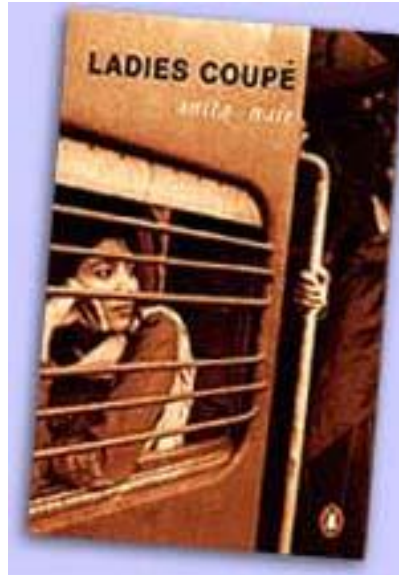


Feminine Existence in the Novel of *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair

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Abstract

Indian women novelists have contributed more for the development of Indian literature. The Indian literature has gifted several talented women novelists who present the Indian version of such books and that too within the limits of dignity and decency. Most of the female novelists are known for their bold views that are reflected in their novels. Among them, Anita Nair is one of the feminist writers. Her novels explore the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her primary focus of attention is the world of woman and the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by narrating women and their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradiction and ambition. She also strikes a perfect balance between their instinctual needs and their intellectual aspects. Most of her works deal with women's suffering, subjugation, oppression, frustration, sexuality, freedom, identity crisis, survival, caste discrimination and social issues especially in her novel *Ladies Coupé*.

Keywords: Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé*, Women's suppression, existence, male domination, subjugation and suffering.

Feminism

Feminism is a powerful tool for voicing some of the basic concerns and aspirations of women. One of the Primal concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. A woman is not the other, she is not an appendage to man. She is an autonomous being capable of, through

trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. The attempts to create female enclave are extremist reaction, but the recent trends in feminist literature are an indication that it is possible for women to live independently in the world where men also live.

In the twentieth century, women's writing is considered a powerful medium that brings out some features of feminism. Their novels speak of certain burning issues related to women as well as those issues that exist in society. Their writings speak about the psyche of the female. The majority of these novels portray the psychological sufferings of frustrated housewives. Women novelists reflect in their novels the predicaments of today's women who have realized that she is helpless and not independent. Among them, Anita Nair is one of the notable novelists who portrays the condition and status of women and how they suffer in the patriarchal society. The aim of this paper is to study the feminine existence in Nair's *Ladies Coupe*.

Anita Nair

Anita Nair is a popular English writer who was born in Kerala. She is a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English and one of the remarkable female writers. She explores not only the feelings and sufferings of her characters, but also describes about their happiness and enjoyment in their everyday life. Nair is a powerful writer and shows a great understanding and compassion for all women through her tender stories especially in her novel *Ladies Coupe*. The title of the book gives a sneak preview of what it is all about. It makes a point how the Indian society treats women. The novel deals with multiple lives and multiple voices that every woman would have faced in her life. The women characters of the novel *Ladies Coupe* suggest courageously new patterns of feminine existence. The novel redefines the lives of women. Anita Nair has done a commendable job in bringing out the positive role transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood.

Ladies Coupé

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* deals with the stories of six women as they travel in the ladies' compartment. The main theme of this novel is the development of the protagonist's mind and character. In *Ladies Coupe*, this formation of character and the development of the women into mature individuals make them aware of their identity through a painful course of repression, revolt and resolution. The six women characters relate their stories and one realizes that all have suffered at the hands of the repressive forces of society.

The repressive forces are varied in their manifestation- a patriarchal society and paternalism; sexual politics in marital relationships; sexual stereotyping with its imposed code on female sexuality and an imposed definition of female roles; the repression and marginalization of women effected through traditional institutions in society. The final outcome of this process of an awareness of repression and a sense of revolt leads the characters on to certain resolutions which are bold and lead them to happiness. The whole process finally leads to an exploration of the dilemma of the new woman who is caught between traditionalism and modernity.

Mood to Rebel and Deviate - Akhila

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is a novel depicting the suffering woman with a mood to rebel and deviate from the fettered living. Akhila, the Brahmin heroine is a forty-five year old spinster

who burns herself like a candle for the welfare of her family. The character of Akhila presents a tragic scenario in the Indian family tradition especially in the middle class where the eldest first daughter has to sacrifice her life for the sake of others especially her parents and brothers as she is the first born in the joint family. No love is shown to her or no proposal for marriage is taking shape as she is the cursed member of the family, who is responsible to shoulder the entire family and sacrifice her life for their welfare.

All the responsibilities were shouldered by Akhila after the death of her father. She has been offered her father's post as a clerk in the income tax department. She has played different roles in her family such as sister, a daughter, an aunt, and a caretaker etc. While caring for her family, her own needs are shelved and put in cold storage. The author narrates: "When Akhila's father died, two things happened: Sunday became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the family" (75). She was originally Akhilandeswari, innocent care free and independent but she was reduced to Akhila the bread winner and care taker of the family.

A woman according to Akhila's mother is born only to take care of her husband and children. She could cherish only the interest of the family and should not go beyond it. Rightly Akhila should have been influenced by the view of her mother. But the death of her father makes her the head of the family. Akhila is thrown to the world of profession, dominated by ambitious men and women and she slowly realizes the difference between her family and the society. Even Akhila's mother does not think of her daughter's marriage but Akhila sacrifices her life and money for the sake of her brothers and sisters who become well settled in life.

