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Journey of Self-discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupé*

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Anita Nair

Introduction – Voices of the Dumb

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, they are often allocated a secondary role. However, they possess the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight, which contributes to the happiness of others.

In those days, they were merely portrayed as the souls of dependence and this dependence can be effectively identified with a couplet from Manu, the ancient codifier of Hindu law:

Duteous girl obeys her father,
Husband sways the duteous wife,
Son controls the widowed mother,
Never free is a woman's life (137).

As they prefer others' happiness to theirs, women's identity is hidden behind the mask of sacrifice and dependence. Their voices are no better than the voices of the dumb, not audible to the world. But, nowadays, women are courageous enough to exhibit their individualities at all levels. Even though they possess the voices of the dumb, they have made it audible in recent years and they also started to shake the conventions of dependence. They are ready to undergo the most challenging journey of self discovery to make the whole world recognize them. Certain percentage of women had successfully reached their destination and remaining are on their way to the destination, "Self - discovery".

The Self

The self is the distinct characteristic individuality of a person. The human self is a self-organizing, interactive system of thoughts, feelings and motives that characterizes an individual. Carl Rogers, the famous psychologist, defined the self or self concept as "an

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organized, consistent, conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of the 'I' and 'me' to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions.”

Self, the result of human's awareness of the individual as a separate entity in the social environment, enables humans to regard their emotionally experience and their own integrity and identity in relation to their past, present and future. Self and society are interconnected and this is a kind of web, the construction of which is partly under guidance from self and partly under the guidance from the prevailing social pattern.

The subtle by-play between society and the individual by which the individual develops a sense of self through participation in social interaction, and yet possess a feeling of separation from others, is a fundamental social process which perpetuates culture and society. Literatures of all ethnic groups around the world deal with the issue of relationship between self and society in many ways. This becomes part of the socialization process. Indian Writing in English is no exception to this situation.

Indian Writing in English

Indian Writing in English has attained an independent status in the realm of Indian Literature. Wide-ranging themes are dealt with in Indian Writing in English. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture and tradition, social values, and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments.

Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary writing in Indian English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meanings and a basis of discussion. Through women writers' eyes one can see a different world and with their assistance one can realize the potential of human achievement. Every appraisal of the Indian English Literature will certainly result in an appreciation of the writing of women.

Creating a World of Women

One of the reasons why women have in such large number taken up their pen is that it has allowed them to create their own world and set the conditions of their existence completely free from the direct interference of men. Similarly, so many women have taken to reading women's writing because it provides them with a "safe place" from which they not only explore a wide range of experience of women of the world but also identify themselves with a range of women characters and variety of their existence.

Indian Writing in English by women is a distinct phenomenon today. The creative output of the Indian women writers, especially novelists, is marked by the choice of English, the medium of expression and expression of a woman's reaction to the varied situation in which tradition and modernity clash as well as synthesize. Indian women writers are dynamic witnesses to the peculiar socio-cultural historic, political conflicts faced by women especially Indian.

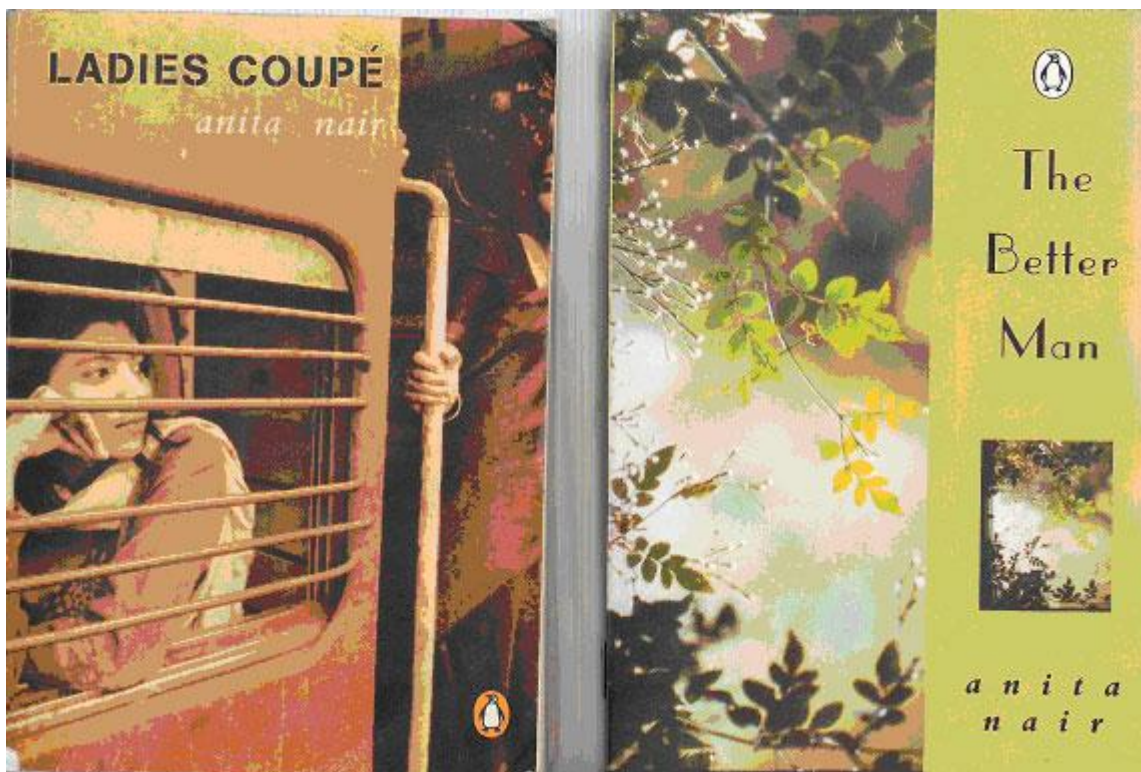
Communicating Globally

These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They are able to sensitively portray a world that has in it women rich in substance. Their women are real flesh-and-blood protagonists who make the readers look at them with awe with their relationships to their surroundings, society, men, children, families, mental make-ups and themselves.

