

## Inspiring Tale of Emancipation and Identity of Women Characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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### ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is known as a distinguished postmodern Indian female novelist. In most of her novels, she has tried to portray the picture of Indian culture and domestic issues tackled by women of modern India. She has become a more prominent writer on account of her captivating style of writing. Her most cherished and prominent novel *Ladies Coupé* is considered one of the five best novels in Indian English Literature. It is a tale of predicament narrated by women of different ages, and social and cultural backgrounds. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel is a year's spinster who spent her whole life taking care of her family. Janaki, Margaret Shanti and Marikoluntun have tremendously struggled to accomplish emancipation and equality in the patriarchal society. This paper is an attempt to explore inspiring stories of women characters in *Ladies Coupé* with a feministic approach.

### KEYWORDS

Modern Indian Culture; Patriarchy; Struggle; Emancipation; Identity.

### Introduction

In the history of the existence of human being men have explained the world from their own point of view. The role of women was always debarred in the stories and she was always the voiceless partner of the man in the history. Virginia Woolf in her book, *The Room of One's Own* tries to put forth the depiction of women in fiction or poetry as completely different than their real situation. She says,

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is

completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was a slave of a boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts from literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of husband.

Simon De Beauvoir a profound figure in feminist writers in her book, *The Second Sex* speaks about 'Otherness' and the way it is used falsely for women by the male dominating society. She writes, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." In her work, Beauvoir strongly argues that women are framed as the 'Other' or 'Object' and men as 'Subject' in the so-called patriarchal society. According to her these vehemently imposed societal norms formed by "Men" who play a major role in the oppression of women. She emphasizes the role of women as human beings and the false perceptions about feminine and masculine identity. "He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other" (Simon de Beauvoir)

Feminism is a movement that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is often considered as the after-effect of the Second World War. It was a time when men in the family had to go in the military and serve the nation during war and women had to work and become the breadwinner of the family. The world war provided extraordinary opportunities for American women. Even though to many extent women became self-dependent, it was just a short-term change. They had to face great challenges because after the war when men returned to their home, they wanted women to get back to their original job of a 'homemaker'. But this temporary empowerment gave birth to a massive movement all over the world. Many profound liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simon De Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf challenged the old patriarchal labels and held this oppressive system responsible for restricting women's potential.

### **Feminism in India**

In countries like India, women are still suppressed and subjugated by male-

dominated society. We are developing in all other aspects. However, a woman in an Indian household has to fight for her individuality and freedom. In Indian society, women are forced to play the vital role of the caretaker of the family. All the social norms formed by the male-controlled society don't allow women to think beyond their defined roles which are formed without their approval. Many emerging Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor and Kamala Markandaya began to portray the picture of women through their work and try to give voice to their pain as well as their efforts to get rid of all the social constraints forced upon them. Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupé* is one of the finest examples of women who are mistreated either by their families or by society. Each one of them, after undergoing the physical, mental and emotional torture decides to think about their own emancipation.

### **About the Author**

Anita Nair was born on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1966 in Kerala and completed her education in Chennai. She is a renowned novelist, journalist, poet and short story writer. She started writing with her first work *Satyr of the Subway* published in 1997. She received remarkable success and international recognition with two of her well-read books *A Better Man* and *Ladies Coupé* which have been translated into almost 21 languages. One can find the depiction of her closeness with her motherland in her works. Being an Indian English writer, she always tried to make connections with people by using comprehensive language in her writing.

Although Anita Nair refuses to call herself a feminist writer, in most of her fiction there is a representation of marginalization and life experiences of women in so-called male-dominated Indian middle-class families. About her work *Ladies Coupé* she says in one of her

interviews:

When I wrote *Ladies Coupé*, it was called a feminist novel. It bothered me because what are we talking about here. Feminism never came with applause. It was like a derogatory jab. I was puzzled. So, for me, feminism is something - as a right of every woman to be a woman and not feel lesser for it. Most of the time, women are made to feel you have to be a certain kind of person, then you are a good woman (An interview: India Today).

