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(M.A.Mar.& Pol.Sci.,B.Ed.Ph.D.NET.)

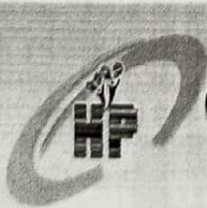
विद्येविना मति गेली, मतीविना नीति गेली  
नीतिविना गति गेली, गतिविना वित्त गेले  
वित्तविना शूद्र स्वचले, इतके अनर्थ एका अविद्येने केले

-महात्मा ज्योतीराव फुले

❖ विद्यावार्ता या आंतरविद्याशाखीय बहुभाषिक त्रैमासिकात व्यक्त झालेल्या मतांशी मालक, प्रकाशक, मुद्रक, संपादक सहमत असतीलच असे नाही. न्यायक्षेत्र:बीड



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**WHY DID SREELAKSHMI DIE ?**

In the novel 'Eating Wasps' by Anita Nair

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**Introduction:** Anita Nair's latest book 'Eating Wasps' sets the pace of my ubiquitous thoughts to run over all the theories of life and criticism for I needed an explanation of Why the central character Sreelakshmi in the latest novel 'Eating Wasps' by Anita Nair killed herself. Was it because she believed that love fades, no matter what we believe? Was it because she was a strange child? Or was it that the vultures of society deemed it the right thing? Did they prompt her into taking her own life? Was it because 'the meagerness of her life, the paucity of possessions, the absolute ordariness of her existence crawled over her reflection, like maggots in a wasps' nest? To analyse the reason behind the death of Sreelakshmi, I will take the help of theory of post structuralism.

Anita Nair's latest novel 'Eating Wasps' is the story of Sreelakshmi. It is a catalogue of the lives of nine women of different strata and types. They are not connected to each other in a way. But the protagonist Sreelakshmi's bone of her index finger is the only point of connection between them. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit my writing to the life of the protagonist and touch only those aspects of depiction that concern her. The novel does seem to be a sequel to Nair's earlier novel 'Ladies Coupe' and presents her views about women in front of her readers. The story is of Sreelakshmi, a writer, a scientist and a lover. She belongs to an orthodox South Indian Nair family.

Sreelakshmi was different than other girls who obeyed the elders and get married early in life. She was intelligent, courageous, imaginative and independent. Her father was quite modern in his attitude towards her. It is his encouragement and support that coaxed Sree to pursue higher education in Zoology, a subject which was not chosen by girls generally. She rejected all the proposals of marriage that came through her family members. She was a queer child. She did not demand anything. Instead she waited patiently for the right man to come to her. She successfully poured her emotions in him and did not think twice before entering into a physical relationship with him. Markose was a married man and a priest at the same time. This made him doubly inaccessible to Sree even though he understood the writer in her completely. They decide to meet clandestinely. Markose goes back without letting Sree know about anything after they spend the night together. She waits for him for two days and then goes back to her house dejected and without the ability to write. After a few days though she writes a serialised novel with intimate description of male-female relationship which the others feel is vulgar, disgusting and unbecoming. Her brothers-in-law too object, as well as her landlord. She quietly goes to the bathroom filled with the aroma of Chandrika soap, a reminder of Markose, and hangs herself. The novel begins with the death of Sreelakshmi, the protagonist.

Sreelakshmi was a scientist, lover and a writer. Her bold writings were interpreted by people as 'vulgar' according to the culture prevalent in India in the middle of the twentieth century. The south of India is still more conservative than the rest of the country. Sreelakshmi did not fit into the normal, natural structure of a woman of her times. She was not an archetype of any known figure. Sometimes one wonders whether she was the female we usually encounter around us in society. One also wonders if Markose was a stereotyped male



with heroic qualities we usually consider the Indian males to be. Neither was Sreelakshmi female nor was Markose a male. Their roles were reversed by Nair. She has often done this in her previous novels too. Her heroes are not heroic and her heroines are stronger than the usual norm. Take for example, Meenakshi, Anjana and Mukundan from 'The Better Man', Akhilendeswari from the 'Ladies Coupe' and Radha and Shyam from the 'Mistress', to name a few. But then who has created these stereotypes in our minds? Why do we consider all Indian males as adherents to the male stereotype and all Indian women as incarnation of devi or devil? Why is the man always courageous, strong, the doer? And why is a woman always shown dependent, weak and opinion-less? Why can we not accept people as they are?