They not only communicate with their own society but also with the global readers. Their primary task is to attempt an imaginative mediation between the traditional forces of Indian patriarchal joint family system and the new demands of modernity. They further seek to reconstruct the socio-cultural values from a woman's viewpoint.

One might tend to think of women writers only in a "Mills and Boon" context, but women writers in India have proved that they are made of sterner and more serious stuff. Indian women writers have grappled with complex issues such as sensuality, servility, subjugation and society. They have handled them with a sense of balance without disregarding Indian traditions. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols, which subvert the canonic versions. Their works are significant in making society aware of women's demands.

Anita Nair and Her Art



Anita Nair is one of the finest writers in Indian Writing in English with an international reputation. She was born at Mundakottakurissi near Shoranur in Kerala State. Anita was brought up in a suburb in Chennai (Madras), Tamilnadu. Her father was with the ordinance

factories. Her grandparents lived in Kerala. So, Anita made frequent visits to Kerala and these trips enabled her to know the heart of rural Kerala.

Anita was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called “Satyr of the Subway” (1997). This book had won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Her second book was “The Better Man” (2000) published by Penguin India. This was the first book written by an Indian author to be published by Picador USA. Her third book “Ladies Coupe” (2001) was rated as one of 2002’s top five books of the year and was translated into more than twenty-five languages around the world. She has also written “The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends” (2004), a book for children on myths and legends. Anita has also edited “Where the Rain is Born” (2003).

Anita’s writings about Kerala and her poetry have been included in “The Poetry India Collection and a British Council Poetry Workshop Anthology”. She has also written a few other novels such as, “Mistress” (2003), “Adventures of Nonu, the skating squirrel” (2006), “Living Next Door to Alise” (2007) and “Magical Indian Myths” (2008). Her works also include many travelogues.

In fact, her works have been widely published in twenty seven countries to be precise and translated. Her work is not only critically acclaimed but also best-selling. She has been publishing regularly for the last seven years. She mesmerizes the readers with her evocative language and descriptions with which her novels abound.

An Efficient Practitioner – *The Better Man*

Anita Nair is easily accepted as an efficient practitioner of the genre of fiction. Her first novel “The Better Man,” which shows great power and style, is suffused with sensuality, myth and metaphor. It tells the story of an elderly bachelor, named Mukundan, who is forced by circumstances to go back to Kaikurussi, a little fictitious village, where he was born. He fled from the village when he was eighteen. As he now gets back to his ancestral house, he finds himself unable to cope with the present. He is haunted by a sense of failure, for not measuring up to his still alive and domineering father Achuthan Nair’s expectations and for having gone through life without really living it. Thus, with pace, humour and a vivid evocation of modern India. Anita traces this man’s psychological and physical, eventful journey to a final life-affirming yet destructive act.

The Better Man is an astonishing book, it is tender, lyrical, humorous and insightful. In Anita Nair’s capable hands the exotic setting comes alive and becomes familiar and we see our struggle and triumphs reflected in the lives of these marvelous characters (2).

The Malabar Mind

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Anita Nair's "Malabar Mind" is a collection of poems, which is real and corporeal, portrays the landscapes and mindscapes with a rare fluid ease. Her descriptions in this collection beautifully exhibit the everyday casual moments, such as the quirky symbol of toddy shops in Malabar, a full bottle of toddy crowned with a red hibiscus and the stressed drone of television newscasters during war time. Then she turns them into metaphors which cast a glow. She also suffuses the ordinary things with extraordinary dimensions and captures the strength and resilience of life.

The collection has cryptic couplets on love, an epigram on how to cope with failure, demanding extended poems about youth and sensual existence. Thus, every aspect of the human existence finds a place in this collection of poems written over a decade. "Anita has a remarkable body language of variegated repetition which comes through well as a narrative even in very short poems giving a local habitation and a name to passing thoughts".

Satyr of the Subway

Satyr of the Subway (1997) consists of twelve stories, each worked around a dramatically different situation ranging from the mundane to the bizarre. This revised edition includes three new stories and incorporates occasional alterations to text, some marginal, some significant, where the writer has revisited her characters or situations long after she first created them. The result is a fascinating collection of stories that traverse the entire gamut of human emotion, penetrating in their insight into male female relationships and seriously funny in their take on the futility of expectation from life or from lovers. "The stories are powerful gritty and evoke a thousand images" (164).

The Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends

Anita Nair's "The Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends" is the fantastic and magical myths and legends from all over the world-Africa to Japan and Thailand to Alaska. Charming and simple, yet profound in their wisdom, the stories encompass a diverse range. Some recount unforgettable tales of love and adventure, of dutiful sons and scheming gods, of enchanted lands and giant serpents. Others tell us how the world was created, why the sun and the moon never meet each other though they live in the same sky, how clouds appeared to save mankind from the sun's scorching rays, and why living creatures shed tears when they are in pain. Retold here by best-selling author Anita Nair, these timeless stories come alive with a freshness and exuberance that is sure to delight and captivate.

