

The Politics of Anger: An Affect-Theoretical Reading of Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps* (2018)

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Abstract

Anita Nair's Eating Wasps presents the interconnected experiences of women who face different forms of patriarchal control, including moral judgement, sexual violence, emotional neglect, digital harassment, social shame, and restrictions on female desire. Published in 2018, the novel brings together women from different generations, social classes, religions, and cultural backgrounds. Although their experiences differ, they are united by emotions that society often expects women to hide. Among these emotions, anger has particular political importance. This article uses feminist affect theory to examine anger not simply as an individual reaction but as a response to unequal social structures. Drawing mainly on the ideas of Sara Ahmed and Audre Lorde, it argues that anger allows the women in the novel to recognise injustice, question patriarchal values, defend personal boundaries, and recover forms of agency. Through Sreelakshmi, Urvashi, Najma, Megha, Liliana, and Maya, Nair presents several forms of anger, ranging from open confrontation to silent refusal. At the same time, the novel does not suggest that anger automatically leads to freedom. Instead, it shows that anger becomes politically meaningful when it produces clarity, self-recognition, speech, resistance, and solidarity. Eating Wasps therefore transforms women's private pain into a wider criticism of patriarchal society.

Keywords: Anita Nair; *Eating Wasps*; anger; affect theory; patriarchy; trauma; female agency; desire; resistance.

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Introduction

Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps* is a novel about women who attempt to understand and narrate their lives in a society that repeatedly denies them control over their bodies, desires, identities, and memories. Published in 2018, the novel brings together the stories of several women whose lives differ in age, class, religion, profession, and historical background. Their experiences include restrictions placed on unmarried women, the policing of female sexuality, child abuse, acid violence, cyberstalking, public humiliation, difficult motherhood, failed relationships, and social isolation. These experiences may appear separate, but they are connected by a common structure of power: the belief that women must live according to rules created and enforced by others.

Patriarchal society expects women to be patient, silent, sexually controlled, emotionally available, forgiving, and responsible for preserving family honour. Women are often taught that anger is improper because it disturbs relationships and exposes conflict. A woman who expresses anger may be described as rude, selfish, unstable, immoral, or ungrateful. Yet the same society may accept male anger as a sign of strength or authority. This unequal treatment of emotion is central to the politics of gender. It determines whose pain is recognised, whose protest is respected, and whose emotional response is treated as a problem.

In *Eating Wasps*, the female characters do not merely suffer. They also feel resentment, fear, disgust, frustration, disappointment, and rage. These feelings are important because they help the women recognise that what has happened to them is unjust. Anger can interrupt the habit of self-blame. It can turn a private question - 'What is wrong with me?' - into a political question - 'Why am I being treated in this way?' For this reason, anger is not only a personal emotion in the novel. It is a form of knowledge that reveals the operation of patriarchy.

This article examines anger as a political effect in *Eating Wasps*. It argues that anger performs four major functions. Firstly, it reveals the presence of injustice. Second, it challenges the shame imposed on women. Third, it helps women defend their boundaries and recover agency. "Negative eco-emotions such as fear, anger, and anxiety are becoming increasingly widespread as the consequences of the ongoing climate crisis are getting progressively worse" (Hallmark 1). Finally, it connects individual experience with the wider condition of women under patriarchy. The article also considers the limits of anger. Anger does not automatically create freedom. It may remain unspoken, turn inward, or fail to change the conditions that produced it. Its political value depends on whether it can be transformed into speech, refusal, survival, self-understanding, or collective recognition.

Affect Theory and Feminist Anger

Affect theory studies the ways in which emotions and bodily feelings shape social relationships. It does not treat emotion as something that exists only inside an individual mind. Instead, it asks how feelings are produced, circulated, and controlled by families, communities, institutions, technologies, and political systems.

An emotion such as anger may begin with a personal experience, but it is also connected to social rules about who is allowed to become angry, whose anger is taken seriously, and whose anger is treated as threatening.

In the Indian sociocultural context, women are disproportionately affected by mental health concerns, irrespective of their occupational status. The coping mechanisms employed to manage daily stressors are often maladaptive, contributing to the onset and maintenance of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. These conditions may further impair their affect regulation, particularly in the expression of anger (Sharma et al. 2).

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* provides an important framework for understanding this process. Ahmed explains that emotions do not simply belong to individuals. They move between people and become attached to particular bodies, identities, words, and social groups. Through this movement, emotions can bring people together, separate them, or place them within unequal relationships. Shame, fear, disgust, and anger therefore have a social history. They influence how bodies are seen and how people are permitted to occupy public and private spaces (Ahmed 16).