In her family Akhila is taken only as a provider- a provider of all comforts to the family. Her brother takes her only for a spinster and not for a sister. Nobody in the family understands her emotions or care for her feelings and take her only as a earning machine for them. Akhila's life thus becomes solitary, melancholic, and discontented. She has become forty five and there is nothing in her life to look back. The mental suffering of being a spinster all through her life torments her mind; she takes a decision to live alone and to live for herself. She is only called Akka by her brothers and sisters and Ammadi by her mother and they never want her to be called as Amma by bestowing her to the status of marriage.

Love Between Akhila and Hari

The love story between Akhila and Hari can be analysed in terms of middle class morality and compromises. She gives gift to Hari but is taunted by the thought of what the society will think of their relationship- middle aged woman seeking the friendship of the young boy and once for all goes away from Hari to an unknown destination. What Akhila longed for was "The entwining limbs, an arm thrown round her waist, a chest to rest her head upon and the blossoming of her wombs, the waiting for her husband to come home and the sharing of an ordinary poiumoment" (160).

She was not given any opportunity for this and her family never took any step for her marriage. Instead they were anxious that Akhila should never get married because all their comforts and luxuries of life will be lost. The final outbursts come when Akhila understands the real intentions of her family members. When they resist her attempt to go alone Akhila retorts:

For Twenty-six years I gave all myself to this family. I asked for nothing in return. And I wish to make a life of my own do any one of you come forward and say it's time you did this. Akka you deserve to have a life of your own instead you worry about what it will do to your individual times. (205)

A Total Organic Unity

The individual story of Akhila has a total organic unity, where the individual woman rediscovers herself and the title itself suggests to organize a coupe not a revolution to overthrow any country or empire but work for a transformation of people's mind and attitude. It is the resolution that takes place in their psyche not to be put out, but fight out till the end. They create a coupe in a do or die situation as it becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by false binaries. Hence, Akhila decides to alienate herself from the traditional world and to live for herself.

Now Akhila is totally transformed, highly independent, and not bothered about what others think of her; she wants to live, live all alone for herself. She is free to do what she wants, attach or detach herself at her will and never live for others or allow her life to be dictated and conditioned by others. She rediscovers herself and it is expressed by Anita Nair as follows:

Akhila discovers that she likes being alone. She has no more doubts what her life will be if she lives alone. It may not be what she dreamt it to be at least she would have the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all the needs to ask of life now. Then she is allowed to try and experience it. (277)

Free and Liberated Bird

Akhila is only a free and liberated bird. Coming out of home to escape from the selfish centered household Akhila has seen and experienced the world in her own and therefore has developed different attitudes towards her life. She thus presents the image of the new Indian women, who can enter into successful and harmonious relationship with men, anchored in mutual freedom and respect without allowing themselves to end up as subjugated sex mates and glorified housekeepers. Akhila tastes power and "...knows what it feels like to be a cat and mouse game" (271). Akhila learns to live by her own rules. She is able to throw her head back and voice her triumph over oneself and culture.

In the Coupé

In the *coupé* the first person to narrate the trajectory of her wedded life is Janaki an older woman, who lives through myriad life experiences only to realize that she loves her husband more than she imagined, even more she loves her son. She is a pampered wife and mother. She marries him to protect her. In the beginning, she is protected by her father, now by her husband, after her husband, her son will protect her. According to her, her duties are to be a good wife and a mother. Janaki had become aware of a certain rage creeping in her and had found everything her husband did is irritating. Her initial response to Akhila's query was "Why should a woman live alone, there is always a man willing to be with her?" (21). Janaki tells Akhila that:

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. Women like me end up being

fragile...I believed in that old cliché that a home was a woman's kingdom. I worked hard to preserve mine. ...And then suddenly one day I didn't matter anymore. My home ceased to interest me, none of the beliefs I had built my life around had any meaning. I thought if I were to lose it all, I would cope (23).

As for Janaki, she develops a friendly love for her husband in the autumn of their lives to find some peace from her son who accuses her of egoism. Her spiritual crisis was short lived and she changed to a fragile creature forever. Anita Nair narrates the story skilfully. Her descriptive skills and capabilities of storytelling can be seen in the life of Janaki.

Next, we have Margaret Shanti. She is another example how women are dominated by men. She is a chemistry teacher, who compared people with chemicals. Margaret's life goes through many physical, mental, and spiritual crisis. She keeps on changing till she feels happy. She marries the principal of the school where she works as a teacher. Her marriage is a love marriage. He loved her but she has no individuality. Margaret's husband Ebenezer Paulraj is an example for male chauvinism. Margaret's repression can be called as one of sexual stereotyping. She is forced to live as a model wife and daughter.

Sheela is the teenager who accompanies Akhila in the train. She explains the act of challenge to make up the face of her dying grandmother whose exceptional perceptive observation makes her understand even the subtle things around her. Then Prabha Devi shares her own tale. Her imagination raises by self-confidence. She seeks sexual liberation in an extramarital link. To escape from everything, she learns swimming which gives confidence to her.

Finally, the last quiet passenger is Marikolanthu who is dressed poorly but the expression on her face said that, "She had seen it all, human fickleness and fallibility, and there was very little that would take her by surprise" (18). Her body becomes the site of violence in the case of raping. Her life had been ruined by one dark night of lust.

Akhila and her fellow passengers argue that marriage is not imperative. Their independence helps them to get over a dominated existence in the hands of men or society because each of them as a spinster older sister, once the breadwinner of the family, still the cash cow. But Akhila is certain that she will not let her family use her anymore.

To Conclude

Conclusively, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* is an examination of the psyche of the women characters. The coupe proves to be a close, packed comfortable and warm environment for the women to speak freely about their experiences. She paints her women as they are with their protection and she is ready to open their hearts to other women. The predicament of her characters is covered with a faint existential shade.

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