

Marriage, Family, and the Construction of Female Subjectivity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*

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Abstract: Marriage and family remain central institutions in Indian society, shaping women's identities through cultural expectations, gendered responsibilities, and emotional relationships. Contemporary Indian women writers increasingly interrogate these institutions by exploring the tensions between social conformity and individual autonomy. This paper examines the representation of marriage, family, and female subjectivity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, particularly the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Nancy Chodorow, the study analyses how Nair's female protagonists negotiate patriarchal norms embedded within domestic life. Rather than portraying marriage as either wholly oppressive or inherently fulfilling, Nair presents it as a complex social institution where identity is continuously negotiated through love, silence, compromise, and resistance. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that female subjectivity in Nair's fiction develops gradually through self-reflection and emotional resilience rather than dramatic rebellion. Her protagonists challenge conventional notions of womanhood by seeking relationships grounded in dignity, equality, and mutual recognition. Ultimately, Nair reimagines domestic life as a site of both constraint and transformation, demonstrating that personal freedom begins with self-awareness and the recognition of women as autonomous individuals. By foregrounding the psychological complexities of ordinary women's lives, her novels make a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature and feminist discourse.

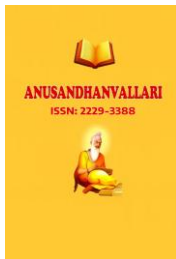
Keywords: Anita Nair, marriage, female subjectivity, family, patriarchy, identity.

Introduction

Marriage and family have long functioned as fundamental institutions in Indian society, shaping social identity, cultural continuity, and gender relations. Beyond their personal significance, these institutions regulate expectations concerning duty, morality, and social behaviour. For women, marriage has traditionally been regarded as the primary marker of adulthood and respectability, often accompanied by expectations of sacrifice, caregiving, and emotional labour. Although these ideals continue to influence social life, contemporary Indian English literature increasingly questions the assumptions that sustain them. Women writers, in particular, have transformed domestic space into an important site for examining power, identity, and gendered experience.

Within feminist literary criticism, the family is understood not merely as a private institution but also as a cultural structure where patriarchal values are reproduced and negotiated. Feminist theorists argue that women are frequently encouraged to define themselves through socially prescribed roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, leaving little room for independent selfhood. As Simone de Beauvoir famously observes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283), emphasizing that gender identity is culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. This perspective provides an important framework for understanding how literary texts interrogate women's experiences within marriage and family.

Among contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Nair occupies a distinctive position for her psychologically nuanced portrayal of women's lives. Her fiction avoids simplistic representations of marriage as either wholly



oppressive or inherently fulfilling. Instead, it presents domestic relationships as complex spaces where affection, duty, silence, desire, compromise, and resistance coexist. By foregrounding the emotional lives of ordinary women, Nair demonstrates that questions of identity emerge not only in public life but also within everyday domestic experiences.

The three novels examined in this study *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting* offer complementary perspectives on women's negotiation of marriage and family. In *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila's train journey becomes a metaphor for self-exploration as she questions whether marriage is essential to female fulfilment (Nair, *Ladies Coupé*). *Mistress* examines emotional isolation and the fragility of intimacy within marriage, suggesting that relationships cannot endure without communication and mutual recognition (Nair, *Mistress*). In *Lessons in Forgetting*, Meera's life is transformed by her husband's abandonment, compelling her to reconstruct an identity independent of marital status (Nair, *Lessons in Forgetting*). Although each narrative presents different circumstances, all three novels explore the gradual emergence of female subjectivity through reflection, experience, and emotional resilience.

A significant strength of Nair's fiction lies in its rejection of binary categories. Her women are neither passive victims nor idealized heroines, while male characters are rarely reduced to one-dimensional oppressors. Patriarchal values are shown to operate through everyday social practices and are often reinforced by women themselves. This complexity enables Nair to examine gender relations without resorting to moral simplification. Equally important is her portrayal of silence as a cultural condition that shapes women's lives. Emotional dissatisfaction frequently remains unspoken within the family until acts of narration and self-reflection allow women to reclaim authority over their own experiences.

