



A Study of Feminist Self Discovery and Assertion in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

Akila. V

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English

Srimad Andavan Arts and Science college(Autonomous),

T.V. Kovil, Trichy-5

ABSTRACT

Ladies coupe is a novel written by Anita Nair whose works are strolling around feminism and searching for women's identity. In a South Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters in *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair focuses on marital relationship including marriage and divorce, social and cultural, and psychological issues. *Ladies Coupe* is a very powerful novel presenting feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this depiction is mainly expressed through the pointing out the crisis of social norms and an inner urge for freedom. *Ladies Coupe* is the story about six women characters who meet in a train journey. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist listens the story of five other women in the compartment and tells her too, seeking in them an elixir to the question that has troubled her all her life: Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete? The question she projects in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these five women characters channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive in this patriarchal society. Thus this paper shows how women are suppressed by men and their struggle to get their own identity.

KEYWORDS

Ladies Coupe – Anita Nair – Patriarchy – Self Realization – Self Identity – Feminism – Male Chauvinism.

INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is a name ineffaceable among female Indian writers in English. Her books, set in the everyday world of India, spellbind the reader with wonderful language and descriptions. Anita Nair plays vital role in examining women's lives and their psyche within the context of South Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles as Mothers, wives and daughters. She has an intense emotional understanding of human motivations and a sharp flexible intelligence. Search for self is the predominant theme with many writers especially in the post modern writings. Anita Nair, a living post modern Indian woman writer in English, has earned much critical attention and has been applauded both in India and abroad as a significant novelist. Her campaign has produced some good works and in a little span of her career she has gained great reputation.

PATRIARCHY

In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair focuses on man-woman relationship, marriage, divorce, social, cultural and psychological issues. One important character Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher. She got married to Ebenezer Paulraj. He is an example of male dominance. He changed her life because of the power which means he was the husband of her and he thinks that he had all power over her life. Her desire is to finish Ph.D. but he asked her to complete B.Ed. Finally she changed herself in an artistic way to win her freedom from her husband. Janaki, another passenger of Ladies Coupe, is an example for old, traditional woman. According to her a woman should be a good daughter, sister, wife, mother and so on. She forced everyone to be like that and she followed the proper traditions.

AKHILA – A different woman

In this world everyone is searching for their identity. *Ladies Coupe* is a very powerful novel delineating feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this delineation is chiefly expressed through the projection of the crisis of social norms and an inner urge for freedom. The Brahmin heroine Akhila, whose life is not good and not in her control, is a forty-five years old 'spinster'. She has to act as a daughter, sister, aunt and the provider of her family after the death of her father. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, she decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities. This journey make her a different woman.

SELF-DISCOVERY

Ladies Coupe is the story of six women who meet in a train journey. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist listens to the story of five other women in the compartment and tells her too, seeking in

them a solution to the question that has troubled her all her life: Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete? The story switches over from past to present and present to past and hence, even other than the five women in the compartment, we are shown of certain women who are mortified . Sunita Sinha says, **“Nair’s India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also implies the existence of an alternative reality” (149).**

Primarily *Ladies Coupe* is the story of Akhila, who is the most crushed member of the family. Akhila is like a catalyst whose presence is never noticed, never appreciated and yet whose absence may make all the difference. Nothing will happen in her absence. 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 expected to be an obedient daughter, affectionate and motherly sister and everything but an individual. As a woman she has her own dreams, desires, but when her dreams come in dissension with the comforts of her family it is she who has to sacrifice everything for the happiness of her family. She lives her whole life for the society ,for family but not for her.

Rarely, she listens to the voice of her innermost being and then she appears a rebel. In fact, her character appears to be a sequence of nothingness and being. On this sequence, nothingness shades into her being very slowly and occasionally. Even Virginia Woolf was aware of the complexity of a character and therefore, she saw character as a flux and wanted to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind”¹. Like Akhila, the other characters are also questioning the system and are “groping for their identities and their status both in the family set-up and the larger social structure”

Though Akhila had done her duties, all that of a head of a family to her brothers and sister, she was not recognized as the real head, just because she was a woman. She has been treated as a typical woman only. Her mother expected her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, “Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first”(150). She is the breadwinner of the family but she needs to get permission from the male member of the family. When Akhila argued that she was their elder sister and why she should ask their permission Amma simply says, “You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family” (150). Akhila’s encounter with her school friend awakened her spirit to think of a life to live her own. But even then, there sprouted the patriarchal domination.

When Akhila boldly told Padma about her decision to live alone, she without reluctance says anyone's, **“Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they’ll let you live alone?”(204). When Akhila says for her defiance, “For heaven’s sake, I don’t need consent” (204), Padma mocked at her telling, “They are the men of the family”(204).** Everyone including Padma, Narsi and Narayan were strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure and hence were unable to bear the thought of a woman living alone. Why a woman cannot live alone when she earns money and when she has a good education?.the reason is that the society permits her to live with her family but it is not applicable for men. But at the end she decided to fly . Akhila’s resistance was stronger than theirs that she boarded the train to Kanyakumari.