Mistress

"Mistress" (2005), is a novel of art and adultery. It is an example for a brilliant blend of imaginative story telling and deeply moving explorations in search of meaning. Anita writes about man-woman relationships and complex Kathakali aesthetics with equal felicity. "Opening up the rich world of Kathakali to English Literature, *Mistress* achieves something rare in Indian writing. It proposes a natural assimilation of our artistic heritage in new fiction".

Magical Indian Myths

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Anita's "Magical Indian Myths" (2008) consists of fifty myths from India, a fabulously produced work. From wise sages to demonic asuras, beautiful river deities to arrogant kings, wayward gods to brave princes, this collection showcases the most enchanting and magical stories from Indian mythology. With over 100 stunning full colour illustrations, this book not only brings alive a fantastic world of gods and demons, it also is a loved and treasured possession to be enjoyed for many years. "Whether it is the Dasavatara or Vishvamitra's rise to *brahmorishi* status or the moon's waxing and waning, none of the 50 tales in this book is new. But the slightly irreverent tone and language gives it a new feel".

Anita Nair among Other Leading Writers in Indian English Literature

Renowned Indian Writer Anita Desai through her novels explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. She also strikes a perfect balance between their instinctual needs and their intellectual aspects. She makes the psyche of the woman reveal through flash back, diary entries, self-analysis and the description of the place they lived and visited and also the people they have met. These qualities are also found in the novels of Anita Nair.

Same way, Shashi Deshpande's notable works such as *That Long Silence* (1989) and *Small Remedies* are sensitive portrayals of women in the patriarchal world. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman in various turmoil, convulsions, frustrations, and their long silence which has been their cultivated nature for many centuries. Thus, this treatment of Indian women in realistic manner can also be visualized in the works of many women writers including Anita Nair.

Anita Nair is a fine writer, with a great sense of character, a vivid knowledge of South Indian culture, and has an eye for describing details. She can move from tender compassion to sensuality, to raging hatred, and is a compelling story-teller.

Not a Feminist Writer

Anita Nair refuses to be labeled as a feminist writer. She makes an attempt to show the quality of strength in a woman. Anita also adds that strength is not usually considered a womanly thing. Her style ultimately differs from other feminist writers.

In other words, she is a feminist with difference. She traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the society. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women in a serious manner. Her attempt to exhibit the plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions of her women characters is remarkable.

Anita Nair's descriptions and portrayal of characters are highly appreciable.

For a long time, woman existed as a gap, as an absence in Literature... This is not only true of the fiction created by men, but also by women, who have mostly confined themselves to writing love stories or dealing with the experiences of women in a superficial manner... (which) represses the truth about the majority of their stories and their lives (85).

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Anita hopes to fill this vacancy. Her primary focus of attention is the world of women – the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society.

The Purpose of This Research

It is my intention to show in this research that the traditional view of women is not any more valid. The traditional picture may not have been valid even for the olden days. With self-discovery of their roles as individuals, women are steadily taking up new roles to play both as individuals and members of families and societies. It is wrong to assume now that women know only their homes. It is wrong to portray that being ignorant of the ways of the world, women experience untold and intolerable hardships if they come out of their home. However, vast majority of women, even now, continue to lose their identity, independence and self-respect. They are pawns in the hands of their husbands and in laws. They should realize how important they are not only at home but also in the society in which they live. They should assert their independence and know themselves. This is achieved through the process of self-discovery.

To emphasize this point, I present a study of the characters in *Ladies Coupé*, a novel by Anita Nair.

Ladies Only: The Lifestories Unravel Themselves in *Ladies Coupé*

Akhila's Lifestory: Is Man Needed for Woman?

Akhila was the protagonist of the novel *Ladies Coupé*. She was born in a conservative Brahmin family. Her father Pattabhi Iyer worked as a clerk in Income Tax office and her mother Chandra was an orthodox Brahmin woman, who followed the strict conventions of the Brahmin caste. Akhila had two brothers, Narashiman, Narayan and a sister, Padma.

Akhila's mother Chandra always preferred her husband to her children in giving comfort. Especially all Sundays seemed to be special as Pattabhi Iyer would be at home and his wife would serve him first with special dishes according to his taste. Unfortunately Akhila's father died in an accident. At that time, Narashiman was only eight years old, Narayan fifteen and Padma six. Akhila wept bitterly for the sudden loss of her father. She cried when she watched her brothers performing the funeral rites. Since they were very young and frail, Akhila being the elder knew well that she has to shoulder the responsibilities of her entire family.

Akhila got the job of her father. She cared for the future of her family members, and her own needs were shelved and put in cold storage. Soon after the death of Akhila's father, "two things happened : Sundays became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the family" (75).

As years passed, Narayan joined the tank factory as a machinist. Narashiman took to teaching job. Both got married and settled without minding the future of their sister Akhila. On her way to her job in the train, Akhila met Hari, younger than herself, who loved her. Akhila also loved him and they both spent a couple of days in Mahabalipuram. Then, Akhila decided to

depart Hari for the sake of her family and social constraints. She had no contact with Hari, but she had his contact number.

Meanwhile, Akhila's mother died. Padma, Akhila's younger sister stayed with Akhila with her two daughters. Murthy, Padma's husband visited them once in a while because his job was like that. Padma had not cared for her sister's feelings and longings. Akhila was fed up with all the routine work and people who failed to understand her. She also met Karpagham, her school friend in a supermarket. Karpagham's husband died and she lived alone with her daughter with self confidence and courage. This meeting with Karpagham gave Akhila a kind of inspiration to face this competitive world alone. She had decided to do something that she had never done before. As a first step she took up a journey to Kanyakumari all alone. "...Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (3).

