

The Portrayal of Women in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Anita Nair

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Abstract

Anita Nair was born in Kerala. She is a famous poet, short story writer and journalist. In *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair focuses on men and women relationship, marriage and divorce, social and cultural, and psychological issues. Here the character Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher who got married to Ebenezer Paulraj. He is an example of male dominance. He changed her life because of the power he had in her life. She wanted to do 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 fellow passenger of Ladies Coupe, is an example for old age tradition. According to her a woman should be a good daughter, sister, wife, mother and so on. Indian society also believes that woman should always depend on some man in their life. Sheela is a fourteen year old girl, who is very sensitive with a deep insight. At the very young age she understands what is meant by life. Her grandmother also teaches her a negative picture of male domination. Her father used to control her whenever she began to talk. Marikolundhu is another passenger who comes from a poor family. She and her mother work as coolies in Chettiar's house. She was seduced by one of the Chettiar's son Murugesan. Marikulundhu shows her love and affection towards Chettiar's grandson but she hates her own son Muthu, the one who escaped from many attempts of abortion.

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Anita Nair's characters *Ladies Coupe* have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle and have their own life in their society.

Complementary Nature of Man-Woman Relationship



Men and women are complementary to each other. But, even in this modern era, women are considered not as equal to men but as the weaker class. They undergo suppression in a male dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of the society. Anita Nair's portrayal of women in her novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001) brings out this fact clearly.

Any relationship is a beautiful bond that connects people to share pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow and success and failure. A strong and healthy relationship assures a person that he/she is not left alone on this earth. Everyone is surrounded by such relationships as marital, parental, siblings and friends. Trust, commitment, adjustment, sacrifice and all the above love are prime pillars of a healthy relationship.

Marriage in the Life of Women

Marriage cuts off a woman from the mainstream of life and pulls back her from achieving her goals. Most marriages are successful only when the women show major attention to the household affairs. For men it's different. In most families, the man is the boss of the house; wife a counselor or a minister who assists or helps; but not the dictator.

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Beyond the threshold of her house, woman finds life less promised and confusing due to her social and cultural insecurities. Whenever women step out of their confinements, they have to fight to wipe out the negative image of women already dwelling in the minds of men and women. In certain aspects women are treated as angels and goddesses. In some other aspects women are expected to be slaves, who are ready to work for a man and his benefits and comfort.

Marginalization and centralization are common in a woman's life. Veneration and isolation both do not help her to mingle with the realities of life. "An Indian woman has been either venerated as a goddess or rejected as a siren. The modern Indian woman has to compete against these two extreme images; she is striving to lead the life of a normal human being with normal desires" (Manogar 22).

Women in the Works of Women Writers of Indian Writing in English

Women writers of Indian Writing in English are good in analyzing complex issues like complexities of human relationships, man-woman relationship, woman's psyche and her potential.

The changing pattern of man-woman relationship is presented not only in the novels, but also in films and television serials. Bold themes and diverse issues are now being taken up by the media. The mosaic of stories highlights the fact that man-woman relationship is a very complex and subtle issue. (Mukerjee 25)

The changing pattern of man-woman relationship can be traced in the works of

Writers such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Shagal, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Shoba De show how the modern Indian women attempt to free themselves sexually, economically and domestically from the male dominated society. Male and female characters in their novels fight against their interpersonal problems without caring for any success; often they end up having some kind of peace.

The novelists, like the readers, know that there is no logical analysis of emotion.

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However, it is interesting to note how certain types of men and certain types of women get along very well. The novelists often focus upon the lack of emotional fulfillment in man-woman relationship (Naik 56).

Anita Nair

Anita Nair was born at Mundakottakurissi near Shornur in Kerala. She was brought up in a suburb in Madras. Her father worked in factories. Her grandparents who lived in Kerala were the reason for Anita Nair to make frequent visits to Kerala and such visits made her to know the heart of rural Kerala. She did her B.A. in English Language and Literature in a small town Othapalam, in Kerala. At the age of twenty-four, she went to United States to study journalism. She was working as an innovative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories.

Margaret Shanti

Margaret Shanti is one of the fellow travelers in the ladies coupe. Margaret's story is a story of a woman who learns her own strategies to get her dreams true. Margaret's husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, is an example for male dominance. He maneuvers Margaret into a position of submissive silence, making her out to be an unnoticed and unremarkable girl. A girl, with a brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality, is reduced to an average girl. His subtle cruelty to the children in his school gets repeated with his wife too. Once he was obsessed with the girlish characteristics of Margaret. It was visible even at their first meet. To retain the girlish charm in her, when she happily announced her pregnancy, he insisted on aborting the baby. Margaret's felt confusion, anger, sorrow, pain and self-pity.