Nair has set the novel in the past deliberately. Today the socio-economic condition of the Indian women has changed. It has placed the young generation in a better and advanced stage where they can dream of equality, freedom, rights and privileges. The present government's policy of women empowerment has multiple dimensions. They are targetting education, financial independence and dignity for women. The society is accepting all types of women from stereotypes to challengers. But the times of Sreelakshmi were different and traditional. And yet nothing has changed. The other women shown in the novel are equally the sufferers. It tells us what is not apparently mentioned. It will take aeons for the destiny of the Indian women to change. Even though Nair writes about the lives of nine women, she is commenting upon the destiny of the victims of acid attacks, cyber crimes, trolling etc.

Sreelakshmi is quite modern and much more resourceful than women of her times. She has much more to offer. Her intelligence and choice of subjects and career itself speaks volumes about her personality. Girls in her times

would choose regular subjects; perhaps majority would have chosen Arts stream with the sole aim of learning how to be a good wife, a cook, an embroiderer, a homemaker and better still a quareller with servants, as said by Kamala Das in her poem 'An Introduction'. The South-Indian society that Sreelakshmi was born into has been quite traditional and conservative. She has violated many norms of the then society.

In the Prologue, she talks about her own death. And then goes on in intervals to tell us her own story. She has become a celebrity. It is as if she had wanted Markose to come to her and the only way she could call him was the extreme way of death. He had to come then. Though he actively did not show his emotions. But it is not out of desperation, shame or disappointment in love that she killed herself. It is that she was a strange person. She did not demand but found a way of getting a particular thing.

Sreelakshmi is the 'doer' here, she did not allow someone else or some sorrow to kill her. She was powerful even in death. Markose had to come to her. She escaped the agony and pangs of love. Whereas he would for the rest of his life die every moment because of the weight of her memories and because of the absolute guilt. She becomes the male stereotype here. We live in a male-dominated society. In the novel, though, these centers are destroyed. In the resulting universe, there are no absolutes or fixed points. Jacques Derrida, the post structuralist embraces the 'decentered universe'. he finds it liberating. While Roland Barthes in his 'Death of the Author' essay celebrates the death and ushers in an era of joyous freedom.

Sreelakshmi describes herself as a scientist, writer and lover. A close scrutiny of the prologue reveals a lot about Sreelakshmi. She calls herself an atheist, scientist....only there was nothing a writer could do except wait in the forgotten vault. She could make do with science or even Markose but what she couldn't



leave was writing. She was sad after Markose went away and that sadness kept her away from expressing herself. It hampered her creative process.

In the opening lines, Sreelakshmi narrates in first person, 'I killed myself' - she uses the emphatic pronoun 'myself' - then she adds that the weather was clear and bright. There was no external influence of gloominess participating in her guilt. Everything else was happy and cheerful. Moreover it was a Monday, a working day. The routine life was going on. There could have been diversions of mundane life, of necessity of job. But Sreelakshmi was not to be wavered. She was steadfast in her resolve. Self importance that she displays through the line 'except I was dead and the world ground to an abrupt halt as the news spread. People everywhere were speaking about her. And the tone of the prologue suggests that she revels in the importance that she is getting in her death. There is no tone of regret or sadness. There is victory of some sort as if now she has finally become a true celebrity, something she wanted to as a writer, that she has finally declared her love for Markose, that now she has become even with life. She is relishing the fact that people are wondering about the reason of her death and since she has not written a suicide note there is confusion. She is an attention seeker. This was the only way she could die, by creating sensation. She created sensation through her writings as well as death also. 'The speculation was as dense as the grief.'