This approach is useful for the study of women's anger. In patriarchal cultures, anger is often linked with masculine authority, while women are expected to express care, sadness, patience, and forgiveness. An angry man may be considered commanding or powerful. An angry woman may be called irrational or disobedient. Such descriptions are not neutral. They weaken women's confidence in their own emotional knowledge. Instead of asking why an injustice occurred, a woman may begin to ask whether she is overreacting. She may feel guilty for being angry even when the anger is justified.

Audre Lorde's essay 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' offers another important feminist understanding of anger. Lorde writes from the specific historical experience of racism among women, and that context must be respected. At the same time, her larger argument is valuable for feminist criticism: anger contains information and energy. When examined and directed carefully, it can support change rather than destruction (Lorde 126). Anger can show that a boundary has been crossed and that an accepted social practice is harmful.

This distinction between oppressive anger and resistant anger is visible throughout *Eating Wasps*. Male anger often appears as a claim to ownership. Men become angry when women reject marriage, end relationships, express sexuality, or refuse male attention. Their anger seeks to frighten or punish. Women's anger usually arises from being denied freedom, safety, dignity, or recognition. It is therefore an anger against domination rather than an anger that attempts to dominate.

Narrative Form and the Movement of Anger

The structure of *Eating Wasps* is essential to its politics. Instead of presenting one complete and continuous life story, Nair brings together the narratives of

several women. Their experiences are connected through Sreelakshmi, a writer whose presence survives through a bone from her right index finger. The finger passes through different spaces and eventually connects Sreelakshmi to the lives of women at the resort Near the Nila. This unusual device enables a silenced woman to become a witness and narrator.

The index finger is symbolically important because it is associated with writing, pointing, identification, and accusation. Sreelakshmi's physical voice has been removed, but the finger continues to connect stories. It becomes a sign of the woman writer who can no longer participate directly in the world but who continues to observe and interpret it. Through this device, Nair allows suppressed female experience to return. The woman who was judged and erased becomes the one who points towards the hidden pain of others.

The fragmented structure also resembles the movement of affect. Anger does not remain within one character. It passes from one story to another and appears in different forms. In Sreelakshmi, anger is connected to literary exclusion and sexual judgement. In Urvashi, it becomes direct confrontation. In Najma, it is tied to survival after gendered violence. In Megha, it appears as bodily resistance before the child has the language to explain danger. In Liliana, anger responds to the loss of identity caused by social media. In Maya, it is mixed with exhaustion, love, duty, and fear.

Sreelakshmi: Anger, Authorship, and Social Erasure

Sreelakshmi is central to the novel's treatment of anger. She is an educated and professionally successful woman living in the 1960s. She studies zoology, becomes a lecturer, and gains recognition as a writer. She also chooses not to follow the conventional path of early marriage. Her education, employment, intellectual ambition, and singlehood should provide independence. Instead, they make her an object of suspicion.

Her society accepts women's achievement only when it remains within established moral boundaries. Sreelakshmi may write and receive recognition, but she is not permitted to write freely about the female body and female desire. When her work begins to explore sexuality, public opinion changes. Relatives, colleagues, students, and members of the literary world judge her writing as evidence of personal immorality. Her work is no longer treated as literature. It is treated as a confession for which she must be punished.

Navya argues that Sreelakshmi's position as an unmarried woman makes her especially vulnerable to moral judgement. Singlehood in a male writer may be interpreted as dedication or independence. In the case of a woman, it is treated as incompleteness, failure, or sexual danger. Sreelakshmi's intellectual success cannot protect her because patriarchy measures women mainly through marriage and sexual respectability (Navya 1267).

Her anger is therefore directed at more than one individual. It arises from an entire network of social institutions. The family expects her to protect its reputation.

The college treats her writing as a reason for humiliation. The literary world refuses to recognise her as an intellectual equal. Housing and professional opportunities are affected by moral judgement. Her private relationship is also shaped by inequality because the man involved is able to protect his public position more easily than she can.

From an affect-theoretical perspective, shame works by making Sreelakshmi see herself through the hostile eyes of society. She is surrounded by judgement until the public voice enters her private understanding of herself. Anger has the potential to resist this process because it redirects responsibility outward. Instead of accepting that she alone is the problem, anger identifies the injustice of the standards imposed upon her.

