ties of family and chose to live a life of her own tells Meera how the patriarchal society runs its norms by underlining the significance of a husband.

You see, Meera, we are brought up to believe that our husband is our god. His wishes are our ours, and without him we are nothing. There is a saying, *Kal analum kanavan, pull analum purushan*. Whether he

is hard as a rock or as worthless as a weed, a husband is a husband.  
Can you make life without your husband? (200)

I realized then that they held Akka responsible for her husband leaving her. She just wasn't a good enough wife, one who could keep her husband at her side. She was a failed woman. My sister, who had taken to being a wife as though it was the calling of her life. 'He left her to become a sanyasi; it wasn't as if he went off with another woman. How can you hold her responsible for that?' I spluttered in my anguish. I had never been as afraid as I was then. A word of support for my sister would have given me some courage. One word of anger on her behalf and I would have known that if anything went wrong in my life, they would encompass me with their love, their strength.

But they wouldn't speak. Like Akka, I would be on my own if I didn't make my husband happy. My destiny was linked to his. I had no life to call my own. I was nothing my own. (220)

The above quoted passage is a typical example of women in a patriarchal family where a woman's life is decided by the doings of her husband. Here Kala shares the story of how her elder sister is blamed for her husband's leaving the house though she had no role in it. The male dominated society would never find any fault with the man but all wrong goes to the women. This subordination of women to men, and the family name and culture being the responsibility of men was forcefully implemented during the nineteenth century during colonialism.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” traces the politics behind the concept of home. To overcome the western domination, the colonized people in India had to present the superior things in their own culture. This was done mainly by ‘rationalizing and reforming the ‘traditional’ culture of their people’. The celebration of Indian culture and traditions in the works of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu etc. were part of this. Indian nationalists argue that other than material aspects of the West one need not imitate the West for the East is more spiritual than the West. In order to highlight this superiority, the inner/outer distinctions were reinstated for they believed that so long as they retain its culture one could adapt to the modern material world without losing the real identity. As Chatterjee points out “the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world-- and woman is its representation. (238)

The dichotomy of materialism and spirituality corresponded with outer/inner or home/world distinctions. The world is the outer where the western material power subjugated the country whereas the inner space or home is unaffected by these things and keeps calm with spirituality. “In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one’s very identity.” (Chatterjee 239) Hence, home became the site where resides the national culture and it became the women’s responsibility to safeguard its culture without any deviations. As defined the woman became subjected to patriarchy which uphold the traditional Indian

woman as opposed to the modern west. The construction of the 'new' ideal woman with all feminine virtues was thus the nationalist agenda which had been followed and propagated by the educated women too. Education for women was primarily to train in them all feminine qualities and entry to the outer world is allowed as long as it did not lose her femininity. As nationalism located its subjectivity in culture and women as its embodiment they ignored the issue of female emancipation and no history could record this.

The domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized was the home, and the real history of that change can be constructed only out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings and such other cultural artefacts that depict life in middle- class homes. It is impossible that in the considerable transformation of the middle- class home in India in the last hundred years, women played a wholly passive part, for even the most severe system of domination seeks the consent of the subordinate as an autonomous being. (Chatterjee 250)

Nivedita Menon critiques the way patriarchy owns the fatherhood of a child while the mother is just an instrument to make a man a father. To maintain patriarchal power woman's sexuality has to be strictly controlled and this is a permanent anxiety of the patriarchal men. Menon cites the famous dictum here 'motherhood is a biological fact; fatherhood is a sociological fiction.' While discussing the changing forms of the 'Hindu' family Menon states that the most

practiced form of present day family-- nuclear, patriarchal and patrilineal where the descent is followed through the male members-- is not a natural one which always existed in all parts of India but something which had been constructed through the passage of human civilization. The key feature of patriarchal family is the form of marriage where a girl has been married off to a man with a lot of dowry with limited rights as wife. Thereafter at her own family she is no more than a guest. She cites an example from her own life which is opposite to this kind of a modern family set up.

In the Nair community of Kerala that I come from, until my grandmother's generation we were matrilineal. A normal household (*tharavad*) for my grandmother meant sisters and brothers living with the sisters' children, and these children's fathers would continue to live with their own sisters. (23)

Here Menon talks about the matrilineal system of Nairs in Kerala which was legally abolished by the joint ventures of Nair male elites and the colonial government. Her appraisal of various laws--The Hindu Code Bills of 1955 and 1956, Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956 and Special Marriage Act-- passed to protect the interests of Hindu women reveals the conflict between the imperatives of the state and those of the family. Praveena Kodoth in her essay "Courting Legitimacy or Delegitimizing Custom? Sexuality, *Sambandham* and Marriage Reform in Late-Nineteenth Century Malabar" discloses how with the passing of Hindu Succession Act, Nair woman's right to her natal property had

been eliminated (349-384). The Act shifted the rights of sister to the wife by indirectly denying her independent existence. The patriarchal colonial government along with the Nair reformers initiated western family system in place of indigenous family system by making the woman as 'wife' to somebody. Thus the patriarchal family become the natural family system in India. As Menon points out the three interlinked features of 'Indian family' are "patriarchy (power distributed along gender and age hierarchies, but with adult men trumping older women), patriliney (property and name passing from father to son); and virilocality (wife moving to the husband's home)." (32) All these make a woman subordinate to man in patriarchy.

The family is an institution that rigidly enforces the system of inheritance and descent and in this structure, individuals-sons, daughters, wives, husbands- are resources that are strictly bound by the violence, implicit and explicit, of this frame. We tend to take this frame for granted, and it becomes obscenely visible only in extraordinary circumstances. (49)

The socially constructed difference between man and woman were the main source of female oppression. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Simon de Beauvoir argues that the historical and contemporary theories of gender consider masculinity as a positive norm and femininity as a deviation from the ideal masculine (813). This resulted in women being the 'other' or the 'second sex'. From the biblical time onwards women are believed as being made out of man and thus given a subordinate status. Women are always defined and

differentiated with men and any such deviation make them different from the ideal masculine and tag them as the 'other' or the 'second sex'. Within the framework of male dominated home space there are women who often try to use the possibilities of this space when all other spaces are inaccessible to her. Margaret Shanthi in *Ladies Coupe*, is one such woman. She begins her story to her co-passengers during the train journey as follows:

God didn't make Ebenezer Paulraj a fat man. I did.

I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with the sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundation of his being. To rid this world of a creature who if allowed to remain the way he was, slim, lithe and arrogant, would continue to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy. (96)

The male pride along with power and a physically fit body was an embodiment of male dominance at work and home. Ebenezer Paulraj is the principal of a school. Using power over students and at home through strict discipline and harsh punishments were the exercise of patriarchal power over women's body and children's future. Paulraj's resolution to have a fit body is refuted by Margaret as protest against this patriarchy since no other choice of retaliation was left for her. It was a transformation of "an untainted, clean, little lovely darling with no big bouncy breasts and horrible woman's bush" (111) to a woman of "folded flesh, unclear lines, sagging muscles and woman's bush" (133). It is through her body she retaliates to the male power. Her inner space of

home and kitchen becomes her weapon to respond to patriarchy and she accomplishes what she wishes for.