This paper argues that Anita Nair re-conceptualizes marriage and family as dynamic spaces in which female subjectivity is continually negotiated rather than predetermined. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis, it demonstrates that Nair's protagonists challenge patriarchal expectations not through spectacular rebellion but through everyday acts of self-recognition, critical reflection, and emotional resilience. By transforming ordinary domestic experiences into sites of intellectual and psychological inquiry, Nair expands the possibilities of contemporary Indian English fiction and contributes significantly to feminist debates on identity, autonomy, and gender.

Review of Literature

Critical scholarship on Anita Nair has expanded considerably over the last two decades, establishing her as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian English fiction. Scholars have examined her novels through diverse critical frameworks, including feminism, postcolonialism, identity studies, psychology, ecocriticism, and cultural studies. While these studies acknowledge the centrality of women's experiences in Nair's fiction, relatively few have examined the interconnected relationship between marriage, family, and female subjectivity across multiple novels. This study seeks to address that gap by offering a comparative reading of *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*.

Among Nair's works, *Ladies Coupé* has received the greatest critical attention. Feminist critics generally interpret the novel as a challenge to patriarchal assumptions that equate female fulfilment with marriage. Akhila's journey has been widely understood as both a physical journey and a symbolic movement towards self-discovery. Studies by Ambreen and Patni argue that the conversations among the six women expose the emotional inequalities embedded within domestic life while simultaneously demonstrating the possibility of female autonomy through self-reflection (Ambreen 144, Patni 10). More recently, Pujarinee Mitra examines the novel through the lens of affect and care work, highlighting how emotional labour within the family frequently remains invisible despite sustaining domestic relationships (Mitra).



Research on *Mistress* has primarily focused on its representation of desire, intimacy, and artistic expression. Critics observe that the novel challenges conventional moral binaries by portraying marital conflict as the result of emotional neglect, failed communication, and incompatible expectations rather than individual wrongdoing. The symbolic use of Kathakali has also attracted scholarly attention, with researchers arguing that performance functions as a metaphor for the emotional roles individuals enact within marriage. These studies demonstrate that Nair's interest extends beyond institutional marriage to the psychological realities that shape intimate relationships.

Lessons in Forgetting has similarly been discussed in relation to female resilience, abandonment, and identity reconstruction. Recent scholarship by Venibha and Raeshma, as well as Yadav and Rohitashwani, argues that Meera's personal crisis becomes a catalyst for self-renewal rather than defeat. These studies emphasize that Nair represents empowerment not through ideological confrontation but through gradual emotional recovery and self-awareness. The novel therefore expands feminist discussions by presenting identity as an evolving process rather than a fixed condition.

The theoretical foundations for this study draw upon feminist literary criticism. Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of woman as "the Other" provides a framework for understanding the social construction of female identity. Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach foregrounds women's lived experiences as legitimate literary subjects, while Nancy Chodorow's work on gender socialization explains how patriarchal values are reproduced within family structures. Collectively, these perspectives illuminate the ways in which marriage and family shape women's subjectivity without reducing female experience to a single narrative of oppression.

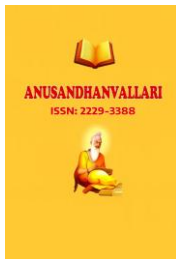
Although existing scholarship has made valuable contributions to the study of Anita Nair's fiction, comparatively little attention has been given to the relationship between marriage, domesticity, and female subjectivity across her major novels. By reading *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting* together, this paper demonstrates that Nair consistently represents marriage as a dynamic social institution in which women negotiate identity through memory, emotional labour, resilience, and self-recognition. Such a comparative approach not only broadens existing scholarship on Nair but also contributes to contemporary feminist debates concerning domesticity, autonomy, and women's agency in Indian English literature.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Perspectives on Marriage, Family, and Female Subjectivity

This study adopts a feminist literary framework to examine the relationship between marriage, family, and female subjectivity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*. Feminist criticism has consistently argued that domestic institutions are not merely private spaces but social structures through which gender roles, authority, and identity are constructed and negotiated. Rather than treating marriage as a neutral institution, feminist theorists view it as a cultural site where women often experience both emotional belonging and structural inequality. This perspective provides an appropriate framework for analysing Nair's representation of women who seek autonomy without necessarily rejecting family or intimate relationships.

