



## Telling it with a Slant: Narrative Style of Anita Nair

### KEYWORDS

Narration; Interpretations; Self-actualization

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### ABSTRACT

Use of "slant" as a narrative mode in women writers and the homodiegetic and heterodiegetic modes of narration employed by Anita Nair in her novels is discussed in the paper. Interpretation being one of the important aspects of a dialectic process, it is examined from the "slant" of a female narration of 'Trust me. That is all I ask of you. Trust me and listen' as opposed to the male construct of "trust not the teller but the tale".

Story telling has been the oldest art of narration. Right from Hans Anderson's absorbing fairy tales to J.K. Rowling's astonishing fancy stories, or from Robinson Crusoe's simple letters of instruction to the Good Man Friday to Faulknerian narratives in the form of interior monologues or *avante garde* third person limited narration or Anita Nair's and Oscar Wilde's "In art ,don't you see, there is no first person" defying self-styled first person interior monologues, the art of storytelling has evolved even as man's consciousness of "Truth" and "truths" have evolved on the planes of relativism.

Gerald Prince speaking on the two effective ways of narration, 'showing' and 'telling', says: "Showing, along with telling enacts one of the fundamental kinds of distance regulating narrative information ... [showing is] *mimesis* as opposed to telling or *diegesis* . . . showing is a mode characterized by the detailed, scenic rendering of situations and events and by minimal narratorial mediation; dialogue constitutes a good example of showing". Narratized discourse constitutes a good example of telling. (Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*). Anita Nair uses interior monologues in the heterodiegetic (many characters or points of view of the same events) narrative mode to tell the innermost thoughts of each of the family in *Mistress*. *Ladies Coupe* employs a homodiegetic (a single point of view or character's perspective of many events) narrative mode with the third person limited and third person omniscient, respectively. While a third person omniscient is capable of "seeing all", godlike, a third person limited perspective vainly attempts to achieve omniscience like a calf tied to a stake.

Anita Nair is seen to be an excellent exponent in the art of balancing "showing" and "telling". The author believes, "trust not the teller nor the tale, but the telling of it." In this she is, like most woman writers, following, with a few variations, the Deshpande quoted Droupathi dictum "tell it with a slant". Slant is not exclusive to women's writing alone. It is found in any mode of expression where constraints imposed by established institutionalized authority seek a disguised outlet.

'Slant' or 'Skaz' according to Bakhtin is a form of "stylization" or "verbal masquerade" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 275). It is the *borrowing* of "one voice the style and timbre of another; it is an "artistic image of another's language" (DI 362). The 'Skaz' identified by Bakhtin is "the word with a sidewise glance". Uttered with a "halting style", it has its eye constantly on the reader literally cringing in the presence or anticipation of someone else's word. For example, Akhila seeks the support and sympathy (a term feminists will object to hear) through the slant of the 'innocent' woman victimized by the social norms of a sense of duty towards her family and yet feels helplessly defenseless and claustrophobic: "So this then is

Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" [emph. mine](2); or painfully, humorously: " the au-bergines, coated with Amma's need to prove her esteem for Appa, would hiss, splutter and then settle to become golden brown relics of devotion. Succulent quivering insides, with just a crunch of spice to tantalize his appetite. Feast, feast, my husband, my lord and master. On my flesh, my soul, my kathrika bhajis." (M49). Akhila's ironic humour over the "wifely devotion' over a mechanical unfeeling husband is an attempt to show the need for satisfying the palate of the man; Amma becomes the "kathrika bhajjis"; her act of wifely servility and sacrifice masquerades as 'suffering-virtue' and also boils within, like the "bhajjis" of inner turmoil that she mostly is; a case of substitute gratification ; an existential transference of a woman's troubled and spluttering inner world and the transformation which cannot be and should not be "proclaimed aloud" in the presence of her 'lord and master'. Amma belonged to a world where she could never voice her inner turmoil and so camouflaged as a devoted wife.

Shashi Deshpande, in her book *Writing from the Margins*, under the title "Masks and Disguises" focuses on this "sin of self proclamation". Why should not women express themselves in the way they want without coming into censure from the malevolent [usage mine] eye? So has been the case and concern over the use of the English language and writing in the creation of a new life and a new way of expressing it. Deshpande quotes Draupadi [sic] from the Bagavath Geeta advising Krishna's wife, Sathyabama, on how to manage men , "clever women know many ways . . . I put aside my ego, I try not to be jealous, I strive to be modest and gracious . . . [and] " be silent about what you think". The salve for womanly survival technique was "Be Silent". The point under contention here is "Don't Think" versus "Don't Think Aloud". This dictum, in fact is echoed in the first phase of women writers that Showalter categorizes in her *A Literature of their Own*.

