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## Women, Land and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Anita Nair's Selected Novels

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### Abstract

Ecofeminist criticism brings together two concerns: the unequal treatment of women and the exploitation of the natural world. The relationship between the two becomes more entangled when it is examined within the social and cultural conditions of postcolonial India. All women do not experience nature in the same way, and their approach to land, work, education, property and mobility differs according to caste, class, age and family position. Anita Nair's fiction provides a useful literary space for examining these complexities. Her novels *The Better Man* and *Mistress* portray women who negotiate marriage, domestic responsibilities, sexuality, their memories and personal freedom, while their lives remain closely intertwined with houses, gardens, land, water, landscape and movement. This article reads the three novels through a postcolonial ecofeminist framework and argues that Nair does not present women as naturally closer to nature. Instead, she shows how social arrangements place women in particular relationships with their physical surroundings. In *The Better Man*, land and inheritance become closely connected with female security and decision-making, while the changing landscape of Kaikurussi reflects the pressures of commercial development. *Mistress*, meanwhile, examines the relationship between female identity, domestic confinement, artistic culture and the spaces created by marriage and desire. Across the three novels, nature becomes a medium through which questions of memory, power, vulnerability and renewal can be explored. The article contends that Nair's contribution to ecofeminist fiction lies in her refusal to simplify either women or nature. Her work instead suggests that ecological and gender justice are connected through material realities and through the struggle to reclaim control over one's own life and surroundings.

**Keywords:** Anita Nair, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecofeminism, women and nature, land, property, female agency, identity, *The Better Man*, *Mistress*

## INTRODUCTION

Literary representations of nature have undergone remarkable change during the last few decades. Once nature was frequently treated as a passive setting against which human drama unfolded and contemporary environmental criticism has questioned this assumption and examines how landscapes, animals, water, forests and other forms of non-human life contribute in human histories. Feminist criticism has made a related intervention by examining the ways in which women's bodies, labour and lives have been controlled by patriarchal institutions. Ecofeminism emerged at the meeting point of these two critical concerns.

The gist of ecofeminism is valuable but it requires careful handling. Women and nature have historically been placed on the same side of a hierarchy dominated by masculine authority and control. Both have been represented as resources available for use. Women have been expected to nurture, reproduce and care, while nature has been expected to provide food, land, labour and other resources. Both contributes for nourishment of human race. Such parallels have encouraged ecofeminist critics to investigate the ideological structures that permit both forms of domination.

At the same time, the association between women and nature can itself become problematic. If women are described as naturally caring or inherently ecological, the argument may unintentionally strengthen traditional gender stereotypes. Bina Agarwal's materialist criticism of ecofeminism is especially important in this context. Her approach draws attention to the economic and social circumstances through which women come into contact with natural resources. A woman who works in agriculture, gathers fuel or manages

household resources may possess detailed environmental knowledge, but this knowledge develops from her social position and labour rather than from an essential feminine quality.

This distinction becomes particularly productive when ecofeminism is applied to Indian literature. The environmental experiences of Indian women cannot be separated from the histories of colonialism, caste, class, land ownership, industrialisation, urbanisation and changing family structures. Postcolonial ecofeminism therefore has to ask questions that go beyond the general opposition between man and woman or culture and nature. It must also examine who owns resources, who performs environmental labour, whose land is taken for development and whose voice is heard when social and ecological decisions are made.

Anita Nair's fiction offers an appropriate field for such an investigation. Her novels are deeply interested in the inner lives of women, but their psychological concerns are rarely isolated from the spaces in which the women live. Houses, gardens, villages, roads, railway compartments, water bodies and inherited properties become connected with questions of identity.

This article focuses on two novels: *The Better Man* and *Mistress*. The texts are different in setting and narrative design, yet they share an interest in women who are trying to negotiate identities imposed upon them. Their struggles are not identical. Some have property, others do not. Some possess education and employment, while others remain dependent on family structures. Some seek physical movement; others attempt to transform the meaning of the space in which they are already living.

The central argument of this article is that Nair's ecofeminist imagination is fundamentally concerned with belonging and control. The

question is not simply whether women are close to nature. It is whether women have the freedom to determine their relationship with the places, resources and bodies that constitute their lives. In Nair's fiction, land can offer security but can also become a burden; a house can provide shelter but can also become a prison; water can signify danger as well as freedom; and travel can become a way of recovering an identity suppressed by domestic expectations. These contradictions make Nair's fiction most suitable for an ecofeminist reading.

