

Ideologies of Individualism in the Select Novels of Anita Nair

Bhavya Balasubramanyam

Research Scholar in English, University of Mysore, India, Email: balasubrahavya@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of individualism in women has its roots in their realisation of fulfilling their rights and attaining empowerment. Indian women of the present era have emerged as strong, self-willed and highly individualistic. The concept of individuality has emerged as the core prerequisite in today's modern world. It springs from the sense of selfhood an individual has attained over the years of his personal growth. Nevertheless, this realisation of "self" has been strongly instilled in the women of the present generation. This has been effectively portrayed in the novels of Anita Nair, especially in *Mistress* (2003) and *Eating Wasps* (2018). Through the novels *Mistress* (2003) and *Eating Wasps* (2018), Anita Nair succinctly outlays the underlying individualistic traits of Indian women victimised under the weight of tradition, superstitious customs and rigid societal mores. These novels encompass highly individualistic human beings as their female protagonists.

Keywords: individualism, selfhood, ideology, gender dynamics, patriarchy.

Introduction

Without an iota of doubt, the concept of individuality has emerged as the core prerequisite in today's modern world. It springs from the sense of selfhood an individual has attained over the years of his personal growth. Nevertheless, this realisation of 'self' has been strongly instilled in the women of the present generation.

The emergence of the 'New Woman' as a result of various factors like necessitating their education, employment and rights has opened doors to inculcating individuality in women's persona. In due course of time, the Western concept of 'individualism' has undoubtedly percolated in the psyche of Indian women too.

Ideology of Individualism

To begin with, the very essence of an ‘ideology’ encompasses the systematic study and practice of a set of certain specific ideals, that is, belief patterns, doctrines and principles. One of the foremost American thinkers of the twentieth century, Lionel Trilling (2012) posits the place of ideologies in society, in general, and in an individual’s life, in particular. He states, “Ideology is not the product of thought; it is the habit or the ritual of showing respect for certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with emotional safety, we have very strong ties and of whose meaning and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding.”s. Likewise, an ideology places an individual or a specific group in a straitjacket environment in society, thereby rendering him a distinct identity of his own.

On the other hand, “Individualism,” as a concept, is the recognition of an adult as independent, free-willed, and of intrinsic worth. According to *Wikipedia*, it is defined as hereunder:

Individualism is the moral stance, political philosophy, ideology, and social outlook that emphasizes the intrinsic worth of the individual. Individualists promote the realisation of one's goals and desires, valuing independence and self-reliance, and advocating that the interests of the individual should gain precedence over the state or a social group, while opposing external interference upon one's own interests by society or institutions such as the government .

Hence, individualism as an ideology vividly encapsulates the emphasis of the “self” over society. It also promotes the value, dignity and choice of an individual with respect to his personal life.

The basic key tenets of individualistic ideology are: individual liberty, self-ownership, self-determination, and freedom of choice. It also enjoys individual autonomy with null interference of the government and society in the personal arena of an individual’s life. At the same time, it is infused with the complete personal responsibility for one’s life and the moral ethics of causing no undue harm to society.

Roots of Individualism as a Western Mode of Thought

Though individualism emerged in the Western feminist arena in the late 1960s, it was nevertheless considered radical and therefore was cast out. Today, it has emerged as a separate wing among the numerous branches of feminism due to the stupendous efforts

and struggles of British suffragist Dora Marsden, Wendy Mc Elroy, Christina Hoff Sommers, Rene Denfield, Naomi Wolf, John Kennedy Taylor and Camille Paglia.

The Canadian individualist Wendy Mc Elroy's statement below effortlessly links individualism with society's moral fabric. She quotes, "On a personal level, every woman has to discover what she considers to be unacceptable. Each woman has to act as her own censor, her own judge of what is appropriate. "A woman's body, a woman's right" carries with it certain responsibilities" (46).

Likewise, the right of a woman to decide for herself was utmostly emphasised in this book. Sexual autonomy and personal choice of dealing with one's body have been one of the prime objectives of individualism in the feminist arena.

Individualism in Indian Women's Writing

Ever since the ages, amalgamating the polarities of the West and the East has been a daunting task worldwide. Moreover, the female world has been constantly overlooked because of the failure of mankind to encapsulate women into its realm. This resulted in the emergence and sustenance of patriarchy, especially in developing countries.

Voice and writing are considered the major duly recognised mediums of women's recognition, which in turn, further leads towards her empowerment. Against this backdrop, women-centred writings have kindled greater interest in the literary world, thereby giving rise to Asian feminist literature. Women writers from the Asian continent like Ismat Chughtai, Megha Majumdar, and Jhumpa Lahiri have probed into the dynamics of identity, patriarchy, and liberalism. Indian women writers have indeed left an indelible footprint in the realm of Indian literature through their writings. In fact, major Indian women writers of the present generation such as Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meera Kandasamy and Anita Nair have penned numerous facets of Indian women. Among the named few, Anita Nair has most effectively projected the inner travails and tribulations of the present Indian women in a spine-chilling yet empathetic manner.

In this post-feminist era, individualism is, no doubt, the essence of feminist thought on Indian soil too. India, the sacred land of diverse cultures faces the essentiality of absorbing Western positives in the present day. Individualism echoing Western thought of contemporary Indian women is strongly marked in Indian fiction for the last fifty years, from Shashi Deshpande to Anita Nair.

