

Feminist Writing with Special Reference to Anita Nair's Novel "*Ladies Coupe*"

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Abstract: *The story is told in first person by Akhila, the protagonist, who is at first presented as a sympathetic figure: sacrificed her life's dream to maintain a medium of normalcy for her sister and two brothers after her father was struck by a passing commuter bus. The protagonist, Akhila, forms a connecting thread that links the experiences of the other five women whom she meets in the ladies compartment of her train to Kanyakumari. Anita Nair, the author, highlights the positive role and positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood. The more traditional a postcolonial society is, the more problematic the question of women's emancipation is, and, therefore, the more passionate its women writers are. No wonder, then, that Anita Nair's engrossing Ladies Coupe rises what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India.*

Keywords: Identity, Individualism, Struggle, Tradition, Womanhood.

1. Introduction

Indian Writing in English has covered a long distance journey to reach its present stage. The present brigade of Indian writers in English viz; Arvind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and many more have taken Indian writings in English to a notch higher. The journey was tougher for the women writers as their work was looked down by male writers. Their work has always been undervalued under the patriarchal assumptions. Writings by women were called the 'Kitchen Literature' as they were supposed to write only about their firsthand experience from within the four walls of their domain. In the past, women writers had to toil hard to make their work even acceptable, worthy of publication.

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender equality, for women and campaign for women's rights and interests. According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave starts from the 19th and early 20th centuries, the second wave from the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. It is manifested in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism. Women's writings came to exist as a separate category of scholarly interest relatively recently. In the West, second wave feminism prompted a general re-evaluation of women's historical contribution, and various academic sub-disciplines, such as women's history (or her story) and women's lives and contributions have been under represented as areas of scholarly interest.

From aspiring to be a psychiatrist to almost being sure of becoming a journalist, to finding a hold in the world of advertising to actually becoming a writer, Anita Nair has come a long way. She has authored many works of fiction and non-fiction including "*The Better Man*", "*Ladies*

Coupe", "*Mistress*", and so on. Anita Nair's novels are passionately woven on the thread of human nature and values, with a feminist outlook. Her characters are inspired by people she sees in her daily life, their candour, their subversiveness and their subtle strength. *Ladies Coupe* is a story of woman's search for strength and independence. *Ladies Coupe*, as the name signifies, has a ladies coupe in a train as the locale of the novel where six women, sitting close to each other, gets into a conversation and peep into each other's lives. Though hailed as one of the most important feminist novel to come out of South Asia, Nair says that she is not a feminist. She enjoys being in the house. She likes to be treated nicely and pampered. She doesn't think that this book is about feminism and it is about the inner strength which she sees in so many women that overwhelms her.

The use of male pseudonyms by a female writer was quite common in the 18th and 19th centuries, when attitudes towards women's intellectual capacities were less than favorable. So to combat the sexism that was unapologetically rife during these eras, women were forced to abandon their names and adopt a male pseudonym to get their foot in the door. Female writers, too, have done themselves a disservice by routinely choosing male pennames. In fact, a female with a female pseudonym seems to be rarest of all. It is due to this male domination in the literature that Anita Nair might have said her novel '*Ladies Coupe*' cannot be considered as a feminist novel. The novel '*Ladies Coupe*' deals with the lives of six women where all characters struggle for their identity. Anita Nair has tried to establish that a sort of feminism would emerge in the women society directly or indirectly through her novel.

The aim of this paper is to explore the feminist aspect with special reference to Anita Nair's novel '*Ladies Coupe*'. It also aims to re-establish the ending of the novel as a new beginning.

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2. Ladies Coupe: The role of women and present scenario

The novel '*Ladies Coupe*' deals with issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. The novel questions whether the role of Indian women living under the oppressive patriarchal system should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, women's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her desires and needs. Anita Nair's imagination terms with stories that leap out like tiny fish, struggling to escape a fisherman's basket. As though to acknowledge the fact, she has signaled that her book is 'a novel in six parts,' stringing together a collection of short stories than in going for the long haul.

