

A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ANITA NAIR'S *CUT LIKE WOUND AND CHAIN OF CUSTODY*

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Abstract

This study tries to critically examine the portrayal of female characters in Anita Nair's select novels like *Cut like Wound* and *Chain of Custody*. Anita Nair who is known to be an eminent Indian author is renowned for her intricate narratives and also the profound exploration of societal issues especially the gender dynamics. The select novels delve deeply into the complexity in the women lives and tries to expose the multifaceted nature of their struggle and resilience towards it in the contemporary society. Both the novels which are primarily categorized under crime fiction, known for employing a realistic and gritty portrayal of urban life. Female characters of Nair are not just mere victims as they are depicted with more depth and agency by exploring the labyrinth of personal dilemmas and societal expectations. Nair's nuanced depiction of these characters poses challenges to the traditional gender roles and also tries highlighting the intersectionality of their struggles. Thus, by investigating the various dimensions of the female characters in *Cut Like Wound* and *Chain of Custody*, this study sheds light on the broader aspects of Anita Nair's work and contribution towards contemporary Indian Literature.

Keywords: Narratives, Identity, Personal dilemmas, Societal expectations, Female Identity, Traditional gender.

Introduction

Among contemporary Indian English fiction, well-known female author is Anita Nair (Kumar, 2013). She has created around twelve books, both fiction and non-fiction, since the release of her debut book, *The Better Man*, in 1999. The Indian women's plight who are portrayed as fictitious characters appears to be a major source of concern for her (Lionnet, 2018). However, her literary work spans a wide range and covers issues related to detective as well as historic fiction in addition to feminism, thus it is not appropriate to classify her as a feminist author. Also like short stories, children's fantasy, and other works such as, "*The Skating Squirrel* (2006)", "*Adventures of Nonu*", "*Magical Indian Myths* (2008)", and "*Living Next Door to Alise* (2007)", her primary literary works are "*Ladies Coupe* (2001)", "*The Better Man* (1999)", "*Lessons in Forgetting* (2010)", "*Mistress* (2005)", "*Idris Keeper of the Light* (2014)", "*Cut Like Wound* (2012)", "*Chain of Custody* (2016)", and "*Alphabet Soup for Lovers* (2015)". However, these works demonstrate her stature as a notable artist. She has received attention as a playwright for her work "Nine Faces of Being". "Mistress", her third book, is the source of the story adaptation. A collection of autobiographical writings titled "*Good Night and God*

Bless (2008)" was also released by Anita Nair. The subsequent novels may be classified as social realism, while "*Chain of Custody*" and "*Cut Like Wound*" constitute detective stories, although the premise of Idris is historically significant. Anita Nair has achieved equal success in producing social realism and detective fiction novels. However, this study aims to analyze Anita Nair's – "*Chain of Custody*" and "*Cut Like Wound*" - two detective stories which showcases the female characterization and how it evolves from struggles to freedom.

The novels, features and comparison- In general

The dominant class's ideological and moral beliefs are reflected in social realism, which is the primary characteristic (Sorokin, 2017). Bangalore and its surrounding suburbs serve as the setting for both books. Nevertheless, both violence and Crime are manifestations of a pervasive moral deterioration, thirst for wealth, and corruption that permeate the city's general milieu (Godson, 2017). The, Urmila, Borei Gowda, Michael, late Ranganathan, and others constitute to the upper middle class, which is represented by the broad moral as well as sociocultural norms.

Cut Like Wound depicts characters that were originally from the working class and impoverished backgrounds, such as the municipal corporator - Ravikumar, and his younger sibling - Chikka. Beginning his career as a street fighter, Ravikumar, who grows into a mobster, amasses substantial wealth and assets through his illicit and political endeavors and becomes a municipal corporator. He keeps a close-knit group of mafia bosses and crooks around him and to achieve his objectives, he will go to any lengths. Ramesh, also known as Chikka, is his younger brother. He is well educated, but when Ramesh was nine years old, Ranganathan sexually abused him, causing him to become hooked to sexual perversion. Characters from a higher middle-class background may be found in "*Chain of Custody*" as well, including Pujari, Sanjay Rathode, Inspector Borei Gowda, MLA Papanna, Santosh along with his father, Urmila, etc.