### The Woman-Nature Relationship

Ecofeminism developed through several intellectual and activist traditions. Some strands concentrated on the symbolic relationship between women and nature, while others examined material conditions and environmental politics. Vandana Shiva's influential work in the Indian context links the exploitation of women and the destruction of ecological systems with models of development that ignore local knowledge and community-based economies. Shiva's contribution is particularly important because she challenges the assumption that economic growth is automatically beneficial. Large-scale development may be described as progress, but its consequences can include the displacement of communities, the loss of agricultural land and the weakening of traditional livelihoods. Women often experience these changes directly because of their responsibilities within households and local economies.

Agarwal's position complicates this argument. She does not deny the environmental difficulties faced by women. Instead, she asks why women should be treated as one undifferentiated category. Rural women, urban women, wealthy women, landless women and women from different caste positions may have very different relationships with nature. The source material stresses precisely this problem, noting that ecofeminist explanations need to

take account of women's economic and political circumstances.

Nair's novels repeatedly support this more differentiated understanding.

Her women do not respond to the environment in a uniform manner. The landscape means something different to Anjana, Valsala, Parukutty Amma and Meenakshi in *The Better Man*. Similarly, Akhila's understanding of movement and water cannot be equated with Margaret's. In *Mistress*, Radha's relationship with domestic space differs again because her identity is caught between marriage, desire and artistic culture. This variety is important. Nair does not construct a single feminine environmental consciousness. Instead, she presents a number of individual relationships between women and place.

The result is an ecofeminism grounded in everyday life. Instead of placing environmental activism at the centre of every narrative, Nair allows ecological questions to emerge from ordinary experiences: maintaining a household, owning property, living on inherited land, travelling by train, remembering a garden, confronting water, cooking food or feeling trapped inside a house. In this sense, the ecological is inseparable from the personal.

### Land in *The Better Man*

*The Better Man* provides the strongest example of Nair's engagement with land and property. The fictional village of Kaikurussi is not simply a geographical background. It is a place shaped by memory, inheritance and social relationships. Mukundan's return to the village after a long absence brings the past into conversation with a landscape that is itself undergoing change.

The village occupies an uncertain position between rural continuity and modern development. Green spaces are increasingly replaced by concrete structures, and land begins to acquire a stronger commercial value. Bhasi's small plot is particularly significant because it

contains medicinal plants and represents a form of knowledge rooted in close observation of the natural world. His forced sale of the land to make way for a development project exposes the unequal relationship between economic power and local attachment.

The significance of this episode extends beyond environmental damage. It demonstrates that ecological destruction is also a social question. The loss of land affects the person who lives on it, works on it and understands it. Development is therefore shown as a process that can redistribute power rather than simply improve living conditions.

This point connects directly with postcolonial ecofeminism. A landscape does not enter the market as an empty object. It carries memories, labour and cultural meanings. When it is transformed into a commodity, these relationships may be weakened or destroyed. Freedom requires more than consciousness. A woman may recognise that a particular relationship is oppressive and still be unable to leave if she has no economic support or alternative place to live. Nair's treatment of property consequently challenges purely psychological understandings of female empowerment.

### **The Meaning of Ownership**

Parukutty Amma presents another dimension of property and female authority. Her ancestral home is connected with family history and social identity. Yet possession of property does not completely eliminate patriarchal power. Her relationship with Achuthan Nair demonstrates how male authority can survive even when a woman possesses a material claim to a place.

The conflict surrounding her husband and the domestic space is therefore significant. The house becomes a contested territory. Who has the right to determine what happens within it? Who decides who may enter it? Who is entitled to dignity inside the home?

These questions turn domestic space into a political space.

The ecofeminist significance of this conflict lies in the connection between physical territory and personal autonomy. A woman's right to control her home is connected to her right to control her own life. The house becomes an extension of social power. At the same time, the natural elements surrounding the house contribute to its emotional meaning. Trees and plants are not merely scenery. They carry memory and continuity. The natural landscape preserves traces of the woman who has inhabited it and invested part of her life in it. This is one reason why the loss or transformation of land in Nair's fiction carries emotional consequences. The destruction of a landscape can also mean the disturbance of personal and collective memory.

### **Valsala: Home Becomes Confinement**

Valsala offers a striking contrast to women who possess property or economic resources. Her relationship with her house and garden initially appears deeply rooted. She has spent years maintaining the household and caring for the land. Yet this attachment eventually reveals another side of domesticity. The natural world surrounding her does not liberate her. Trees, vines and the garden become associated with her inability to leave. Her surroundings, which might conventionally be interpreted as symbols of fertility or harmony, instead acquire the meaning of enclosure. The source material identifies this transformation very clearly: the landscape becomes psychologically associated with the restrictions imposed by her marriage. Nair refuses to assume that a woman's proximity to nature is automatically positive. Valsala lives close to plants and land, yet she is not free. Her problem is not a lack of contact with nature but a lack of control over her own circumstances.