A foundational contribution to feminist thought is Simone de Beauvoir's argument that woman is historically positioned as "the Other" within patriarchal society. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283) challenges biological determinism by demonstrating that femininity is socially produced through cultural expectations and institutional practices. Marriage plays a significant role in this process because women are often encouraged to define themselves through their relationships with fathers, husbands, and children rather than as autonomous individuals. Nair's protagonists repeatedly confront these inherited expectations as they question identities shaped by duty, sacrifice, and emotional labour.

Equally significant is Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism, which shifts critical attention from male-centred literary traditions to women's lived experiences. Showalter argues that women's writing should be examined through its own cultural and psychological contexts rather than measured against masculine literary



norms. Anita Nair's fiction exemplifies this approach by privileging women's voices, memories, and emotional experiences. Homes, kitchens, railway compartments, and everyday domestic settings become spaces where women articulate anxieties, desires, and aspirations that remain suppressed within conventional social discourse. Through these ordinary settings, Nair demonstrates that domestic life is an important site of intellectual and emotional inquiry rather than merely a backdrop for family narratives.

The work of Nancy Chodorow further strengthens this analysis by explaining how patriarchal values are reproduced within family structures. Chodorow argues that gender identities are learned through everyday familial relationships, particularly between mothers and daughters, making the family a primary institution for transmitting cultural expectations. Nair's novels repeatedly illustrate this process. Older women frequently encourage younger women to accept self-sacrifice, silence, and dependence as natural aspects of femininity, revealing that patriarchal norms are sustained not only through male authority but also through their internalization across generations.

Contemporary feminist criticism also understands subjectivity as fluid and relational rather than fixed. Female identity develops through memory, emotional experience, work, and interpersonal relationships instead of being determined solely by marital status or biological roles. This perspective is central to Nair's fiction. Akhila, Radha, and Meera do not attain liberation through dramatic acts of rebellion; instead, they gradually redefine themselves through reflection, emotional resilience, and independent decision-making. Their journeys suggest that autonomy is a continuing process of self-recognition rather than a final state of complete freedom.

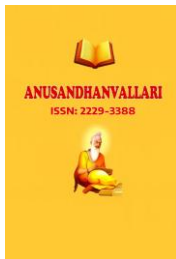
Within this theoretical framework, marriage emerges as an institution characterized by negotiation rather than inevitability. Nair neither idealizes nor dismisses domestic relationships; instead, she reveals how they are shaped by power, communication, emotional reciprocity, and cultural expectation. Her novels therefore challenge essentialist notions of womanhood by presenting female subjectivity as a dynamic process that evolves through lived experience. Feminist literary criticism thus enables a nuanced understanding of how Nair transforms ordinary domestic life into a critical exploration of identity, agency, and gender in contemporary Indian society.

Marriage as a Site of Negotiation in Ladies Coupé

Among Anita Nair's novels, *Ladies Coupé* offers the most sustained critique of the assumption that marriage is indispensable to female fulfilment. Rather than rejecting marriage outright, the novel interrogates the cultural beliefs that define women primarily through domestic roles. Nair shifts the focus from marriage as a social obligation to marriage as a relationship that acquires meaning only when it recognizes women's individuality and emotional autonomy.