On her way to Kanyakumari, in the ladies coupé, Akhila met five other women and each of them had a story to tell. Then, all the five women started narrating their stories one after another. Akhila found in these stories an answer to her problematic question: Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?.

Janaki's Lifestory

Janaki was the oldest woman among the five. She was a pampered house wife and a confused mother. Her relationship with her husband Prabhakar was like the friendship between the two friends in need. "Friendly love. The curve of the rainbow before the clouds shrouded them in a haze of dawn". She learnt to love him after the marriage at the age of eighteen. She, at last, had a man to protect her till her death. She was first protected by her father, then by her brother, then by her husband and after him it would be her son, Siddharth. Janaki believed that to be a good mother and good wife were the only duties of a woman and who made her home as her kingdom.

Sheela's Lifestory

The second story to unfold was that of a fourteen years old girl, Sheela. She was different from the generation of Janaki but she possessed a mental maturity that quite surpassed her age. She accepted her grandmother's death with an air of a person who had seen it all and done it all. "What makes Sheela different from others is her ability to look beyond things and her knack of perceiving what others cannot" (68).

Margaret Shanthi

The third story was that of Margaret Shanthi. She was a chemistry teacher married to Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of the school she worked in. He was a pompous self-opinionated individual who successfully destroyed Margaret's self-confidence by bullying her to aborting her first pregnancy and then treating her as a housekeeper and a cook.

Thus, Margaret realized that her husband was not the knight - at - arms that she expected him to be but, on the other hand, he was insensitive self-obsessed despot who could not care for the welfare of his wife.

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Paulraj also entertained sycophants to lavish meals without concerning the extra chores he inflicted on his wife. Ebenezer's every action gradually transformed Margaret's love into hatred. Margaret used a very ingenious method of overfeeding him till he lost his athletic figure and became a flat slob. "She formulates a scheme which would not only save her marriage but also eat into his amour *propre* and shake the very brasstacks of his being"(133).

Prabha Devi's Lifestory

The fourth tale to open up was that of Prabha Devi. She was born to rich parents. She had the perfect childhood. Her mother beamed with pride when Prabha Devi turned eighteen. She had everything that a girl ought to be. She was beautiful, docile, a good cook, a good singer and her needlework was always perfect. Soon this demure was married to a diamond merchant's son. After marriage her life went on smoothly, happily and peacefully.

But something happened a week after her fortieth birthday. She began to realize that somewhere in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother, Prabha Devi forgot how she was to be herself and she learnt to "strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be" (187).

The Lifestory of Marikkolanthu

The fifth and the most heart rendering tale was that of Marikkolanthu. She belonged to a poor family in a village called Paler near Kancheepuram. On her ninth birthday, her father died of a disease. Her mother worked as a cook in Chettiar Kottai. As a kid she too worked and helped her mother to raise her brother Eswaran and Sivakumar. Even though she attained physical maturity, she was innocent. She was deflowered by Murugesan, one of the relatives of Chettiyar. She was naïve until she become pregnant.

This unpleasant incident changed Marikolanthu's entire life and destroyed her verve. She gave birth to an illegitimate baby. She hated the baby and left it to her mother to take care of him. After her mother's death, Marikolanthu's brothers neglected to look after her son Muthu.

Marikolanthu realized that she was the only soul to love her son Muthu. Then, she joined the Mission Hospital as a helper to lead her life without depending on others. "I told you about the roles in my life having no Chronology; no sense of rightness. What happened then was that for the first time, I wrested control of my destiny. I wasn't going to wage wars or rule kingdoms. All I wanted was a measure of happiness. All I wanted to be was Muthus's mother" (268).

Alight Here for Your Next Train

Thus all the co-passengers narrated their stories to Akhila and departed one by one as they reached the station concerned. Akhila finally reached her destination, Kanyakumari. There she stayed in a resort and she spent her evening hours peacefully at the seashore.

Akhila pondered over the life stories of the co-passengers she met and she also recollected many incidents in her life. She discovered her Self. In those days, woman needed a man for protection but today a woman needed a man for companionship and also to share the ideas and thoughts. So, as a conclusion, Akhila rang up to Hari, her X lover. Thus, the novel comes to an end.

Postcolonial Feminist Literature

Postcolonial feminist literature has always carried the heavy burden of dealing with the layers of misinterpretation of traditions and religions. At the center of this dilemma is the role of woman and her dependence, economically and socially. The more traditional a postcolonial society is, the more problematic the question of women's emancipation is, and therefore, the more passionate its women writers are.

The Portrayal of the Marginalization of Women

Indian women novelists have powerfully focused light on the psyche of women of different strata in modern times of never ending existential struggle in their life. Like other novelists, Anita Nair, an eminent modern novelist, has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. She has the marvelous understanding of the psyche of women and therefore, she explores the world of specially women with all their overwhelming problems and challenges in her novel *Ladies Coupé*. She empathically purports the view that even in modern time with all socio-political as well as economic achievements, the graph of woman exploitation is shockingly rising. Women, sometimes owing to the compelling situation of their life, are pushed into the net by their protectors while, at other times, their soaring ambition and will to assert their freedom, takes them into the tunnels of unimaginable sufferings.

Raising Taboo Questions

Anita Nair's engrossing *Ladies' Coupé* raises what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India. Nair's India suffers from a system of a sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. Patriarchy in its different forms has tried in many ways to repress, debase and humiliate women, especially through the images represented in cultural and traditional forms.

Ladies' Coupé deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions. This not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also implies the existence of an alternative reality. But differently, the novel questions whether the role of Indian woman as a representative of other women living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to culture resistance should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs.

