

Caste Hegemony versus Communism: Society of Kerala in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe and the Better Man

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Abstract

Anita Nair is an Indian English language writer. In her novels she deals about traditional thought of Indian culture, such as caste, communism and complex feelings. Through the characters in her novels she deals the caste system of Indian society. Caste plays a very important role in Indian Society. Modern people will not admit it, but sometimes their speech, behavior and responses shows caste references. Social reforms, urbanization and reservations have definitely reduced the density of caste. Oppression in the fiction helps in understanding the complex dynamics of a heterogeneous society like India. This paper shows the works of Anita Nair and the social condition of Kerala in which many of her works are set, to understand the caste scenario in Kerala. Many fiction writers in English focus exclusively on caste with its glaring inequalities. Communism was the another word she adequately used her novels. Caste system in her novel is just against the communism. Anita Nair concentrates on the caste factors and communism which play a vital role in Kerala society. In the novel *The Better Man* Anita Nair introduces the low caste character Kamban, the post-master of Kaikurrusi is a best example of how caste politics operates within the parameters of rural village like Kaikurrusi, Kamban, who belongs to the lower most Pulaya caste. He is treated like an outsider by the villagers. In spite of a dignified post he holds as a government employee, the villagers keep him at bay from the social activities of the village. Kamban doesn't dare to offend the boundary drawn for him by the upper caste fearing the wrath and scorn of the latter. Anita Nair shows how caste politics operates amongst the rural folk and how ascendancy in class hardly makes any difference to the social status granted to the lowest castes.

KEYWORDS: Urbanization, Heterogeneous, Reservations, Modernization, Paradigmatic.

Anita Nair's novels mainly portrays sufferings of women. Here, *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* Nair introduces caste and communism in Indian society especially Kerala. People from various caste and religions who have come to the cities in search of employment opportunities, try to forge their own identity through the work they do and many a times erase the caste markers which differentiate them from the mainstream. Many of them consciously engage themselves in what M.N. Srivas terms as Sanskritization process whereby all the caste markers are disowned. In the novel *The Better Man*, a white collared job equips the section Manager Shri. Ramappa (who belongs to the lower caste) with arrogance, pride and the power to talk back which was once the forte of upper caste individuals. The reader can easily notice how the whole dynamics of caste and theories regarding pollution topple with the infiltration of class into the social fabric of urban society. The reason for the social acceptance of Bhasi (who belongs to

the backward class) and negation of Kamban and traced to the phenomenal rise of the Ezhava Community due to the efforts of the social reformer Sri. Narayana Guru. Narayana Guru made a direct connection between the low social and religious practices of the Ezhavas and their low status. He also covered the people to get them educated and especially encouraged English education and learning of English language. In the novel the better man describes two years ago Kamban had worked in the post office at Perinthal Manna. When the post master slot fell vacant at Kai Kurussi, Kamban requested a transfer and was given it. Every day he offered a little prayer of thanks that he was back in the village he was born. Kamban's work experience in his own village is different. At first the village didn't know how to react to his presence. One half of them kept him at length, going about their business brusquely, afraid that he would take liberties if they demonstrated any signs of familiarity. The other half pretended to look through him, preferring to deal with postman Unni. . But Kamban Seldom joined in the gossip the rest of the village liked to carry to the post office.

He work his aloofness as if it were a protective amulet guaranteed to keep away the wrath of all creatures malevolent, when he had to deal with any of the villagers, he did so awkwardly, shrinking into himself as though afraid that they would think nothing of hurling a stone at him yelp. Once the villages realized that Kamban wasn't interested in makings any overtures of friendship, they settled into a kind of amicable distance in their relationship in which nothing beyond postal transactions was encouraged. (TBM 147)

