

The Portrayal of the Female Mind in Ladies Coupe

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Abstract: Anita Nair has presented in her novel *Ladies Coupe*, modern Indian women's search for identity in male dominated society. The novel primary focus on psychological exploration of inner self of its female characters. Nair permeate deep into the inner psyche of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring out their issues, which are mainly because of the psychological and emotional inequalities in a society. Since the beginning of this world, both the outside world and the family suppress Women and this oppression is expressed by the quest to self-identity and elf-discovery, which pervades in Anita Nair's '*Ladies Coupe*'. The concept of a free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom, but relates to her mental and emotional attitude and wellbeing.

Keywords: Oppression, Psychological exploration, Inner psyche, Psychological and Emotional Inequalities, Subjugation

1. Introduction

Ladies Coupe is a very powerful novel delineating feminine sensibility, although the truth that this delineation is chiefly through uttered the projection of the predicament of social norms and inner support for freedom. Akhila, the female protagonist in the novel, symbolizes the feminine sensitive of the novel. The novel is about the journeys women take in their own life. The novel is prepared in such a way that, it lends itself to be a symbol of the women's journey. According to Anita Nair, the book as a novel is in parts because there are five short stories interwoven into it. There is a single narrator, whose perception is the dominant perception of the novel Thus, the novel may be seen as collection of parables on the incapacity of women to convey the inner with the outer, the individual with society. It is an effort to know personal relationships through the characters Akhila meets.

2. Objective

The goal and purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the significance of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* in which she demonstrate the condition of women in a male dominated society presented with notable insight, unity and humor. This paper is an attempt to summarize the mentality of women in various stages of life at contemporary situations of life.

3. About the Author

Anita Nair is a popular Indian English writer. She was born at Munda Kottakurissi, near Shornur in Kerala state. She was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway* which she sold it to Har-Anand Press. The book won her a fellowship from the Virginia centre for creative arts. Her second book was published by Picador USA. Her books have been published in several languages around the world. She lives in Bangalore.

Anita Nair established her place in English Literature with her second novel *Ladies Coupe*. Though not a feminist, she

projects her concern over the predicament of women through this novel. Though the theme is an often repeated one the novelty of the technique employed by her elevated this literary work.

Anita Nair is a writer of repute and has a number of popular novels to her credit. Nair places major emphasis on examining woman's lives and their psyche within the context of south-Asian family, representing women in their tradition roles as mothers, wives and daughters. She has an intense emotional understanding of human motivation and a sharp flexible intelligence. *Ladies Coupe* is an explicit visual description of feminine psyche and the vehemence of passion it produces.

Anita Nair is a contemporary Indian woman writer who uses English as her fictional language. She lives in Bangalore with her husband and their eight year old son. Her first novel *The Better Man* was published in 1999 and second novel *Ladies Coupe* in 2001 by Penguin India. Her novel takes its title from the second class reservation compartment for women in Indian trains.

4. Portrayal of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

Ladies Coupe a novel in parts is a story of a woman's quest for her potency and freedom. Until early 1998, there was a special counter for ladies in the Bangalore Cantonment railway station but then the ladies row has been abolished and *Ladies Coupe* does not survive anymore. Though some trains still contain *Ladies Coupe*, it exists next to the compartment for the physically challenged. As the novel's title propose, it discuss about the ladies travelling in one *Ladies Coupe* or compartment. The stories of six women are rush together to make a single story. Taking a cue from Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, where a group of pilgrims goes on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, telling tales to each other, Nair has made use of the old methods. Akhila, the protagonist has never been allowed to live her own life. Dissatisfied with the lifetime sacrifice for her family and with the thought of rebellion, she goes in search of what she has missed in life.

The quest in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is something

remarkable from the point of view of the character Akhila. She determines to liberate herself from her orthodox Tamil Brahmin life by travelling to Kanyakumari by train in a Ladies Coupe where Akhila meets five other women: Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj, Prabha Devi, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolanthu. Coupe stands as a confession box where all these women admit their account of their life which makes this work a kind of confessional novel. As the protagonist Akhila listens to their stories, she knowingly takes an action at the end to conquer the refutation of the traditional world by seeking an answer to the question, "Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?" (Priya 174) Nair here moves the characters from a state of inferiority into a state of lively presence. Akhila is symbolic of all those who are in search for female space.

