



## SUBALTERN ISSUES IN ANITHA NAIR'S *IDRIS*

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### ABSTRACT

*In Idris: keeper of the light, one can observe how subaltern characters subvert the motives of the dominant characters in the social front. Anita Nair has presented a typical Indian joint family abiding by the traditional norms and values. She depicts the patriarchal Nair joint family in Malabar during seventeenth century. In India, families were considered to be pillars propping up the society throughout its history. Anita Nair is always on the side of the marginalized and is resolutely against racism, colonialism and male chauvinism. Idris brings a clear picture of miserable condition of women, casteism and assertion of identity etc. As a committed artist, Anita Nair deals with social and political realities of medieval India. She comments on a wide variety of unexplored medieval issues such as the expression and repression of human sexuality, plight of woman in Indian society, gender roles, morality and identity.*

**Key words:** subalternity, Untouchability, Casteism, subjugation, marginalization

### INTRODUCTION

The term “subalternity” refers to a condition of subordination brought about by colonization or other forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and cultural dominance. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes. Subaltern Studies focuses attention on the dispossessed and subjugated by colonial institutions. Spivak suggests that literature can provide a different space to articulate subaltern women’s insurgency and resistance in the social text of postcolonial India. Anitha Nair examines the marginalized role of women in literary texts. According to Spivak, native subaltern women

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are doubly colonized. They are colonized by the patriarchy of men in the domestic sphere and by the patriarchy of colonial power in the public sphere.

Anita Nair has brought her novel a new outlook which underlines a rich heritage mingled with strong western influences. In the Medieval India, families were always patriarchal, that is male dominated. Women were never given any rights of liberty and equality. They were always treated in an inferior way. Woman as a woman has no place in feudal culture. She can only survive as a mother, daughter, wife and sister. A woman is expected to be a submissive daughter, a caring mother and a docile wife. Elders remarked that education is to be decided by gender. Only male has right to education. A few people knew Sanskrit and Arithmetic. In *Idris*, we can see Itukka Menavan's trick of silencing his listeners using Sanskrit verses at common people because nobody knows the meaning of Sanskrit verses. When a Brahmin guest suggests his decision to teach Sanskrit, arithmetic and music to Nair children, Kuttimalu becomes happy. But she remembers some restrictions given by her uncle.

In the Medieval Age, Nair women's life was so miserable. Kuttimalu's character tells that her husbands are not real husbands. They are mere sambandhakarans. They will come to Nair women's home some nights only to experience their flesh and smell. Nair women had to hold their tongues and desires. They had no right to speak up against men. That's why when Idris gives her respect; Kuttimalu tries to gain his love. She understands the difference in touch between sambandhakaran and Idris. She saw a celestial lover in *Idris*. Hence she did not resist him while he touches her. She aspires for self-recognition and dream fulfillment.

According to Kerala history, Nair women were not bidden to stay indoors. At temple festivals, they would be present wearing all their ornaments so that they may be seen and admired. In the month of Karkitakam, the untouchables will hover by these tharavads. If they spot a Nair woman, they hurl a stone or a twig at her. If the stick or stone touch her, she will be excommunicated and will have to make home with those untouchables.

In *Idris*, there are three different kinds of women — Kuttimalu, Thilothamma, and Margarida. Kuttimalu reveals her agonized self, her intense feeling of love and gusto for life which resulted unfortunately in pregnancy. Because of her natural thirst for love and sexual desires she happened to defy the patriarchal values, cultural and moral restrictions and the institution of marriage.

In *Idris*, another woman character Margarida cannot do anything against her fate of becoming a whore. After the death of her parents, seven year old Margarida was looked after by her nanny. For the next six years, the nanny did her best. Then Goncalo, a broker suggested her the easy way to earn money by using a young girl. Although nanny rejected the opinion

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initially, later she saw Margarida as if she were a fowl. So Goncalo had to wait till Margarida turned into a woman. The novelist presents Margarida as a girl who lives in the society accepting all the humiliations, injustices, sufferings and miseries without raising any voice or making resistance.

In seventeenth century, women have been living in pain and silence as victims of male dominance and sexual violence. The idea that rape can be used as a tool to control women reaffirms the fact that male sexuality has a greater influence on the creation of masculine identity. Male sexuality is regarded as a symbol of power and strength where as female sexuality is considered passive and something to be ashamed of. Today women are victims of gross sexual violence.

Third woman character Thilothamma, who is described as a paragon of beauty. She is the symbol of emancipated woman. She does not play passive feminine role. The character of Thilothamma is truly existentialist who suffers alienation from her own self. She tries to protect her grandfather's property because one day he had told her the story of getting a diamond from his land. Then she continued her single life. Later she accepts the marriage proposal of a cousin Ranga Reddy, a widower. After two years of their marriage, he began to quarrel by saying she did not pay any respect to him. Being a bold woman, she is not ready to sell her land for living with her husband on a distant land. She led a solitary life after Ranga Reddy abandoned her. To her, Ranga Reddy is not a good personal and he could not give her physical and mental satisfaction. Later we can see her motherly affection towards Kandavar. Thilothamma has become a desperate victim of society because she tries to live independently and enjoy life as much as possible. As an emancipated woman of modern India, she has been in search of true meaning of life. She works for her identity and breaks the fetters of conventionality.

Thilothamma is a rebel against the traditional role of woman. Her emergence from unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual, is an assertion of her personal freedom. She meets Idris and falls in love with him. She finds in him everything which she had been searching for in her husband. Idris does not ignore her presence, but instead helps her to regain her freedom as an individual, a human being with her own identity. In his company she realizes that she has to free herself from her unhappy married life. She is a blend of both traditional and modern elements and she wants uniqueness and autonomy.

On examining history, it is clear that the hierarchy was regulated in accordance with the interest of the hegemonic classes. The main evil was casteism which corroded the roots of the society. On top of the pyramid were the Brahmins who were supposed to be the highest caste.

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Just below them were the Nairs with whom the Brahmins could have illegal matrimonial union. Below the Nairs came the Ezhavas. Parayas, Pulayas and other castes were the lowest strata of the society. The upper castes were persistently keeping the Ezhavas and the other lower castes away from educational opportunities. There was even a regulation which fixed the distance to be kept by each caste from a Nambootiri.

The caste system has been practical in the Indian society for centuries. The roots of the evil system are deeply and firmly planted in the Indian mind. It has poisoned the healthy thinking of the people in the society. Untouchability is the worst result and the greatest curse of caste system. Later Vivekananda's and Gandhiji's thoughts and philosophy based on *Gita* and humanitarian teachings of Ruskin and Tolstoy reduced the discrepancies in the inter-caste relationship and finally flouted the evil system of the Casteism. Gandhiji tried his best to raise the status of Dalits. Today, the constitution of free India has forbidden the practice of untouchability in any shape or form.

## CONCLUSION

In *Idris*, Anita Nair examines the influence of past on present and reveals the predicament of individuals who are subjected to the events of history. The situations and the characters intend to highlight the universality of experience. She makes an attempt to write subaltern history through fiction and making the theory into practice in a unique manner.

In *Idris*, Anita Nair deals with the themes of love, sex, marriage, violence, gender inequality, social inequality, power games and alienation and individual isolation. She explores and exposes the residual effects of foreign domination in the political, social and economic spheres. It is a retelling of the political history of the seventeenth century South India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters. Being deeply associated with the inner consciousness of the human race, it represents man's hopes, aspirations, visions, ideas, objectives, joys and sorrows with great insight. It mingles history, geography, voyages, trade, adventure, magic, memory and multiple points of view.

Anita Nair has explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. She depicts both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. She offers an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization.



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