

Reconstructing the Self in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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Abstract

Anita Nair occupies a prominent place as a novelist in Indian English Literature. In her novels, she depicts all kinds of characters and explains how her characters are alienated from one another and from the society. *Ladies Coupé* deals with multiple voices, where Nair answers few questions that every woman would have faced in her life. *Ladies Coupé* unravels the misinterpretations about the role of women in contemporary post-colonial feminist literature.

Key words: Anita Nair, feminism, *Ladies Coupé*

Anita Nair's Novels

Anita Nair occupies a prominent place as a novelist in Indian English Literature. In her novels, she depicts all kinds of characters and explains how her characters are alienated from one another and from the society. Her major themes are of social treatment, human relationship, particularly that of man and woman, their loneliness and lack of communication. Her concentration is exclusively is on feelings and thoughts of the characters, and their search for

self-identity. Nair makes her characters suffer and enables them to come out of it. Nair's characters, their suffering become their strength and weapon to fight out their predicaments.

Ladies Coupé

Ladies Coupé, deals with multiple voices, where Nair answers a few questions that every woman would have faced in her life. *Ladies Coupé* unravels the misinterpretations about the role of women in contemporary post-colonial feminist literature. In *Ladies Coupé*, Nair uses the fictional strategy of the ladies compartment to bring together her six characters. Each of them narrates their own stories. *Ladies Coupé* is a story of women's strength and independence.

Roles and Real Selves

The story of the novel *Ladies Coupé* is set in a railway compartment specially meant for ladies. Six ladies traveling in the coupe narrate their stories and share their secrets lying deep in their hearts. The train journey, through various tunnels and wild vegetation, unfolds a backward journey, which ladies undertake in their lives. Their backward journey helps them to understand the major bruises experienced by them in the course of their life. The ascents and descents which they have witnessed in their roles as daughter, sister, beloved, wife and mother make them realize how isolated they stand amid the crowd where they are the part and not the whole. The vivid realizations of their roles separate them from their real selves.

Central Character Ahila

The central character in the novel *Ladies Coupé* is Akhila who listens patiently to the ups and downs of her co-passengers' life and starts thinking of her own life which she finds devoid of meaning at the age of forty-five. She loses her father in the prime of her life and being the eldest child of the parents, shoulders the responsibility: "she had become the head of the household. Someone who would chart and steer the course of the family's destiny to safe shores" (LC76). She guides her brothers in their studies and career, and also arranges for their marriage. The house is in order but the members have forgotten about Akhila's emotion and her emotional needs. Akhila handles all cumbersome responsibilities dexterously and she's allowed a bigger identity.

Questions about Life

Akhila has a volley of questions and she tries to find answers from her co-passengers who had seen more life and had experienced the basic realities of living with husband, baby, home, and mother-in-law. Akhila's circumstance enables her to think that woman could live by herself and that marriage was unimportant. She wonders how her co-passengers, despite their settled lives were living lives on margin. Most of them had a vacuum in their lives, stories to tell and had innumerable cries.

Janaki, one of the co-passengers opposed to Akhila's idea, feels that the basic purpose of a women's life is to get married. Janaki, though satisfied with her life, hints at the dissatisfaction which all human beings have at a certain age. Women, according to Janaki, is a subordinate self and as her horizon expands, her sole satisfaction lies in being with the male counterpart "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband; when my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile; our men treat us like princesses" (LC 62). Janaki's story disturbs Akhila a lot and Akhila is left wondering if she had made a mistake by wishing to escape, escape from loneliness.

Sheela Vasudevan

The next portrait is that of Sheela Vasudevan, a fourteen year old girl who tells the story of her grandmother who was an ardent worshipper of beauty. She dies of cancer. When her body was prepared for funeral Sheela remembers her granny's lesson to her "the only person you need to please is yourself" and dresses up her wasted body in costume, jewellery and gaudy makeup. As a result Sheela has to face the wrath of her parents. Instead of bothering about others, she should please her own self.