Ebe slowly became a fat man. A quiet man. An easy man. A man who no longer needed the coterie or defaced books. A man whose fondness for eating blunted his razor edge. Since I was the one who appease his appetite, he sought me more and more. I tantalized his appetite for food and occasionally for sex, in every which way I knew. He needed me like he had never before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again... while Ebe remained fat, there were no adrenaline surges; no power struggles. All was quiet and calm and watered down in our lives. (134)

Here the male-female power structure has been subverted by demeaning the things what one proud of. Food has been used as the medium through which the woman achieves it. It is through these kinds of “small” resistances women use their agency to work within their own limited spheres. For Margaret, food was the medium to resist the dominance. For Parukkuty in *The Better Man*, using power over her own property is the resistance whereas Kalachithi in *Lessons in Forgetting* resists through cutting away her long hair as a protest against and liberation from patriarchy. What all these point out is that all these ways of resistances against male dominance inside home contributes to the subversion of liberation of women.

According to Chris Weedon, the author of *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*, “power relations rest on the social meanings given to

biological sexual difference and include the sexual division of labour, the socialisation of individuals in gender roles through such institutions as the nuclear family, educational systems and the media and the internalized norms of femininity which govern people's behaviour and identity.” (8) Against the popular saying ‘one’s biology determines one’s destiny’, feminists have been attempting to subvert the gender roles by questioning the so called natural order. Judith Butler in her key work *Gender Trouble* (1990), argues that the process of ‘girling’ or ‘boying’ begins at the very day of calling a child a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ and it is repeatedly reinforced by using performatives. In every culture the ideas about gender help to formulate different forms of beliefs and practices. The concept of gender is the main constitutive element in a person’s sense of self and how he socializes in a culture. This identity first gets formulated in the micro space of home.

In the context of the selected novels, I try to unravel the concept of home through the lives of women and children in the private domestic sphere. It includes women’s struggles against the imposed gendered norms which define certain codes of behavior to be followed by her in a patriarchal system. In Anita Nair’s novel *Ladies Coup*, one could see how Akhilandeswhwari or Akhila, one of the five protagonists in the novel is trapped and controlled by the patriarchal norms of femininity, vegetarianism and domesticity. The idea of home and domesticity impedes her as a woman from following her dreams (even her dream of having a home of her own). To acquire the independence which she enjoys towards the end of the novel (even to take a journey of her own), she has to

relinquish her formerly close adherence to religion, and ideals pertaining to familial home. In the train journey she reveals her life story to her co-passengers without any hesitation. It is a breakaway from what and how she used to be so far (reserved, homely). She tells them her age which is quite unexpected of a woman specially if she is unmarried. All these indicate her decision to move away from how she used to be so long. Akhila contemplates over her mother's theories on wifely duties. To her a woman's husband is her master and she is supposed to put his interests prior to anyone's in the world.

‘There is no such thing as an equal marriage,’ Amma said. ‘It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man's role. Or the gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage?’ (14)

Her perceptions on womanly duties make her disapprove Karpagam's mother who earns a livelihood by teaching dance. To Akhila's question of ‘Can a woman live by herself?’ (23) to co-passengers in the ladies' compartment -the other five women- shared their life stories. Janaki, the oldest among the group wonders why one needs to think of living by herself when there is always a man ready to take care of her. She adds that “our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by

themselves.” (23) She had been taken care of by her father and later after marriage by her husband so well that she could find no reason why one should think of living life all alone. Sheela the 14-year-old girl shared the story of her grandmother the matrilineal head of her taravdu. She was a strong woman who urged Sheela to be like her, the one who never live to please others but one’s self and lived a life of her own until her death.

At first I thought I would pretend to my family that I had talked to several people before I decided that I could live by myself. But one night, I woke up with a start. My heart was hammering in my chest and I was paralysed by a nameless fear. How can I? I asked myself. How can I who have never spent a week away from my family survive a future alone? What do I know of running a household? I mean, I have never been responsible for the everyday running of one. How am I to manage a home? When I fall ill, what will I do? Who will I turn to? What do I know of life? How am I going to cope? Then I thought that may be if I met other women who were single, or just any women, if I talked to them, may be it could help me make up my mind. (21)

This dilemma of Akhila, an earnest desire to live according to one’s will and the fear of losing the security of a family/home is common to every woman who force themselves to embrace the power structures of family. The questions Akhila poses is every woman’s questions who wants an individuality in life but struggle themselves to confine into the interiors of family life. A woman’s

primary responsibility is supposed to be a dutiful wife and if she is a unmarried woman, though she is educated and employed, need special attention of her family. While sharing their life stories Janaki and Prabha Devi agree that one needs to be with a man, a family, rather than choosing to spinsterhood. Margaret Shanti, the school teacher later shares her story by stating her opinion about this.

They are nice women but they are the kind who don't feel complete without a man. They might say otherwise but I know them and women like them. Deep in their hearts, they think the world has no use for a single woman. The truth as I know it and as I live it is that a woman needs a man but not to make her feel whole. Which is why I am going to have to tell you about Ebe and me. And when I have, you'll understand why I say that a woman doesn't really need a man. That is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality. (95)

While Margaret Shanti subverts the power structure in the family in order to run her family, Janaki in the same novel, accepts patriarchy as something normal and makes peace with herself. Prabhavati who comes from an upper class family could do away from patriarchy for the simple reason that she could afford it financially. All three women submit to patriarchy at different degrees. Whereas Akhila's friend Karpagam and her mother could live without any patriarchal interference though they were despised for their freedom by women who call themselves 'chaste' family women. When Karpagam's father passed away her mother found livelihood through dance classes which Akhila's mother couldn't

accept, for she believes that women of 'good' families don't work for money. After her husband's death, Karpagam raises her children all by herself by not bothering about the patriarchal norms. Sarasa Mami and their children, who were Akhila's family friends in the village, were living a very obedient life within patriarchy until her husband's death. But after her husband's death, Sarasa Mami, sent her eldest daughter as a domestic help to a bachelor's house in order to make both ends meet. Thus, patriarchy works different for different women based on their personal surroundings.

In the essay "Mitro Marjani: Recasting Women and Subversion" Shubdra Nagalia reiterates that in patriarchy 'woman and man are pre-given, fixed, timeless and ahistorical individuals' where need a constant reshaping of one's present to fit into the modern world (190). Nagalia adds that as it is regardless of class, caste and gender one finds it difficult to work against women's oppression within this structured domination. The feminist scholarship's agenda here is to recover some strategies which women develop in order to resist given structures.

While reading the works of Anita Nair it is clear that her women don't embody any 'universal feminine essence'. Rather they are seen as caught between an urge to break away from all that regulates their mobility and a desire to go back to embrace the familiar roles of family. Fear of violence is a patriarchal strategy to keep women under obedience and the varied ways women resist it reformulates the women protagonists in Anita Nair's novels. All her women are situated in family, the stronghold of patriarchal domination and they are portrayed as resisting gender roles and norms even when going through

severe inner conflicts. In the novel *Mistress* Radha contemplates her relationship with her husband and new found attachment to Chris.

I think 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. -- I do not understand what's 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? (54)

In "A Place Elsewhere: Lower-caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century" (2010) Dilip M. Menon brings in Sudipta Kaviraj's views on Bengali women to draw a parallel with the Malayalee women.