Though the ladies compartment or coupe, Anita Nair shares the experience of her female characters with the readers. She places her protagonist in a cross-cultural scenario. She explores the immigrant sensibility, duality and flexibility identity. Her characters come from all parts of India with divergent social, religious and cultural preoccupations. She explores the multiplicity of themes which center around her characters struggle to outgrow traditionally inherited cultural values. Her women characters are docile creatures who believe in wrestling with their own problems rather than trying to dominate their male counterparts.

Women characters and their social life

The Brahmin heroine, Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is a forty five year old spinster daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family. She becomes a woman who has always been a backbone of impossible demanding family until the day she gets herself a one way ticket to a resort town, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman. The protagonist, Akhilandeswari or Akhila, forms a connecting thread that links the experiences of five women whom she meets in the ladies compartment of her train to Kanyakumari. Each of the character brings a new perspective to the simple question that runs right through the novel, "can a woman be happy alone, without a male protective presence in her life?" In the intimate atmosphere of ladies coupe, Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers: Janaki, a pampered wife and a confused mother; Margaret Shanti, a Chemistry teacher married to an insensitive tyrant too self-absorbed to recognize her needs; Prabha Devi, the perfect daughter and wife transformed for life by a glimpse of a swimming pool; fourteen year-old Sheela with a remarkable ability to perceive what others cannot; and Marikolunthu, whose innocence was destroyed by one night's lust. They have nothing in common to save their gender: some made happy marriages; some were not happy; one was raped and took her revenge and another one seduced men much younger than herself. As Akhila listens to their stories, she is drawn into the most private and personal moments of their lives, to the hidden desires and aspirations of their real selves and to the working of their inner minds.

Marriage and sex

The concept of marriage is seen as a social contract at its

most basic sense and hence, this concept tends to affect the construction of women too deeper ways than can be observed. Entry into marriage denoted not merely the cohabitation of two individuals but goes onto creating spaces that the women must fill, most of the time having to change their own identities to do so. Janaki's early marriage to her husband, conditions this identity formation in her, thereby making him an incredible part of it and restricting her perception of her own self as a woman till her menopause, an essentially female event. Akhila's mother too reflects this dependence on the man of her identity as we see her performs simply in order to please her husband and fulfill her duties as a wife. Prabha Devi and Margaret too are seen to dedicate their lives being the perfect daughter-in-law and wife before reconstructing their ideas of themselves based on their own desires. Akhila's unmarried state becomes an irregularity in the otherwise smooth world of social happenings and is therefore a matter of uncomfortability, as indicated by the reaction from her co-passengers to this revelation of hers at the beginning of life.

Women and socially constructed norms

In the novel, Sarasa Mami's decision to convert her daughter into a prostitute evokes social ire superficially because it violates moral norms but at a deeper level, it questions the over aching need for a male presence to survive in life, rather seeing the money gained by her daughter is used to run the house. Also, despite Akhila's role as the eldest child and provider for the family, her mother still insists that she asks her younger brothers' permission to go for an office trip because she is still 'a woman' despite her age and position, thereby concretizing power relations within the family and extension, society too. The idea that emerges thus is a sense of self-deprivation of pleasure simply because of the burdens attached to being a woman, a fact acknowledged by Cixous as being the major reason why women do not write and express themselves. The six women in the novel are all trapped in the unsteadiness of custom and the social order. The patriarchal society into which they are born, places a number of hurdles and obstacles in the path of their smooth development. The future appears bleak and dark with an air of nothingness being spread about. The journey undertaken by the women is not only physical one but more emotional in nature, at the end of which each has a better understanding about themselves. As a woman, Akhila has her dreams, her desires, but when her dreams come in conflict with the comforts of her family, it is she who has to sacrifice. She cannot follow her dreams and her identity is completely lost. She lives a life designated by the society or family. On few occasions, she listens to the voice of her innermost being and then she appears a rebel. In fact, her character appears to be a continuum of nothingness and being. Akhila is skilled, knowledgeable, and financially independent yet she doesn't have enough courage to defy the norms imposed by the society. Akhila expects the society to treat her as a human being and not as a sexual commodity.