The heroine of Ladies Coupe is like a common victim of exploitation in the patriarchal society. Akhilandeswari is a forty-five year old income-tax clerk. Having lost her father at a young age, and as an elder daughter she became the breadwinner of the family. Her life has been taken out of her control by her family. Akhila is a spinster, daughter, sister, an effective worker and the only contributor of her family but a person who has no right to take her own decisions just because she is a woman. Akhila lives with her mother, two brothers Narayan and Narshimhan, and sister Padma. Narayan joined a tank factory as a machinist.

Narshimhan who is called Narsi became the first graduate and postgraduate in the family and he got a job in teaching profession. As her two brothers acquired good positions, Akhila felt some relief. But both brothers determined to marry without thinking of their elder sister. No one in her home including her mother is ready to introduce the subject of her marriage. Akhila suppressed her inner feelings of hurt and frustration. She sustained to live as the man of the family. Till the day she left her home, she is allowed by her sister Padma and her husband. Padma's husband does not have a very well paying job. Akhila, Akhilandeswari is the "Mistress of all worlds. Master of none" (Nair 84). She does what is predicted of her and dreams about the rest. To her hope is full of unsatisfied desires.

Forty-five years old, and without old-coloured spectacles, and without husband, children, home and family, Akhila dreams to escape and to have her own space. She is craving for her own life. "Getting fed up with the multiple role and responsibilities, Akhila decides to go on a train journey leaving away her family and her errands hoping that this journey will make her ultimately a different woman, will be a journey towards wholeness of her life" (2).

All this six women have been given separate chapters to express their lives' conflict and experiences. Every woman's life story contains the journey towards completeness. The first woman, Janaki is the oldest woman among the five, pampered wife and a confused mother. Janaki was married to Prabhakar in the age of eighteen. Throughout her girlhood, marriage was a goal she was being well groomed for and her relationship with her husband is a friendly love. Janaki, though happy of her married life, is dependent on her

husband. She does not have individuality and feels that her identity is her husband and her son because that is the way life has been for her. She is frequently confused whether her son really cares for her or not. Though she is in a confused state of mind, Janaki wanted others to think of her as a tranquil and satisfied woman. She is a kind of woman who feels that her life is complete only with a man.

Sheela is the second and the youngest in the coupe to share her story. She is a fourteen-year-old girl who has the ability to comprehend what others cannot. She was brought up by her grandmother Ammumma who was a great example of femininity. Ammumma maintains herself to be very bright-looking, applying lotions and powders. She was always well dressed and decorated herself every night with all her jewels before sleep. She hated imperfections. In her home, there was no room for a daffy plate, or a faded damper. Ammumma groomed Sheela to be different from her mother and aunt and said, "You mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (Nair 97). She is a great inspiration for Sheela. But there was evil spirit intent in Ammumma's womb which has not left the asylum of her body until death. Sheela's understanding of her dying grandmother, which others cannot comprehend, paves the way for her own future liberation. She had allowed her aptitude to rule her rather than to do what was predicted of her.

Margaret Shanthi is well educated and became a chemistry teacher who is married to the 'poetry of elements' (149), an insensible tyrant. To Margaret's eyes, all people become a chemical. She identifies their nature, records it and guess with it. She says that it helps her to understand the person better and to devise her behaviour in his or her company to decrease any chance of unplanned burst. Among the five elements, she classifies herself as water. Water that dazzle, that heals, that forgets, that accepts, that flows inexhaustibly, water that also destroys. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj is a self-regarding school principal, who fails to see further himself.

Paulraj's egotistic behaviour restricts him to know her needs. He loves to eat tasty food but is more aware of his health and body. His broad-shouldered fitting appearance makes people give him importance. His wicker was his scepter, a symbol of the power that he exerts. To erode his self-worth and shake the very foundation of his being, Margaret conceives a plan to revenge him by shaking the basic of his fit physical appearance. She cooked an array of delicious food and overfed him. A year later, he became fat, losing his early fitness and excitement. Ebe slowly became a fat man, a quiet man who no longer needed his defaced books. Margaret succeeds using her femininity to take a revenge on her husband and his egotistic behaviour.