The idea of marriage is also closely related to the creation of a private space which is affective as well as spatial: a distinction between mine and not-mine as well as home and outside. For Bengali women, the home came to mean 'a precinct for a paternalistic, supervised, materially comfortable incarceration', a realm of security. Most of the novels written by upper castes speak of the modern inner spaces of homes; by late nineteenth century the home of the nuclear unit of husband and wife became a desired norm. (505)

While living as a part of a civil society marriage is the only approach for an Indian woman to experience the warmth and emotional bond. The subordinate position she has to endure and the many of compromises she has to make are all her vain attempts to maintain her acceptability in the society. A woman can live an independent life to a greater extent if she has the economic and material benefits at hand. Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting* and Anjana in *The Better Man* could afford to live without their husbands since they were economically independent as compared to many others who were forced to be in marriage for financial security. But all women are not 'worthy' enough to enter marriage as per the set norms of patriarchy. In Smriti's case the outgoing, modern woman is good to be hanging around for a date but not for a family. However modern or progressive one is, marriage and family are always quite conventional. The amusing thing one could observe until recently in Malayalam movies substantiate this point. The story might start vaguely like this- the boy meets the girl, they fight with each other, the boy falls in love with the girl who is in most modern outfits, they get married (with or without their parents' consent), and then the twist. The girl in modern outfits takes a sudden transformation to the conventional way how a wife is expected to be -- wearing sari and a vermilion mark and adorned with flower garlands on her long hair. The relationship between Smriti and Rishi in *Lessons in Forgetting* is of this kind. Rishi enjoyed dating a NRI girl but the moment he realized she is taking it to marriage and family he backs out for he feared that she cannot be the typical Indian wife material. Moreover, Smriti is now on a purpose she wants to work against some

of the social evils in the society and it was on her attempts to act against female foeticide she was brutally attacked. A woman with a purpose is an unbearable one and Rishi prefers much more docile and obedient woman as his wife. Woman empowerment in India is not an easy task; the first against whom one has to fight is in most cases her own family members. In the essay “From Patriarchy to Neopatriarchy: Experience of Women from Pakistan”, the authors differentiate between patriarchy from neopatriarchy (Habiba, Ali, and Ashfaq 212-221). In traditional patriarchy the domination is a power play between the sexes while in neopatriarchy this division has been supported and perpetuated mainly through women who imbibe these patriarchal values. The male domination is internalized through various customs and practices which are closely linked to the family. The twin questions of how women act as the agents of preserving patriarchy and how do this internalization of patriarchy work at the familial level will open up the politics behind the construction of modern family in India.

J Devika argues that education along with financial stability would make a woman independent to a great extent but in the case of educated but poor women they have to go through difficult times (*Pouriyude* 75). She suggests feminism as the only alternative for women’s empowerment in Kerala.

That convinces me that we do need feminism --antipatriarchal struggles that address woman as a collective. So that women can live full human lives without necessarily treading the heroic path. So that they do not have to murder themselves unable to cope

with a society that places impossible demands on them. So that they stop thinking that their journeys are on unconnected, precarious, individual paths that they MUST tread all alone. So that sharing and connection is still possible. That alone will save young Malayalee women who are not of the elite from teetering on the brink between suicide and mental illness. Contrary to what our smug intellectuals have to say, it is not the upper class young women in Kerala who need feminism anymore. They have their escape routes, and these are widening, it seems. It is the disadvantaged but educated, individuated, young Malayalee woman who desperately needs feminism. Individualized empowerment, routinely dished out by our governmental machinery, cannot be a substitute. (3-4)

The above said view of Devika can be exemplified from the novel *Ladies Coupe*. Akhiladeshari, being the eldest of four children, has become the breadwinner of the family after the sudden demise of her father. She works in the income tax department where she used to work and at home also she substitutes her father's role. She settled down their lives as an elder sister and after her mother's death, she finds her life meaningless. Though she had many aspirations about life she dares not follow it being a spinster reaching her middle age. All of a sudden she takes a decision to travel to Kanyakumari on a ladies' compartment of a train where she discusses about life with five other women passengers. They all open up about their personal stories as there is hardly any chance of meeting

each other again. The very conversation with these women brings in great changes in Akhila's attitude towards life. She raises to a state as Margaret Shanti told her "Akhila, if there is one virtue I have, it is immunity to what people think of me. Naturally this makes them dislike me even more. People don't like to think that their opinion of someone means nothing to that person. And when it is a woman... the thought is intolerable. But like I said, I don't care. I am not saying that you ought to think like I do. But you'll discover that once you stop worrying what the world will think of you, your life will become that much easier to live." (136) Later she meets her childhood friend Karpagam, who also urges Akhila to choose to live a life of her own. Karpagam's words "I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose... Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first." (202) It is these women who gave the courage to Akhila to make a decision on how the rest of her life should be. As Devika pointed out in the above passage it is women like Akhila who needs feminism and support from fellow beings on their struggle against patriarchy and to enable them self-reliant individuals.

As Linda Jones has put it 'the home becomes a contested, gendered space when subject to heterosexual occupancy and associated expectations' (32-35). To her home becomes another performative space which reveals emotional and psychological aspects of its inhabitants. Tired of such kinds of role plays and gendering some women tend to reduce themselves to be the objects that are part of the domestic space. According to Sharmila Sreekumar

Despite the ideology of housewifisation, there is a relatively greater sanction for women to take up jobs outside the home as well as to engage in entrepreneurial work from within homes. There have also been new incursions of the “outside” into interiors of homes-through television, magazines etc. Then again, there is the decrease in child mortality, the popularity of the two-child norm, the increase in the average age of marriage for women, their greater life expectancy, the low maternal mortality and so on. Surely, the contemporary domesticity in Kerala is vastly different from what it had been in the nineteenth century.

(205)

The kind of domesticity Anita Nair imagines in Kerala is the neo-liberal patriarchal families where husband makes all major decisions about the family which the wife and children are supposed to obey. To her domesticity is modern male dominated patrilineal space where women and children are subservient to men.

### **Motherhood**

Birthing has been constructed into a gendered social relation in the name of motherhood with an association of affection, emotion and bonding which are the lived experiences of women. Maithreyi Krishnaraj calls this an ambivalence between ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’ (*Indian* 34-43). Jasodhara Bagchi reveals the politics behind the veneration of motherhood in India through the following words

As it turned out, for class and caste ridden societies, the hallmark of privilege lay with the women who were delinked from productive labour and relegated to the reproduction of status through procreation of the species. All the institutional build-up of motherhood, whether through upper-caste rituals, especially when a woman fulfills the expectation of perpetuating the patrilineal clan by producing a son, or through the glowing effect of the white, well-fed mothers breast feeding healthy babies with beatific smile, are ploys for reproducing the dominant patriarchal structure of privilege. (*Interrogating* xxiii)

Bagchi draws her attention to the traditional and modern convergence on the myth of motherhood to unravel how patriarchy subjugates not just women's body but their minds too. She calls for a gendered understanding of motherhood for it is not something which is relegated to the private realm but it straddles between 'private' and 'public'. So one has to keep in mind the dual aspect of the term for it touches issues pertaining to specific cultures, family, state, scientific and technological experiments. Recently Kerala witnessed a furious debate over concept of motherhood when a popular magazine for women had a cover page with a breast-feeding mother<sup>1</sup>. The photo shocked the so called 'cultural elites' in the state mainly for two reasons, firstly, it shook them to see a woman showing her half covered breast in public and secondly they were worried about the child being forced to suck from a milkless breast. For them breastfeeding is a

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<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. "Keralathodu Ammamar: Thurichu Nokkaruthu, Njangalku Mulayuttanam." *Grihalakshmi*. 1 March 2018, pp. 20+.

private affair and to do it in public is something which defies one's culture. Many mothers came in public in protest against these culture bearers by posting their breastfeeding videos in social media. Feminists, social activists, the stakeholders of 'Malayalee culture' all took part in this debate. All these furors underline the fact as to how a woman's body has been commodified and marketed by the modern capitalist patriarchy. Referring the historian Jocelyn Olcott, Bagchi argues that motherhood is "constructed as an extremely private experience that is made surreptitiously to seem public without an overt acknowledgement of its deep signification in the public domain" (xxv). The binaries of private/public, love/labour, production/reproduction, emotion/reason, personal/political all appear to dominate the gender divisions in order to exercise power.