The narrative is structured around Akhila's train journey, which functions as both a physical journey and a metaphorical movement towards self-discovery. Having spent much of her adult life supporting her widowed mother and siblings, Akhila realises that her identity has been shaped almost entirely by familial responsibility. Although she is financially independent, she remains emotionally constrained by the expectation that an unmarried woman must continue to prioritise her family's needs over her own aspirations (Nair, *Ladies Coupé*). Nair thus distinguishes economic independence from psychological freedom, suggesting that material self-sufficiency alone cannot dismantle deeply internalised patriarchal values.

Akhila's central question whether a woman can lead a complete life without marriage becomes the organising principle of the novel. Rather than answering it directly, Nair presents a series of interconnected narratives through which different women recount their experiences of marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and personal fulfilment. The railway compartment temporarily suspends social hierarchies, allowing the women to articulate emotions that remain unspoken within their homes. Storytelling therefore becomes an act of resistance, transforming silence into self-expression and enabling the women to reinterpret their own lives. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that patriarchal control operates not only through explicit domination but also through everyday expectations of care, obedience, and emotional labour. Akhila's lifelong devotion to her family is appreciated only insofar as it serves



others; her personal desires are consistently deferred. This condition reflects Beauvoir's argument that women are encouraged to exist for others before themselves (Beauvoir 283). Akhila's journey is therefore not simply a rejection of marriage but a rejection of an identity founded exclusively on self-sacrifice.

The stories shared by the other passengers complicate any singular understanding of marriage. Janaki appears content within a conventional family, yet her narrative reveals a lifetime of dependence first on her father, then on her husband, and finally on her son. Nair does not ridicule Janaki's choices; instead, she exposes how dependence has been normalised through cultural conditioning. Chodorow's theory that gender roles are reproduced within family structures is particularly relevant here, as Janaki's acceptance of dependence reflects values transmitted across generations (Chodorow).

Margaret Shanti presents a contrasting experience. Despite being highly educated, she finds herself trapped in a marriage marked by intellectual and emotional domination. Her husband's arrogance reduces her to a subordinate role, illustrating that education alone cannot guarantee equality within patriarchal institutions. Margaret's subtle acts of resistance reveal that power in marriage is often negotiated through everyday interactions rather than dramatic confrontation. Nair suggests that female agency frequently emerges through quiet assertion rather than overt rebellion.

Similarly, Prabha Devi's story questions the assumption that material comfort ensures personal fulfilment. Although she enjoys economic security, she experiences an acute absence of individuality. Learning to swim becomes a symbolic act of self-discovery, allowing her to experience confidence beyond the domestic sphere. Nair transforms an ordinary activity into a metaphor for reclaiming bodily autonomy and personal identity, illustrating that liberation often begins through seemingly small acts of self-recognition.

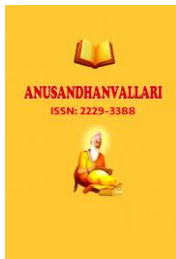
Marikolanthu's narrative introduces another dimension by exposing the intersections of gender, caste, class, and sexual violence. Her experiences demonstrate that patriarchal oppression is neither uniform nor experienced equally by all women. Yet Nair refuses to reduce her to a figure of victimhood alone. Her resilience underscores one of the novel's central insights: female subjectivity is shaped not solely by suffering but also by the capacity to reconstruct meaning after trauma.

Collectively, these narratives dismantle the cultural myth that marriage guarantees fulfilment. Some women experience loneliness within marriage, while others discover forms of independence outside it. Nair therefore rejects universal prescriptions regarding women's lives. Instead, she argues that the quality of relationships depends upon mutual respect, emotional reciprocity, and recognition of women's autonomy rather than upon marriage itself.

The novel concludes without presenting marriage as either the ultimate goal or the ultimate obstacle to female fulfilment. Akhila's renewed willingness to reconnect with Hari does not signal a return to conventional expectations; rather, it reflects her transformed understanding of herself. Having recognised her own emotional needs and personal agency, she approaches intimacy as a matter of choice instead of social obligation. In this sense, *Ladies Coupé* redefines marriage as a relationship that acquires value only when it enables women to retain their individuality. Female subjectivity, as Nair portrays it, emerges through self-awareness, critical reflection, and the courage to imagine life beyond inherited cultural expectations.