Like a rag-picker with an eagle eye, she [Nair] observes
the ordinary lives of maidservants, masseurs,
vendors, and other women who course through

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daily life. It is the strength and resilience of the everyday woman that Nair brings out...Nair's women are fleshed out to the last detail. You can visualize them clearly – their faces, bones, their desires...

Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupé* is a profound discourse of womanism. All the characters of this "female culture" without exception go through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of their families and every one of them acquires an implacable resilience not only to stay alive, but even to discover their inner source of dynamism and creative wellspring. The novel unfolds itself against the background of a train journey, and each of these characters narrates the story of her life as the train chugs, trundles and troops to its destination.

Akhila as an Individual, Unmarried Woman

Akhila was forty-five years old unmarried woman. She was a clerk in Income Tax department. She was not a creature of impulse. She took time over every decision. She pondered, deliberated, slept over it and only when she had examined every single nuance and point of view, she made up her mind. Starched cotton saris always demand much planning and thinking ahead. Gauzy chiffons and ready-to-wear polysilks were for the people who changed their minds at least six times every morning before they settled on to wear. They were for the fickle and feckless (those who have no sense of responsibility). Starched saris need orderly minds and Akhila prided herself on being an organized person.

Akhila was not allowed to live her own life – always the daughter, the sister, the aunt, the provider of her family after the death of her father.

What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brothers and sister had always called her Akka. Elder Sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. All women were Madam and all men were Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Ammadi... So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? (84)

Getting fed up with these multiple roles, she decided to go on a train journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that would make her a different woman. She was dreaming of escape and space. "Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (2). This sense of longing and search for self had made her to take up a journey, to Land's end, Kanyakumari.

Learning from Fellow Sufferers

In the intimate atmosphere of the ladies' coupe, Akhila met with five other women, her fellow passengers: Janaki, pampered housewife and confused mother; Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher, married to the poetry of elements and an insensitive tyrant; Prabha Devi, the perfect daughter and wife; Fourteen years old Sheela, with her ability to perceive what

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others cannot; and Marikolandhu, whose innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. Each of them in the coupé shared their experiences with Akhila, which were very different, interesting and shocking. After hearing their stories, Akhila came to know that many women are there in this world without a proper identity. This gave her much pain and at the same time, these experiences provided with a hope to live and discover her self.

They were all women who wanted to be independent and were in search of their lost identity. Akhila wondered how she had let her family members rule and ruin her life. She came to know that she was not “Akhila” all these years. She failed to realize her “Self” among the responsibilities upon her shoulders. Akhila was drawn into the private moments of her life, which made her to recognize her “Self”. She also felt proud regarding the gradual development in discovering her “Self”.

Akhila’s Saga

Of all the saga of the six women, the most fascinating and most compellingly beautiful story was that of Akhila, mainly because she was in the process of discovering her own self-identity, also because she finally emerged as a skilled obstacle-racing champion of life. The harshness of life and its cruel blows had triggered her inexhaustible well springs of dynamism.

As a child Akhila had watched her father lionized by her mother while she and the other children were marginalized. His favourite foods were made and offered first to him. It was only after he had eaten that the children were allowed to taste them. At the least annoying happening, he tended to announce a headache and had to be pampered and ministered to. After his father’s death, Akhila as the eldest child, took her father’s place as the bread winner of the family. She was not given the same sort of importance. She might have got equal pay for equal work but she certainly had not received equal respect even though the family survived only because Akhila brought home a decent pay packet. “Amma had her Akhila. Akhilandeswari, Mistress of all worlds. Master of none” (84).

In comparison, Nair shows a parallel situation. It was Akhila’s neighbour’s family. When the man of the house died, the widow was forced to put her eldest daughter on the street as a prostitute. Both the families were Brahmins and lost the man of the family. The difference was that the neighbour family made their survival in an undignified way. But, Akhila’s great contribution to the dignified survival of her family was certainly not appreciated by its members and they never repaid her in any way.

It began more as a hazy and misty blur of self-confusing thoughts but soon Akhila’s resilient self began to take form and shape. At long last, her “entombed desires” (194) surfaced and she decided to carve out a life of her own.

Akhila in her own sheaf of life-negating experiences, stood out as a symbol of feminine strength and grace. She listed out her own problems with clarity and arrived at the conclusion that she was in need of an education which could give her a sense of firm footing. She discerned her own needs and began to take care of herself. “On her thirty-fifth birthday, she decided to get herself an education. She enrolled in the Open University for a Bachelor of Arts degree. Akhila chose history as her main subject” (85).

Akhila's routine life was indeed restricted. It consisted of the office and home, nothing more. She became a creature of routine, catching the same train every day, wear a starched cotton sari each day, minding her own business – until the starch entered her personality and soul. There was no place for chiffons and frills in her life. She was still expected to ask her brothers' permission to join an office outing.

Akhila was the saviour and silent worker, entirely behind the scenes, while all the younger children get their moments centre stage. Her brothers asked for and they got what they wanted education, marriage and a life of their own. Her needs were taken for granted when her own siblings thrived like parasites on her. They milked every opportunity to bolster their lives at the expense of their eldest sister. Akhila was left behind, silently hoping they would consider her aspirations and desires too, at least once, when theirs had got satisfied. But they were not.

Akhila had become a useful instrument, a faceless provider. Even her mother failed to gauge, or rather, carefully avoided her longings and desires, "When the other widows gathered around her and stripped (her mother) of her marks of marriage, Akhila cried because she know that this was what it meant to be a woman"(59). Akhila understood and cried for her mother but her mother, having internalized male ideological system for years, found it convenient to ignore Akhila's womanhood. Thus, Akhila was catapulted into the position of being the breadwinner of the family and to an extent, she experienced an erosion of life.

