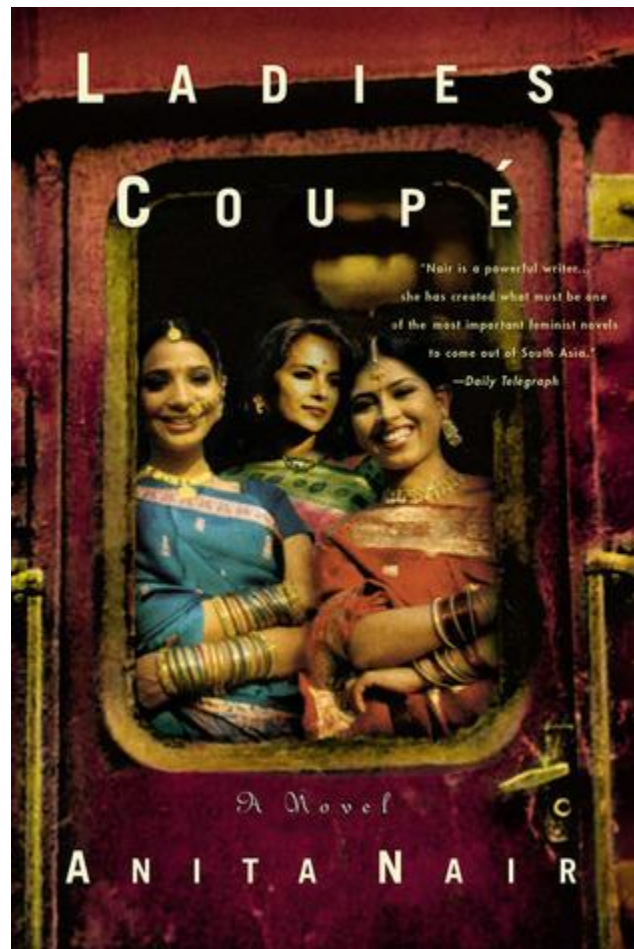


Protagonist of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* as a New Image of Woman

P. Tamil Selvi

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Abstract

Anita Nair in her second novel *Ladies Coupé* broods on the empowerment of women from the female bonding that occurs within the ladies' compartment of a train. Six women share the ladies compartment, a place where each of them can express their oppressed feelings and sufferings that they have never shared with anybody before. The problems and the way out that they have followed shows how these women have worked hard for their quest for independence. Along with the protagonist Akhila, the other women who travelled in the same coupe are Janaki who voices out for her desire to rebel against her husband who has attempted to control even her

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grown up son. Next important character is Margaret Shanti who is a victim of her husband's domination he had controlled her body, mind, and spirit and had never allowed her to be herself. Marikolanthu is another occupant who has suffered rape and has been the victim of no mistake of hers. The stories of all the women show that all of them are sufferers of patriarchal society and have transformed into repressive forces of the society. Education and financial independence has made them establish themselves and emerge as new image women.



Anita Nair

Courtesy: <https://mbrady.wordpress.com/2014/02/06/ladies-coupe-by-anita-nair/>

Introduction

Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy have become dominant factors that paved way for the feminist discourse that accentuated the relationship between inequality and injustice. Though colonialism has been brought to end 70 years before, the impact of colonization can be felt in the form of patriarchy. However, men have taken the role of colonizer and have started to oppress women. As a result, women are subjected to persecution by men. At this situation, education and financial independence has helped women to fight against patriarchal system. This new image of woman has helped various writers depict the change of status of women in this 21st century. When analyzing the works of Indian writer, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* depicts the exploitation of woman protagonist by the family and the society at large, and also shows how she and her five co-passengers work hard to evolve from patriarchal oppression into a new image of women.

Akila

Akila, the protagonist of *Ladies Coupe* can be called the new image woman, breaks free from the dictates of her family from the strength she has gathered from the female bonding in the ladies coupe of a train to Kanyakumari. Her family disregards all her desires and expects her to

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afford them monetary support throughout her life. Though Akila attempts to prepare herself for this sacrifice, the oppression that she suffers makes her revolt and emerges as a new woman who is searching for her freedom and identity. Akila's knowledge, expertise, and exposure to the world empowered her with agency and a sense of purpose.

Feminism

Feminists work hard at changing the reality in terms of female-centric system so that the oppressed women are liberated from the patriarchal system and emerge as new women breathing free. Usha Bande in her *Writing Resistance* states that "feminist resistance is shown through articulation; the most important aspect of it is to break the silence and to re-discover the female self" (15-16). Anita Nair in *Ladies Coupe* depicts the protagonist's dilemmas, requirements, and uncertainties with a charming manner. The novel attempts to figure an answer for the question- Can a woman stay single and lead a happy life, or does she need a man to lead a complete life? In the process of finding an answer, Akila searches for her freedom and liberty and also questions the taboos that were laid to restrict women from being independent. *Ladies Coupe* moves from past to present and present to past. This novel attempts to show how suppression and oppression are forced upon women in the guise of love, protection and the promise of security.