Family, Desire, and Emotional Isolation in *Mistress*

While *Ladies Coupé* interrogates the social necessity of marriage, *Mistress* examines the emotional dynamics that sustain or undermine marital relationships. Anita Nair shifts the discussion from the question of whether women should marry to the more complex issue of how intimacy, communication, and individuality shape married life. Rather than presenting infidelity or marital conflict as isolated moral failures, the novel explores the emotional conditions that produce alienation within domestic relationships.



At the centre of the novel is Radha, whose marriage to Shyam appears socially successful but is marked by emotional distance. Shyam fulfils the conventional responsibilities of a husband by providing financial security and social respectability, yet he remains unable to acknowledge Radha's emotional and intellectual needs. Nair suggests that patriarchal marriage often privileges external stability over emotional reciprocity, reducing companionship to routine. The absence of meaningful communication gradually transforms marriage into a relationship sustained by obligation rather than mutual understanding (Nair, *Mistress*).

Radha's growing emotional attachment to Chris is therefore not presented simply as an act of transgression but as a response to prolonged emotional neglect. Chris offers attentive listening, intellectual companionship, and recognition of Radha's individuality & qualities absent from her marriage. Nair avoids romanticising the relationship; instead, she uses it to expose the limitations of a marital structure in which emotional needs remain unspoken. By refusing simplistic moral binaries, the novel invites readers to consider how silence, loneliness, and unmet expectations reshape intimate relationships.

The novel's treatment of desire is equally significant. In many patriarchal societies, female desire is either ignored or regulated through cultural expectations of modesty and self-sacrifice. Nair challenges these assumptions by portraying Radha's emotional and physical desires as legitimate aspects of her identity rather than as moral failings. This representation aligns with feminist critiques of gendered double standards, which have historically granted men greater emotional and sexual freedom while restricting women's autonomy. Radha's desires do not undermine her dignity; instead, they reveal the inadequacy of relationships that deny women emotional recognition.

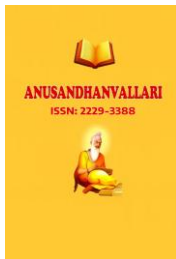
Art functions as an important interpretive framework throughout the novel. The recurring presence of Kathakali extends beyond cultural symbolism to become a metaphor for emotional performance. Just as Kathakali communicates complex emotions through stylised gestures and expressions, the characters themselves perform socially prescribed roles within marriage while concealing their inner conflicts. Public appearances often mask private dissatisfaction, suggesting that domestic harmony may be sustained through performance rather than genuine intimacy. Nair thus contrasts external conformity with internal fragmentation, exposing the emotional costs of maintaining socially acceptable identities.

Family relationships in *Mistress* also illustrate the tension between personal desire and social obligation. Characters remain bound by affection, memory, and cultural expectations, yet these bonds frequently inhibit honest communication. Emotional conflicts are rarely confronted directly; instead, silence becomes a habitual strategy for preserving domestic stability. Nair demonstrates that such silence does not resolve conflict but intensifies emotional isolation. Relationships deteriorate not because disagreement exists but because meaningful dialogue becomes impossible.

From a feminist perspective, *Mistress* critiques patriarchal marriage without dismissing the institution itself. The novel does not suggest that marital failure is inevitable; rather, it argues that intimacy depends upon equality, empathy, and mutual recognition. Emotional neglect, rather than legal or social commitment, becomes the principal threat to marital stability. In this respect, Nair expands feminist discussions of domesticity by showing that structural inequality often manifests through ordinary interactions rather than overt acts of domination.