This section critically views at motherhood as an inevitable mark for female identity through feminist framework. When one thinks of the ideals of motherhood in India the first image to come up is the Hindu Mother Goddess. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj puts in the Introduction to *Interrogating Motherhood*:

A puzzle in the social construction of motherhood is the contradictory delineation: veneration on the one hand, and on the other hand, deprivation of actual living mothers of enabling conditions that would reward their dedicated service in bringing forth the generation of the human being. The *jagatjanani* (mother of the world) is only in temples of Mother Goddess, in poetry and art. (xi)

Women who were bearing or raising children, not necessarily their own biological offspring, are called mother. That means they earn this entitlement by giving birth or by raising children. Many of our ideals about motherhood come from the upper caste Hindu scriptures and writings which symbolize a woman's womb in the pot. Even though women are praised as a mother goddess it is of no doubt that women have only a subordinate position in patriarchy.

While discussing about Jasodhara Bagchi's book on motherhood, Maithreyi Krishnaraj attacks patriarchy

Women may earn the entitlement of being considered 'mother' by virtue of giving birth, by raising children, by supplying ovum for fertilizing an embryo. We have the birth mother, the biological mother and the adoptive mother. These concepts are not exhaustive because much depends on how social, cultural and religious discourses define these roles. Much of our information comes from upper-caste Hindu scriptures and writings from the brahmins who had ritual supremacy as the repository of knowledge and sacred rituals denied to others. Most Hindu rituals ordained the use of the *kumbh*: the pot (usually copper or brass) as symbol of the womb and its regenerative force. For the mother, however, it is not only an emotional, affective experience, but also an intensely physical experience through pregnancy, the nurturing of the foetus with her own blood through placenta, and later through breast feeding. (xi)

In *The Better Man* the reverence to motherhood is done in an ironic way. Parukkuty the mother of Mukundan and wife to Achuthan Nair has been disregarded by both of them throughout her lifetime. The middle aged Mukundan has sought solace or rebirth through an old urn which is kept at the attic to escape from the world miseries. As the urn metaphorically represents the womb, motherhood and womb has been used by the patriarchy when and where it is necessary for them like the unused urn in the attic. Bhasi takes his friend to the attic of the old Nair *tharavad* as a treatment to Mukundan's past miseries as the latter is guilty about the disregard he had shown towards his mother. As he coaxed Mukundan into the urn he says

Mukundan, it is time you released your mother's soul. To cling to the dead is to curse them to exist without a body. Let her go. Let her find the destination that every soul is headed towards, from the moment it is separated from the Greater soul. You don't need her anymore. Within you are the genes of your ancestors. Of men and women who let nothing trample them down. Let the genes of your ancestors talk to you now.

Couched in the womb, Mukundan called forth his genes. He reverted to his original form- a single cell. Bit by bit the embryo of this new man developed. Eyes. Nose. Ears. The three sensory organs. Two hearts fused into one. Budding limbs. Bones. Genitals. Lulled by the warmth of the jar, fed by the soothing drone that washed over him, Mukundan felt himself dissipate. He

closed his eyes to shut out the light. Surrounded by the blackness, he felt himself split into several selves. All of whom had no claim to the one that had stepped in to the urn. Disembodied, he was no longer anything that he had been before. He could separate himself endlessly so that he could be anything he wanted to be. A new man, a new life. Afraid no longer. Capable of so much more than he had ever dreamed of. (198-199)

This resurrection out of the urn which had been thrown in the attic for years is a going back to the mother and womb after years for comfort from the public life. This is exactly why patriarchy admires motherhood-- to feel secure from the chaotic public life.

In order to maintain patriarchy intact veneration from its stakeholders is needed. Bagchi states the reason why women accept patriarchy even though they are not contented within that framework. "Motherhood and mothering need support and a new mother can get it only by accepting her status in return for economic and social support from her family" (xii). While motherhood is a celebrated one in the country the responsibility of nurturing the child is the sole duty of the mother. The child is known by his/her father's line but the fostering of the child should be done by the mother! Mothering and motherhood is not a personal matter so long as she provides a future citizen, a future mother if it's a daughter, to the patriarchal society.

If a woman gets impregnated out of wedlock or because of rape it is a different issue altogether. In general, the right to have or not to have a child is

not a choice of the woman alone. In the novel *Ladies Coupe* Marikolanthu, the young servant girl had been raped and impregnated by her master and the society expect her to be responsible for child rearing. She is the most powerful of all the women characters of Anita Nair. But she too has been stereotyped at the end due to the forces of the society. She doesn't want the child to be born but abortion is a distant dream for her. She had been sent away to a relative's house where she hoped to abort the kid. She was afraid to go to a hospital as she was told that "...but at the hospital, they'll ask for names and details. Your name. Your husband's name. your address. Your next of kin. Do you want to let everyone know who you are?" (248) So the child is born and she left 'it' (the way she addresses the child, without any so called motherly affection. For Marikolanthu, the child is a 'reminder of what her life had turned out to be.') at her mother's hands to join the two English women where she had been working as an assistant earlier. They had earlier promised her to find a helper's job in the hospital which had been denied to her in her new circumstances. On her asking Miss Kate, with whom she stays with a hope of a better job, replies that

You have changed, Mari. At first when you came here, I thought you would suit the job. You had so much joy in you; a willingness to please. There was a kind of glow that came from you that made me think you would bring light into those dreadful hospital wards. Not anymore.

A helper's job is difficult and thankless. You need to be at peace with yourself to be able to do your job well. More than anything

else, you need to have compassion. I'd like to persuade myself that this is just a phase. That someday you will become again who you once were; that you will seek your son out and accept him as your own. All these days I waited for you to tell me about your child. I thought you would want to go and see him. But I see a woman who pretends that her life hasn't changed. How can I turn a blind eye to what you have become? (252-253)

This reiterates the agenda of patriarchy which makes child rearing as the responsibility of the mother alone. Even when it is an unwanted child the woman is expected to have all those supreme feelings towards the child while the man leads a normal life as before. Marikolanthu remembering the time of giving birth to the child wonders,

... when my son was born, all I felt was revulsion for the child. My mother would bring him to me and ask me to let him feed at my breast, and a tremendous loathing would fill me. I would thrust him away screaming, 'Take him away. I don't want him near me.'