Her story also demonstrates the importance of unpaid domestic labour. The work she performs inside the house does not

translate into economic independence. She contributes to the maintenance of a property without possessing the same power over that property. This creates an important distinction between working with land and owning land. The distinction is central to Agarwal's materialist position. Environmental knowledge and environmental labour do not necessarily provide power if the person performing the labour lacks rights over resources. Valsala's tragedy therefore becomes an extreme illustration of what can happen when emotional dependence, economic dependence and social restriction operate together.

### **The transformation of Kaikurussi**

The transformation of Kaikurussi provides another significant ecological dimension to *The Better Man*. Nair presents a village that is gradually moving towards a more commercial and urban form. Concrete structures appear where green spaces once dominated. Bhasi's land is threatened by development, while the older relationship between people and their surroundings becomes increasingly fragile. The novel does not simply divide the world into a perfect rural past and a corrupt modern present. Rural society itself contains patriarchy, inequality and exclusion. This is important because an uncritical celebration of tradition would weaken the novel's feminist argument. The environment therefore becomes a meeting point between older and newer forms of power.

### **Mistress: Desire, Marriage and Female Identity**

*Mistress* expands Nair's examination of female identity by bringing together marriage, artistic culture, desire and the history of Kathakali. The novel centres on Christopher Stewart, the Kathakali artist Koman and Radha, whose life as a married woman becomes increasingly complicated by her relationship with Chris. The source material also identifies Saadiya, Angela and Radha as women whose lives are separated by time and circumstance but connected through Koman's story.

The novel's relevance to ecofeminism is less direct than that of *The Better Man*. It does not place land ownership at the centre of its narrative. Instead, it develops the relationship between woman, body, place and identity through changing environments.

Radha's movement from her natal home into married life is important because marriage changes the meaning of the spaces she inhabits. A woman's identity is frequently reorganised when she becomes a wife. The domestic environment begins to be interpreted through the expectations associated with marriage. Radha's dissatisfaction therefore cannot be reduced to a simple desire for another man. It involves a deeper question: who is she when she is no longer defined primarily through the roles assigned to her? Her relationship with Chris complicates rather than solves this question.

The title *Mistress* itself exposes the cultural labels imposed on women. A woman can be defined through her relationship with a man before she is recognised as an individual. Nair's treatment of Radha ultimately moves towards a rejection of identities imposed by both marriage and desire. According to the source chapter, Radha eventually refuses to remain defined either as Shyam's wife or Chris's mistress. This is important because liberation is not represented as simply exchanging one male relationship for another. The deeper movement is towards self-definition.

### **Environment and the Construction of Identity in *Mistress***

The environmental dimension of *Mistress* can therefore be understood through the idea of place as a social construction. A place is never experienced in isolation from relationships. A house occupied by a wife is different from the same house occupied by an unmarried woman. A homeland may carry nostalgia for one character and constraint for another.

Nair's use of Kerala as a cultural and geographical setting is important here. The

world of Kathakali, family structures, domestic expectations and traditional social values creates an environment in which the characters negotiate their identities. Art becomes a space where identities can be performed, transformed and remembered. This connection between performance and identity provides an interesting parallel with Nair's feminist concerns. Social life itself often resembles a performance. Women are expected to perform particular roles—wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law—while their private desires may remain unrecognised. Radha's struggle involves recognising the difference between the role she performs and the person she wants to become.

#### **Nature Without Romanticism**

A significant strength of Nair's fiction is that she does not consistently romanticise nature. The gardens in *The Better Man* can be beautiful, but they can also represent confinement. Land can provide security, but it can also be commercialised. Water can bring fear as well as confidence. The home can offer protection while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal control. This ambiguity is central to a mature ecofeminist reading.

If nature is treated simply as a feminine refuge, the complexity of women's experiences disappears. Nair avoids this by allowing the environment to take different meanings according to the circumstances of each character. Her women do not escape society simply by entering nature. Instead, they have to negotiate the structures that determine their access to space, property and resources. **From Ecofeminist Symbolism to Material Experience**

A purely symbolic interpretation might read trees, water, gardens and land as metaphors for female identity. Such readings are useful, but they are insufficient on their own. Nair's novels repeatedly remind the reader that physical environments have material consequences. A woman can lack property. A

household can depend upon unpaid female labour. A woman can be prevented from travelling. A rural woman can lack educational and economic opportunities. These are not merely metaphors. They are material realities. This is where Nair's work can be placed productively alongside Agarwal's materialist ecofeminism. Environmental relationships are shaped by ownership, work and access. The implication is important: ecological justice cannot be separated from questions of economic justice.

If women are excluded from land ownership, their relationship with the environment is partly determined by that exclusion. If they perform agricultural or domestic labour without controlling resources, their environmental knowledge may remain unrecognised. If development removes land from local communities, women may experience the consequences differently from men because their daily responsibilities are differently organised. Nair's novels make these questions visible through individual lives.

