

From Acquiescence to Assertion: Journeying of a Woman's Body  
from Other to Self in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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**Abstract**

Gender roles are constructed through social discourses and cultural practices. These societal and cultural traditions generally expect a woman to be accommodating, courteous and nurturing and a man ambitious, aggressive and insensitive. Such activities and attributes often turn a woman passive and repressive and a man imposing and dominant. Time and again, individuals have become victims of such gender stereotyping. However, Anita Nair's women rebel against such irrational traditional views by claiming their bodies not only physically, but socially too, and in the process, liberating themselves from the chains and control of patriarchal discourses. They un-write the writing of the patriarchal discourses on their bodies and self -write their bodies. Nair, in allowing her women to do so, creates an alternate reality that reinvents a new concept of woman and gender in her work *Ladies Coupé*.

**Keywords:** Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé*, discourse, body, sex, writing, un-writing, re-writing, male domination, reclaim freedom, reinvent one's identity

**Introduction**

Indian literature in the recent times grappled with issues of globalization, social change, and gender roles. Some of the noticeable features in the modern literature are rejection of what constitutes appropriate behavior for men and women, denunciation of traditional forms of Indian adult woman's subjectivity in marriage, refusal in subsuming individual desires to the social processes etc. Modern literature began to stress more on individualistic approaches to life and relationships. As centuries of social inequalities practiced against women in the country became a part of the collective consciousness, women writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundathi Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair, Anita Rao Badami, Suniti Namjoshi dealt with

women's body and sexuality without any inhibitions shattering all the socially constructed sensitivities associated with a woman's body.

### **The Scope of the Paper**

The researchers confine themselves in this study to Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupé". They seek to elucidate the manner in which the patriarchal discourses imposed their power on a woman's body leading to a continuous strife within her body and how as a result, a woman's body produced power to counter these external discourses showing the way to a new writing of the body on which a woman acquires complete control.

### **Gender in the Indian Sociocultural Context**

It has always been an absorbing experience, understanding the masculine discourses in India in thoughtful ways. Ancient philosopher, Vatsyana disapproved unrestrained freedom for women and Manu(200 BCE -100 CE) held a view that in childhood, a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. He was of the view that a woman must not be allowed to do anything independently even in her own home. (Buhler 5; 147-149; 154-156). The Mahabharatha declares, "A woman must do whatever her husband asks her to do, whether that be in accordance with dharma or opposed to it." ( Deslongchamps Book ii, Sloka 155). Thus a man could assert himself by delimiting a woman's personal freedom and dignity.

Later, the British with their radically different cultural tradition showed the country a new way of organizing relations. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, recognizable reformist ideologies particularly about women brought about a new age. Therefore, women novelists took up new subjects and novel themes dealing with women's self-awareness. For many Indian woman novelists, the favorite theme has become the quest for identity in the imposing patriarchal system.

### **Journeying of a Woman's Body from Other to Self**

The protagonist of the novel, *Ladies Coupé* is Akhila, an income-tax clerk, a Brahmin who is forty-five yet single not by choice but by compulsion. Akhila's desire to connect with others, her hunger for life and experiences drive her to explore the world beyond hers. By journeying in an all-women sleeping car to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, she seeks an answer to the question that tormented her as to whether a woman could live alone. (Nair 21). For Nair, Akhila's interactions with the outside world allowed her to dismantle the biased traditions unfavourable to women, further these interactions also helped Akhila to rise above her conservative brahminical world and have a more comprehensive view about complex social issues such as prostitution. Akhila's physical journey of exploration, all alone symbolically represents the journey of a soul from suppression to freedom. As Kate Millett states in *Sexual Politics*, "masculine gender-norms" in a family reinforce "women's subordination" and as a result "women learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men" (Millett 26). It is the traditional family that doesn't

allow a woman to grow and as a result, Akhila moves out the system that imprisoned her to attain liberation and freedom. It is hoped that the knowledge gained experimenting with the outside world plays a key role in disturbing the status quo of the women in the society.