My mother would heat cow's milk, dilute it with water and feed this to my son who drank it greedily. Even then he was a quite child who demanded nothing.

I have been a bad mother. (220)

To her the child is the reminder of what happens in her life and she couldn't accept the child as her own. But what the patriarchal society has taught is motherhood is a natural feeling to all women in whatever circumstances the women are. In this way the fathers could always make an easy escape from all kinds of responsibilities. Marikolanthu wanted to study nursing. But her life was changed unexpectedly and then she is expected to love the child as her own which she is unable to do. The society blames her for not taking care of the child while the man is living his life freely. Even the educated Miss Kate was ready to educate her only when she was willing to accept her child. In this way Anita Nair make Marikolanthu to submit to societal norms whereas what she wants was to break away from all such ties by educating herself.

The veneration of motherhood happens mostly to the mother of sons and if she gives birth to a daughter it is treated as some deficiency in the mother. It is because of the upper-caste Hindu belief that only through a son one gets *moksha*. Although there exists a strong bond between mothers and daughters in families, once the daughters are married off they are treated as guests in their own family. The social value attached to motherhood is so high that a childless married woman is treated as barren. Even today many parts of the country follow this belief and the rate of female infanticide is very high. The law allows abortion only if the pregnant woman's life is under threat but it has been widely misused to abort a female foetus and in most cases the woman has no say in this. Anita Nair's novel *Lessons in Forgetting* is woven around this issue. On her journey to her father's native village, Smriti accidentally come to know about the illegal

female foeticide happening in a hospital. On further investigations in the area she understood that female infanticide and the following death of the woman is a common practice among the villagers there. In most cases it is the husband and his family forcing the pregnant woman to abort if it was a female fetus. If the woman is unwilling to undergo either she will be physically assaulted by her in-laws or send back to her parent's house. Fearing this the women who undergo abortion sometimes lose her life itself in this process. Smriti managed to get in touch with one elderly woman whose daughter lost her life while undergoing abortion, who was willing to produce documents against such practice. On her mission to bring in this issue to the administration she was brutally raped and her life was reduced to a living corpse to be nursed by her father Jak and his aunt Kala Chithi. Smriti attempts to convince one of the women, who brought her own daughter to undergo abortion in the clinic, but she turned furious,

Tell that to the men. Tell that to the women who bore these men!  
Do you know what a burden a girl child is? My daughter already has two. Her marriage is at stake here. If she delivers yet another girl child, her husband might even leave her. He has already threatened her. (329)

This illustrates that all mothering is not venerated. Therefore, motherhood and mothering is not matter to be treated as something natural, on the contrary it is the most politicized realm in a woman's life that need to deconstructed. Motherhood has many contexts and as Krishnaraj aptly states, women need "public provision of adequate care and nourishment, of respite form onerous

work, of workplaces to treat motherhood as not just an individual responsibility but the responsibility of society, of families and partners to offer a caring hand” (xix). This will remain a farfetched dream so long as we eliminate poverty that hinder human dignity; eliminate inequality and mitigate patriarchal power.

To the question whether there had been a matriarchy in the place of patriarchy where women had the power and authority, Krishnaraj concludes by drawing Engels’ argument. It is with the invention of herding and agriculture the ancient matriarchal set was overthrown. In India matrilineal system existed mainly in Kerala, Meghalaya and the Lakshadweep Islands which had undergone much changes with the advent of colonialism and capitalism.

From the foregoing discussion it could be concluded that the home is a traditionally accepted space where women are defined in terms of domesticity and the feminine roles assigned to them. Thus, the ‘ideal home’ is a mere illusion which, however, must be espoused and acts as a model to encourage prescribed modes of behaviour for women in the patriarchal frame work to the extent of maintaining its solidity. Since it has become very much a legacy of the Nair *tharavad* system in Kerala, even in the context of the advent of modernity, women find it difficult to transcend their home –bound life pattern and so get fixed in an inescapable situation.

The chapter is founded on Engel’s observation on modern nuclear family where women and children are subjugated under male supremacy. Through problematizing patriarchy, division of labour and power hierarchy in the family, the chapter attempted to define female space within it. It concludes on the

argument that home/family being the smallest social unit in the society, it reflects all its power struggles. On the basis of the analysis of the three novels, *Lessons in Forgetting*, *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*, I conclude that home/family is the most politicized space where dominant section enjoys power over relatively weaker sections- women and children. The institution of marriage ensures this division of power rather than maintaining gender equality and motherhood is equally politicized by patriarchal powers in order to ensure male domination within the family, thereby extending it to the society at large. Motherhood is always considered as a feeling which comes automatically to a woman with pregnancy and giving birth of a child whereas it is one of the most politicized feelings constructed by the society and culture where a woman ceases to exist as an independent individual. Remi Akujobi while discussing about motherhood in African literatures and cultures shares Barbara Christian's opinion about motherhood as "an unwritten story" because, to her 'the story is just beginning to be told and this interrogates women's struggles to become "all that they can be"' (372). As Christian has rightly said, let there be more voices from mothers to speak about motherhood and let the story begin now.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to speak of a politics of interpretation without a working notion of ideology as larger than the concepts of individual consciousness and will. At its broadest implications this notion of ideology would undo the opposition between determinism and free will and between conscious choice and unconscious reflex. Ideology in action is what a group takes to be natural and self-evident, that of which the group, as a group must deny any historical sedimentation. It is both the condition and effect of the constitution of subject (of ideology) as freely willing and consciously choosing in a world that is seen as background. In turn, the subject(s) of ideology are the conditions and effects of the self-identity of the group as a group. It is impossible, of course, to mark off a group as an entity without sharing complicity with its ideological definition. A persistent critique of ideology is thus forever incomplete. (Spivak 161)

In “The Politics of Interpretations” (2006), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks about the politics of interpreting a text and the need to undo the ideology of the text with clarity. She argues that a critic’s responsibility is “to address a less simplified view of the world.” (163) Spivak reiterates that one cannot ever move away from ideology and one’s responsibility is to identify and recognize the most common “choice” one makes in life and to acknowledge the challenge of interpreting it; in so doing one must work on to change it. (165)

As Shalini Moolechalil points out “one of the challenges associated with working on the writings of a contemporary writer is that one needs to review and rework the framework of the study to incorporate the ongoing shifts and changes in the writings and ideology of the writer in a constantly shifting socio-political scenario” (181). Though she never addressed the social issues as a writer, as she doesn’t advocate ‘activism’, Anita Nair’s works always reflects the socio-political changes. Therefore, this study tried to incorporate the contemporary trends in her writings as far as possible, locating her work within the framework of feminism. When I started this study Anita Nair had written only four novels *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe*, *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting*. *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* and *Eating Wasps* and other two crime thrillers featuring Inspector Garuda -- *Cut Like Wound* and *Chain of Custody* were published later. As I have chosen my subject of study as matriliney and family, I have included *Idris: Keeper of the Light* to the list of primary texts as it embodies those themes. As Anita Nair’s works are based mainly in Kerala and its women, writings from other women and contemporary socio-political and cultural movements in Kerala have helped me in shaping my arguments in the thesis.