Ladies Coupe is the story of six women who come from varied walks of life who have experienced oppression in the past and how as new women they have attempted to overcome such painful domestic oppression within their familial milieu. The novel slowly develops against the background of a train journey where the six women who share the ladies coupe relate their stories to the others as the train moves towards its destination. The ladies coupe has become a comfort zone for all the six women, a place where each one of them can express their problems and sufferings and voice their feeling of oppression so that each of them develop courage and strength from the others to evolve as a strong independent woman.

Analyzing each of the woman characters helps to understand how they have worked to fight the patriarchal oppression. Akhilandeshwari or Akhila, the protagonist of this novel, is a forty-five year old spinster and one among the six women in the coupe. She forms the link between the other women to narrate their way to win the oppression that they once experienced and they also provide a new perspective to the question put forth by Akila: "Can a woman be happy alone, without a male protective presence in her life? (LC 4). All these six women through their discussions about the role of women in society express their thoughts on their emancipation and how to cope with life.

The first woman to narrate her story was Akila. She begins her story from the time she was nineteen, the time her father died and her family starts to put all the responsibility on her. She gets her father's clerical job in income tax department. The family burden makes her shun away all the romantic thoughts that all girls will usually develop at that age, and takes away the entire burden with any regret. However, the family demands and commitments start to eat her vitals that she starts longing for freedom and independence even though she is the breadwinner of the family. As she is the eldest daughter of the family, the family considers her as a money mending instrument and forgets to consider her desires. Even her mother never spared a thought for her well-being. This is clear when the author says: "When Akhila's father died, two things happened: Sundays became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the

family” (75). Over the period of time, when Akila’s family takes control over her, she starts to think of a family for her own thereby rebelling the control exerted on her by her family.

The thoughts of each member of the family were clearly explained by Anita Nair. This quote also explains how all of them never thought of Akhila’s marriage and they assume that she is happy with her situation:

Amma had Akhila to replace her husband as the head of the household. Amma had her-Akhila. Akhilandeswari. Mistress of all worlds, Master of none. 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 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? (LC 84)

Even though Akhila is considered the head of the family as she has become the earning member, she is not given the designated status of being the actual ‘head of the family.’ Traditionally money gave the power but that equation was undermined by patriarchal forces in most of the families. All the people that Akhila encounters are rooted in patriarchal thoughts. The men and elders in the family, who practice patriarchy, always wanted the money that women bring in; however, they fail to accord the status that they actually deserve. Even Akhila’s sister Padma refuses to respect her desires and thoughts and after a long dilemma, Akhila realizes the need to find an authentic life and happiness on her own. As a first step in her mission for an independent life, Akhila makes up her mind to acquire an education:

Instead, 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. ... To study the intricacies of what made a certain dynasty behave in a certain manner. To watch the unraveling of life from the sidelines. To read about monarchs and concubines; wars and heroes; to observe and no more (LC 85).

Akhila also thinks of the vanished hope of marriage in her life which occupies her psyche largely. When she believes that her life has become a vacuum with marriage, motherhood, and child-rearing, she starts to realize that her life is empty and has led life without any goal. This is evident from the following lines, “The world of the householder was not hers. From the Gurukula stages of life, she had moved directly to the Vanaprastha. And she wanted no part of someone else’s karmic flow” (LC 85-86).

The passion that Akhila yearns for gets a focus when she meets Hari. The encounter with him marks the next phase of Akhila’s transition, the breaking off of oppression that is imposed on her by her family and the baby steps towards the freedom that she has longed for. She breaks away the traditional norms imposed on her and subverts the societal norms of being a virgin until marriage, and enjoys being touched and fondled by her lover. In short, she experiences “a vein of strength” (LC 210). As sexuality is a significant part of human life, Akhila flouts the societal norms and goes to the extreme of experience which had been denied to her.

Akhila starts to break the boundaries when she begins to nurture her relationship with Hari who becomes Akhila’s world when she starts to think only about him. Thoughts of Hari start to rule Akhila and she begins “to braid them into a future” (LC 203). In return, Hari was able to generate a sensation in Akhila which stands as a testimony for the love that each of them

cherish. There is a healthy male-female relationship that develops between them. Akhila starts to bloom after the arrival of Hari in her life. However, she once again gets into her shell when she calls off her relationship with Hari when he expresses his interest in marrying her. This makes Akhila think of her future life being married and leading a life of oppression as she believes marriage as a source of oppression for women. Her bitter past makes her believe marriage as an body used by men to control women. Therefore, she rejects being in relationship. All she wanted is a free and liberal world. She does not want sex to oppress the freedom of woman by dominant man. She refuses to marry him saying that he is younger than her. The love and passion that Akhila has on Hari brings them closer that they get physically close which is a revelation for her. As a result, she lets their relationship die away which is yet another milestone in her evolution as an independent woman.