Anita Nair portrays certain characters like Akhila’s mother, to express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal structure that has framed strict social, political and economic limitations on women. The traditions and rules never affect certain people but the author’s view is different. If the rules never affect the people it would not be a problem but it affects most of the females.

Akhila’s mother is a conservative and orthodox mother, a devoted wife. According to her wife is always inferior to her husband.Among these type of women,the revolutionary thought is always be a question mark. Akhila’s mother is the sort of woman who never takes decision on her own but left all decisions to her husband for she believes, “He knows best” (14). According to her, “A good wife learnt to put her husband’s interests before anyone else’s, even her father’s. A good wife listened to her husband and she lived as she said.

“Sometime it is always good to be 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 so much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly” (14). When Akhila wants her mother to take music lesson as Karpagam’s mother teaches dance, She disapproves of it telling, “I don’t approve of what Karpagam’s mother is doing” (13). She reminds Akhila what her father told her when they were first married, “I want my wife to take care of my children and me. I don’t want her so caught up with her job that she has no time for the house or for taking care of my needs” (14). Education forces women to do everything in this society. Women respect men but they never want to be under their control. This is the reason for Akhila’s changeover .Men and women should be treated equally.

Even after the death of Akhila’s father, her mother lets her eldest daughter Akhila shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family, taking advantage over her sense of duty to keep them safe, secure and comfortable. Anita Nair brings in Sarasa mami’s family that faces the same situation. As

Subramani Iyer, Sarasa mami's husband dies, Sarasa mami becomes the breadwinner of the family by going every doorstep demanding to be taken as a servant – maid. But every neighbourhood just gives her a handful of rice. Society makes her a beggar which will make her sell her daughter Jaya for the sake of their living. Anita Nair chooses this family as a complete contrast of Akhila's family to interpret how the moral predicament of women are trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against subjugation and doom.

AN-AUTHENTIC-SELF

Akhila has Listened to all the stories of various women in the coupe .Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari as a changed woman to rediscover her "self". She wants to get rid of her life because she had lived for her family and others. she desires more of her life.she has decided about Hari and executes her decision to get reunited connected him over phone. Finally she succeeds in her defiance against patriarchy. She destabilizes the repressive forces of patriarchal ideas that have chained her not letting to discover her "self".

Thus, in the novel, *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair has presented an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which a woman is constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize her own strength.This novel gives some revolutionary thought to women. She has presented her women struggling side by side because of patriarchy but at the end has given them a gesture of defiance against patriarchy. Her women have been portrayed as intelligent, questioning women who are not contented with the injustice and rebellion against them. So Anita Nair's women raise the question of their way of life consolidated by patriarchy, and see it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to get their own identity.

Ladies Coupe deconstructs that which is taken for granted as the sacred, the traditional, and the ideological.Akhila's mother never take any step for marriage of her daughter because Akhila is the breadwinner for the whole family.. Akhila is still a spinster as she has to provide and the Brahmin traditions in this case become flexible. Marikolanthu, a low-caste woman is raped and unsurprisingly, she is to blame: "Why does a young woman walk alone?"It is pleasing to note that Anita Nair observed that it is the uneducated, poor and rural women, like Marikolanthu, who boldly reject traditions that define their lives in dependent relationship with men more strongly than the educated and urban women reject. Indirectly she says that education will not be the weapon for the one who is searching for their identity. She asserts that education can empower and liberate women only when it is aimed at changing social attitudes. In fact, in Nair's writing, the restructuring of male-female relationships brings changes in social and interpersonal attitudes and becomes the most important basis of feminist emancipation.

CONCLUSION

These five women characters have struggled a lot in the male-dominated society. Some of them suffer with men and some without men. If Akhila had a father, she would have led a normal life but her father's absence made her to fight with the society. Margaret shanthi, though she had very good educational background she could not sustain the desire of finishing PhD because of her male partner. Instead of making her own destiny she was forced by the society to abide the invincible customs pushed on her by the society to play along her man. 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 struggle for emancipation in spite of being poor and illiterate. She can be called as an Indian version of Ibsen's Nora. None can fail to admire her gradual growth through experience from docility to defiance, defiance to full confidence. Although not formally educated in a school or college, she is rigorously trained in the University of Adversity. Thus she succeeds in her fight with the preconceived notions of gender-roles and develops her identity. In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these five women went on to manage their emotions in stupendous ways because of their strong urge to breathe the freedom of air. They broke their cage and came out with full freedom which gives some meaning for their struggle.

This novel shows the path to readers to find themselves in a better manner with their own will power. Anita Nair has thus offered a clear vision thereby upholding the ultimate godliness, beauty and truth of life in *Ladies Coupe*.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupe*. New Delhi: Vintage, 2003. Print.
- [2] Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
- [3] Bulbeck, Chilla. *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- [3] M.E. Derret. *The Modern Indian Novel in English: A Comparative Approach*. Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1966. Print.
- [4] Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
- [5] Kulke, Hermann and Rothermund, Dietmar. *A History of India*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.