A woman's body has always been a subject of many discourses, these discourses articulated by men have often relegated women to private and men to public spheres of life, creating a widening gap between the sexes. In these dichotomous views, is inherent the notion that women lack mental capacities and intellectual powers and so are inferior beings when compared to men and therefore have to be reduced to mere bodies. These discursive accounts that are pronounced by men have always tried to disempower a woman's body. The control exercised by Akhila's family on her and the exploitation of the body of Marikolanthu by the Chettiar family is to be understood from this point of view. The same discourse enunciated by men, which expects a woman's body to be passive and docile in the private and in the public spheres also expects it to be useful, productive and powerful (Sawicki 67) while discharging its functional responsibilities. And this act of being useful and productive while at the same time being docile comes as a challenge for women.

Thus the act of empowering Akhila's body by her family by allowing her to go into the public sphere has in fact disempowered her because it resulted in the demand for more effectiveness on her part. Her words, "Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman?" echo this (Nair 77). Further, one sees the acts of writing and un-writing of a woman's body is done as per the convenience of the external discourses that operate upon her. Accordingly, although Akhila is, in a way empowered she is disempowered as she has to seek the permission of her younger brother to go on an official trip.

As Butler says, a female body is "the site where "doing" and "being done to" become equivocal. As a woman struggles to realize her body and own it, she comes to understand that her body has an "invariably public dimension" to it. Therefore, in struggling for autonomy of her own body, a woman also has to struggle with the conception of herself in the eyes of the community by "impressing them as well" which is a double edged sword for a woman (Butler 21). While for Akhila, the realization that she is a woman whose body needs sexual fulfillment becomes the springboard in the construction of her own self, for Marikolanthu, an illiterate woman, class and gender existing in the country shape her self. Marikolanthu's life potentially mitigates or even reverses the long held notion that education is the pathway towards gender equality. It deepens our understanding of the complex interplay between caste, power on one hand and gender on the other hand. She turns around socially mandated roles with such careless abandon that it shocks the reader. Her words "Women can do everything as well as man. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" is in a way, realizing the superior position of her body over a man's body that helps her to shape her own body (Nair 209-210). She turns lesbian to satisfy Sujatha akka of the Chettiar family and

simultaneously allows her husband too into her body like a “naïve girl and a “brazen whore” just to preserve Sujata akka’s happiness and position in the household (261). Her ability to support her life and her son’s and also one more that is kicking in her womb from the second man who entered her body by overcoming and rebuking the male dominated structures stands as a testimony to Marikolanthu’s journeying from other to self .

Likewise, Akhila does not give into the stress of preserving the virginity and purity of her body, as enunciated by male discourses, but on the other hand, un-writes the writing of public body of a woman that views it as the site for controlling sexual desires. According to these patriarchal discourses, a woman’s sexual desires have to be controlled as she alone is under obligation to protect the survival of the society and its institutions (Foucault 146–7). The patriarchal discourse, further expects a woman to be asexual for her own self, but sexual for the gratification of a husband’s sexual desires which is again a concept that causes strife in a woman. Further, according to these discourses, a woman cannot have any pleasure with her own body while a man can derive sexual pleasure through a woman’s body with his own body. A woman possessing sexual desires and gratifying sexual desires outside her private sphere (understood as husband), is a woman who is doing her gender wrong (McNay 31). This act of silencing the body of a woman by exposing her to the social constructions of gender is a way through which only men move up. But Akhila’s casual sex with Vinod whom she chances upon near the beach of Kanyakumari with doors and windows flung open to the night and her sexual relationship with Hari whom she invites, avoids and invites gain is a complete reclamation of her body against the imposed discourses discussed above. Her acts only open up the strong currents of repressed lust inside a woman embanked for fear of unacceptability.

As Akhila and Marikolanthu both unconsciously identify with the image of their bodies constructed by the external discourses initially, however, they tend to move away from that image as soon as they realize how a woman’s body is exploited by these discourses and this helps them in writing their own bodies where their “needs come first”.(Nair 201). For Akhila and Marikolanthu, their bodies become their own prime assets and not the assets for their families. Their act of reclamation, strips their bodies of every cultural, social, religious writing and in their bodies, one cannot find the scripts of others, but their own. Akhila and Marikolanthu find themselves when they look into their bodies and not the others. And this consciousness of exploitation plays a major role in empowerment and societal transformation.