Sreelakshmi's writing already performs part of this resistance. By writing about female desire, she refuses the belief that women's bodies and emotions must remain unspoken. Her work challenges the division between respectable literary subjects and supposedly shameful female experience. She makes the desiring woman visible as a thinking and speaking subject. The threat lies not simply in the fact that she experiences desire, but in the fact that she gives it language. Written desire can circulate, reach other women, and expose the false idea that respectable women do not possess sexual or emotional needs.

Sreelakshmi's anger, however, does not develop into a secure political community. She is isolated from family, colleagues, and literary companions. Without supportive relationships, the emotional force that might have produced collective resistance becomes difficult to sustain. Her tragic death should not be romanticised as a victory or presented as an ideal form of protest. It reveals the severe consequences of a society that refuses to provide women with liveable forms of freedom, companionship, and dissent. The novel does not allow Sreelakshmi to disappear completely. Her narrative presence returns and connects the experiences of other women. The society that attempted to silence her cannot fully control her story. Through narration, her suppressed anger becomes historical memory. Her index finger continues to point towards injustice even after her public identity has been reduced and forgotten.

Urvashi: Anger as Boundary and Confrontation

Urvashi belongs to a more contemporary social world than Sreelakshmi. She is educated, professionally successful, married, and employed as a journalist. Her situation initially appears more liberated. She has a career, mobility, and access to technology. However, these advantages do not remove patriarchal control. Her marriage has lost emotional and physical intimacy, and she seeks desire outside it. The relationship she begins later becomes possessive, intrusive, and threatening. Urvashi's experience shows that the language of romantic love can hide a desire for ownership. Her lover does not accept her right to end the relationship. He behaves as though previous intimacy gives him continuing authority over her. Calls,

messages, and digital contact become methods of pressure. Technology allows his presence to enter spaces from which Urvashi has physically removed herself.

Cyberstalking is therefore not only a technological problem. It is an emotional and political form of control. The stalker attempts to create fear, guilt, and shame. He wants Urvashi to believe that ending the relationship makes her cruel or morally guilty. He also uses knowledge of their intimacy as a weapon, relying on the social tendency to judge women more harshly for extramarital sexuality.

Firstly, Urvashi attempts to escape the situation by creating distance. Yet distance does not fully free her because fear continues to organise her actions. Her political transformation begins when anger becomes stronger than the shame imposed upon her. Anger clarifies that she is not responsible for satisfying his demands. It also allows her to understand that consent to a relationship in the past is not permanent consent. Her confrontation with the stalker is one of the novel's clearest examples of anger becoming agency. She refuses his belief that she belongs to him and states that the relationship is over. Navya notes that Urvashi refuses to be shamed into submission and reclaims control over her choices (Navya 1269). This moment matters because it marks boundary-making. A boundary states that another person does not have unlimited access to one's body, attention, time, or emotional life.

Patriarchal relationships often weaken women's boundaries by presenting endless availability as love or duty. Urvashi's anger restores the distinction between her desires and the man's demands. Her anger is political because it challenges male entitlement. She does not claim that her own decisions were without contradiction. Instead, she claims the right to make, reconsider, and end those decisions. Agency does not mean always making perfect choices. It means maintaining the right to act, reflect, and change direction.

Najma: Anger Against Punishment and Possession

Najma's story presents one of the most direct forms of patriarchal violence in the novel. She is a young Muslim woman raised by a mother who values education and independence. Her mother's own difficult marital experiences make her determined that Najma should have greater freedom. Najma becomes a teacher and imagines a future shaped by employment and personal choice. This future is attacked when she refuses the marriage proposal of Imtiaz. His response reveals a dangerous form of masculine entitlement. He does not recognize Najma's refusal as a valid decision. Instead, he treats it as an insult to his authority. His violent action attempts to punish her for believing that she has the right to choose whom she will marry (Patel and Chakravorty 4).

The violence against Najma also shows how men may use the language of religion, honour, or sexual morality to justify personal resentment. Imtiaz interprets her education, uncovered face, and public mobility as signs of improper behaviour. Other members of the public repeat similar ideas rather than defending her. The

wider social environment therefore helps create the conditions in which his anger becomes violence.

His anger and Najma's anger are morally different. His anger arises from frustrated ownership. He believes he deserves control over her life. Najma's anger arises from the violation of her dignity, safety, and future. His anger aims to reduce her freedom. Hers helps her survive the attempt to destroy it.

Najma's refusal to disappear from public life becomes an important form of resistance. The attack is intended not only to injure her but also to make her ashamed of being seen. Patriarchal violence frequently attempts to convert the victim's body into a permanent warning to other women. By refusing to hide herself, Najma rejects this intended meaning.