It is observed that, Sanjay Rathode, a lawyer, is actively involved in child labor, child maltreatment, girl trafficking, and the land mafia, among other illegal activities. Moreover, Pujari is his agent as well as chief assistant. Under Sanjay Rathode's supervision, Pujari hires a number of people, including Suraj, Siddarth, Mohan, and Rakesh, also known as Krishna. Pujari thus serves as the primary operator within the aforementioned illegal activities' network. The police inspector Borei Gowda, delves the crimes deeply in this book as well similar to "*Cut Like Wound*".

The self-assured detective who restores order along with the crime are introduced in the second part (Chatterjee, 2020). Whereas women trafficking and child labor are the main issues in "*Chain of Custody*", serial killings are the main focus of "*Cut Like Wound*". The societal balance is disrupted by crime in both books, but Inspector Borei Gowda has the ability to restore it. Ramesh develops into a sexual deviant following Ravikumar's murder of Ranganathan when he was twelve years old in "*Cut Like Wound*". He masquerades as a stunning woman named Bhuvana and ventures out at night time to satisfy his strange sexual craving, courting young

men as he wanders the streets. During the course of a month, he/she captures five young guys, killing four of them as soon as they figure out whom he is.

A young man named Liaquat who was a street kid and chicken Razak's catamite, a middle-aged pharmacist named Kothandaraman, Mohan, a young Keralite who was employed as a steward in a Kerala restaurant close to Marathahally, and Rupesh, the joint secretary of Haryana's young son are the four casualties. The same method of operation was used: striking the victim in the head and strangling their neck with a rope laced with glass particles. The corporator Ravikumar is also responsible for the deaths of Bhuvana's boyfriend, Sanjay and Ranganathan. The first murder was committed as payback, and to eliminate his drug mafia's proof, the second murder was committed. Similarly, in "*Chain of Custody*", the story begins with Pujari's disabled wife Geetha murdering Sanjay Rathod.

The offenses listed above come to light as a result of the murder investigation. Teenagers who are single, such as Nandita – Shanti's daughter, the housekeeper and cook of Borei Gowda - and Bangladeshi girls, Tina and Moina are brought in via coercion or while under the chloroform effect for the mercenary purposes by subagents such as Mohan, Mary, as well as others. Sanjay Rathode hires Rakesh, also known as Krishna, to force abandoned boys from Bihar and other places into the child labor and utilize them as home slaves. A few made an effort to flee, but they are apprehended once more and brought to textile mill as an employee. Abdul was sexually abused by Mohan.

However, Pujari presents himself as a devout man with lofty spiritual goals. He often accompanies his wife Gita, who is disabled and is well-cared by her husband till the very end, routinely attend a nearby temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Gita strongly believes that her husband is a clean and devout guy. Gita doesn't realize how wicked her husband is until the very final moment of their encounter with Sanjay Rathode. She hits him on the head with the Buddha's stone statue, leading him to death. Gita believes that Sanjay Rathode is the one responsible for her husband's apparent degradation. The third characteristic is that there is no detailed description of violence, and the investigator is neither threatened by it nor uses it (Kelman, 2017). This trait is true in both stories, as Borei Gowda, Inspector, investigates the case with complete confidence and is never in a state of urgency. He neither uses violence nor runs away from it. But Moina is described as being viciously raped nearly every single day until she fainted in "*Chain of Custody*". This also applies to Mohan's rape of Tina. The way Sanjay Rathod beats and starves his boy servants also reflects a certain level of aggression.

The fourth element is the motive for sexual satisfaction and petty love crime (Burunat, 2016). In "*Chain of Custody*", the primary motivations are land mafia, greed and sex drive, women trafficking, and child labor; in "*Cut Like Wound*", the primary motivation for crime is revenge and greed. Examples of minor romance and love in "*Chain of Custody*", include the unexpressed attraction between the sub-Inspector Santosh along with his colleague Ratna, and the love of Rakesh for Nandita, which motivates him to take greater risks in order to save her from the brothel house; in "*Cut like Wound*" include the youth love affair between

Gita and Pujari that culminates in marriage and endures long after Gita's accident, which leaves her permanently crippled and leads to Sanjay Rathode's murder, and the illicit love affair between Urmila and Borei Gowda, the artificial or unnatural love between Sanjay and Bhuvana. It's noteworthy that suspense, irony, and analytical inquiry all play a part in the fifth feature. The spoken and unspoken actions of the characters in the novels occasionally reflect the investigation techniques of Borei Gowda, who was known for his analytical reasoning and thinking. The Police Inspector, Borei Gowda is the chief detective and investigator for both "*Chain of Custody*" as well as "*Cut like Wound*". He receives devoted and thorough assistance from ASI Ratna and Sub-Inspector Santosh when investigating crimes.