In his introduction to *Narrating India: The Novel in Search of the Nation* (2005) E. V. Ramakrishnan describes how novel as a polyphonic form with its inherent dialogism helps to explore a variety of themes (11-20). As Joya Mitra points out “the subject of themes chosen by women are not necessarily different from those projected by the male writers. The difference is more a matter of

attitude/positioning rather than the actual reality portrayed” (188). In her own words

When the woman writer appeared on the scene she raised questions about the terms and conditions that constricted and in a way defined her existence. A major part of women’s writing speaks about the injustice and humiliation they have to face in a patriarchal society. Perhaps it would not be right to think that these writings were against men in particular, what should be made clear in fact is that these writings are not aimed at men as individuals but at the patriarchal system. As a matter of fact, it is not only women who fall prey to patriarchy. Of course when one is attacked, or oppressed for a very long time, one has the right to protect oneself as strongly as one can. To counterattack as sharply as possible. A woman writer wants to look at things in her own way and she writes in her own idioms. (187)

In the essay “Indian Feminisms: The Nature of Questioning and the Search for Space in Indian Women’s Writing” (2013), Jasbir Jain differentiates Indian feminisms from the West as “women’s lives are culturally constructed” and in order to locate women’s issues with all its reality one has to understand “its indigenous origins, the nature of its questioning and the concerns and approaches of women writers in contemporary literature” (29). She observes that the impact of colonial rule in India are quite oppositional ones in the lives of women as the imperial strategies were worked out around women by making

child marriage, polygamy, sati and widow remarriage etc., the central issues to be addressed. The nation was symbolized through its women as they became the bearers of national culture largely in terms of chastity and motherhood. One of the challenges Indian feminism faced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the debate on social reforms which was constantly supported by the scriptures, epic literatures and Vedas in order to reinforce patriarchy. Jain defines feminism as a movement “fragmented by region, caste, language, class and levels of education” but in order to bridge all these differences it works through “consciousness raising, experience sharing, storytelling sessions and through intervention in the social and legal structures through activism, literacy programmes and employment generating schemes” (30) all these to escape from the narrow confinements of patriarchy. Marriage and motherhood have been viewed as cultural impositions and has been critiqued by feminists in a variety of ways. According to Jain

Women’s writing in India, no matter in which language, needs to be placed against this background of political history, tradition and social activism – The questioning of Indian women writers problematizes the struggle between male ego and the female desire for freedom. This freedom cannot be worked out only through education and economic independence, it has to be achieved through the body because it is on the basis of its (the body’s) attractiveness, docility and productivity, that traditional role models have been constructed. Women have been worshipped for these virtues and discarded when they have failed

in them. Thus, any need for personal space, for working out new definitions of freedom, for loosening the hold of tradition without destroying it, has to begin with the body and by redefining the values placed on womanhood. The ambivalences and multiplicities which are present in tradition and myth and have been silenced by male discourse, need to be opened out. (36)

The introductory chapter reviews the theoretical frames of the present study by placing it within the discipline of Comparative Literature. The olden times of Indian Writing in English with its contemporary relevance is discussed in the writings of Vinay Dharwadker, Aravind Krishna Mehrotra, Amit Chaudhuri and Francesca Orsini. The different approach to novel by Western theoreticians like Lucien Goldman, Pierre Macherey and Raymond Williams who discussed the sociology of the novel, novel as a literary production, and as a cultural production respectively have facilitated to place the novel in the framework of the present study. Along with this, the critical views of Indian scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Udayakumar, Susie Tharu, K. Lalitha, E. V. Ramakrishnan, Geetha have contributed in the formation of the introductory chapter. In order to mark Anita Nair and her writings in the contemporary Kerala context a detailed analysis on writings about women, gender and caste in Kerala is incorporated. Analysis of women writers like Kamala Das, Sarah Joseph etc. and a discussion on contemporary feminist movements in Kerala aided placing Anita Nair and her writings in contemporary Kerala context.

The first chapter, “The Works of Anita Nair: An Overview” discusses in detail about Anita Nair as a major contemporary writer in English from Kerala and explains the themes of her major works. The chapter reads between the lines of what she has written in order to unearth the deeper meanings of the novels. Drawing upon Pierre Macherey’s idea of the ‘silence’ which gives life to a work the chapter looks for what the work doesn’t say. It moves further discussing feminism and gender in India. It draws upon how feminism, caste and gender identities are represented in Anita Nair’s works and what is her standpoint on feminist activism. The chapter also hints on matriliney, the cultural practice of Nair community and how its legal abolition leads to the formation of a modern nuclear family.

The second chapter, “Debates Around Nair Matriliney: An Overview” analyses the term culture and how it holds hegemonic powers in terms of patriarchy. The colonial government and national leaders have equally contributed in defining women as the bearers of Indian tradition and values thereby insisting importance to women’s chastity and motherhood. The chapter discusses the matrilineal culture among the Nair community and its breakdown after legal abolition. It focuses on what is/was matriliney to women and lays down different scholarly views on this cultural past. It critiques Anita Nair’s representation of Nair matriliney and the contemporary relevance of this representation.

The third chapter “Contentions on Family and Motherhood” analyses the concepts of family and motherhood as represented in Anita Nair’s novels. the

transition from matriliney to patriliney had obviously made a shift in the status of women within home/domesticity. The chapter discusses what family and domesticity means to Indian women as it being the microcosm of the larger society reflects all its power structures. It discusses how patriarchy is naturalized in certain women while some women try to subvert/manipulate it in order to find an agency for themselves. The chapter also discusses how motherhood is a politicized term and how it gets represented in Anita Nair's novels. Mothering and nurturing of children has been considered as natural duties of women. The chapter questions this notion and problematizes the very idea of motherhood as a device of patriarchy to regulate women.

An important contribution that the study makes is to recognize the inner-politics of contemporary family as a social institution where women and children try to make spaces of their own. I understand Anita Nair's work as a conscious attempt on re-visioning the ideologies behind the institution of family and marriage as one traces her novels beginning from *The Better Man* to *Eating Wasps*. An understanding of contemporary patrilineal/patriarchal family system in Kerala is always incomplete without a detailed understanding of the matrilineal past of the state.

While discussing *Indulekha*, the first accepted novel in Malayalam, in "Oru Pranayakathayude Sadhyathakal" (Possibilities of a Love Story), K. N. Panikkar observes that a Nair woman as educated and intellectual as Indulekha is nowhere to be seen in real life during 19<sup>th</sup> century in Malabar (23-43). Though English educated, Indulekha doesn't think Nair marriage practice is bad as

Madhavan does. The discussion between the two on *sambandham* among Nair community is an indication on the debates around the marriage reformations during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the essay “Sthreepaksha Chintha Malayala Sahityathil” (2010), Sara Joseph observes matriliney as something which assured certain rights for women which the colonial powers and the newly emerged male dominated Indian middle class subverted for a patrilineal system (55-92). She questions the contemporary belief of non-righteousness in married women continuing to live in their own houses. She reminds everyone that according to Kerala tradition women are not the property of men and girls shouldn’t be raised under such conception. Women used to live in their tharavad as they wish and that was the practice once in Kerala.