Her resistance is not based on the claim that trauma has disappeared. Survival does not erase pain. Instead, her agency lies in refusing to let the attacker become the final author of her identity. She continues to occupy the world with a body that society may treat as damaged. In doing so, she changes the meaning of visibility. What was intended as a mark of humiliation becomes evidence of endurance and refusal.

Najma's anger is therefore embodied. It is expressed through the decision to remain present. She does not need to perform heroic confidence at every moment. Her continued existence in public space challenges the belief that violence has the power to define her completely.

Megha: Bodily Anger Before Language

Megha's story shows how anger may appear before a person possesses the language required to explain injustice. As a young child, she initially understands adult attention as affection. A man gains her trust by praising her, giving her special attention, and making her feel important. Gradually, his behaviour becomes inappropriate and threatening.

Megha cannot immediately explain the situation to the adults around her. The man's actions are hidden within apparently friendly behaviour, while the child has been taught to respect adults. When she reacts physically against him, others interpret her behaviour as disobedience rather than self-defence. The adults focus on the child's visible action without understanding the danger that produced it (Sumathi and Shri 35).

Her reaction can be read as embodied anger. The body recognises danger before social language can clearly name it. This is politically significant because children's resistance is often dismissed as bad behaviour. Adults may demand politeness, obedience, and apology without asking what caused the child's fear or anger. The episode also exposes the failure of adult listening. Megha's behavior is a sign, but the adults do not read it carefully. Patriarchal authority protects the appearance of respectable adulthood while treating the child's emotional knowledge as unreliable. Her anger is therefore both resistance and communication.

Contrary to Urvashi, Megha cannot turn anger into a clear verbal boundary. Her vulnerability demonstrates that political agency depends partly on whether others are willing to listen. The novel asks readers to take seriously the emotions of those who lack social authority. It also suggests that protection begins when adults believe discomfort and investigate its cause rather than punishing its expression.

Liliana: Digital Shame and the Recovery of Identity

Liliana's story extends the novel's politics of anger into digital culture. A video and the reactions surrounding it produce a public identity over which she has little control. Social media users reduce her to a sexualised label, circulate images and comments, and transform her into an object of entertainment. The online name given to her begins to replace her complex personal identity.

Digital humiliation creates a particular emotional condition because it appears unlimited. The hostile audience is not restricted to one family, workplace, or town. Images, comments, and jokes can travel across platforms and continue to follow the person into new spaces. Even strangers feel authorised to judge her. The distance of the screen makes cruelty appear without consequence, while the targeted person must live with the results in everyday life.

The violence is produced through repetition. One comment may appear temporary, but thousands of comments create an emotional environment. Shame gathers around Liliana's body and name. In Ahmed's terms, emotions become attached to signs and identities. The digital label becomes emotionally 'sticky': it carries judgement wherever it appears (Ahmed).

Liliana attempts to escape the public identity imposed upon her by going to a dance academy in Kerala. Yet the online narrative enters the physical space. Other people recognise the label, whisper about her, and treat her according to what they have seen online. Patel and Chakravorty observe that social media follows Liliana into the new environment and continues to shape how others perceive her (Patel and Chakravorty).

Her later response involves reclaiming the identity used against her. This does not mean that the abuse becomes acceptable. Instead, she refuses to allow the insulting name to remain entirely under the control of those who created and circulated it. Reclaiming a harmful label can weaken its power to produce shame because the targeted person changes her relationship to it.

This movement from shame to anger is politically important. Shame asks, 'What is wrong with me?' Anger asks, 'Why have others treated me in this way?' The first directs attention inward; the second reveals the social structure of humiliation. Liliana's anger allows her to see that the problem lies not in her existence but in the culture that consumes and circulates women's images without responsibility. At the same time, the novel does not offer an easy solution to digital misogyny. Reclaiming a label does not remove the content or change every viewer. Her agency is emotional and narrative rather than complete control over technology.

She cannot erase the public history, but she can refuse to let it contain the whole meaning of her life.

Maya: Anger, Care, and Emotional Exhaustion

Maya's anger is quieter and more complicated. As the mother of Naveen, a son who requires lifelong care, she carries a heavy emotional responsibility. Her life is shaped by love, fear, social isolation, and anxiety about what will happen to him when she can no longer care for him. The cultural image of the ideal mother leaves little room for such anger. Mothers are expected to give endlessly and to treat care as natural fulfilment. Feelings of exhaustion, resentment, or frustration are judged as evidence of failure. As a result, mothers may be forced to hide the emotional cost of caregiving. "Psychosocial interventions targeting personal beliefs about the nature of the disease and its social aspects may be an effective way to reduce emotional distress symptoms" (Pankowski et al. 3).