#### **The Significance of Kerala as Literary Environment**

Kerala provides more than a backdrop for these narratives. Its houses, agricultural landscapes, cultural traditions, social structures and changing patterns of development shape the characters' lives. In *The Better Man*, the fictional Kaikurussi embodies the tension between inherited rural culture and modern development. In *Mistress*, Kerala's artistic and cultural world provides the setting for a complex negotiation of tradition, performance, marriage and desire. The region thus functions as a cultural environment. Nair's treatment of Kerala also allows her to complicate simplistic distinctions between tradition and modernity. Traditional spaces may preserve community and memory, but they can also preserve patriarchal expectations. Modern spaces may create opportunities for women, but they can also produce alienation and commercialisation.

There is no simple route from tradition to liberation. The novels instead suggest that women must negotiate both.

### A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Understanding of Development

The question of development is particularly important in reading Nair alongside Indian ecofeminist theory. Vandana Shiva's criticism of development highlights the destructive effects of models that treat natural resources as commodities. The source material describes her understanding of such development as harmful to women, nature and marginalised communities.

Agarwal, however, encourages a more grounded analysis by asking how existing social inequalities shape the effects of development. Colonialism and modernisation may cause environmental damage, but local structures of caste, class and gender cannot be ignored. Nair's novels can be read through this combined framework. The destruction of land in *The Better Man* raises questions about commercial development, but the novel also shows inequalities within the community itself.

Radha's problems in *Mistress* emerge from cultural and domestic structures that are neither purely traditional nor purely modern. Thus, the novels resist a simple explanation in which all social problems originate from one external source. The result is a distinctly postcolonial ecofeminist perspective: environmental and gendered oppression must be examined within the particular histories and material conditions of the society in which they occur.

### CONCLUSION

Anita Nair's *The Better Man* and *Mistress* provide a rich basis for rethinking the relationship between women, environment and power in Indian English fiction. The novels do not offer a simple equation in which women are naturally ecological and men are naturally destructive. Such a formulation would overlook

the social and material differences among women themselves. Instead, Nair's fiction shows that women's relationships with their environments are shaped by the circumstances in which they live.

In *The Better Man*, land and property demonstrate the material foundations of female independence. Anjana, Meenakshi and Parukutty Amma possess forms of security that influence their ability to make important decisions, while Valsala's lack of economic autonomy contributes to her confinement. At the same time, the changing landscape of Kaikurussi exposes the pressure of commercial development and the transformation of land from lived environment into economic commodity. Bhasi's experience demonstrates that ecological loss is also a loss of livelihood, memory and cultural knowledge.

*Mistress* adds another dimension by examining the relationship between female identity, marriage, desire and cultural space. Radha's struggle suggests that liberation cannot be achieved merely by exchanging one social identity for another. Her movement towards independence requires her to question both the role of wife and the identity imposed upon her through her relationship with Chris.

Nair's fiction is particularly valuable because it keeps these questions within the ordinary world of human relationships. Environmental concerns are not detached from domestic life. They appear in houses, gardens, fields, journeys and memories. Women's struggles are similarly not presented as abstract political arguments. They emerge through marriage, work, property, sexuality, family responsibility and the desire for an independent self.

The novels therefore support a form of postcolonial ecofeminism that is attentive to difference. Women cannot be treated as one homogeneous group, and nature cannot be reduced to one stable symbol. The relationship between the two is mediated by social position,

labour, ownership, culture and history. This approach also helps to bring Shiva and Agarwal into a productive conversation. Shiva's warning about destructive models of development remains relevant to the changing landscapes and communities represented in Nair's fiction. Agarwal's insistence on material conditions helps explain why women experience those changes differently. Nair's characters inhabit the space between these two positions. Their lives demonstrate both the symbolic connection between women and the natural world and the concrete economic conditions that determine whether that connection becomes empowering or oppressive.

Ultimately, Nair's women seek not a return to some imagined natural harmony but the freedom to participate in shaping their own environments. They want control over the spaces they inhabit, the relationships they enter and the choices that determine their futures. This desire for self-determination is what links the three novels. Nair's achievement, therefore, lies in making the personal ecological. A piece of land can become a question of dignity. A house can become a question of power. A journey can become a question of identity. Water can become a way of confronting fear. A garden can preserve memory while also revealing confinement.

Through these apparently ordinary details, Nair shows that the environment is never entirely separate from human relationships. The struggle to protect a meaningful relationship with place and the struggle to live with dignity are often connected. Her fiction consequently opens a space for an ecofeminism that is neither romantic nor purely theoretical, but rooted in the everyday experiences of women negotiating the difficult boundaries between home and freedom, tradition and change, belonging and independence.

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