The novel's psychological realism is one of its greatest strengths. Neither Radha nor Shyam is presented as wholly virtuous or entirely culpable. Their relationship is shaped by inherited gender expectations, personal insecurities, and failures of communication, making marital conflict appear as a product of broader cultural structures rather than individual morality alone. This complexity distinguishes Nair's fiction from narratives that rely on clear divisions between victims and oppressors.

Ultimately, *Mistress* argues that marriage cannot endure through social obligation alone. Genuine intimacy requires emotional openness, respect for individuality, and the willingness to recognise the other's interior life. By



foregrounding Radha's search for emotional fulfilment, Anita Nair redefines female subjectivity as the capacity to acknowledge one's own desires without surrendering moral agency. The novel therefore presents marriage not as a fixed institution but as a continuously negotiated relationship in which equality and communication determine the possibility of meaningful companionship.

Female Identity and Domestic Reconstruction in Lessons in Forgetting

Among Anita Nair's novels, *Lessons in Forgetting* presents the most sustained exploration of female subjectivity through the experience of personal loss and emotional reconstruction. Unlike *Ladies Coupé*, which questions the necessity of marriage, or *Mistress*, which investigates emotional alienation within marriage, this novel begins after the apparent stability of domestic life has collapsed. Nair examines how identity is reconstituted when marriage, the institution through which society often defines a woman—suddenly loses its permanence.

The protagonist, Meera, initially appears to embody the ideal middle-class wife. Her life is structured around domestic responsibilities, motherhood, and her commitment to maintaining familial harmony. Like many women shaped by patriarchal socialisation, she derives her sense of purpose largely from the roles she performs for others rather than from independent aspirations. Nair deliberately constructs this seemingly stable domestic identity to demonstrate how deeply women's selfhood is often intertwined with marriage and family (Nair, *Lessons in Forgetting*).

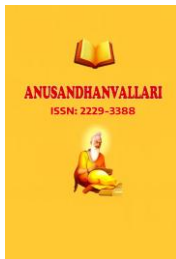
The unexpected departure of Meera's husband, Giri, disrupts not only her emotional security but also the social identity she has carefully sustained. His abandonment forces her to confront a fundamental question: who is she when the role of wife no longer defines her? Rather than treating separation as merely a personal tragedy, Nair presents it as a transformative moment that exposes the fragility of identities founded exclusively on domestic roles. Meera's crisis thus becomes a critique of cultural assumptions that equate female fulfilment with marital success.

A distinctive feature of the novel is its refusal to romanticise empowerment. Meera's transformation is gradual, marked by confusion, grief, self-doubt, and emotional vulnerability. Nair rejects narratives of instant liberation, portraying selfhood instead as an evolving process of reflection and resilience. This psychological realism distinguishes her fiction from celebratory models of empowerment that overlook the emotional complexities of personal change. Female subjectivity emerges not through dramatic rebellion but through the difficult work of rebuilding confidence after loss.

Memory functions as a central narrative strategy in this process. As Meera revisits episodes from her married life, she begins to recognise patterns of compromise and emotional invisibility that had previously seemed natural. The past is not simply recalled but reinterpreted. Through this act of reinterpretation, Nair demonstrates that identity is shaped as much by the meanings individuals assign to experience as by the experiences themselves. The novel's title captures this paradox: forgetting is not an erasure of memory but a conscious release from emotional burdens that prevent personal growth.

The novel also critiques the social expectations imposed upon separated women. Meera's experiences reveal how a woman's social legitimacy often remains closely connected to her marital status. The reactions of relatives and acquaintances—ranging from pity to unsolicited advice reflect broader cultural assumptions that continue to privilege marriage as the defining marker of female respectability. Nair exposes these responses not through overt ideological commentary but through everyday interactions, allowing readers to recognise how patriarchal attitudes are embedded within ordinary social behaviour.