However, Inspector Borei Gowda deserves most of the credit for examining the information at hand, connecting the disconnected pieces of crimes, determining the crime's purpose, identifying the offender, and drawing the right conclusions. In both books, it's important to highlight the support that Borei Gowda received from his friend Michael and his dear Urmila. Borei Gowda never turns to violence or falters when conducting a criminal probe. Similarly, Borei Gowda doesn't feel intimidated by his adversary's predicted acts of violence, and behaves honorably and respectfully even in the face of attempts by his corrupt higher official, ACP Vidyaprasad, to obstruct his advancement in solving crimes. The two novels' plots are held in tension by the obstacles erected at various phases of the investigation by the jealous police official and the criminal. Furthermore, satire and irony are prominently featured in the conversations and remarks exchanged by various characters, such as Pujari as well as Rakesh in "*Chain of Custody*" and Urmila and Gowda himself in both novels.

Portrayal of female characters in Cut Like Wound

The notion that an individual's identity is multifaceted, complex, and influenced by a range of elements including gender, culture, personal encounters, and class is explored in Anita Nair's "*A Cut-Like Wound*" as it delves deeply into the issue of identity. The plot of the book centers on Inspector Gowda, Indian police - investigating officer looking into a string of gruesome killings in Bangalore. Gowda, an overweight, melancholy middle-aged guy who is having a hard time accepting his own current and past experiences, is forced to face himself as he digs deeper into the case. An affluent entrepreneur hiding a sinister secret, a young lady battling her own sexual orientation, and a transgender prostitute are among the suspects' and victims' varied identities that confront him. Nair explores the nuances of identity via these characters, highlighting the ways in which sex, gender, cultural standards, and class overlap. Additionally, she discusses the part trauma plays and how it can affect the development of individual's identity. In the end, *A Cut-Like Wound*'s identity theme emphasizes the notion that a person's identity is dynamic and ever-evolving, shaped by the decisions and experiences they encounter in life.

The book spans 38 days, beginning on Ramadan and ending on St. Mary's Day. The main antagonist of the book is a transsexual psychopath. One might wonder why it makes sense to use a pronoun associated with her gender realization or identification, or sex when selecting

one to refer to her. Therefore, one shall refer to her as woman as she expresses her gender strongly. At the end of the tale, the corporator convict's younger brother, Chikka, is revealed to be transgender (Harale & Patil, 2016). The other thugs who hang around Corporate Ravikumar do not resemble Chikka. Despite his distaste for the brutalgang at home, Akka is the only one in the gang that Chikka approves of, the elder eunuch and one of those who saw Chikka's change into the stunning prostitute Bhuvana (and later known as Kakshi).

Cut Like Wound, tells the tale of the investigating officer - Inspector Borei Gowda. He is a heavy drinker, wonderfully angry, and fundamentally imperfect person. He has an erratic family life with an absent wife, a mysterious mistress, and an estranged son. Nair presents Urmila, a female figure who, in order to satisfy her desire, indulges in betrayal and adultery. Gowda's ex-girlfriend is Urmila. After 27 years, she finally meets Gowda. Gowda experiences an emotional upheaval as a result of Urmila's arrival. Urmila's marriage life did not materialize. Her spouse is a womanizer. When he starts dating a woman in the vicinity, Urmila finds it hard to handle the situation. She is awaiting a legal divorce as he left her a few years ago.