Janaki, Prabhadevi and Margaret bodies become victims of marriage and other social discourses being written by the men in the families. Quoting Arabella Dennehy, Sheila Jeffreys says in *The Spinster and Her Enemy* that marriage is “a mere piece of social mechanism for subjugating women” (Jeffreys 43). It becomes an instrument through which the women are controlled. Margeret’s frustration for a man who treats his house like a hotel with “Food on the

table. Laundered and ironed clothes for him to wear. Beds made, shelves dusted, towels changed, bathrooms cleaned, errands run, all by invisible hands” (Nair 115) is much akin to Christine Delphy’s view about marriage as “the furnishing of unpaid labor within the framework of a total and personal relationship ... precisely a relationship of slavery” (Delphy 35). For Janaki, Prabhadevi and Margaret, who would no longer let their bodies be docile, their assertion over their bodies comes in the form of resistance. If male discourses impose power on their bodies, their own bodies try to produce power leading to a strife. Here it has to be understood that resistance is the natural corollary of controlling a woman’s body. Therefore, these women resist the powers which are immediately available, i.e. their husbands.(Focoult 780).

Also, these women who detach themselves from their own bodies after the marriage, find their reattachment with the image of their bodies in their own way. Janaki’s life validates Betty Friedan’s view in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that women do not find happiness and fulfillment in the domestic sphere and a woman aspires for a career outside her home. According to her, a woman’s body controlled by the external forces within the family experienced a “problem that has no name”(Horowitz 3). Janaki’s outbursts against Prabhakar, her husband, “you want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding” (Nair 30) can be viewed in this light. Janaki finds reattachment with the image of her body by taking upon herself a superior position in the institution that makes her feel helpless and dependent. Janaki’s confidence that she too is equally competent keeps her afloat.

Prabha Devi represents those girls who, when grown into womanhood, comply more with the feminine roles demanded of them. They are subtly conditioned to feel that over-achievement is an unfeminine trait. She reconnects by recovering the image of her body by “swinging hair” and by practicing a “confident stride” (177)and by delaying her pregnancy. Anita Nair’s portrayal of Prabha Devi as a blend of chirpiness and stoicism with her own insecurities about her identity makes her an endearing and relatable character. Her act of learning how to swim and staying afloat the water without a ring is symbolic of learning to lead her life without that support called husband. This act of assertion like a chain reaction also explodes sensuality within her. That night she shows her husband the “nakedness” of her sexual “hunger” and they “melted together.... I am afloat, I am afloat. My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear” (194- 195).

Margaret is an example of how social roles are seen to play the part of the tools of repression for women. It is a travesty of how the ideas of femininity can even stifle a financially independent woman’s urges and her creative side. She asks herself, “Don’t I have a right to have any expectations of him? Don’t I work as hard as he does and more because and I run the house as well?”(112) This represents the agony of a woman. To a family system that tramples on a woman’s sensitivities, she recuperates her body by flattering her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj to high-fat foods until folds appeared on the neck and his belly jiggled. She ceases not until she turns him into a man she could live with once again thus freeing herself and regenerating her life living within the

system without escaping from it. In Margaret's case, one sees, the rise in the power of women is directly proportional to the decline in the power of men.

### Conclusion

Nair's women are the new generation women who resist the patriarchal script that demands a woman to be female and a man to be male. These women transcend every male discourse that views her as a mere body. These bodies on which patriarchy has written its text, become the bodies in which the same text is un-written and re-written as well as self-written. This act of un-writing itself constitutes a new writing of a woman's body by the woman herself. There is hope one day all the sufferings, ignominy, deprivation and hurdles faced by women due to various social, cultural constraints will give way to an equitable society. To that extent, literature plays its role effectively in the social transformation.

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