Maya's experience shows that love and anger are not opposites. A person may deeply love another human being while also feeling trapped, tired, or frightened by responsibility. Recognising this emotional complexity does not make Maya uncaring. It reveals the absence of social systems that could share her burden. Her anger should therefore not be directed only at herself or at Naveen. It points towards a society that treats long-term care as a private duty, usually assigned to women. The family becomes responsible for problems that require wider forms of community and institutional support. What appears to be a personal emotional failure is actually connected to an unequal organization of care. Maya's decision to continue caring and to search for another day does not remove her fear. Her survival is not presented as effortless courage. It is a daily and uncertain act. Through her, Nair expands political anger beyond direct confrontation. Anger may also exist as the exhausted knowledge that one has been left alone with a responsibility society refuses to share (Sumathi and Shri 38).

From Private Pain to Political Recognition

The women in *Eating Wasps* do not experience anger in the same manner. Their differences in age, religion, class, profession, and historical period influence the forms their emotions take. Sreelakshmi's anger is connected to writing, singlehood, and public morality. Urvashi's anger becomes a boundary against possessive intimacy. Najma's anger resists violent punishment. Megha's anger is expressed through the body. Liliana's anger responds to digital humiliation. Maya's anger arises within the unequal structure of care.

The novel also demonstrates that anger alone cannot guarantee liberation. Sreelakshmi possesses intelligence and creative courage, yet isolation limits her ability to transform anger into sustainable resistance. Megha reacts against danger, but adults fail to understand her. Liliana may reclaim her identity, but the digital record remains. Najma survives, but survival cannot undo violence. Maya continues caring, but the social burden remains unequally distributed.

Anger must therefore be supported by listening, community, material protection, and social change. Without these conditions, women may recognise injustice but remain exposed to it. The political value of the novel lies partly in making readers into witnesses. By bringing these experiences together, Nair shows that many supposedly private problems are connected to public structures.

The shared narrative produces a form of affective solidarity. The characters do not need to have identical lives for their emotions to speak to one another. Their stories show that patriarchal power adapts to changing times. It works through family honor in Sreelakshmi's period, romantic possession in Urvashi's life, physical violence in Najma's case, and digital culture in Liliana's story. Modern technology and professional success may change the form of oppression without removing its emotional logic.

Anger connects these forms because it identifies the repeated message beneath them: women are told that their lives belong to others. Their bodies must protect family honour, their desires must obey social rules, their relationships must continue according to male wishes, and their emotional labour must remain available. Female anger refuses this message. It asserts that women are subjects of their own lives rather than objects within the plans of others.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps* presents anger as a complex and politically meaningful emotion. The novel does not reduce anger to rage, aggression, or loss of control. Instead, it shows anger emerging from women's encounters with judgement, violence, possessiveness, neglect, humiliation, and unequal responsibility. Anger enables the characters to recognise that their suffering is not simply the result of personal weakness or bad luck. It is connected to social structures that regulate female bodies, desires, speech, labour, and identities.

Through Sreelakshmi, Nair exposes the punishment faced by a woman who writes openly about desire. Through Urvashi, she presents anger as the power to establish boundaries. Najma's continued visibility challenges the attempt to define her through violence. Megha's bodily reaction reveals the emotional knowledge of a child whom adults fail to hear. Liliana transforms digital shame into a struggle for narrative control, while Maya's exhaustion exposes the unequal social organisation of care.

An affect-theoretical reading demonstrates that these emotions are neither completely private nor isolated. They move through families, institutions, relationships, public spaces, and digital networks. Patriarchy attempts to attach shame and guilt to women, while excusing male entitlement as love, honour, protection, or authority. Women's anger interrupts this emotional order by redirecting responsibility towards the structures and individuals that produce harm. Conversely, the novel also warns against treating anger as an easy solution. Anger requires language, support, safety, and collective recognition if it is to become lasting political action. When women are isolated, anger may be silenced or turned

inward. The task is therefore not merely to celebrate anger but to listen to what it reveals and to change the conditions that make it necessary.

On the whole, *Eating Wasps* transforms stories of individual pain into a wider feminist criticism of society. Like the wasp in the title, the experiences represented in the novel carry a sting. The women seek love, freedom, dignity, recognition, and security, but often encounter punishment instead. Their anger records that betrayal. More importantly, it gives them a way to question it. In Nair's novel, anger becomes political when it allows women to reject shame, defend their personhood, and begin writing the meanings of their own lives.

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