The present study originated around the concept of Malayali woman outside Kerala and how this image is portrayed through Anita Nair’s works for her international readers. She is successful so far as in depicting women from different stratas of society but their experiences are taken as one. One of the limitations of Anita Nair’s writings is that she tries to generalize the experience of women of different class/caste as one by ignoring differences among them. The present study concludes by quoting a few words on the Kerala Model of Development on women by J. Devika

The critical lenses of feminist social science revealed two serious shortcomings of the developmentalist notion of women’s ‘uplift’.

First, the fact that the female figure celebrated in the ‘Kerala

Model' discourse was not the autonomous female agent. Rather, she was functional to social development, and hence attributes of development like literacy, better reproductive health, and low fertility, all of which would improve her performance of domestic roles and the quality of the next generation, are granted central importance in depicting this 'ideal woman'. Secondly, and related to the above, the picture of the ideal womanhood is not disturbed by absences of the attributes of autonomy like mobility, presence in the public-political, arena, or sexual choice. It is now accepted broadly that the developmentalist imagination of the 'uplifted woman' was not anti-patriarchal; indeed, it seems to have been both a product of and bolster to modernized patriarchy of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. (185)

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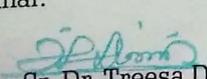
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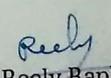
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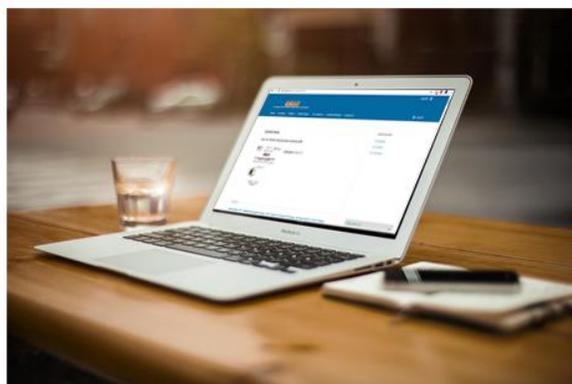


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### <sup>i</sup>Who gains in Matriliny? A Critical Observation on the Matriliny among the Nairs in Kerala

#### **Abstract:**

There have been a lot of debates still going on around the subject of matriliney and the status women had enjoyed in the system. While many of them, including Nair reformers, argue that women hadn't gained anything in particular in matriliney; Dr.K.Saradmoni and G.Arunima view matrilineal period as the golden age of Nair women and its abolition through a series of legislation as a well-planned patriarchal move. The sociologists and anthropologists, however, observe it as a byproduct of various socio-political and economic circumstances in the history. Through this paper I analyse the matrilineal past of Nair women based on Anita Nair's novel *Idris: the Keeper of the Light*.

Key words: Matriliny, Kerala, Nair Women

The matrilineal system in Kerala was developed around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, widely practiced until the initial decades of 19<sup>th</sup> c. Due to British legal system and Nair reform movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> c, many changes occurred in this system and finally, it got legally abolished in 1976 when Kerala government promulgated the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System Act. Some critics and social scientists in Kerala consider matriliney as the glorious past of Nair women. In Kerala matriliney existed not only in Nair caste but other religious and tribal groups as well. Concentrating on the dominant Nair caste and their matriliney had contributed to view Kerala predominantly a matrilineal society though it was not restricted to that one particular community. While matriliney was followed by many Hindu caste groups, some tribal, Muslim and Christian groups; the rest of Muslim, Christian and the Nambutiris followed the patrilineal system. Even within each caste and religious groups different norms and customs are followed which make it difficult to understand the family structure of Kerala. There have been a lot of debates still going on around the subject of matriliney and the status women had enjoyed in the system. While many of them, including Nair reformers, argue that women hadn't gained anything in particular in matriliney; Dr.K.Saradmoni and G.Arunima view matrilineal period as the golden age of Nair women and its abolition through a series of legislation as a well-planned patriarchal move. The

sociologists and anthropologists, however, observe it as a byproduct of various socio-political and economic circumstances in the history. Through this paper I analyse the matrilineal past of Nair women based on Anita Nair's novel *Idris: the Keeper of the Light*.

Robin Jeffrey who had done an extensive study on matriliney is of the opinion that the greater freedom women enjoyed in matriliney enabled them to access salaried employment and in this way they were considered as the potential earning members the same way the men were. He says,

“matriliney created conditions in which some high status girls, in some parts of Kerala, learned to read and write, had more freedom of movement than most high status women of their time elsewhere in India, and some of these women went to work in salaried jobs (648).”

But Praveena Kodoth comments that only a quarter women who belong to privileged social background were employed and had access to public places(20). Saradamoni deals with three fundamental features of matriliney such as the tharavadu, the marriage system and the inheritance with the descent through the female line. She draws attention to the following points emphasized by K P Padmanabha Menon: simple and complex *tharavads*, depending on their composition; women forming the stock of descent and kinship; *tharavad* estates being held in trust for the support of the women and their descendants in the female line, with no individual partition; and control and management by the karanavan. Saradamoni had studied the matrilineal system in the Travancore region in Kerala and applies the same throughout the state. What she misses to point out that the status divisions among the Nair caste itself. There are many families among the Nairs who follow *makkathayam* or patrilineal system(58). As C J Fuller says it was in central Kerala- Cochin, Calicut and the rest of south Malabar- which had the typical pattern of matriliney which includes strong matrilineal descent groups, property groups as residential and common households constituted of matrilineal kin, duolocal residence with visiting marriage, the absence of institutionalized conjugal family, inter-caste hypergamy, and some non-fraternal polyandry. In respect of marriage, the following points are emphasized by Saradamoni.

“Women entered into sambandham with men of their own caste or castes above. It was a simple affair. Children belong to the mother's tharavad and had rights of maintenance there. Dissolution of sambandham was easy and was not looked down upon. Remarriage of divorcees or widows were not considered inauspicious, nor were they subjected to inhuman treatment as often happened in the upper caste of matrilineal India. Women continued to be the members of their natal tharavads throughout life, with rights of residence and maintenance there. A man was not considered legally responsible for protecting or maintaining his wife and children, although men doing that were not lacking (76).”

All these had created a derogatory attitude among the high caste patrilineal Hindus and people of other religions towards Nair sambandham. These caused embarrassment to Nair men with new education and exposed to western ideas and values. This hurt their masculinity, when women enjoy life long rights and lived with a sense of independence and self-worth. Thus, all these led to Nair reform movements and men became the protector and supporter of women and children, converting women as their dependent.