Akhila realized that life had slipped by her all these sixteen years as she juggled with her career and family. She was the only unmarried person in her office where twenty-four people work. The deprivations of life impinge on her psyche. She became aware of the fact that she had been living life without dreams. "From the Gurukula Stage of life, she had moved directly to the vanaprastha" (86).

Seeking Sexuality and Sensual Pleasures

Akhila's yearnings for tenderness, tough and erotic fulfillment were never verbalized. They exist only in her dreams and her unexpressed sub-consciousness. In her dream she had the guts to defy her parents and continue an entirely physically passionate love affair while they watched with horror and disgust but in reality she had no such courage.

It was amusing that in dream Akhila did not wear starched cotton but a flimsy chiffon sari which her mystery lover in the dream removed with a flick of his finger. The quest for the recognition of her womanhood was expressed through her dream. Akhila's longings are beautifully revealed through the dream. Akhila allowed an unknown passenger to covertly touch and stroke her back and this further naturally revealed her longings for sensual pleasures. "Akhila had never felt anything like this before. An unfurling... A quiet flowering..." (139). Thus, the faceless passenger had been welcomed by Akhila because he noticed her and approached her as a woman. No one else had done that to her before.

Akhila's craving for physical pleasure was mirrored in her dream where she experienced the touch of male fingers. The personal warmth though this touch in this dreamy sensation in a strange way soothed her, though it was insubstantial. She was now emboldened to seek out

emotional nutrients in order to cater to her sensation-starved body. She navigated her life through a series of U-turns and sharp pins. The passion in her caught fire when she met Hari. She then experienced the flow of life, as she yielded herself to the finger-tingling of Hari. Thus, the encounter with Hari marked the first phase of her transition to fulfillment and freedom.

For the first time Akhila enjoyed the feel of being touched and fondled and she experienced “a vein of strength” (210). Sexuality and sexual fulfillment were the essential part of human life. As Simone de Beauvoir aptly remarks, “Sexuality most certainly plays a considerable role in human life; it can be said pervade life throughout” (77).

Akhila’s resilience surfaced when she began to break out the boundary of her personal space and allowed freshness and newness by letting in Hari. He possessed a special sensitivity to fan the dying embers of love’s flame. Akhila took many skeins of life and began “to braid them into future” (203) with the touch and life of Hari. He too found a sounding board in Akhila, which was an essential dimension of a relationship.

He talked to her; of his colleges, the frustration he felt in his colleagues, the frustration he felt in his job, . . . , a movie he had seen the night before . . . And in turn, he drew her out. So that when her stop arrived, she got off the train reluctantly. But there was the consolation that he would be there the next day. That was enough, Akhila thought (143).

Complementing Power of Male and Female Forces

The kind of sensations Hari generated in Akhila testified to the fact that the male and female forces had a great complementing power to surface the inner resources of each other. “In Oriental philosophy the Yin Yang represent the male and female principles which come together to form the whole. Both men and women partake of the opposite principle” (Bryan Strong,76).

Liberal Man-Woman Relationship

In Akhila’s encounter with Hari and the subsequent burgeoning of their lives, Anita Nair opened endless possibilities for the flowering of a liberal man-woman relationship. It was certainly a relationship of master and slave. The novelist underscores the importance of healthy male-female for mutual being. Akhila’s personality began to bloom at this juncture, “They became friends. It was as easy as that. An instant camaraderie that they nurtured in the thirty-five minutes he and she sat opposite each other. Soon they began taking the same morning train too” (142).

Giving Up Male-Female Relationship

Instead of finding mutuality and happiness in this love, Akhila decided to give it all up. She was older than him and it was a dreadful transgression of the conventional norms. Then, they had to answer questions and deflect taunts when they come later on. Akhila was sure that people would point fingers and they would ultimately make Hari unhappy with his choice.

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She left Hari rather than face, confront, and answer the predictable verdict of the male gaze. Thus, Akhila's transition into a higher stage of her evolution occurred when she decided to call off her friendship with Hari. In other sense, Akhila's decision to call off her relationship with Hari marked yet another important milestone in her evolution as an autonomous woman, who was in search of "self".

Akhila's discerning mind helped her to recognize when to abide by rules and when to fling it to the winds. She was in the process of becoming more genuine and truer to her inner self. Akhila's interior growth was also marked by her ability to take risks. All along she had been taking "the Risk of independence" (Peck, 134). It was this inner dynamism that propelled her to board a train to Kanyakumari, all in her own sweet company.

According to Scott Peck, risk-taking is an important trait of people who are on a quest. Peck clarifies, "Thus all life itself represents a risk, and the more lovingly we live our lives the more risks we take" (134).

Akhila who was "excluded" and "dislocated" gradually discovered what life and love are. She had a penchant for solitary reflections. She sensed that she was very close to some deep experience and mused happily. She felt that she was successfully journeying towards the source of fulfillment.

Interior Monologues and Public Conversations and Postures

When co-passenger Prabha Devi asked Akhila whether she was happy, Akhila had no answer. Like the fourteen year old Sheela, who did not know what she wanted, Akhila at forty-five still could not say what she wanted out of life and whether she was happy or not. Same way, when Janaki expressed her liking for the smell of food wrapped in banana leaves, Akhila then discovered that she too liked it. As Akhila toiled for the welfare of her family members like a robot, she forgot all her likings in this life. Only her co-passengers helped her to discover her hidden wishes. Janaki was not surprised that Akhila had never thought in terms of what she liked or disliked because she knew the mental status of women for centuries.

