

Feministic Perspective in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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Abstract

Anita Nair is a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English. As a woman writer, she goes in depth to find the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and brings to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psyche and emotional inequalities in a male dominated society.

Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe" has turned out to be a great success. It is the story of a women's search for freedom and women's conditions in a male dominated society. The novel raises the questions whether the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to cultural resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In this real world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs. Hence, this paper tries to point out how Anita Nair projects Indian feminism and attitude through women characters in her novels.

Keywords: Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé*, Feminism, Patriarchy, Self-identity, Patience, Balanced mind.

Introduction

Feminism emerged in the western world as a movement in support of the same rights and opportunities for women as for men. Feminism has been subtly handled in the massive work of English novels of India. Feminism is defined as a cultural, economic, and political movement that is focused towards establishing legal protection and complete equality for women. In Indian writing, feminism has been used as a humble attempt for evaluating the real social scenario as far as women are concerned. Today's contemporary Indian English novelists are writing for the masses using the theme of feminism, which not only creates the interest among the readers but also affects them. Throughout the world, feminism has generated interest amongst the people and India is no exception.

Anita Nair

Most postmodern Indian women novelists are interested in exploring the feminine consciousness of the women characters, their evolution towards an awakened conscience and how eventually this leads to enrichment of their inner self in a male dominated society. Writers

like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Bharathi Mukherjee and some others have rejected any sort of feminist bias in their writings, but an in-depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issue pertains to be the chief concern of their plot. Among these writers, Anita Nair is one of the most prominent women writers in Indian English. She has refused to be labelled as a feminist writer. Far from taking a feminist concern, thereby fighting against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has brought out the feminine sensibility in a balanced view of life from a woman point of view.

Objective

Anita Nair has written six novels so far. They are "The better man", "Ladies Coupe", "Mistress," "Lessons in Forgetting," "Cut Like Wound," and "Idris: keeper of the light". Among these novels, "Ladies Coupe" has received much appreciation and it has been translated into 21 languages.

The main aim of this research paper is to focus the feministic point of view of Anita Nair. The portrayal of her memorable women characters and the feminist tone in her novel make Anita Nair one of the most outstanding female Indian novelists in English.

About the Title

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001) is a story of a woman's search for freedom and independence. Nair says "I am not a feminist. I enjoy being in the house. I liked to be treated nicely and pampered. I don't think this book is about feminism". "It's about the inner strength which I see in so many women that overwhelms me". "When fifteen years ago, I was travelling in a Ladies Coupe, the women around me began talking... people talk more openly to strangers". That is why Anita Nair keeps the title a "Ladies Coupe". (Behal, Suchitra: An Interview. *The Hindu*)

Anita Nair compared her novel to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* told by a band of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury. They are a collection of stories in frame. Likewise, in "Ladies Coupe", Anita Nair depicts six women in a railway compartment, each has a story to tell. By narrating the stories of six women, Nair moves from a state of passivity and absence to a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories which together make a single story of women rediscovering their bodies. There are stories which become a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by fake binaries.

Six Important Protagonists

Anita Nair narrates the stories of six women who are travelling together in a Ladies Coupe of a train. Mainly it depicts and connects the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom. Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila forty-five, single and working as a clerk, has been brought up in a conservative family of Tamil Brahmins. Akhila bears the burden of her family after her father's death. Her brothers and sisters grow up and get married and they hardly think

about Akhila's needs and aspirations. She has never been able to live a life of her own or passes an identity of her own. 'She was always an extension of someone's identity; daughter, sister, aunt... Akhila wished for once someone should see her as a whole being' (P.201-202). On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women – Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu. Though, they met for the first time they share their life's experience with each other. Even though they differ in age, educational background and cultural upbringing, their stories have a common thread, the tragic predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal social order.

Janaki, the oldest of the six women in the Coupe, grows up in the traditional family of being groomed into an obedient daughter, a loyal wife and a doting mother. She has been looked after all her life by men. "First there was my father and brother; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting, to take off from where his father left off. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat us like princess" (P.22-23). She is someone who always had a man to protect her. Someone who was first protected by her father then by brother then by her husband and after him, it would be her son. She recognizes the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother and the need to assert self-identity and freedom to live one's own life.

The Youngest of the six is Sheela, fourteen-years-old who talks about the female child abuse by men. Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar as, "one Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip. Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time" (P.66). When once Nazar knotted the bows in her sleeves, "She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother's eyes" (P.66). After that Sheela took the right decision that "She would never go to Hasina's house again" (P.66) as a means of her self-protection. Through this character, Nair has brought out the ill-treatment of women by men.

Margaret Shanti, another woman in the Ladies Coupe, is a successful chemistry teacher, embroiled in an unhappy marriage with Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of the school she works in. He is intensive, self-absorbed and indifferent towards his wife. Margaret would like to divorce him but does not to do so because she is afraid of society. Her way of taking revenge is to feed him oily food and make him a fall and dull person.

Prabha Devi is an accomplished woman whose embroidery was done with stitches so fine that you could barely see them, whose 'Ideas were light and soft', and who 'walked with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant; womanly' (P.170). After her marriage, her life swished past in the blur of insignificant days till one day a week after her fortieth birthday. When she realized that somewhere in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother, Prabha Devi forgets how it is to be herself and that's when

she learns to strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be and a shufti of a swimming pool helps her realize the need for the balancing act. The most heart-touching tale is that of Marikolunthu, thirty-one years old and an unwed mother who is a victim of a man's lust: her poverty forcing her to do things that violate traditional social, moral injunctions. Now, she is a mother to an illegitimate child. She has experienced poverty, rape, lesbianism and physical torture. "I was a restless spirit warped and bitter. Sometimes I would think of the past and I would feel a quickening in the vacuum that existed within me now" (P.266).

One night in the Ladies Coupe and her interaction with the five women, helped Akhila to realize that she had given the society an unnecessary power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question- 'Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?'. Hence, she comes to conclude that she gets back in touch with the gay who she felt in love with, someone who she did not accept for the fear of the society.

Akhila's quest for freedom is turned inward and aimed at the goal of self-discovery/identity. Women occupy a central place. Nair presents both restrained and apparent analysis of conflicting phases, underlying reasons and suggests a way out of it. It becomes more enthusiastic enough to analyse the image of women in Ladies Coupe when it is portrayed by a woman writer. Today, the woman plays multiple roles both indoors and outdoors. She participates in all the hitherto male dominated spheres. But a conflict persists in her mind and makes her restless. Family, marriage, and social norms bind her completely.

Conclusion

Ladies Coupe questions the status of women in a traditional bound social order that sees women exclusively in the role of an obedient daughter, a polite wife, and a breeder of children. Women in post-colonial India boldly defy such delimiting roles and assert self-dignity and personal freedom. They are to pen their basic physical and emotional needs and acts uninhabiting to satisfy them. The train journey in fact symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make them conscious of their self-esteem and dignity. It is a journey towards self-discovery Akhila travels with the question that has been haunting all her adult life. She meets five women characters in the novel and travels with the same question. This wonderful atmosphere, delicious, warm novel takes reader into the heart of women's life in contemporary India, revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships with husband, mothers, friends, employees, and children.

Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe" brings into focus the issue of self-realization. Though Anita Nair is not a feminist, her stories portray the sensibilities of a woman, how a woman looks at herself and her problems.

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