Matriliny, often confused with matriarchy, is almost on the verge of extinction in India in the present day. It has always been celebrated as the ideal institution which emancipates or empowers women often understood as the opposite to patrilineal and patriarchal societies. Many sociologists and social scientists tried to understand it from different points of view without any regard to time and space. There exist several myths about the institution of matriline. Almost all of them convinced that under matriline women enjoyed an equal or even more than equal status with men. Some quote the earlier writings on and continue to argue on that ground as if there has not been any change in this institution. Many of them cherish it as an ideal type to practice evading the tensions and variations within it. There have a lot of legislations been passed in support and against the existence of matriline. Still there are only a few studies which tried to understand matriline in a very critical perspective. According to Dr.Celine Augustine, author of *Matriline in Transition: A Comparative Analysis*:

Matriarchy is a hypothetical system of social organization in which familial and political authority is held by women. The real life type of social organization that most resembles the so called 'matriarchal' society is matrilineal social organization, in which the descent is traced through women. In such a society the household usually consists of the adult women and their in-marrying husbands. Authority over such a matrilineal household, however, is in the hands of a male, most commonly the oldest brother of the woman. In such a society, property and position are inherited matrilineally; the property being handed down from the mother to the daughter while the position and authority passes from the mother's brother to the sister's son. In matrilineal systems, the ownership of property and the authority over the property never rests in one person as in the case of father/husband of the patrilineal system and the succession of the two offices follow the female line (mother-daughter) and male line (uncle-nephew), respectively. (6)

*Idris: Keeper of the Light* is set in pre-independent India matriline held strong position in society and here I attempt to contemplate on the claims of Matriline in the context of the select novel. Primarily, in matriline women were supposed to enjoy more freedom than in patriline. They had the power to make decisions in the family as the men. They owned property and descendants of the family followed through female. They were said to have sexual freedom- the freedom to select their conjugal partner and also to reject them. All these are cited to talk about a glorious past that Nair women had enjoyed in matriline. The below cited passage is by a woman from a matrilineal taravadu which shows the karanavan's control over the women in taravadu.

“Ammavan didn't approve of girls making noise. You don't laugh; you smile. You don't speak in your natural voice; you whisper. You don't meet a man's gaze; you peer at a point beneath his chin. Ammavan had many such edicts.”  
(Nair 28)

Saradmoni and Robin Jeffrey say women get education in matriline and this enabled them to carry out salaried employment. But the fact is all women didn't get educated in matriline- a privileged few got the opportunity due to different reasons. In the novel *Idris: The Keeper of the Light*, the female protagonist Kuttimalu had to hide herself among the many boys to attend the classes and when discovered by her mother she had been scolded for doing things

which the girls are not supposed to do. Her mother says “Why do you do things to annoy my brother? Why can’t you be like other girls? Why do you always have to be different?” The mother was more worried that her daughter’s education may displease her brother who is the karanavan of the taravadu. But the karanavar let her continue education thinking that she may continue ‘to fill her head with this and that for some more time’. Kuttimalu was eleven years old then and about to reach puberty. The karanavan thought that soon the girl may become ‘old’ enough to start a sambandham till then she may find some entertainment in education.

Another point which is often cited to talk about matriliney is about the freedom women had to choose and to reject their conjugal partner in sambandham. The sambandham relation is always talked about to show how much freedom women enjoyed in matriliney. It is the connubial relation a man begins with a Nair woman through a simple ritual-by giving her a piece of cloth in the presence of a lighted lamp in the presence of the karanavan. Nair women engage in sambandham with other Nair men or with men from other higher castes especially Brahmins. Mostly it is a pride for a karanavan when men from well-known taravadus start a sambandham with his taravadu. In such cases women may not have a choice to begin a sambandham with a man whom she likes. If the sambandham is from a higher caste the men observe certain customs to not to lose their caste purity. For example, they will not eat from or stay overnight in the Nair taravadu. Woman continues to stay at her place and her sambandhakaran is an occasional visitor to her taravadu. It is said that the woman can end the sambandham if she want by keeping his things outside the house when he comes to visit her next. But in many of the cases women remain waiting for their men to come home. All these leave the women with a kind of bereftness. The following passage describes the agony of a Nair woman in sambandham.

“It’s a strange life we lead... Our husbands are not really husbands; they are merely sambandhakarns- consorts with whom we share some nights and the call of the flesh; they fill our wombs but seldom our hearts; they come and go while we wait; when one leaves another takes his place. For a piece of cloth he will buy the tenure to my body and if my soul craves for more, I will tell myself as my mother did and hers before that: Still your tongue and desires, girl, we Nair women keep our names and homes, isn’t that enough? Shouldn’t that do? Your destiny is not hitched to that of a man’s. Any man’s. Learn to accept what you receive and no more. The Nair woman’s heart should never ache with expectation. Leave that to others in whom the warrior spirit has no place.” (Nair 31)

Another argument regarding matriliney is Nair women had the freedom of movement while women from upper-castes were not allowed to step out of their houses. But many a times this freedom of movement was present themselves to men of higher castes to begin a sambandham. The novel shares a strange custom which existed in Kerala. During the Month of Karkitakam, if a man from untouchable caste happened to see a young Nair woman outside her taravadu, he would throw a twig or stone at her. If that touches her, she will be excommunicated from her caste and she will have to make home with that untouchable man. Fearing this no Nair woman would step out of their house during that time. Idris wonders what made Kuttimalu so desperate to come to the pond on that particular night when they met for the first time. If a woman had any relation with men who do not belong to the accepted caste, she would be killed by her own family members or would be sold as a slave. That rigid was the caste laws in Kerala(92).

In matriliney women were supposed to be actively participated in decision making. The instance from the novel doesn't match this argument. When the karanavan requests Idris to take Kandavar along with him, Idris had asked him whether the kid's mother had agreed for that. For which the answer was "She will not question my decision." Kuttimalu listens to this conversation through a small window which is would be there in any taravadu. It is through this window, women used to listen to any important discussion that men have. The window is made in such a way that the women could see the men while they remain unseen to them. (Nair 148)

The children of sambandham grew up with sense of insecurity and question on their identity. The following words shows the agony of the son in matriliney

"Father! I never had one. He was my mother's consort but when her belly swelled with me, he stopped coming. He died soon after. She has a new sambandhakaran now. a fair, soft worm who doesn't know one end of a spear from the other."

By the early 20th century the opposition to the matrilineal tharavadu grew stronger and one reason for it was "the coalescing of the interests of discreet groups, like the younger members of the tharavadus and the tenants, into a more systematic attack on matrilineal kinship." Among Nayars and Nambuthiris divisions based on tharavadus were replaced by the caste identity and they critiqued identities centered on the family. Their attack was mainly on the matrilineal kinship which they considered as 'the barbaric past of the Nayars'. They 'rejected the narrow-minded divisiveness of tharavadu identities' while ignoring the basis of the caste identity itself. "For the Nayars, the idiom of progress was defined by the need for an identity that would be both patrilineal and broad-based enough to encompass the interests of its different sub-castes, with their varying ritual and material statuses." As G Arunima says, "The two primary aims of the community, it was felt, were to provide husbands for its women and to create opportunities for employment for its men." The reformers contended the custom of talikettukalyanam as it reduces the status of woman since it is a not 'real' marriage. They opposed polygamy and easy divorce. They felt the colonial state standing in the way of progress and thought individual partitioning and the apportioning of shares as a path to progress. Arunima further points out that, not only was the idea of transforming matrilineal practices into a patrilineal system entrenching gender differences and a skewed access to property, it was also premised upon the creation of a new familial ideology based on conjugal love. For this to be possible, there was the need to create a new ideal type of womanhood and female virtue that would gently and without demur accommodate itself to the changing times. "A perfect wife is the way to perfect marital happiness... good behaviour, wealth and status make a woman an asset to the family... no one should be able to put a price on her." All this ended up in gender difference and allotting gender roles(159).

Observing the various arguments which support, oppose and critically examine the matrilineal joint family system and the status of women under that system one can conclude that matriliney is a product of social changes that happened in society due to various socio-political and economic reasons. As many have assumed it did not offer any absolute power to its women although the matrilineal women had enjoyed a greater freedom of mobility as compared to their equals in patriliney.

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### End Note

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