

Women, Identity, and Selfhood: A Comparative Study of Selected Novels by Anita Nair and Margaret Laurence

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Abstract

Canada and India were once British Empire colonies, and they are now Commonwealth members. The immense contrast between Europe in general and England in particular has had its effect on the social, political, cultural, and literary landscape of the two countries, which can be easily understood. Canada's geophysical factors made it an entirely different country from typical European nations. Most immigrants to Canada had little literary tradition of their own, except for some. India's position, however, is quite different, as it has a glorious cultural heritage that goes back to the Vedic Era. This paper conducts a comparative scrutiny of the concept of gender and its representation by examining one novelist from India and one from Canada.

The comparative study of Anita Nair and Margaret Laurence within the Commonwealth context compares the two paradigms on two levels. On one hand, it seeks to compare two authors with different cultures; on the other hand, the study draws attention to the underlying concerns of the two authors and to the parallels that can be found in such different disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and religion. The selected novels of Anita Nair and Margaret Laurence testify to the struggles women face in defining their individual selves within male-dominated cultures. Both women authors portray their female characters through different modes of perception.

Keywords: Location, Female protagonists, Freedom, Survival, Migration, Dual cultures

Submitted: 30.08.2026 Revised: 27.08.2026 Accepted: 29.09.2026 Published 30.09.2026

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Introduction

Ania Loomba remarks:

Literature is a place where 'transculturation' takes place in all its complexity. Literature written on both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs, appropriates, and inscribes aspects of the 'other' culture, creating new genres, ideas, and identities in the process. Finally, literature is also an important means of appropriating, inverting, or challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies. (63)

Comparative Literature studies literature without borders. It studies literature across national borders, time periods, languages, genres, arts, music, and cultural expression, spanning linguistic, national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries. Indian-Canadian comparative literature explores the intersections between Indian writing, diasporic Indo-Canadian experiences, and Canadian literary traditions, focusing on themes of migration, identity, and post-colonialism. Among the comparative studies, Indian-Canadian women writers explore themes of migration, identity, dual cultures, and gender.

This article presents a comparative study of selected works by Anita Nair and Margaret Laurence. The significant factors that determine the women and their brooding nature in the two different landscapes are effectively analysed in this paper. For an effective comparative study of the aspects of the nature of the Indian and Canadian backdrop, five novels by Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Cut like Wound* (2012), and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014), and three novels by Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974), are chosen for this research.

The comparative study of these writers within the Commonwealth context is not new. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin classify such studies under three broad categories:

Three principal types of comparison have resulted, forming bases for a genuine post-colonial discourse. These are comparisons between countries of the White diaspora—the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—comparisons between areas of the Black diaspora, and thirdly, those which bridge these groupings, comparing, say, literature of the West Indies with that of Australia. (18)

The Indian English novel has gained a unique viability and vibrancy. It has been attracting a remarkably wide readership and universal acclaim. The richness and diversity of present-day Indian writing are reflected in the works of women writers, and one among them is Anita Nair. She is a creative artist bestowed with immense proficiency in language. Nair is not like the usual contemporary Indian novelist who writes for popularity by compromising with language and plot. Her characters are mostly drawn from small towns or rural India. She takes a mature view of Indian reality and handles new themes with greater clarity and confidence, expressing her ideas in novel ways.