Akhila developed the ability to take risks and it is this courage to manage risks that motivates her to take a trip to Kanyakumari. She gradually attempts to find answers to all her questions regarding her loneliness. It is with this thought that she takes the train to Kanyakumari. She takes the train to discover her strength, independence, and answer to her questions in the ladies coupe, a perfect setting to unburden her memories. The atmosphere in the ladies coupe is very intimate. When Akhila opens the conversation and narrates her life, all the co-passengers join the conversation hoping to give their life example on where women need men. When Akhila says “as far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, Yes. I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can’t live alone, what do you think? Can a woman live by herself?” (LC 21). Each character shares their thoughts the last as she arrives at an insight into her condition after delving into the lives of the others.

The first person to narrate the story in the ladies coupe is Janaki. She was married and has a son and a daughter-in-law. She said that when her husband tried to control everybody, including their son, she felt “queer rage uncoil within her” (LC 30) and expressed her anger to her husband. When thinking of the importance of a man in a woman’s life, initially, she stated that “Why should a woman live alone, there is always a man willing to be with her?”(LC 21); however, after continuous discussion, Janaki continued to say that

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 thought if I were to lose it all, I would cope. If I ever became alone, I would manage perfectly. I was quite confident about that. I think I was tired of being this fragile creature... ‘Now I know that even if I can cope it wouldn’t be the same if he wasn’t there with me’ (LC 22-23).

The words of Janaki makes it clear that role of men is not important in her life. Next character to share her life was Margaret Shanti who has become the victim of male domination. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj had controlled her body, mind, and spirit and is the typical example male patriarchy. He uses marriage as a weapon to control her. Her academic excellence goes for a waste as he refuses to send her work. When she is interested in pursuing Ph.d, her husband forces her to do B.Ed. He has forced her work where he works. She continues to live with him and take control over him. As Ebe is proud of his physical appearance, she started to take control of him using flattery. She takes revenge on him by providing him with rich food and sex, the things that he likes the most. As a result, she started to control him completely. By, this she has started to find a way through which she has got a family which she dreamed off. Thus,

Margaret Shanti can be called a representative of all women who seek some kind of appreciation from their spouse.

The next important character who travels with Akila is Marikolanthu who has suffered rape and has suffered immense problems throughout her life when compared with others. She is from humble family background and male domination is forced heavily on her. Marikolanthu is employed to look after the Chettiar house and take care of child in that house; however, she hates her own son who was born as a result of her rape by Murugesan. She was vexed as the rapist was not punished; instead she was punished to make her living by being a helper in the Chettiar house. Lack of education and employment makes her a sufferer throughout her life. Her anger subsides only after seeing the corpse of Murugesan burning on the pyre. From the story of Marikolundu, it is clear that she is worst sufferer because of social, familial and financial repressions. Marikolundu can be called a true feminist as she wanted to uplift her standard from the false life imposed on her by the patriarchal society. She realizes that the boy born to her is innocent and starts to love him. It is through her story that the problems of rape, virginity, motherhood, heterosexuality are clearly brought out in the novel.

The stories all the women in the ladies coupe clearly brings to light the repressive forces of the society and how women are struggling to revolt against those oppression and establish themselves to the society. The stories create a change in Akila and she starts to think about Hari and wishes to lead a married life with him. This is evident from the thoughts of Akhila:

Perhaps, it is not too late, Akhila thought. That while what she half lost might be irretrievable, life would toss forth a second chance. Like it had for Janaki. And for Margaret too in some convoluted way. And then Akhila remembered that there had been the makings of a second chance, but she had not known it to be so at that time... (LC 154-155).

Akhila stays in the hotel and starts to think about her freedom, independence, and her future. When she was on the beach, she picks a conversation with a man and calls him to have sex with him. She does so in order to take control over men. When the man asks lots of questions on her, she cuts short the conversation and refuses to answer him. She starts to enjoy the assertiveness and continues to have a physical relationship with an unknown man. Bande in her *Writing Resistance* states has stated that Akhila wants to use her dominance by calling a man to have sex with her and does not want man to control her. This physical relationship can be said to

The intercourse that Akhila had with the unknown man has paved way for her to discover her true self. She experiences the pure sensations that have been denied to her for years. As a result, she emerges as a new woman that is manifested in her body language. Also, the new-found freedom and liberty gives her self-assurance which is visible in her energy and liveliness. This shows that Akhila is a 'new woman' who has evolved from her cocoon with her new found courage to liberate herself from the traditional customs. In the words of MalashriLal in *The Law of Threshold*:

For the 'new woman,' the courage of her convictions is all she can rely upon. In repudiating convention and the protections offered to her, she has also separated herself from other women who habitually authenticate their passivity by giving value to a common belief of socialization. Being outside the complicity that indirectly supports the ongoing patriarchal arrangements, the woman outside the threshold has to devise a world of her own. (20)

Thus, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* helps in empowering women and also provides space for them to liberate themselves from the social constraints and emerge as a new image of women.

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P. Tamil Selvi
Asst. Professor of English
Government Arts College (Men) Autonomous
Nandanam
Chennai 600035
Tamilnadu
India
tamilselvi33@gmail.com