The first phase, feminine phase, is one that drills the women writers to Not to Think but "toe the line of the male order". The second phase (feminist) decides to think but not aloud; Deshpande's women's interpretations "don't think aloud", they resist toeing of male text dictums and resolve to be self expressive. But, at the same time, being conscious within of the feminine self (a self that wants to but somewhere, somewhat hesitates to establish that self-assertion. This is where Anita Nair's *Karpagam* of *Ladies Coupe* comes in; the widow's unrestricted flaunting of her female identity .....and her parting shot to Akhila, advising her to "Damn it! Think aloud", and not only think aloud but throw age old, biased enforcements on women with a "cock-a-thumb-laugh. The

third and the female phase with the suggestion of Helene Cixous's "Medusa's laugh" attached to it.

To think aloud but not let others know that you are thinking aloud is Deshpande's suggestion to women writers, through the appropriate use of "slant" or "masks" or "disguises". If we observe closely, the shift in application and realization of woman's expression moves from "restrained freedom" to "freedom restrained" to "freedom in freedom"; i.e., freedom in the choice of freedom. To give it a more literary application, it is the shift from the "zenana" factor to the "Lakshman Reka" to Sylvia Plath's driving of the stake into cultural vampires in her poem "Daddy" or her "Mirror" factor which tells us of how freedom and self-actualization can be won through either "being liberated through self" [like Akhila and Radha with respect to their margins either self made or socially imposed] or "being liberated through others". This feeling of entrapment is what both protagonists attempt to break away from a condition which Margaret Atwood, in her book *Survival*, an excellent critique on the nature and function of Canadian writing remarks: "The Canadian protagonist often feels trapped inside his family. He feels the need for escape, but somehow he is unable to break away" (25). Anita Nair tells about the conservative society-drawn modern "Lakshman Rekas" that the marginalized (men or women) have to carry or counter, especially from the zenanas each occupies.

In *Ladies Coupe* Margaret Shanthi and Marikolanthu are the only two characters given the first person narrative privilege. They represent two extremes of the female principle that reveal and instruct Akhila more than the others. The only time italicized narration is used in the novel is post Margaret Shanthi's story. The lesson that Akhila learns from her is "I am Me".... "be immune to what others say or think of you"..... "I can neither be defeated nor destroyed" (135). A close reading of this first person narrative tells the reader that there is yet another traveller in the *Ladies Coupe* – FEAR and DEFEAT. Each of the women in the coupe is enshrouded by this

demon that she needs to "kill" like the "angel in the house"- the phantom that Virginia Woolf warns all women against. Shanthi symbolically takes on the omnipotent power of Creator and Destroyer – "Akhilandeswari". Woman is "blue vitriol" and "water" simultaneously. She reflects what is before her like the woman in Plath's "Mirror". She is the dutiful wife and the killing machine.

Karpagam's words of wisdom uttered to Akhila during their chance meeting, "I didn't like the person I had become and so I changed" (LC167). The women characters of Ms. Nair "Know the devil in order to win the devil", which is exactly what Akhila was prohibited from doing by her orthodox patriarchal/parental culture, but she begins to experiment with the help of Katherine Webber starting with "boiled eggs" and ending with her Kanyakumari catharsis.

Ms.Nair in her *The Better Man* calls Philipose 'hot air' and nothing else. Her philosophy of men is that they are two faced and they with masks and disguises approach the outer world. Kamban the *dalith* whom Philipose hates (because of his community) revenges by driving out Philipose from Kairur. This instance would remind one of Margaret Shanti's revenge on her husband Ebenezer. Both represent the marginalized milieu; one as a woman another as a *dalith*. Both do not attack the men directly they use slanted methods. Margaret Shanti by making her husband fat avenges and Kamban inflicting the fear of ghosts and necromancy in Philipose.

Under the slant of lampoon Anita Nair presents the true condition of the marginalized; be it women or *dalith* the issue is all about a self-actualized life for all. Her narratives prove that Anita Nair is neither a feminist nor a person fighting for the oppressed she is a humanist who deviates from the traditional male text.

## REFERENCE

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