Anita Nair in her work shows the condition of women in post-colonial Indian patriarchal social order and their journey from the role of women as a mother, sisters, daughters and a wife towards self-discovery. Women in Indian society are always considered as inferior counterparts of men in social and economic strata. Anita Nair not only shows the picture of this submissive kind of woman but a new self-assured and enlightened individual.

### ***Ladies Coupé: An Inspiring Tale***

This paper primarily attempts to explore inspiring tales in Anita Nair's well-known novel, *Ladies Coupé* with a feminist approach. All six women characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* are of different ages, and social and cultural backgrounds, and share their experiences with each other on a train journey. In spite of being diverse from each other, they are struggling with the same dispute, i.e. their quest for self-identity. Akhileshwari, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikoluntu are the six main characters in the novel who present the role of women in every household in Contemporary Indian society. She has tried to showcase the effects of gender discrimination, lack of education, physical exploitation, patriarchy and many other evil practices on women's psychology. A psychological transformation of all six

women can be noticed from a confused and confidence-less personality to a strong and victorious individual. Akhila, the protagonist and narrator of the novel had rebelliously left her family and escaped from a mundane life, in order to get freedom and accomplish personal desires. She is a forty-year-old spinster who never thought about her own dreams and happiness. After the death of her father, she had to take care of her whole family. She served her family and fulfilled their expectations throughout her life. She has suppressed all her inner desires as an individual and sacrificed her youth for her family. Even though she is the only earning member and the eldest sister, she has to tolerate the dominance of males in the family. She always needed the permission of her younger brothers to make any smallest decision in her life. Poor Akhila who has lost her individuality, finally, decides to leave the house and take a train journey where she meets other five women in the *Ladies Coupé*. According to the Father of Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, dreams are psychological aspects of human life. In his book, *The Interpretations of Dreams*, he says that a dream is the reflection of a human's inner mind, incomplete desire and feelings. Akhila's dream on a train journey about fulfilling her sexual desire displays the impact of her family's restriction on her psyche.

In modern Indian society, where Akhila plays the role of a father and takes care of the whole family single-handedly, it is also said that women should be always taken care of and protected by the 'Man' in the family. It can be a father, a brother, a husband or a son. Kate Millett in her book, *Sexual Politics* speaks about the tale in which a woman is blamed for all the misfortunes and discomfort of the lives of human beings. Eve succumbs and eats the forbidden fruit and her punishment is, "Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply / By thy conception; children thou shalt bring / In

sorrow forth, and to thy husband's will / Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule." (Milton and Pullman 291). According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all these Christian ideas for women to degrade her are intentionally formed by the Patriarchal system to put woman after man and to forcefully impose the superiority of men over women. Not only in Western but Indian epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata also blame women as a reason for the fall of humanity. Such a perception about women was not found during the Vedic time period in Hindu Culture. Women at that time were given immense respect as equal to men. During the period of Manu Smriti, *Manusamhita* was written in which women were belittled and refused from the study of Vedas and considered as Shudras. This changed the status of women in Hinduism permanently and women till today suffer from these misconceptions about their sexuality. Another significant character Janaki is always pampered by her husband. Being the oldest woman in the group she has developed a different rather conservative thinking pattern. In spite of being satisfied in her marital life, she is completely reliant on her husband. She led her life assuming that a woman's life is complete with her husband and son. There are many women in Indian households who have lost their identity with the belief that the happiness of a woman lies in upholding good relations with the 'Man' in the family. Financial independence gives woman the power to change their lives. Unlike Janaki, Akhila could make a strong decision to leave her family only because she was financially independent. Dependency is the prime source of women's suppression which emphasizes the importance of 'Man' in the lives of women.