On one hand, Shashi Deshpande's feminist concerns have proved beneficial for women engulfed in balancing tradition and modernity. On the other hand, Anita Nair's liberal leanings enlighten contemporary women to establish their individuality, nullifying the social and cultural norms of Indian society. Nair travails the journey of coating Western ideas into Indian soil, through their select fiction. Their thematic and characters' representations focus on women's liberation in the twenty-first century. The nuances of the Western mode of thought on Indian soil are explored through the select fiction of Anita Nair. Nair has indispensably achieved an astounding feat in exploring the subtle nuances of individualism in the persona of Indian women, still living under disguised patriarchy.

Through the novels *Mistress* (2003) and *Eating Wasps* (2018), Anita Nair succinctly outlays the underlying individualistic traits of Indian women victimised under the weight of tradition, superstitious customs and rigid societal mores. These novels encompass highly individualistic human beings as their female protagonists. They claim and practise their right to choose and traverse their own free-willed path in the respective journeys of their lives, notwithstanding the turbulent trials the society poses on them.

Assertion of Sexual Autonomy in the Novel *Mistress*

The epic novel, *Mistress*, penned by Anita Nair, is exemplary in viewing the lives of Indian women through an individualist lens. It highlights the realisation of selfhood in an individual, through its female protagonist, Radha.

Radha, the "New Woman," posits herself as the representational character in this novel who believes in both unfolding her innate desires and living them. A married woman immersing herself in feelings of longing and lust as she says,

Pleasure, longing, lust... we call it by so many names. It is human to do so. To give a name to everything and everybody, to classify and segregate. For only then can we measure the extent of this need to know, conquer, to hold this wondrous being, this creature that suffuses every moment with a strange and inexplicable yearning. Look around you and tell me, what else is love? (*Mistress* 7).

Radha permits her inner self to soak in the glory of love as she states, "Love lives in the present. All else is memory and hope." (*Mistress* 7). Here, the concept of the Free Love Movement comes to the fore in this novel through the angst projected by its female protagonist, Radha. Having emerged in the 1960s, Free Love Movement advocated that

sexual choices, marriage, and birth control have null interference from the government and its control. A woman making her own sexual choices outside wedlock for free will marks the onset of one of the key principles of this movement in India.

Here, rather than posing questions of ethically wrong or right, the point to be noted is the realisation of her “self” and her marital doom. Radha avers, “Again that sadness. Shyam, who is so sensitive to people’s attitudes when it comes to buying and selling, doesn’t have the faintest notion of how my mind works” (*Mistress* 63). This enlightens her about her husband’s emotional disengagement from her.

Radha, from her viewpoint too, discloses her irksome equation with her husband when she avers, “He may be daddy, but I refuse to be the trembling, penitent child” (*Mistress* 105). Her marital discord blooms subject to its own pace of space and time. As a typical housewife her husband wishes her to be, Radha reaches a saturating suffocation when she explodes so, “Don’t I have the right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights” (*Mistress* 73). This point moots the innate desires of an educated, intellectual Indian woman striving to free herself from the conventional stereotypical standards of the patriarchal society. This point exactly shapes the surfacing of the individualistic “New Woman”, breaking the shackles of patriarchy prevalent ever since ages. Through the representation of the character Radha, the author succinctly reconciles the basic tenets of individualism with the present Indian women’s sensibilities.

Radha’s independent needs and unfulfilled desires in her marital life culminate in her developing feelings of love for her uncle’s guest, a travel writer and a researcher writing a book about Kerala, Christopher Stewart. Her uncle Koman voices out her prediction and reveals the innermost feelings of his niece towards Chris as she converses with the latter,

She walks forward. ‘Do you need any help?’

There is a lilt in her voice. Where has the discontent seeped away to? There is no need for abharam. Her face is radiant. Her eyes throw him a sidelong glance (*Mistress* 29).

Therefore, Anita Nair, as a fierce and frank Indian woman writer, has effectively portrayed the various nuances of individualism in the present generation of women through her vengefully radical Radha, in her epic novel, *Mistress*.

Rising Towards Individual Identities in the Novel *Eating Wasps*

In this novel, Anita Nair espouses the lives of numerous women overcoming the obstacles that threaten their existence. The main female character Shreelakshmi, an unmarried female lecturer in Zoology in her thirties, recounts her bitter experiences in the society she lived in, after her suicidal death, “A memory separated itself from another lifetime” (*Eating Wasps* 16). Individualistic streaks seem to innately occupy Sreelakshmi’s persona, who recalls, “I was a strange child, everyone said. I wouldn’t demand. Instead, I waited for whatever I wanted to come to me. Or I found a way to fulfil my desires on my own” (*Eating Wasps* 17).

Anita Nair, through this novel, weaves unhappy stories of different women – Urvashi, Liliana, Theresa, Maya, Brinda, Najma who break the glass ceilings of patriarchy and move on without retaining themselves as hapless victims of online stalking, acid attacks, child abuse prevalent in the present society. Hence, *Eating Wasps*, by Anita Nair hails as a novel wherein the female protagonist, along with linear women characters embarks herself on her own individualistic journey of regard, self-respect and dignity in the ethereal world, if not in the farcical, real with its own double standards.

Works Cited

Nair, Anita. *Mistress*. Penguin Books, 2003. Print.

---. *Eating Wasps*. Penguin Books. 2018. Print.

Wendy McElroy, XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography,
<https://www.wendymcelroy.com/xxx/chap6.htm>.

Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination* (ed.). New York Review of Books, 2012. Print.