Women and Tradition

Anita Nair makes use of this ancient or traditional Indian custom of women sharing the news about their families when they get together or meet at the common Weller pond

in the village. Men have more occasions to meet at social and work places. Women however suffer from the lack of exposure or free access to such common meetings or occasions. Akhila, a victim of circumstances, a martyr at home, and a stoic in life, finds herself released in her interactive passions. As she travels with five women, she gets involved in a conversation with them. Prabha Devi is quite communicative, and Janaki, the elderly woman is quite inquisitive. Prabha Devi puts forth a question with due apologies as to why Akhila chose to remain unmarried. Akhila responded such that she had to look after the family in her father's absence and by the time all her siblings got settled and she became too much old to marry. Women's options are extremely complex being influenced by culture, culture class and gender. Traditionally women are taught to put others before themselves. They have been pressurized to put family life above other spheres of activity. Marriage does not divide all the life chances of women. Women react to life emotionally and empathetically and so they become victims of the push and pull of circumstances. Change will subsume women's life unless they become active participants in the process. Economic class membership influences the quality of women's life. Hence, economic independence is the most necessary component of women's empowerment. The experiences narrated by Marikolunthu, emphasizes this factor clearly. As Akhila is drawn into the most private moments of the lives of the members in the coupe, she is still seeking an answer to the most gnawing question for her life; can a woman stay single and happy, does a woman need a man to feel complete? Marikolunthu, who narrates her story of rape, forced motherhood, lesbianism, heterosexuality, etc. strikes the last nail on the coffin of question.

Self-identity

Of all fascinating saga of the six women, the most compelling beautiful story was that of Akhila, mainly because she was in the process of discovering her own self-identity., also because she finally emerged as a skilled obstacle-racing champion of life. The harshness of life and its cruel blows had triggered her inexhaustible well springs of dynamism. It began more as a hazy and misty blur of self-confusing thoughts but soon Akhila's self- resilient began to take form and shape. At last, her 'entombed desires' surfaced and she decided to carve out a life of her own. Akhila in her own sheaf of life-negating experiences, stood out as a symbol of feminine strength and grace. She listed out her own problems with clarity and arrived at the conclusion that she was in need of an education which could give her a sense of firm footing. She discerned her own needs and began to take care of herself. Akhila was the savior and silent worker, entirely behind the scenes, while all the younger children get their moment center staged. Her brothers asked for and they got what they wanted – education, marriage and a life of their own. Her needs were taken for granted when her own siblings thrived like parasites on her. They milked every opportunity to bolster their lives at the expense of their eldest sister. Akhila was left behind, silently hoping that they would consider her aspirations and desires too, at least once, when theirs' had got satisfied. But they were not. Akhila realized that life had slipped by her all these sixteen years as she juggled with her career and family. She was the only unmarried person in her

office where twenty-four people work. The deprivations of life impinge on her psyche. She became aware of the fact that she had been living life without dreams.

Akhila yearning for tenderness, tough and erotic fulfillment were never verbalized. They exist only in her dreams and her unexpressed sub-consciousness. Akhila's longings get beautifully revealed through dream. In her dream, she had the guts to defy her parents and continue an entirely physical passionate love affair while they watched with horror and disgust. But in reality, she had no courage. Akhila's craving for physical passionate was mirrored in her dream where she experienced the flow of life, as she yielded herself to the finger tingling of Hari. Thus, the encounter with Hari marked the first phase of her transition to fulfillment and freedom. The kind of sensation that Hari generated in Akhila testified to the fact that the male and female forces had great complementing power to surface the inner resources to each other.