Tired of her submissiveness at her home, she finally takes her life into her own hands. With supreme will power she collects her hidden strength and sends the ball to his court. Having learnt the tactics from his constant playing of games to get his things done, she takes her revenge by following the same tactics which are her husband's tools to rule her.

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Margaret has gone through physical, mental and spiritual crisis throughout her life. She keeps on growing till she finds a state where she is happy and peaceful.

Margaret's marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj is like a fairy tale for her. Ebenezer Paulraj loves Margaret Shanti from the bottom of his heart but not ready to accept her individual likes and dislikes, whims and fancies and dreams and aims. Margaret's state, hands tied freedom, is excellently portrayed by Anita Nair. He loves her but he did not allow her individuality. Margaret is initially a little girl who says 'yes' to whatever her husband says and ready to do anything for him. She is jolted out of this role when she has to go for an abortion. He controls her completely. She is forced to do B.Ed., though she wants to do Ph.D. She is made to work only for her husband and he nags her all the time. She starts to hate him and the day she realizes her hatred towards him, she feels liberated from some unknown clutches:

I mouthed the words: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZER PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. HATE HIM. I waited for a clap of thunder, a hurling meteor, a whirlwind, a dust storm... for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelations. (Ladies Coupe 98)

When Margaret understands that she is isolated, she finds consolation through eating a lot of food. She puts on weight. Ebe, on the other hand, who is aware of his health and fitness, makes her feel guilty about her weight gain. She leads a routine life until the day James, the golden fish, floats dead. The moment proves to be a turning point in her life. She does not want her life to float like dead fish. She identifies herself with the golden fish. In the words of Anita Nair,

Among the five elements that constitute life, I classify myself as water. Water that moistens. Water that heals. Water that forgets. Water that accepts. Water that flows tirelessly. Water that also destroys. For the power to dissolve and destroy is as much a part of being water as wetness. (Ladies Coupe 96).

Ebenezer's love for food and sex becomes a tool for Margaret. She starts pampering Ebenezer with sex and food he likes the most in his life. The result he becomes fat, loses his vanity and needs her more and more. She, once controlled by him earlier, now holds him completely in her hands. A unique way adapted by Margaret helps her to go back into the society, changes her parents' outlook and attitude of her husband. The strategy, finding and attacking the weakness of the opponent to win him, is artistically handled by Anita Nair. The heavy depression of Margaret, her silenced voice, her physical and mental sufferings, and the effort she takes to make her strong are the places where Anita Nair proves to be a notable writer of Indian Writing in English.

Janaki, another fellow passenger of Ladies Coupe is an example of age-old belief of Indian society that a woman should always depend on some man in her life. The comparison of woman with Sita or Savitri, epic characters of Indian Literature, also insists this motive.

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband, in default, upon those of her father, if she had no paternal kinsmen, upon the Sovereign, a woman must never govern herself as she likes (Ross 44).

Notion of Good Wife

According to Indian tradition, a woman is always synonymous with good wife. A good wife should be faithful, obedient and virtuous. Janaki is expected to take up this traditional role of women. She plays various roles such as a daughter, a wife and a mother but not an individual who claims her life to be her own. The secondary position becomes permanent for her. This is mainly due to the patriarchal pattern of her society, which is accepted as a natural phenomenon.

The problems of adjustment with the husband and his relatives have been the most widely treated problems in the novels written by Indian women novelists. This has been treated, for instance, by Nayantara Saghil, Antia Desai, and Shashi Deshpande.

These writers suggest that wives must be given more rights and not to be treated as inferior to their husbands; they should have a more positive outlook than the one they already have: the negative should be nullified.

Janaki gets married to Prabhakar, when she is eighteen year old and leads a happy, comfortable, long married life for forty years. Janaki's husband is a caring partner and she has a son and daughter-in-law. Janaki leads a happy life until she realizes her submissiveness. She feels some string of revolt when she finds her husband controlling everybody even their grown up son. She says to her husband, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding." (*Ladies Coupe* 30).

Prabhakar's overbearing dominance, exactness, and precision irritates Janaki. The life which has gone smoothly starts to find its ups and downs. She discovers herself and her true happiness that lies in her, but she is not able to take off the web under which she is covered for a long period. Her initial response to Akhila's query "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always man willing to be with her" (*Ladies Coupe* 21), explains it.

I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Woman like me end up being fragile (22).