Nair has made her mark by not conforming to the prevalent trends in Indian English literature. The concepts, ideas, and plots of her novels differ from those of ordinary contemporary fiction writers. She has chosen her own way of writing. She vividly portrays her characters' mental suffering. She has confessed that what she has read and seen inspires her writing. As Swapan Banerjee states:

I also get ideas from newspaper articles. When I see sadness in somebody else's life, it bothers me a great deal. The only way I can come to terms with this kind of sadness is by writing about it. So, without being from the scope of my own experience, it could be the story of someone else which I can translate into part of my plot. (44)

Canadian writing began as an imitative colonial literature and has steadily developed its own national characteristics. The aim of women writing in Canada is to bring about remarkable changes in the lives of Canadian women in society. To advance gender equality in Canadian society, they have tried to improve women's life chances in their fiction. They believe women can help build a more peaceful world. As Sumita Roy observes:

A seminal study of these subjects is Margaret Hall's book *Women and Identity*, which explores some of the key concepts interwoven with the process of self-realisation and self-expression in women. This sociological document establishes the fact that when women have time to think and reflect about themselves and the world, they can develop a sense of who they are and cultivate this conscious identity. (67)

Margaret Laurence is recognised as a transitional figure in English-Canadian fiction. Canadian literature reflects Canada's viewpoint on nature, frontier life, and its place in the world. In its literature, the racial and cultural diversity of Canada is expressed, and most of the influential writers concentrate on ethnic life. In Laurence's novels, true change comes from within, resulting from a change of mind or heart rather than a change of location and time. When they discover their identity through elemental energy, which is readily accessible in their milieu, the search for their protagonists' true selves is complete. Through her language and narration, Laurence advances the predicament of women. Her unique narrative style draws out the truth of life. Kaveri Bose writes about Laurence thus:

Laurence, like a typical Canadian artist, seems to return constantly to the subject matter of the country, which is dominated very much by its natural surroundings. She is also interested in understanding the relationship between human beings and the land. She is an artist who not only depicts a place but also creates it, for depiction is never mere representation of visual experience (177).

In her novels, Laurence depicts her protagonists' innermost psychology. In relation to interpersonal bonds, she explores more deeply the essence and causes of women's misery. Her curiosity about life's drama and the facets of human encounter lets her depict issues that emerge from human contact with great insight.

Attempting a deep analysis of the selected novels *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974) by Margaret Laurence and *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2003), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Cut like Wound* (2012), and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014), it is visible that both Laurence and Nair depict their female protagonists in every possible familial and social role. They are portrayed as daughter, sister, friend, lover, wife, and grandmother. As feminists, they portray the sufferings of women, insist on the need to protect their rights, and suggest means for their emancipation. They transform their protagonists to discover their individual identity. They also help uphold their rights by presenting them as individuals and human beings. It affirms their capacities to be autonomous, intelligent, strong, and successful.

It's astonishing to visualise Rachel Cameron, Stacey Mac Aindra, Morag Gunn, Akhilandeswari, Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanthi, Marikolanthu, Radha, Smriti, Meera, Kuttimalu, and Thilothamma behaving in their given lives. They act as if it is a new phenomenon, but it is the same old pathway; whether the characters belong to Canada or India, they react the same.

Literary style and approach:

A parallel study between the selected creations of Anita Nair and Margaret Laurence has been undertaken in this research as they appear similar in their progressive visions as women writers. Both authors are also preoccupied with interrogating areas of silence, especially regarding women. From the above study, it is also evident that the two writers have their own way of reworking the events and personages from their personal lives into art.

This comparative character analysis examines the various forms of female characters and their suffering in both writers' works. It also examines female characters as they heroically rebel against society's norms and rules. The chapter also highlights the protagonists' quest for identity by women placed in peripheral positions in society, where they feel threatened. On the other hand, the society they inhabit grants them only a pseudo-identity, and women are defined only by the relationships they bear to their husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons, on whom they depend.

Hence, this comparative study has been undertaken to illuminate the virtues and defects of the fiction of two feminist writers. In the novels of Nair and Laurence, the characters are unique and recognised as real. Not only the characters but also the incidents of the novel are based on real-life experiences. Despite these similarities, the novels of Nair and Laurence also show striking differences. The paper is an interesting exercise that compares and evaluates both writers in terms of their creative writing.