Sree relates an incident that happened when she was four years old. She loved honey and wanted to eat it. Her grandmother used to mix it with water and give it to children. The others used to throw tantrums and had their wish fulfilled. But Sree never demanded. Honey is the symbol of our pure unadulterated expression. Pure honey was not allowed. It needed to be diluted, mixed with something. It had to be made palatable with some moderation. But Sree not

only wanted the full bowl of honey, she also wanted the source of it. So she ate the wasps thinking that it has a lot of honey in it. She found a way to fulfil her desire like she found it with Markose. But she lacked the wisdom of her grandmother. We cannot consume anything in its pure form. It takes a different kind of courage. It is true of love also. Nair has shown that it is with expressing through writing too. We need to put our thoughts into the right perspective in the right language accepted by society. Only then the writing would yield praise. An artist needs validation from others for his or her art. All this can be understood through all that which is not said in the text. One has to go beyond the established structures to find out the meaning of the text. The meaning is fluid.

As a scientist, Sree wanted to choose Zoology. She wanted to study an unconventional thing, a wasp. She wanted to research and so the way chosen by her was not usually done by women. Her mother and maid were amazed. As a lover, she wanted the love of a married man and a priest. She waited for the mans to seek her out. Once he did that, she did not hesitate to gie everything she possessed, her heart, her virginity and her soul. She loved him with a great abandonment. As a writer, she wantd to write everything, every emotion every experience with Markose she wanted to write about the volcanic emotions she felt in the intimacy she shared with him. She flung herself headlong in her writing. She coupled imagination with reality to write without thinking ever of what people would say. She was only truly angry or disturbed when her own mother asked her to stop writing and publishing it shamelessly. Her mother did not support her in her reckless abandonment, in her need to truly embrace her love, her body. She missed her father, the father with whom she had identified herself. In today's world probably the acceptance rate of such writing is more. Sreelakshmi must have received support from social media too. No doubt she would have been



criticised for her writing too. But had she been born in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century she would not have to kill herself. Now 'imagination' and 'spirit' are considered desirable things which were not in the past.

'Love fades. Love does, no matter what one believes'. On reading this for the first time, we feel that Sree says this about Markose since the almirah in which her bone is kept by Markose is moved out of the house. But a close reading tells us that it could well be her own emotions even. Nair has written it separately. It is not a part of the paragraph. The narration moves from past to present to past. Nair breaks the conventional pattern of chronological advancement set by earlier writers. She starts with writing of Sree's death in 1965 and then talks about the present day. References to technology, Facebook, Twitter suggests the present, nearly two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The age Sree was born in, was the preindependence era 1930. Nair does not write anything about the freedom movement neither of the resulting partition nor of the struggle by the South Indians in protesting the importance of Hindi language. She only refers to the idea of New India. Her father being a progressive person, was preparing her for the emerging New India that was to come up with the independence. We got our country after being under two foreign rules for centuries. India was like the infant who tries to crawl. And to make it a developed country we needed strong and focused young generation. This was the vision that Sree inherited from her father. But did she fulfil that vision? She wrote bold and new literature. But did she have the conviction to stand the criticism that would eventually come her way? May be India was also learning how to walk in the initial years after freedom. But Sree could not sustain because of the mediocrity of her existence. The dream that she along with her father had seen remained incomplete.

The usual sequence of a traditional plot

is Characters -Setting-Complication - conflict - denouement. Here Nair has not followed this sequence. She has gone to and fro in time to tell us that the same destiny awaits all women. Times might have changed. The problems that women face today have also changed through years. They have not minimised though. Nair has also used the first person point of view for Sreelakshmi. It lends a sense of immediacy or reality. For the other characters though she has used the third person narration. The omniscient point of view suggests human littleness.

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