Sheela and the Dynamics of Life

Sheela, the next narrator of *Ladies Coupe*, is a sensitive girl of fourteen year old, blessed with a deep insight. She looks at the family around her and relationship between her grandmother, mother and father and she understands the dynamics of life. Her grandmother teaches her practical life. She becomes attached to her grandmother until she dies and the attachment brings in a maturity to Sheela. Her conversation with other fellow travelers seems to be a matured one. The knowledge of three generation women can be found in Sheela; her mother's and her grandmother's and also her own. She knows

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that “Women turn to their mother when they have no one else to turn to. Women know that a mother alone will find it possible to unearth some shred of compassion and love that in everyone else has become ashes” (Ladies Coupe 71).

Sheela’s grandmother also teaches her the negative picture of men who dominate women physically as well as psychologically. Sheela is reprimand by her father incessantly for using shit in every sentence, for speaking to boys and for being rude. He has encouraged her to speak “with a razor-edged wit and a finely developed skill of repartee” (70). Sheela’s father always gives preference to her as his child. However, when she starts to talk like a matured woman, he is completely changed and starts to control her whenever she begins to talk.

When her grandmother dies of cancer and her body is prepared for funeral, Sheela dresses her grandmother in a good costume with her jewels. She does it because she remembers the words of her grandmother, “The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy” (Ladies Coupe 67). Thus, Sheela fulfills the wish of her grandmother by adoring her dead body with jewels. A fourteen year old girl’s inner search and maturity are beautifully pictured by Anita Nair.

Story of Marikolundhu – a Story of Sexual Exploitation

Anita Nair, with a deep, psychological insight, skillfully utilizes the story of Marikolundhu to comment upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women from rural background. Marikolundhu’s story recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of women’s loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. They never hesitate to blame the woman at the end. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that a woman’s responsibility towards the family is total whereas any sort of other authority is conveniently denied to her. This society shuns to think that the woman is strong willed to create disastrous consequences if she is completely ignored.

Marikolundhu undergoes humiliation and debasement, which result in negating her son Muthu. Marikolundhu's character reveals the physical as well as mental suffering due to ignorance.

Marikolundhu comes from a poor background. Her mother works as a cook at Chettiar's house, which is one of the richest families in their village. Even as a child she is the victim of social and economic repression. She loses her education by this. She looks after her house when her mother goes for work; later when her mother is seriously ill, she is employed at the Chettiar's house. There, she is assigned with the work of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. She showers love and affection upon the child. She takes care of him well, but hates her son Muthu, the one who escaped many attempts of abortion. He is the result of her seduction by Murugesan. She does not want the child which is the result of seduction but the circumstances do not help her. So she leaves her son at her mother's care and takes care of the household of Chettiar family.

Marikolundhu, deprived from the society, and Sujata Akka, deprived from her husband, find mutual happiness in their nearness. Later Sujata's husband also uses Marikolundhu to fulfill his sexual desires. When Sujata Akka comes to know this, instead of punishing her husband, she pushes Marikolundhu out of her household. She gets the responsibility of her own child after her mother's death. Mercilessly she mortgages him at one of Murugesan's looms for Rs.5000/-. The anger she has on Murugesan, the society which saves him from punishment, her inability and the hatred of her son, everything comes to an end only at the death of Murugesan.

The turning point in her life comes when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre and she sees Muthu tends to the pyre. She is shocked at the realization that she has reduced her son to a very lower state for no fault of his. All the hatred she has on him goes with the flames. She feels love for her child. She decides to look after him and makes up her mind to call him back to her.

Marikolanthu is surrounded by social, familial and financial problems. Her resolve to bring up her child enables her to begin a new chapter. Finally Marikolanthu, a voiceless victim, forced motherhood and lesbianism, finds peace only after accepting her responsibility of the child, whom she has negated and neglected. Marikolanthu's constant search for meanings and values of life ends here.

Anita Nair's Art

Anita Nair presents the existential struggle of woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. The woman emerging out of such situations is a defeated individual who undergoes much pain and suffering. Such characters exhibit a sense of insecurity due to their traumatic psychic experiences and also due to the collapse of one value system and the absence of enduring values. Thus, in *Ladies Coupe* (2001), Anita Nair traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice is heard throughout the novel.

Conclusion

Margaret, a chemistry teacher represents the women who are forced to lose their self-identity by their husbands. A fourteen year old girl Sheela's portrayal depicts the modern young women who are aware of their need of individuality. Marikolanthu, pictures the rural women who lose their life because of illiteracy and ignorance. Janaki, a pampered housewife's posture is common to be found in India.

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