3. Discussion

Feminism is, certainly, a serious effort to examine, understand and elucidate how and why femininity or the feminine sensibility is dissimilar to masculinity or the masculine experience. It brings into perspective the points of dissimilarities that characterize the 'feminine identity' or 'feminine psyche' or 'femininity' of a woman. It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of femininity vis-à- vis masculinity. The male writers have mostly seen women as mediocre and frail. Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by men. They treat men as 'grander sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are treated as 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are supposed as logical, rational and objective, and, women are supposed as emotional, inconsistent, instinctive, subjective and lacking self-confidence. In "*Ladies Coupe*", Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and shows inequality in relationships. Her novel raises questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India. The India suffers from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. The feminist writings have increased its number in postcolonial Indian Literature.

4. Conclusion

One of the primal and seminal concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. A woman is not the "other". She is not an appendage to man. She is an autonomous being capable of finding her own way to salvation, through trial and error. Liberation is meaningful, if woman is not confined within the bounds of family. After marriage, a woman has to become submissive like Sita, 'the solid woman, the archetype of womanhood. The ideal way of her dignified identity and empower her within herself and outside society. Then, like Karpagam, Akhila's childhood friend, a woman can brush aside male chauvinism. All the characters in the novel, Akhila, Margaret Shanti, Sheela, Marikolunthu, Prabha Devi and even the veteran Janaki, meet with moments of self-revelation of their status as women in their communal

sharing of collective subjectivity. They perceive that the familial structure, marriage and husband are not as they are made to appear by the traditional patriarchal fundamentalists. At the end of the journey, Akhila and her friends are on the threshold of self-discovery. The manner in which Nair relates these transformations is revelatory and redeeming. The awareness of repression leads into a questioning of the validity of their imposition. The process of revolt is an intense and honest introspection on the part of the characters leading to a painful sense of alienation and a self; that is dividing between the old acquiescence and the new urge towards an individuality that has so far been suppressed. The sense of revolt, which manifests itself, is a slow tentative rejection of societal and patriarchal oppression.

Anita Nair highlights the positive role and positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood. The form the novel takes is such that it can be easily be dissected into six parts. It is like six short stories merging into one through the main character and the train journey. It is interesting to note that Nair uses the journey motif for her creation to undergo a process of transformation. Like a traveler, Akhila must find her way and consider the forms of power at stake, in order to restructure her identity. This she does with the help of other women and their collective sharing of their lived experiences. Nair's India suffers from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. Of course, patriarchy, in its different forms, has tried in many ways to repress debasing and humiliating women- especially through the image represented in cultural and traditional forms. Ladies Coupe deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. In such a world, women's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her desires and needs. The primary goal of feminist perspective, according to Maggie Humm is to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender and class and sexual preference and how to change it. As such, the feminist principle is an 'uncompromising pledge' and an antidote to all types of exploitation and oppression of women. The personality of women has been damaged and distorted are her very status as human being is interiorized under the overwhelming male- domination in patriarchal society. In Indian social thought, Manu, the ancient law-giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra assigns women a secondary position in relation to man. According to Manu Smriti or Manu Samhitha, a woman should depend upon a man from her cradle to grave and should never live as an independent entity.

Throughout the novel, we were continuously made conscious of the women subjugation by the male figures directly or indirectly. Every character brings out the stories for victimization physically and psychologically. A woman is always treated low, thinking that they are incapable and cannot handle life without the help of men in family as life of women depend on their companion unwillingly. The arrival of 21st century has not brought any noticeable changes as expected in the life of women. But the most optimistic aspect of the novel is the ending, which tried to

display the possible independence of women in future through the protagonist.

5. Future Scope

Literary feminism was concerned with the politics of women's authorship and the representation of women's condition with literature. The feminist and feminist writers have been successful in achieving the legal rights for women, yet much has to be done at the social level. Feminist writers today proudly hold their cause of womanhood through their writings. The Indian literature field is bold to represent feminism in the hands of Well- known writers, who have transformed from theoretical theme to historic and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, women's outlook and actions. Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. Though the term 'feminism' misled the majority of society, and conceptualized as the movement against all men; it is the political and social movement in support of people to step the foot on the gender-biased society. The 21st century feminist writers has exploited the literary norms to exhibit the equivalency in literature and many more to come.

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