Urmila's failed marriage drives her to look for a partner who can satisfy her desire. Urmila never seems to care about either of their lives, just looking on Gowda for physical fulfillment. Mamtha, the spouse of Gowda and a doctor, maintains a long-distance relationship with him. Roshan, the son of Gowda, is a medical student who resides in Hassan with Mamtha. Gowda is alone, and in need of affection. However, he is also vigilant about his son's professional endeavors and his marriage. Urmila and Gowda cross paths in a cafe. Urmila seeks to have an illicit relationship with Gowda, while he concerns about the situation and his honor. Furthermore, Gowda always receives calls and messages from Urmila. Gowda's life is tedious and annoying because of his unfulfilling marriage. Urmila is very passionate and loving. Moreover, Gowda is not pleased; he is perplexed. Married Urmila talks openly about how much she loves Gowda.

"You would be the Borei I once knew. And fell in love with" (Nair, *Cut like wound*, 109).

Hearing a married woman use the "L-word" makes 49-year-old Inspector Gowda feel conspicuous. For the second time, Urmila invites Gowda to the cafe and makes romantic overtures to live together. She emerges a liberated woman, shattering the shroud of tradition and norms. She is a complete failure in her marriage. There are no kids for her to suffer with. In order to vent her anguish, she moves around. She decides that her ex-lover Gowda is the ideal person to comfort her. She confides in him with all of her sentiments and emotions. Gowda is, in her opinion, the best friend she has ever had. Gowda's life remains unchanged despite his illicit contact with his former flame, Urmila. He continues to lead a normal family life. In favor of Urmila, he doesn't abandon his wife or children. He faces extreme difficulties in the relationships with his wife, son, and ex-college girlfriend. He contemplates "My career is going nowhere, my wife is a stranger, my son is probably a drug addict, and here I am falling in love again. Do I really need this in my life now?" (Nair, *Cut like wound*, 126-27)

However, Gowda is important to Urmila. She gives him complete control over her life. Urmila is Lady Deviah until she obtains a formal divorce. Experiencing love and passion for a married guy can be extremely challenging, particularly when he is expressing the same emotions toward his spouse. Urmila makes the audacious decision to breach the marital barrier. She isn't mature enough to realize that her relationship with Gowda is only temporary. As he is a family man, his relationship with Urmila will never be considered true. The female characters in Anita Nair's stories suffer subjugation and enslavement in their families and in society as long as they are kept inside the constraints of social standards and gender roles. In an effort to end this bondage, they rebel against society.

The entire book is a protracted hunt for this mysterious criminal. Who is responsible for all of these offenses? Is it Bhuvana or Chikka? A woman or a man? "Are Chikka and Bhuvana not products of society, even if they are to be condemned for these offenses? Furthermore, has society not failed her? All of this emphasizes the ambiguity of labels pertaining to gender, orientation, sex, and throws a web of confusion over it (Harale & Patil, 2016).

Reflection of women depiction in *Chain of Custody*

Anita Nair' *Chain of Custody* delves into the dark and hidden world of human trafficking with the help of characters like Ratna for illustrating the very devastating impact of this heinous crime. Ratna is a young girl who is known to have become a tragic symbol of innocence which is corrupted by nefarious human trafficking forces. Nair's critique of the broader societal issues facilitating and perpetuating exploitation have been the focal point of this characterization.

"I was six years old when my father sold me to a man for thousand rupees. That was to be my price for the season" (Nair, *Chain of Custody*, 10)

Ratna's narrative is marked by a profound vulnerability sense from the outset. She is represented as a child with aspirations and dreams, whose life takes a tragic turn when is kidnapped and taken by the network of human trafficking. The detailed portrayal of Ratna showcases the brutal reality faced by numerous girls in similar scenarios. Her character depicts the plight of women and children in patriarchal society. The representation of these young girls and the reduction to a mere object, lacking identities are the result of their relentless physical and psychological abuse. Ratna is forced and exposed to this systematic failure and deep-seated misogyny. The author highlights the intersection of gender discrimination, poverty, lacking legal protections and regulations which make young girls especially to trafficking.

Simultaneously, Anita Nair introduces the character of Anita a brave journalist in stark contrast to the character portrayal of Ratna. Anita is known for her moral fortitude, resilience and also the continuous pursuit towards justice against exploitation. She is crafted in such a way that she is a symbol of both resistance and agency. She is very determined in uncovering the truth and bringing justice for the victims from such perpetrators. As a journalist, she doesn't simply state the facts alone instead she offers voice to the voiceless and those who are responsible and accountable for this. Her journey is also marked by significant personal risks.