Growing Up in Tune with Social Constraints and Expectations

Akhila wondered whether a woman can manage without a man indefinitely or whether she was missing something that was vital to a woman's satisfaction. "Can a woman cope alone?" (22). Akhila was strangely innocent at the age of forty-five and she was frozen in the same situation as the child Sheela. Sheela was bewildered by her father's disapproval of the cheeky wit and "pertness" he so used to enjoy and encouraged in her till she "grew up". Now, suddenly, everything seemed to be wrong. In confusion, Sheela retreated herself into a shell of quietness. Her father approved of this silent Sheela just as Akhila's family was content while she stayed in the wings, making no demands, issuing no orders, inarticulate in spite of her breadwinner status. Akhila was as confused as Sheela until she met her childhood friend Karpagam and later, the co – passengers in the coupe. Then she realized that she must live for herself.

While Prabha Devi and Margaret Shanti had husbands to wait for, Akhila had no one to and nothing to look forward to. Her life was governed by her brothers, and her parasitic sister's family sponged over her.

In the words of Anita Desai, lives were spent in "waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death, dying misunderstood, always behind bars..."

Finding Some Voice

Akhila's interaction with Karpagam helped her to find a voice and a will. Karpagam was a widow but continued to wear the signs of marriage and living a satisfactory life. Her defiant stance inspired Akhila to decide to live her own life. "I live alone. I have many years now. My daughter who is just twenty-three does as well. We are strong, Akhi. We are if we want to be... Build a life for yourself where your needs come first" (202). Again, Karpagam declared: "I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am" (202). Inspired by her, Akhila finally managed to cast off the influence of patriarchal society, found her voice, speak out, assert herself and win her right to live independently without any bondage of responsibilities.

Groom Yourself for Yourself!

Young Sheela had understood what Akhila at forty-five had barely begun to think about. Sheela's Ammamma used to say that women should groom themselves for themselves, not for others.

Wreaking Vengeance Or Asserting One's Own Position

Margaret's story demonstrated how a woman could strategize to get her own way. Margaret's husband Ebenezer Paulraj was the worst example for male chauvinism in the novel. A vain and arrogant poseur, he changed Margaret into a position of submissive silence, making her to be an unremarkable, average kind of women. As he was the principal, his subtle cruelty to the children was repeated in his treatment of his wife.

Tired of her subaltern position in his house, Margaret finally took her life into her own hands. She gathered her forces with supreme will power and turned the tables on him. Having learned from his constant playing of games to get his way, she took her revenge by inventing the game that would render him harmless to her, an ineffectual gourmand. Margaret compared herself with water. It effectively portrayed her ability to adjust things.

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 is(96)

These qualities also suit Akhila, who got adjusted with everyone.

Taking Reins in Your Own Hands

In Margaret's life, Paulraj was dominating, mean and almost perverse. In the case of Marikolanthu, her life was thrown up by the men in her life, a rapist and an adulterer. Prabha Devi's husband was a typical conservative male who neglected her in by considering it as the standard way to treat wife. Janaki's husband had accompanied her in all the routine works, which made her to depend completely on him. Sheela's father had successfully silenced her as she had grown up. Thus, all of them suppressed their desires to make others happy and learnt to live according to the life they had.

Akhila realized that she must take the reins in her own hand, take her own decisions and live life for herself. The "other" had enjoyed far too much importance in her life. It was the right time to relegate to the wings and to assume the stellar roles in her life. Too long had Akhila seen herself as object.

The journey implies a physical escape from the patriarchal world she had inhabited and also the stereotypical metaphoric value attached to the concept of the journey – that of experimental growth and an expansion of horizons. The combined experiences of her co-passengers helped Akhila to develop the new confidence that marked her behaviour after she disembarked.

The Therapy of Sympathetic Listening

The narratives of Akhila's co-passengers in the coupé fairly tumble out of them, revealing the need of each women to speak to a sympathetic listener. Each woman had been cocooned in her own silence and longed to be heard. The achievements of Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanti, Marikolanthu and Karpagam strengthened Akhila's determination, so that, when she got off the train at Kanyakumari, She was a new Akhila and she was grown into her selfhood.

Akhila has no more fears. Why then should she walk with a downcast head? She throws her head back and voices her triumph....Akhila smiles...because she discovers it is so easy to smile now that she has her life where she wants it to be (275).

The aura of the new-found confidence made her to book a call to Hari. He might be married, he might have moved on. Still, it was still the effort. She loved Hari "but she desires life more". If he was available and interested, life could take a turn for the better. If not... the narrative is open-ended.

The telephone on the table near the bed rings. Akhila walks towards it. Her heart races. She wonders: could it be him? Hari's voice is low and cautious; incredulous, too. 'Hello,' she says. ' This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari (276)

Hari answered the call but Nair does not tell us what he told. Whatever it was, a new Akhila is born – one determined to be heard and noticed, capable of building a new life for her.

The Metaphor

The metaphor of the journey was further developed into the metaphor of the destination – Kanyakumari was a seaside town with the grand vista of the meeting of three seas.”At Kanyakumari, three seas meet. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea” (3). The openness of the scene symbolized the range of possibilities open to Akhila. The Akhila who was wrapped in her family situation in a small land-locked town in Tamilnadu now sat gazing at an azure sky and playing with the sand. Three oceans meet and mingle at her feet, she realized with exhilaration. Her realization of her own independence was epiphanic.