Meera's evolving relationship with Professor J. A. Krishna represents another important dimension of her transformation. Unlike relationships founded on dependence or obligation, their interactions are characterised by mutual respect, intellectual engagement, and emotional honesty. Significantly, Nair does not present Krishna as a



replacement for Giri or as the solution to Meera's crisis. Instead, their relationship illustrates that meaningful companionship becomes possible only after Meera has begun to reconstruct her own sense of self. Emotional fulfilment is therefore presented as a consequence of self-recognition rather than emotional dependence.

Motherhood also undergoes significant redefinition in the novel. Initially, Meera's maternal identity is inseparable from her role as wife. Following the breakdown of her marriage, however, motherhood becomes an independent source of strength rather than an extension of domestic obligation. Nair refuses the patriarchal assumption that caregiving must consume a woman's individuality. Instead, she portrays motherhood as compatible with intellectual growth, emotional autonomy, and personal renewal.

Read through a feminist lens, *Lessons in Forgetting* challenges the belief that a woman's identity is permanently determined by marriage. The novel affirms that subjectivity remains dynamic, continually reshaped by memory, resilience, work, and human relationships. By tracing Meera's gradual movement from emotional dependence to self-awareness, Anita Nair demonstrates that personal freedom is not achieved by rejecting family but by refusing to reduce oneself exclusively to familial roles. In doing so, she offers a nuanced vision of empowerment grounded in dignity, self-reflection, and the capacity to rebuild one's life beyond social expectations.

Comparative Discussion: Marriage, Family, and Female Subjectivity Across the Three Novels

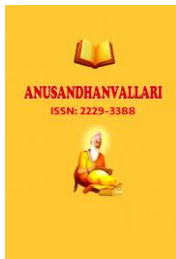
A comparative reading of *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting* demonstrates Anita Nair's sustained engagement with the ways marriage and family shape women's identities within contemporary Indian society. Although each novel centres on a different stage of women's lives, they collectively challenge the assumption that marriage alone determines female fulfilment. Instead, Nair presents domestic life as a dynamic space where identity is continuously negotiated through emotional experience, memory, and self-reflection.

The three protagonists represent distinct moments in a woman's relationship with marriage. Akhila questions the necessity of marriage before entering it, Radha confronts emotional dissatisfaction within marriage, and Meera reconstructs her identity after its collapse. Read together, these narratives reveal that female subjectivity is not tied to a single life stage but evolves throughout a woman's personal and emotional journey. By locating these experiences within ordinary domestic settings, Nair demonstrates that questions of autonomy and selfhood emerge from everyday interactions rather than extraordinary events.

One of the most significant contributions of Nair's fiction is her rejection of simplistic representations of marriage. She neither idealises the institution nor dismisses it as inherently oppressive. Instead, marriage is portrayed as a relationship whose success depends upon communication, equality, and mutual recognition. Where these qualities are absent, emotional distance, silence, and alienation gradually replace intimacy. Consequently, the novels critique patriarchal practices within marriage rather than marriage itself, offering a balanced perspective that avoids ideological absolutism.

Family occupies an equally complex position in the three novels. It functions as a source of emotional belonging, cultural continuity, and personal support while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal expectations. Parents, spouses, and even older women often reinforce ideals of feminine sacrifice, obedience, and emotional labour. In this respect, Nair supports feminist arguments that patriarchy is sustained not only through institutional authority but also through deeply internalised cultural practices transmitted across generations. The family therefore emerges as both a nurturing environment and a site of ideological negotiation.

Another unifying feature is the recurring motif of silence. Akhila suppresses her aspirations for years, Radha struggles to articulate emotional dissatisfaction, and Meera initially internalises the pain of abandonment. In each narrative, silence reflects the cultural expectation that women preserve domestic harmony regardless of personal cost. However, Nair consistently transforms silence into narration. Through conversation, introspection, and



memory, her protagonists reclaim authority over their experiences. Storytelling thus becomes an instrument of agency, enabling women to redefine identities that had long been shaped by external expectations.