Concerning this belief, many Indian highly educated women sacrifice their careers for their families. Margaret Shanti has a similar story of such women in

Indian families. A gold medalist in chemistry wants to do her Ph.D. and go to America but gets married to the repressive "Man" who killed her ambition and made her a slave. He not only forced her to change her personality but also compelled her to abort their child. Margaret was so frustrated with her dominating husband and soon her love was replaced by hatred. Being an educated woman, she started questioning herself about her self-esteem which many women forget to ask themselves. She took revenge on her husband and taught him a good lesson with her clever mind. This story of Margaret indicates that every woman has the power to fight against oppression and win their freedom.

Karma (Destiny) plays a very eminent role in Indian culture. Women in India are taught to believe that their oppression and subjugation are the result of their Karma either the sins of present birth or the previous birth. This concept gives them the strength to tolerate the injustice happening to them. Domestic violence, rape and physical assault is another severe and distressing issue women have to face in so-called Modern Indian society. The country where the woman is worshipped as a goddess is also exploited, blamed and deserted by the male domineering system. Unlike other characters, Marikolanathu and Sheela were the victims of sexual abuse. Marikolanathu, a poor maidservant has a very tragic and disheartening story. At a very young age she was raped by her master's poor relative and gave birth to an illegitimate child. The physical torture continued even after this incident and she was sexually exploited by her master and even his wife forced her to have a lesbian relationship. Another painful aspect of society is that no one listens to the poor. Marikolanathu tried to tell the injustice that happened to her but no one believed her. She had to suffer the perceived hatred of her family and society when it was no

fault of hers. Sheela, a fourteen-year-old girl was physically abused by her own friend's father. The feeling of disgust and helplessness made her embarrassed. Nonetheless, in the end, she resolves to forget all the pain and stops going to her friend's house again. At such a young age Sheela's realization of her self-esteem demonstrates her heroism and mental maturity to fight against the old traditional beliefs about man's authority over woman. She is a girl of the young generation who understands how to handle such situations skillfully. The youngest of all women in the compartment proved herself stronger than the others.

Simon De Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Prabha Devi, was a confident woman who was an epitome of beauty and mannerism. She was admired by people around her for being a good wife and a daughter-in-law. A girl child in an Indian household is trained to be a woman by their mothers. Prabha Devi was also brought up by her mother to be an ideal wife. She never wanted to live such a monotonous and restricted life. Her beauty and attitude attracted her husband's friend towards her which made her realize that a woman has to be very conscious about her conduct which may mislead a man with a wrong perception of her. This incident changed her completely and conquered her shyness and fear. She finally removed the mask of mannerisms with self-actualization.

After listening to all these stories, Akhila contemplates her own condition. She thought about man and woman relationships and decided to lead her life alone. She thinks that she doesn't need a man in her life to be complete. She began to realize that women are self-sufficient. Any kind of dependency on the opposite

gender makes them subordinate and submissive. All these characters in the novel are true depictions of women in Indian households who deal with painful situations in their social and familial lives. Every woman in some or the other way is trapped in the presumption of being subordinate to 'Man'. Women constantly remain under the impression that they are inferior to men. The novel exhibits the effects of the patriarchal system on women and their battle against the situation. After experiencing discrimination, injustice, domination and physical torture the women in the novel find their way to liberation and feminine identity. All these inspiring stories portray the image of a courageous 'New Woman' challenging the old unjust stereotypes and social practices. Slowly and gradually women are challenging these misconceptions and raising their voices against the patriarchal stereotypes. Women like Janaki and Margaret are realizing that their prime duty is not to serve their husbands but to lead their own lives towards their contentment. Rape victims like Marikolanathu are recovering and rebounding themselves from the pain. The awakening of women characters in the novel brings awareness to the Indian women to throw away their social bondage. Woman whether it is educated, working or a homemaker has to defy and elevate to bring out their real self. The miseries and humiliation is not going to diminish in society but women need to fight and rise for their dignity. Women have to struggle in search of revival from the oppressed system created by the 'Man' in society in order to lead a self-contented life. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* is an epitome of women's power which reveals the emerging Indian women with the right to equality and emancipation.

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