Prabha Devi is a perfect daughter and a rich dominated wife who loves swimming because swimming symbolically gives her a sense of achievement. Prabha does not want to be a latent wife and changes herself when she goes foreign with her husband. She cut her long hair, learned to apply make-

up, changed her traditional clothing to modern, watched talk shows and soap operas, and to a great widen, she avoided her pregnancy. But later, she realizes her stupidity and became the woman her mother had unreal. She would be a woman beyond reproach and above all qualms. Now Prabha is the steward of his home and the mother of his children. She listened. She obeyed. She lived on the outskirts of his life. Again this obedient wife felt that her life is unfulfilled and her own image in mirror parodies her that "I became a woman, neither heard nor seen" (Nair 184). Prabha Devi felt a great desire possess her. She had never known anything about this. She decided to learn to swim which gives her a sense of attainment which she has successfully achieved.

The fifth and the heart-rending tale is that of Marikolanthu. Marikolanthu, a thirty-one years old woman who is neglected by upper-middle women, born in a little village called Palur near Kancheepuram. Mari's family lead their life in extreme poor condition, and her mother worked in Chettiar's family to run her household. Her mother born in a poor family, Mari led a sheltered life. But her life was destroyed by Murugesan, a relative of Chettiar family. Her innocence as a child was destroyed in one night of lust behind the mango orchard. Mari's rape joined with extreme poverty and class develop literally and metaphorically is the climax of all the stories. Marikolanthu had been content to remain a sister to the real relationship. She is an alternate housewife, surrogate mother, surrogate lover and finally she wants more than all these. She wanted to be the real thing, the real woman with her own identity and decided to live with her son, who was rejected by her from the birth.

The five stories are woven around Akhila's story and each lady leaves a message to her. These women share their experiences and give her something to think about. There is a human being inside every woman who is left behind somehow or hidden somewhere or buried while provide to others demands and when familial roles are loaded on her. It is the nature of Indian women to accept their life as it oriented and live accordingly. In Chapter one, Akhila's mother gives her own theories of a good wife. "It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time... a woman is not meant to take on a man's role" (14).

The affecting tales of five women from different ages and backgrounds lay in front of Akhila from which she chooses bits and pieces to originate her mind that is on the search to find what her life means to her. She considers over the life stories and discovers herself. In this novel of multiple lives and multiple voices, Nair answers a few questions which every woman would have face experience, the questions related to her role in the society. This novel untangle misunderstand about the role of women in Indian society.

Akhila was told by her mother and her family that a woman cannot live alone. A woman cannot cope alone. The fundamental question in this novel is, "the situation of women-whether a woman can live alone or not? Whether a woman cannot handle with alone?" (151). This question lingers in Akhila's mind throughout her life and hopes of

getting an answer. She is irritated of her domestic duties and gets psychological trouble, restrained within the walls of the house and leading the life she is expected to live by her family members. She expresses, "I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon and the life she was expected to live" (Nair 4). Like other women, Akhila does not long for a marriage slightly she needs a companionship. She tells this view to Prabha Devi:

As far as I am concerned marriage is unimportant. Companionship. Yes. I would like that. The Problem is I wish to live myself. What I am trying to do is to convince myself that a woman can live alone. Then I thought that may be if I met other women who were single, or just... any women... if I talked to them... may be it could help me make up my mind. (21)

This feeling to create a bond with other women to relieve problems is sisterhood what is called sorority. They are not biologically related but are bonded in concord. The novel deconstructs the one which is taken for established, the holy the traditional, and the ideological-companionship instead of marriage.

Akhila saw herself as a serpent that had lain coiled and supine for years. She saw life as a thousand-petalled lotus she would have to find before she knew fulfilment. But she is bewildered of how and where to begin the quest. She was brought up as Tamil Brahmin girl and therefore, had the wish for getting married. Her desires, yearnings and hopes are break by her family and her oppressed desires are locked in her insensible. They were never even verbalized and left enclosed. The pursuit for the identification of her womanhood was formulating her dream. Even her longings are beautifully expressed in her dreams.

While travelling in a crowded bus, she allowed an unknown passenger to touch her who naturally brings out her longings for sensual pleasures. This passion in her caught fire when she met and loved Hari who is younger than her. Again when she sees a very loving couple standing at the platform, the reserved desires comes to her conscious mind. Janaki and Prabha Devi are women who could not feel complete without a man. When Janaki told her story, more displeasure covered Akhila's face.

This passive feel made her leave her family and move away in seek of the self-realization and completion. Enlightenment has lick on her at the late age. At least in this age of forty-five, Akhila wants to lead her life as she wishes and her journey towards completeness begins here. From the Gurukula or Brahmacharya period of life, she had moved directly to the Vanaprastha without enjoying Grihasthya.