The advent of modernity in Kerala is mainly due to the cultural sedimentation caused by the socio-political turmoil of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, which includes colonial domination as well as several progressive initiatives, that is the nationalist Movement, Namboodiri Yoga KShema Movement and the Communist Movement modernization has brought about changes in the relationship between caste and class. It has been argued that the creation of newer jobs as the economy modernizes will not only lead to an increasing movement of people away from hereditary occupations to non-caste occupations, but also to occupations that were originally the prerogative of the higher castes Panini states that:

Since enhanced competition is likely to enhance professional management of firms to enhanced productivity and profit, criteria stressing efficiency and skill will prove to be more important in recruitment than the caste of the worker and his loyalty to the firm. As competition opens up and productivity increases all around, the economic growth rate is likely to get accelerated which in turn would multiply job opportunities to such an extent that workers do not have to play their caste backgrounds to get jobs. (Panini: 60)

Likewise the history of the communist movement in Kerala shows that its early leaders belonged to the upper castes, and that the crusade for equality was carried out by caste elites. In Nair's *The Betterman* there is the Kuttu, born Sivan Kuttu, who in his youth greatly admired Che Guevara, "So every thought he had, every sentence he mouthed, was distilled from the philosophy propounded by his idol. Soon his friends began to refer to him as Che Sivan Kuttu. Over the years his real name was discarded, and he became CheKuttu" (TBM 5). Now, only a beard like the guerilla leader's mangy tuffy one, and a lock of hair over his forehead remains of, "It is leftist leanings and

militant youth” (TBM 5). That he has chosen to upturn a red plastic pot on a pole outside his shop shows that his communist past continues to havn’t him, “ red being the colour of revolution” (TBM 5). As Nair writes some other country he would have staged a revolution, probably even have been a highly paid guerilla. But here in Malabar, all the CheKutty was continue with the family business. InThe Better Man selling today for a living, CheKutty contributes his mite to the war against to bourgeoisie by disbursing the common Man’s drink, “he was helping reduce the profits earned by the bourgeoisie who peddled western imperialist spirits like whisky, brandy and rum” (TBM 5) and thereby thwart the power structures of class.

Anita Nair portrays the caste system as a social reality deeply embedded in the psycho of most Indian irrespective of the class or caste they are born. The surfacing of casteist pre-conceptions and ill treatment melted out to the dalit like Kamban. Communism also plays a major role in her novels. Nair’s strength as a writer is evident in her presentation of caste as well as communism which was reinvented a modern institution, especially its new modes of reproduction the fresh meanings it provides and functions. It is acquiring in the area of globalization. Mukundan in The Better Man gets involved in caste politics at the grass roots level, even though he tries his very best to keep away from it.

In the novel Ladies Coupe, the protagonist Akila points out the humiliation and jeering her father (Appa) has to regularly face in the office due to his peculiar style of dressing, eating habits which actually stand out in the mainstream culture. She says,

He was the butt of jokes and much laughter. They laughed about the way he worked, the cloths he work, the feed he ate, why, they even laughed at the way he suffered their mockery. He stomached his humiliation silently in the misguided belief that if he didn’t react, they would finally heave him alone. Instead, it merely invited his tormentors and provoked them to subject him to greater ridicule. (LC 43)

Within a particular text which is a treatise of the socio-economic condition of a particular society, one can find spaces where there is an erasure of the caste and class differences. One such place is Sankar’s tea club in The Better Man: Where people belonging the various castes and religion assemble to share their political ideas as well as beliefs. Right from labourers like painter Bhasi to the bourgeoisie Mad Moidu to the aristocrat at Mukundan Nair, and also an occasional visit by the capitalist, it becomes a hub for all, thereby creating a sense of community thus, it is in places like this that the borders created by class and caste temporarily melt.

Thus, to fully understand the socio-economic reality of a place or a society which is as rich and diverse as India, we cannot isolate caste from class. All of Anita Nair’s major works are unique examples of the inter-relationship between caste, class and gender. Thus this study also depicts caste hegemony and communism in the society of Kerala.

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