Margaret Paulraj

The next figure to merge is Margaret Paulraj, a chemistry teacher who reduces everything into combinations of acids, alkalines and gases. She explains to Akhila that a women needs a man but not to make her complete. She tries to shatter the myth of women needing a man to be complete, by relating the story of Ebenezer Paulraj and herself. Her husband is a narcissistic,

self-opinionated person who wants to reduce her to being a simple housekeeper and a cook. When she conceives he convinces her to undergo an abortion. Paulraj liked her to cook lavish meals to entertain sycophants. Finally she found her own unique weapon: she starts feeding him to a state of benign fatness. Her efforts paid off at last and he loses his athletic figure: “Ebe slowly become a fat man. A quiet man. An easy man... He needed me like he had before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again” (LC 134). Margaret knew how to overcome the male egoism.

Not Seems To Be Convinced

Akhila may not seem to be convinced with what the women in Ladies Coupe think about life but she establishes a common concatenation in their stories, and that is to ‘make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen’. Akhila finds that ‘anyone’ amiss in her life and her train of thoughts drives her to past life which she couldn’t give a name, an opportunity which she got and lost because of the conflict between her emotions and her reasoning. Akhila never imagined that she would meet someone younger and smarter who’d propose her. They met like co-passengers, enjoyed some good moments and separated.

Akhila and Hari

Akhila obliges Hari and spends a contented night in a seaside resort. Soon after, she realizes and becomes aware of what others say. Her guilty conscience haunts her and she feels it as a conundrum the union between a young man and an older woman. She decides to tell Hari the truth the years between them could not be bridged. Neither society nor time would approve of such an unusual bonding. Her crippling longing for Hari bisects her into two halves—to be or not to be. Two halves of Akhila seem never to make a whole.

Prabha Devi

Prabha Devi is one woman who doesn’t go by the norms set by men. She has her own opinions and plans for her life. She does something out of routine to make her life interesting, who likes to be the way she is, who knows what she wants and what she doesn’t, rather frightened into a lifeless conformism until she discovers her own possibilities and learns how to float symbolically and otherwise. The glimpse of a swimming pool made her decide that she

would learn how to swim. Her whole life is transformed - “She felt the years slip away from her...My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear” (LC 134). Thus, Prabha is portrayed as a rich submissive wife who loves swimming because it metaphorically gives her a sense of achievement.

Tragic Situation

Prabha’s story moves Akhila and she tries to reassess and reevaluate herself. Akhila had sacrificed all her aspirations for the welfare of her family members who could never think she too had a woman in her. Akhila’s sizzling desires get some relief to think of her past. We find her wriggles in the given line:

“Sometimes Akhila thought what she hated most was not having an identity of her own. She was always an extension of someone else’s identity... Chandra’s daughter; Narayan’s Akka; Priya’s aunt; Murthy’s sister-in-law...Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being” (164)

A Moment of Universal Pity for Women

Her only worry was that nobody could understand the waves undergoing within her makes her cry at times. The vibrations in Akhila’s inner sanctum bring a moment of universal pity for women in general and Akhila in particular. She finds herself totally ignored, alienated and unattached. Prabha Devi’s experiences inspire Akhila and she thinks if she could learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks.

Marikolanthu

The sixth passenger was Marikolanthu a woman “from whom anger poured forth like a stream of lava?” (LC195). Hers was the most horrifying story of a woman raped, cast out abandoned, beyond hope, a thirty-one year old woman with a son and no husband. She hates men in general and alternatively gets interested in women. When women are victimized they become stronger. To live well is the best vengeance possible. She manages to do that in the end. Marikolanthu motivates Akhila and tells her: “Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more but a

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:2 February 2016

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woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself, it does not show itself naturally” (210).

A Mirror

The stories of her co-passenger generate in Akhila a desire for life, a life she wanted to live on her own. She too, like her compatriots, should respect her womanly feelings and start her life afresh. The lives of the woman that she encounters in the *Ladies Coupé* form a kind of mirror in which Akhila may see her reflection and grasp the happiness. The characters seem to find the ray of happiness only when they become aware. This awareness is created only when one looks at one's own self.

The Journey of Suppression and Oppression

Thus we find that the characters of Anita Nair's novel undertake the journey of suppression and oppression in their lives. Most of the women characters, despite their misuse by society, preserve their real selves, the key to salvation.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **16:2 February 2016**

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