

## The silenced voices of desire in the novel *Eating Wasps*

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**Abstract:** The present paper analyses the women characters Urvashi, Sreelakhmi, Brinda and Najma in the novel *Eating Wasps*. The protagonist is the ghost of Sreelakhmi and she takes the readers through the lives of other women in the novel. Anita Nair portrays the confined lives of women even in the modern society. She portrays a society that considers women's desires as a sin. Gender roles are deeply engrained in the minds of both men and women in a patriarchal society. The family and society consider women's desires as unnatural. They are silenced and are forced to live a life they despise. The paper discusses the shame and guilt faced by the women in the novel and the gender discrepancies in the society.

**Keywords:** gender, identity, shame, female desire, gender theory

### 1. Introduction

The society assigns gender roles depending upon the biological traits of people. Men take responsible roles in the society and very often women are assigned the role of housewife. Even if they are allowed to pursue their career, it is their responsibility to take care of the family, which includes their husband, children, and husband's family if any. A woman is expected to delight in taking care of her home and family. Women are either under the control of their parents or husband. The society demarcates specific roles for men and women. Several writers have written about this gender gap created in the society. The gender dissimilarities widen with the years. Writers have long been portraying this gender dissimilarities and the subjugation of women in the family and the society.

Anita Nair is a well-known Indian woman writer who writes about women issues and the expected gender roles. Her novels revolve around the ordinary life of people.

### 2. Literature Review

Anita Nair is an eminent writer who writes about human psychology and man women relationship. Women take the center stage of discussion in her novels. In *Eating Wasps*, she writes about the lives of ten different women who belong to different backgrounds and age groups. She narrates how their desire stings them like wasps. Nair also writes about the consequences of men's desire and the adverse effect on women.

The society determines what a woman should wear and how she should behave.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes,

Custom dictates the compromise between exhibitionism and modesty; sometimes it is the neckline and sometimes the ankle that the 'virtuous woman' must hide; sometimes the young girl has the right to highlight her charms so as to attract suitors, while the married woman gives up all adornment: ( 588)

Anita Nair's women aspire to lead a life they desire. Nair also narrates the consequences they face in life because of being desirous in life.

Feminist state that gender disparities are socially established whereas patriarchy believes they are established biologically. Women accept their life and live in a society that is fashioned by the ideas of male. The society considers the women who excessively desire as sinners. Nair portrays the life of women that spans between ancient and modern times. Sreelakhmi, the protagonist lived during the year 1962. Nair was fascinated by the story of the writer Rajalekshmi who committed suicide in the year 1960. She was a celebrated writer and Physics lecturer who died at the age of 35.

Through the life of Sreelakhmi, Nair excavates the position of women in the modern age. Sreelakhmi worked as professor in Zoology department. She was a writer and poet. She won the Akademi prize and acquired literary reputation. She continued to work as professor and moved with her mother to a rented house. She says, "I was now the man of the house. I gave my watch to my oldest niece and took to wearing my father's Favre Leuba." (142) Anita Nair does not confine her women to the patriarchal society and customs. She gives her women the freedom to express their desire. When Sreelakhmi wears her father's watch, her lover Markose asks her,

"You wear a men's watch.

She replies, "It was my father's".

"It's not usual to see a lady wearing a gent's watch', he smiled

“I am not the usual kind of lady.” (215)

Nair gives her women the freedom to think and opine. Though Sreelakshmi lives during an ancient time, she thinks ahead of the people of her times.

She called herself the ‘gatherer of wasps and wantonness’ (228). Even though Sreelakshmi was the bread winner of the family, her mother curtailed her freedom. Sreelakshmi preferred to wear salwar kameez when she went for fieldwork. To her mother, salwar was a vulgar piece of clothing. Her mother objects to her wearing salwar and says, “Are you going out wearing that?” (227) According to her salwar wasn’t a respectable dress. Nair creates strong women characters who, stand up for themselves. Sreelekshmi says,

I wrote about women whose lives didn’t go the way they would have wanted. I wrote about heartbreak and loss; of temptation and giving in. I wrote about what it was to be a woman. (209)

Sreelakshmi’s writings were published only in weekly magazines as they felt that she wrote against the custom and culture of the society. It was not the acceptable kind of writing. Her mother too chided her especially since she was a spinster and warned her to be careful. Nair portrays the difficulties faced by women in expressing her views to the world. The society criticizes and restricts the freedom of women writers.