She is threatened, intimidated and this highlights the dangers faced by the people who try to defy the odds and fight against such corrupt and powerful entities. Inspite of all this, Anita's relentless efforts to resolve shows the power of individual action and moral courage which is essential for fighting against societal evils. Her character portrayal offers a beacon of hope, highlighting that a change can be brought by means of perseverance and also through ethical conviction.

In addition to this, the interactions with the other characters stress the need for solidarity among women. She endeavors to collaborate with fellow activists, supports the survivors and also the other allies and this shows that a collective power can arise when the individuals unite for a common cause. In the world of journalism which is mostly a male-dominated field, Anita also faces skepticism and sexism. The author brilliantly makes use of these scenarios and experiences for showing the gender biases which is prevalent in societal structures and in various professions. The capability of navigating through these circumstances and showing persistence in her mission highlights the determination and resilience of women who fight in the face of adversity.

Looking into the character of Mamta who is a quintessential homemaker is known for fulfilling the roles that a society expects a woman to do. She has a routine and normal lifestyle such as taking care of her husband and children and this portrayal establishes the emotional turmoil of many women who are burdened with societal norms and rules. Her initial acceptance showcases the societal internalization of the norms which dictate a woman's major and foremost responsibility is her family and home and one shouldn't possess any of personal desires and aspirations in these domestic settings. Her internal conflicts and need to question such system and roles explore the theme of self-worth and personal fulfillment quest. She strives to possess her own identity despite having children and the increase in dissatisfaction when she fails to do so due to the constant pressure from the society and family shows her confinement within the family. Thus, as a result of this, her journey is marked by situations and moments of resistance and self-doubt from those around her, emphasizing the societal pressures which women face when they attempt to break free from traditional expectations. "But only Mamtha could combine tenderness with censure, concern with the rasp of shrewish petulance, all in one breath. For as long as he could remember, it had been so" (Nair, *Chain of Custody*, 130)

This journey is the embarkment of quest for independence and challenge that test her resolve. Nair depicts the struggles with realism and empathy and illustrating her efforts of balancing the responsibilities as well. This nuanced portrayal focuses more on the transformation complexity for those women who seek autonomy in this patriarchal society. The character development of Mamta is marked by significant milestones which reflects her increasing independence and confidence. She starts prioritizing her wellbeing, signaling a shift from submission, oppression to self-assertion. Nair also uses these moments to analyze the traditional gender roles which confines women to subservient positions and to stress the significance of self-empowerment.

Mamta character in '*Chain of Custody*' provides a profound exploration of the challenges and struggles faced by women within domestic spaces and the societal constraints which they navigate. This reveals the multifaceted nature of the experiences which is both unflinching and empathetic. She avoids simplistic victimization and possess the capacity of resistance.

Thus, *Chain of Custody* has female characters are depicted as active participants in their own lives, grapples and subverts often with suppressive forces. Through this novel, the author sheds light on the broader systematic issues affecting Indian women that shifts from institutional corruption to violence, while also celebrates their indomitable spirit and possibility of redemption and hope.

Conclusion

Thus, from above the critical reflection it can be said that *Cut like Wound* and *Chain of Custody* provide a profound story from these female characters within the modern Indian society context. With the help of these narration, Nair talks about gender dynamic complexities and offers better exploration on themes like marginalization, resilience, identity.

In *Cut like Wound*, all the diverse array of female characters which encompasses Radha who is a transgender woman, Urmila wife of Gowda and they all tend to grapple with personal struggles and social constraints. The novel stresses the need for agency and strength in complex suppressive norms.

Looking into the *Chain of Custody*, all the women show the true nature of the Indian society. Their lifestyle varies from being a human trafficking victim to a homemaker who loses her self-identity due to her family and society to brave journalist trying to fight against all the odds that come in her way while trying to bring justice to people who have suffered too much because of oppressive nature of the society.

With all this, novels have tried to demonstrate the intersectional and diverse experiences of these women, depicting them as the active agents who strive to have better destiny. Thus, Nair's nuanced way of including empathetic characterizations into the storytelling for showcasing the significance of resilience and solidarity. Thus, the author has provided better contribution to the discourse on gender and power while providing a powerful commentary on the challenges and victories of women in the face of systematic suppression.

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