Akhila's very identity is at pledge as no one had called her by her name. Her brothers and sisters called her as akka, her colleagues called her as madam, her amma addresses her as ammadi She resents "So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all she did, what was her identity?" (152). Although Akhila loves Hari, a person younger than her, she is frightened about society. She says, "Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the question in their minds

what is he doing with an older woman?" (152). Her mind is unbalanced. She fears that someday Hari might regret their relationship. She is in confused state of mind and feels that it is a violation of formal norms of society. At the end when Akhila decides to leave her home, her brothers and sister, her brother does not allow her to do so. Narsi says, "It's improper for a woman to live alone. What will the society say? Here the question arises, why didn't her brothers think of her life and marriage? Why didn't they think of society then? It is only now they think of her reputation in the society" (152).

Akhila's first effort to smash free herself from tradition is shown when, as a Tamil Brahmin girl, she tasted egg offered by her colleague Katherine. Akhila's meeting with her school friend Karpagham is another kind of motivation to live her life in this aggressive world. Finally, she was affected by the condition of individual lives. The women like Janaki, Sheela and Margaret wear self-sufficiency as a glory, and are trying to make some sense of their own life. Only in the last chapter Akhila Speaks, she attains her journey towards wholeness through the fellowship with Hari.

Akhila's decision to call off her relationship with Hari marked an important milestone in her achievement as a liberate woman who is in search of self. Akhila's emotional journey towards wholeness is the metaphor of her destination, Kanyakumari. It is a place where the three seas meet and it opens up vistas of possibilities of life to Akhila. At the end of the novel, Akhila is decimated into ten entities Kali Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumathi Bagala, Matangi and Kamala showing the potential of womanhood. Novel ends on hopeful note and there is a strong message of hope.

As T.S. Eliot says in Four Quartets: "In my beginning is my end in my end is my beginning" (153). Akhila's end to her family restraints is revealed as another beginning therefore, the coupe has become a metaphor for utopian world that is free from patriarchal domination.

Nair has powerfully focused the Indian women's psyche through the women characters in the novel. She has listen on the marginalization of the women in Indian society. Patriarchy has tried to suppress and humble women in many ways particularly through the stereotypical images represented in our culture and tradition. Anita Nair amazingly understanding on women's psyche made her to discover the tumbling questions and overpowering problems rooted deeply in every woman in the novel Ladies Coupe. The basic questions rose in this novel, not only shake the ideological ground of male-dominated system in the traditional society but also implies the creation of an alternative reality. The novel Ladies Coupe, like Alice Walker's The Colour Purple is a reflective conversation of marginalized women

5. Conclusion

Anita Nair has engrossing Ladies Coupe rises what many readers might believe prohibited questions about the

character of woman in modern postcolonial India. Nair's India suffers from a structure of sex role stereotyping and domination of women that subsist under patriarchal social association. Certainly patriarchy, in its various forms has tried in many ways to suppress and humiliate women particularly through the images represented in intellectual and customary forms.

Ladies Coupe deals with such issues which ask basic questions that not only quake the ideological foundation of man's patriarchal position in a traditional society but also mean the subsistence of an alternative reality. Put differently, the novel questions whether the role of India women as agent of other women living under cruel patriarchal systems in relation to traditional resistance should be limited only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world woman's role is adequate to reproduction despite of her own desires and requirements. The Brahmin heroine Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is forty-five years old spinster daughter, sister, aunt and the only giver of her family after the death of her father. Getting fed up with these many roles, she decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities, a journey that eventually make her a different woman. She tries to alter the way of her life and family significantly. But it is not possible as she lives in a fixed world. Neither she is free to grasp her goals, nor to explain her dreams into realities. Akhila, sans husband, children, home and family, is dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience, tender to content, she sets out for a journey.

Anita Nair chooses ladies only, train compartment as the setting of the novel because the conversation in coupe is mainly preoccupied with issues of women's equality. The Ladies Coupe of the Indian Railways was based on the supposition that one sex was weaker than the other, and required to be confined from nomadic eyes and hands. Six women locked themselves in security and decency in the strange coupe, while the multitudes shoved and pressed in the rest of the train. In all female Ladies coupe she meets five other women, each of whom has a story to tell. The stories are all an effort to answer Akhila's difficulty question can a woman stay single and be happy at the same time.