The novel comes to an end by identifying Akhila with Durga, as Shakthi, indicating the potential of womanhood. From an image of absence and silence to one of confrontation and assertion, Akhila had come a long way. Shedding the patriarchal image of women as a silence and an absence, as imperfection and incompleteness, Akhila appropriated the voice and the will that had been the provenance of men, took an active part in life. Thus, Nair had made a gesture for the advancement of women, that class which, along with the Dalits and forest folk, according to Mulk Raj Anand, constituted the rejected people of our country.

Having discovered her true self in shared love, Akhila experienced a sense of pure sensations. The new woman in her was manifested by her body language. She exulted in her new – found identity and liberty. She could not hide her exuberance.

But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her any more. Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered (270).

Akhila's life now moved in the direction of an ideal social matrix where men and women could come “multi-way bridges” gracefully resonating the consonance of maleness and femaleness. And from an abbreviated Akhila, she had transformed into the fullness of an Akhilandeswari. Without sacrificing her independence as a woman, she had been able to make a life with a man. She thus represented the image of the new Indian women, who could enter into successful and harmonious relationship with men, anchored in mutual freedom and respect without allowing themselves to end up as subjected sex mates and glorified housekeepers. Hence it could be rightly said that Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupé* is not only a very potent novel about the womanist discourse but also of a humanist discourse.

What Lies Ahead

The twentieth century India, in which Anita Nair emerges as one of the leading novelists, is the more transitional century in the millennium of the Indian History. It is era of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, cybernation, technical advancement, mechanical process and educational expansion. These developments made India Self

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Independent both monetarily and technologically and changed the mode of living in the Indian society. Modern society creates a new system of values in which the pursuit of wealth and technological efficiency replaced the basic human values. Thus, this change in the social outlook affects the condition of women in India.

A woman in the post independence era is aware of the discrimination she has to face, the sexual harassment and violence to which she explores in the male-dominated society. Due to higher education, women start questioning and are able to prove themselves. A woman in the contemporary era has developed the urge to create a milieu for the full expression for her emotional and moral self and what is important to her is that the craving to be accepted as an individual, a person in her own right and enjoying the same status as man has always enjoyed. So she indulges in search of self or real image. This exploration of her own self is the trait of the women characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*.

Anita Nair, the great dame of Indian English Literature, seems to rise to great heights in her art of characterization of women who engage themselves in finding their own selves or attain a state of self-realization. From the traditional roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother, Nair's women characters, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Marikolandhu and especially Akhila, emerge as individuals in their own rights. They achieve not by being brazen feminist or iconoclasts but by the process of introspection and self-realization. These women characters are neither rebels nor conformists. They are neither trail-blazers nor self-effacers.

Faced with dilemmas of life they seek a path that allows them individual freedom growth even with the constricting environs of a traditional upper middle-class family. In their reaction to role conflict in a patriarchal society, they show the strength to achieve their goals of self-realization. From the state of passive acceptance they move to one of active assertion. Without succumbing to societal pressures and without breaking away from accepted, traditional, social institutions, these women characters succeed in being individuals.

Some Contradictory Positions in Our Thinking

Even Manu, the law giver of Hindus, has insisted on honouring women: "Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rites yields awards". "The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic" (65).

As this concept is obviously for the ideal one, it is not accepted and practiced by the society. The laws of Manu, on the one hand, insist on honouring women and, on another hand, impose strict duties on them. In these duties their individual identity and liberty have no place. Here, woman is a mere dependent creature. In comparison, men are given more liberty.

This plight of women is well pictured in the initial part of the lives of the women characters in this novel, *Ladies Coupé*.

Same way women in India lead a multi-curse, multi-abuse and multi-neglect. Unwanted, uncared, neglected and treated as inferior being, she is conditioned to accept a second-class status in the traditional male dominated socio-economic set up. Anita Nair is quite aware of this injustice implied in the forced silence of the millions of Indian women. In a land where

the goddesses of wealth, knowledge and power are of women, the real situation is diametrically different. Nair has the exact picture of these situations with efficient narration.

Recent Portraits

In recent years, this situation started to undergo a process of gradual development. As generation after generation passes, women's ability to face this competitive scenario, also experiences advancement. This progress in the world of women is aptly displayed in Durga Prasad Panda's remarkable poem **Family Portrait**:

Father, a renowned vet,
loved animals,
more than anything in life.

To win his love
mother turned herself
into a meek goat.

And resigned herself
into the vague darkness
for the rest of her life.

From an early age
my sister mastered the art
of barking like a bitch.

When I grew up
to be a raging bull
gone berserk in the street.

Likewise, Janaki, Margeret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Marikolundhu and especially Akila who share their life experiences in the coupé, reveal their experience focusing on the progress they have made. All these women struggle for their inordinate ambitions with all their strength in male dominated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn things around. As Anita Nair's women don't believe in suffering submissively, they leave no stone unturned to reach the peak of joy and success. Struggling hard with hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tear-filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge the society to turn the tide in their favour.

“The women's life stories give an insight into expectations of married Indian women, the choices they make and the choice made for them. Anita Nair's story-telling is superb and each woman could easily spawn novel of her own. ...There is a story message of hope through change and even the ending is revealed as another beginning. Enticing and uplifting”

Anita Nair puts stress on 'self-trust' and the proceeding lines suit her view accurately:

Life's battles don't always go

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To the stronger or the faster hand;
They go to the one who trusts in himself
And always thinks,
“I can”.

Women break all barriers to assert themselves but they still demand what they have already desired, i.e., protection, love, care, compassion and understanding. Thus, their **Journey of self-discovery**, no doubt, their indomitable will and undefeatable spirit compels them to carry on their lives.

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Colophon

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