Sreelakshmi meets Markose in a library. Markose was a married man and he lures Sreelakshmi into a relationship. When her family and society criticized her writing, Markose encouraged her. He praised her writing and she was a victim for his false praise. He leaves her when he was tired of her. She feels the weight of desire and the desire of her lover on her. Her writing was never accepted in the literary circle anymore. She thought about her childhood when she opened her mouth to eat a wasp.

She says,

My mind went back to the little girl who stood with her mouth open, ready to eat a wasp. I thought of how brave and hopeful she was. I felt tears sting my eyes. Carefully, I unwound the saree I wore. I slung it through a wooden beam in the bathroom and made a noose. I upturned the bronze cauldron that stood on the ledge and stood on it. I was weary of the cycle of life. Yes, this too shall pass. There was nothing left inside me to dredge hope from. I was done. All I wanted to do was leave. (252)

Sreelakshmi killed herself on a Monday. She wondered how easy it was to kill oneself. Nair highlights that it was easier to die but it was difficult for such women to live peacefully. The author chose an incident that happened in the 1600s. She draws a parallel to the contemporary society, which is no different from the earlier times.

Anita Nair portrays the character Najma who is desirous of living a better life. Her mother always said, “Desire is a luxury. Not that desire was evil or wrong, but it could cause heartbreak.” (58) Her mother gave her the freedom to be herself and remain who she wished to be. She wished a better life for her daughter. When a young man named Imtiaz who worked in the same place where her mother worked, asked for Najma’s hand in marriage her mother denied with a laugh. He felt insulted and decided to take revenge on her. He waited for the right time and one day when she was travelling in a train, he flung acid in her face. He wished that if he didn’t marry her then no one else should. He flung acid on her desire and life. Najma never gave up. She did not commit suicide but she lived with dignity. Initially, she covered her face with a burkha but later she shows her face to the world. She decided never to hide or run away from reality. She finds a job and lives a respectable life.

Nair rewrites the idea of feminine beauty through the character Najma. She draws the reader’s attention to the character Brinda, who is a young badminton player. She was never accepted as a girl because she was a player. Once she overheard her aunts discussing about her physical appearance:

She is like a boy dressed up. All angles and no curves. Girls need curve. Do you think she’s on steroids? They say most sports people say. Male hormones and steroids. Even her face has none of the softness of a girl.”(128)

She is afraid of the family and the world and leaves behind her career. She would have won the Olympic gold leaves her desires to fit into the desires and wishes of her family and the society.

Nair draws the character Urvashi. Urvashi is a married woman in her thirties. She was trying to get away from her overbearing lover. Mahesh, her Zeus husband is interested in many women. She feels that she lived a perfect life and her husband took care of her. She felt that she lacked the chemistry with Mahesh in life. She joins a dating app upon her friends’ insistence. She soon finds a married man and talks to him about her feelings and life. He invited her to his house in the absence of his wife and they entered into physical relationship. When Urvashi felt that all they had was a sexual chemistry, she did not wish to continue with the relation. She expressed it to him several times that she wished to stop the affair with him. He doesn’t agree and he stalks her.

Simone de Beauvoir says,

Adultery, furthermore, has very different characteristics according to customs and circumstances. In our civilization of enduring patriarchal traditions, marital infidelity is still more serious for the woman than the man.” (The Second Sex, 610)

Nair does not portray Urvashi was a perfect woman. She is not a pitiable character either. She is a strong woman with her own perception of life. Urvashi boldly rejects both Mahesh and her lover. They were not perfect men in her life. Mahesh cheated her and so did the substitute she found. She told her lover with the voice of steel, I was never your prisoner, to escape. You are just a silly boy throwing a childish tantrum. But I am not your mother to indulge you. So listen to me: it's over. You and I are finished, no matter what you think. Nothing you say or do is going to change that." (205)

She wished to end her relation with Mahesh and thought that she would broach on the subject later when she returned. She did not wish to continue with the meaningless life with the men who considered her as a ritual and puppet.

Women are treated as objects in the society. The position of women has not changed over time. Nair portrays weak and strong women characters. Sreelekshmi and Brinda give up their desire while Najma and Urvashi face life boldly. Women are considered only as secondary and are materialized by men. Nair writes about the gender disparity and questions the discrimination, social injustice, and exploitation of women.

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