Each chapter of the novel is committed to one of the woman's story, Janaki, the old woman whose relationship with her husband is a friendly love, Margaret, the Chemistry teacher, who succeeds imprisoning her egotistic husband or principal, Prabha, the rich passive wife who loves swimming because it symbolically gives her a sense of accomplishment, Sheela, the fourteen years old whose understanding of her vanishing grandmother paves the way for her own future freedom and Marikolanthu whose rape, literally and symbolically coupled with excessive poverty and class-development is the conclusion of all other stories.

Each of the women is finely drawn, each trapped in a net of relationships partially of her own creation and partly one that is made for her. All these stories form of all other stories. All these stories form a kind of mirror in which Akhila may see her reflection so that she may move to acquisitive the happiness-she has a right to. At the very end, Akhila is empowered to regain her lost love. Six women being in one

compartment recover the support and hold the story together like a band holding a bunch of different kinds of flowers of different shapes, colours and mad fragrances.

Primarily Ladies Coupe is the story of Akhila, who happens to be the most quiet, rather compressed member of the family. Akhila is like a method whose company is never noticed, never acceptable and yet whose absence may make all the distinction. Akhila is a woman lost in the jungle of her duties; sometimes to her mother, at other times to her brothers and still at other times to her sister. She is accepted to be submissive daughter, loving and motherly sister and everything but an individual. As a woman Akhila has her dreams, her wishes, but when her dreams come in clash with the comforts of her family it is she who has to sacrifice. She lives a life chosen 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 range of nothingness and being. On this field, oblivion shades into her being very slowly and occasionally. Even Virginia Woolf was aware of the difficulty of a character. She saw character as a change barren wanted to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind" (17). Akhila's character lends an occasionally spiny but always concerned centre to the book and the sleeping car, which teems with memories from her own life and visions of the lives she might have led.

This amazingly atmospheric, delectably warm novel takes the reader into modern India revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships are same world over. Nair demonstrates credibly that she is a writer dedicated to stress the travails and contradictions of women's lives, the sacrifices and choices essential to build a relationship, a marriage and a family. Her strength as a writer lies in bringing alive the everyday wishes and qualms of these six ordinary women. What comes under pressure in Nair's novels is the resistance between ideological form represented in a mythic and metaphysical accept of the material world and reality shown in the material domination of women of low class and their sexuality.

Ladies Coupe deconstructs that which is taken for decided the holy, the custom and the ideological. Akhila is not given the chance by her family to get married and have a family. She is slightly expected to present. Akhila is still a spinster as she has to give and the Brahmin tradition is not blendy. Marikolanthu, a low caste woman is raped she is to blame: "Why does a young woman walk alone" (Naik 18). It is pleasant to note that Anita Nair observes the uneducated, poor and rustic women, like Marikolanthu, who bravely refuse customs that describe their lives in dependent relationship with men more strongly than the educated and urban women reject those traditions. Through this description, Nair criticizes the rubric of proper education that reinforces the patriarchal habituation in men and women. She asserts that education can sanction and liberate women only when it is expected at changing social attitudes.

Nair's writing the reform of male-female relationships that brings changes in social and interpersonal attitudes becomes the most important basis of feminist liberation.

The struggle of educated and rich women for liberation is not the same like that of an uneducated and poor woman. Marikolanthu's greatness lies in her conflict for emancipation of being poor and uneducated. She can be called as an Indian account of Ibsen's Nora. None can fail to respect her regular growth through experience from obedience to insolence, defiance to full confidence. Although not properly educated in a school or college, she is severely trained in the University of Adversity. Thus she succeeds in her flight with the rigid notions of gender-roles and develops the existential courage to be herself.

By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves them from a state of obediently and absence into a state of lively presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories make a single story, of women rediscovering themselves. The coupe becomes an image for a utopian world that is unconventional from patriarchy. It is not categorized by false binaries. Hence the conscious action taken by Akhila at the end of the novel an action that aims to overcome the contradictions that are feature of the traditional world and its necessary determinant called isolation. In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these five women endeavour to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong advocate to subsist. Having entered a chakravayuha from which there is no escape, they want to make the best of their given life by hardening themselves to face the cruel realities of life. Anita Nair has thus offered an assenting idea upholding the eventual kindness, beauty and truth of life in Ladies coupe.

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