Nair also reconfigures the meaning of empowerment. Unlike feminist narratives that associate liberation exclusively with rebellion or separation from family, her novels depict empowerment as a gradual process of self-recognition. The protagonists rarely reject relationships altogether; instead, they seek forms of intimacy grounded in equality, respect, and emotional reciprocity. This nuanced representation broadens feminist understandings of agency by demonstrating that autonomy and relationality need not exist in opposition.

From a literary perspective, Anita Nair extends the tradition of Indian women writers who have explored domestic life as a site of ideological conflict. Yet her distinctive contribution lies in her emphasis on psychological realism. The transformations experienced by Akhila, Radha, and Meera occur through ordinary acts of reflection, emotional resilience, and personal decision-making rather than dramatic revolutions. By privileging interiority over spectacle, Nair reveals how profound social change often begins with subtle shifts in individual consciousness.

Taken together, these novels establish marriage and family as evolving social institutions rather than fixed cultural ideals. They affirm that female subjectivity is never static but is continually reconstructed through lived experience, emotional negotiation, and critical self-awareness. Anita Nair's fiction therefore contributes significantly to contemporary Indian English literature by redefining domestic space as a powerful arena for examining gender, identity, and women's agency.

Conclusion

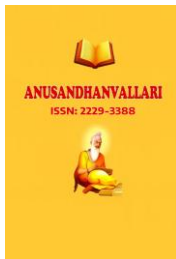
Marriage and family continue to shape women's social identities in profound ways within Indian society, making them enduring concerns in contemporary Indian English fiction. Through *Ladies Coupé*, *Mistress*, and *Lessons in Forgetting*, Anita Nair re-examines these familiar institutions by foregrounding the emotional and psychological realities of women's lives. Rather than presenting domestic relationships as either wholly oppressive or inherently fulfilling, she reveals their complexity, demonstrating that love, companionship, inequality, silence, and resistance frequently coexist within the same familial space.

This study has argued that Nair's fiction reconceptualises female subjectivity as a continuous process of self-recognition rather than a fixed condition. Akhila, Radha, and Meera occupy different social and emotional contexts, yet each negotiates patriarchal expectations through reflection, resilience, and the gradual assertion of personal agency. Their journeys illustrate that identity is not determined solely by marital status but is continually shaped by memory, emotional experience, work, and interpersonal relationships.

A significant contribution of Nair's novels lies in their rejection of binary thinking. Marriage is neither idealised nor dismissed; instead, it is evaluated according to the quality of relationships it sustains. Similarly, family functions simultaneously as a source of affection and as a mechanism through which patriarchal values are reproduced. By portraying these contradictions with psychological realism, Nair moves beyond simplistic feminist binaries and offers a more nuanced understanding of domestic life.

The novels further demonstrate that empowerment need not emerge through dramatic rebellion. Instead, meaningful transformation begins with the recognition of one's own emotional needs, intellectual autonomy, and individual dignity. Everyday acts of questioning, remembering, speaking, and choosing become forms of resistance against inherited cultural expectations. In this sense, Nair's fiction affirms that personal freedom is achieved not through the rejection of relationships but through the creation of relationships founded upon equality, empathy, and mutual respect.

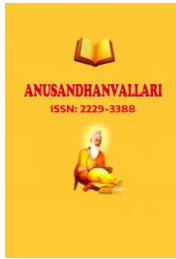
From a broader literary perspective, Anita Nair has expanded the possibilities of contemporary Indian English fiction by transforming ordinary domestic experiences into compelling explorations of gender, identity, and



subjectivity. Her work demonstrates that the home is not merely a private sphere but a significant cultural space where power, desire, memory, and selfhood are constantly negotiated. Consequently, her novels make an important contribution to feminist literary discourse by illustrating that female subjectivity remains dynamic, relational, and continually open to reconstruction. Through this nuanced portrayal of women's lived experiences, Nair invites readers to reconsider conventional assumptions about marriage, family, and womanhood in contemporary society.

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