Nair deals with the themes of love, sex, marriage, violence, gender inequality, social inequality, power games, alienation, and individual isolation. She explores and exposes the residual effects of foreign domination in the political, social, and economic spheres. It retells the political history of seventeenth-century South India

through a fictional recasting of events, episodes, and characters. Deeply rooted in the human mind, 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.

Nair's five novels have been discussed deeply in this chapter. Nair, a Keralite woman, pays more attention to culture and art. Her female characters are most likely lawbreakers. Nair's female characters do not remain the same, as they transform themselves into various identities over the course of their lives. They penetrate barriers like religion, culture, morality, age, status, caste, and custom to achieve their identity. Nair's protagonists are bold enough to question the fake customs and culture. The paper throws light on Anita Nair's portrayal of women as victims of marital life, female infanticide, polygamy, and sexual abuse in her respective novels. The research paper highlights the status of Indian women from the early period to the present day. Even in the advanced twentieth century, most women still find themselves victimised and fettered by strict, unfair moral codes and social norms. Nair's heroines reluctantly follow the enigma called self. She writes about the plight of women trying to balance the roles society expects them to play with the roles they want to play. Nair stubbornly admits that women must exist for their own sake. She must rise to the occasion to achieve complete economic and social equality. Nair's novels show the protagonists' passionate search for themselves.

Margaret Laurence portrays her female characters in every possible family and social role, such as daughter, sister, companion, girlfriend, wife, and grandmother. Laurence gives more importance to women, the voiceless, than men. The problems that Laurence analyses in her works are equality, survival, colonialism, and the complicated condition of women. She penetrates her characters' minds and sees through their eyes. Laurence also treats her characters as real ones. She affirms her protagonists' ability to be independent, smart, strong, and effective. As a feminist, she depicts women's suffering, highlights the need to protect their rights, and proposes ways to emancipate them. She lets them discover their identities as individuals. Through her art of characterisation, she helps them uphold their rights. The search for identity is another thematic concern in each of Margaret Laurence's novels.

Throughout her career, she has presented a female perspective on contemporary life. She opines that women must find meaning and purpose in life. She does not neglect men but gives them space as catalysts. Her novels explain the past and the present, the place they play in women's lives, and express the inner turmoil of women. In her novels, Laurence generates her female characters as multifaceted personalities. She has ultimately created women who express the very character of Canadian culture and subculture.

The novels of Margaret Laurence investigate the relationship of the personality and the institutions of Canadian society in the mid-twentieth century with an

attentive social consciousness. Her books, unusually for her time, present a persistent reluctance to be heroic or to look for deterministic trends. The feminine nature of Laurence's women, their acts of discovery and re-discovery, frequently returning to the past, and their search for identity are discussed in the second chapter. The rebellious nature of the women to achieve their goal is visualized. Probably Laurence's protagonists are paralysed by one problem or the other, either past or present.

Laurence's fiction visualises the physical and mental turmoil of her female characters. Her novels centre on women's personal relationships with men such as fathers, husbands, lovers, and sons. Though gender is a subject, she maintains a sharp focus on the human condition. The female protagonists of Laurence's novels prove the maximum that they can be destroyed but never defeated. This third chapter reveals thematic insights and highlights identity and self-discovery in Laurence's work.

Literary Survey:

Freedom, survival, marginalisation, sacrifice, and the complex situation of women are other issues alike in the works of Laurence and Nair. Regarding the characters of Rachel Cameron and Akhilandeswari, they became the heads of the family after their father's demise. Both protagonists sacrifice their youth, marital life, earnings, and everything for their family's sake, but no one in the family even thinks about them. One more striking similarity between both the protagonists is that their mothers are alive, but are least bothered about their daughter's marriage. Rachel Cameron's elder sister, Stacey, is married and has four children. Stacey cares little for her aged mother and spinster sister. Thirty-four-year-old Rachel has worked as a teacher for the past fourteen years and provides for the family. Laurence pictures the painful words of Rachel as:

I haven't seen her since the last two were born. I haven't seen my sister for seven years. She never comes back here. Why should she? She'd lived away for years. She had her own home, and wouldn't be bothered to visit here, not even so Mother might see the children...My great mistake was in being born the younger. (17)

Similarly, thirty-four-year-old Akhila arranges a marriage for her twenty-two-year-old sister Padma. As quoted in the novel:

Even then, Amma and her brothers never asked, 'What about you? You've been the head of the family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a husband, children, a home of your own?' In their minds, Akhila has ceased to be a woman and has already metamorphosed into a spinster. (77)

In comparison, Stacey Cameron, married to Mac Aindra, has two sons and two daughters. Thirty-nine-year-old Stacey, who searches for her identity, is quite different in her affair with Luke Venturi, who is the same age as her elder daughter, Katherine. Laurence brings out Stacey's inner voice thus:

It's not a qualitative difference, anyway. It doesn't matter a damn to me. That's not what is important. Would a guy think of it that way, though? I don't suppose so. . . Luke Venturi. I don't even know who he is. I know he's too young. Nine years-well okay, nearly ten, then-that's not so much difference. (189)

The protagonists belong to a distant landscape; they both seem expressive and helpless, hard-pressed by their society's shallow orthodoxies. Like Rachel Cameron and Akhila, they are controlled by their responsibilities and knotted by low self-esteem. Both suffer isolation and are unable to relate themselves to their fellow human beings. At the same time, their low self-esteem stems from their inability to reconcile with their inherited identity. At the same time, they seem frustrated and unable to come to terms with their self-absorbed nature.

The mythological comparison of both Laurence and Nair in their respective novels seems similar. Stacey and Mac Aindra Clifford as: "I got married sixteen years ago, and I thought he was like Agamemnon, King of Men. . ." (181). Morag Gunn's self-dramatisation as: ". . . the house on Hill Street, the apartment in Toronto...Morag looks out the long high-up windows and sees the cars hurtling along Avenue Road...The lonely tower. Self-dramatisation. Rapunzel, Rapunzel. . ." (208).

Similarly, in the Indian context, the love story narration of Koman and Angela is compared with the legend of King Nala and Damayanti. As quoted in the novel: "The second day of Nalacharitam. Would I play Nala? I agreed. It would take my mind off Aashaan and Angela, I told myself" (367). Meera, throughout the novel, has been referred to as the Goddess Hera, and Giri, Meera's husband, is referred to as the God Zeus. Meera cherishes, as she says: "Zeus spoke as he worked his way through the Sunday newspapers. Zeus, whose bidding even the heavenly bodies obeyed, listened" (4).

Through the suffering of their protagonists, both Laurence and Nair reveal society's cruel face. Both writers sketch women's struggle for domestic survival. The women in Laurence and Nair break free from social norms and do not confine themselves to traditional female boundaries. Both writers' female characters are bold and confident enough to fulfil their desires by going against society.

Conclusion

Two representative novelists from two countries, Laurence and Nair, not only display a distinct and deep awareness of the social, economic, and cultural realities around them, but also succeed in transmuting them effectively into their literary experiences and assimilating them into their writings. In their writing, numerous thematic trends and poly-angular perspectives explicitly bring out the multicultural ethos that forms the base of their writings. This research examines the themes, character portrayals, and evocative symbolism of their major novels. Finally, by investing their works in a multicultural perspective, both Laurence and Nair have greatly contributed to the literary world.

Laurence and Nair, the authors selected for this research, not only show a distinct and deep awareness of the social, economic, and cultural realities around

them, but also successfully transform them into their literary experiences and integrate them into their writing. This paper examines women in the fiction of Laurence and Nair. Both writers' feminist affiliations are appropriate. The authors present positive portrayals of women as spinsters, intellectuals, and artists. Laurence and Nair present their characters as adopting values different from those of the society they live in and rejecting commonly accepted social values.

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