



SELF - DISCOVERY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN ANITA NAIR'S "LADIES COUPE"

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Abstract

Women are steadily taking up new roles to play both as individuals and members of families and societies. However even now, huge majority of women continue to lose their identity, independence and self - respect. They are like instruments in the hands of the husband 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'. It is focuses on importance to Anita Nair makes her central characters to expect over this topic.

Anita Nair is an Indian English Language writer. She was born on 26th January 1966 in Shornur, Palakkad district of Kerala. And also she has a screen writer and poet. Her famous notable works are *Ladies Coupe* and *Chain of Custody*. Nair was educated in Chennai before returning to Kerala, where she gained a B.A in English Language and Literature. She is one of the finest writers in the Indian Writing in English with an international reputation. Prominent Indian Writer Anita Nair through her novels explores the real condition of woman in our society. Her popular fictions include *The Better Man* in 2000, *Ladies Coupe* in 2001 and *Mistress* in 2005. She mesmerizes the readers with her suggestive language and descriptions with her novel overflow. The important point is that her novels reveal the self - discovery and women empowerment.

In 2002, *Ladies Coupe* was elected as one of the five best in India. The novel is about women's conditions in a male dominated society told with great insight, unity and humour. *Ladies Coupe* in 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.

Sensibility is particularly to respond to aesthetic and emotional inducements. The stories written or read by mistake make us take in the inner self of both the writer and the characters created by the writer. Representing the story of a woman's search for strength and liberation; Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* focuses on the suppressed strengths which every individual. However ladies do not disclose their life stories to each other in journeys of the protagonist, Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers in the intimate atmosphere of the ladies coupe which she shares with five other ladies are Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolanthu in her long train journey to Kanyakumari. This paper makes an effort in stating the very nature of Indian Women to sharing experiences by emphasizing the Indian emotional response of women in identifying themselves part of the Indian tradition and culture.

This is a story of Akhilandeshwari, Akhila forty-five and single, an income-tax clerk and a woman who has never been permitted to live her own life. She has always been a provider as a daughter, as a sister and as an aunt. Once she gets herself a one way ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, amazingly alone for the first time in her life. She determines to liberate herself of all that her traditional Tamil Brahmin life has certain her. In the friendly company of five other women in the ladies coupe Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers. She tries to find out an answer to the basic question which has been in quest throughout her life.



Akhila who has the protagonist of the novel, she gives up her education to take up the responsibility of the family. As the novel unfolds, we come to know of Akhila's past. Akhila was born in Tamil Brahmin family. Her father PattabhiIyer worked as a clerk in income tax office and her mother was a traditional Brahmin woman who followed the strict conventions of Brahmin caste. Akhila had two brothers Narayan, Narashiman and a sister Padma. When she was nineteen years old, her father died in an accident. Then she became the employee of her family. She innate her father's job with the use of her earning, Akhila made her brothers to undertake their graduation. Her younger brother Narashiman took the teaching job and Narayan joined the tank factory as a mechanic. But instead of considering about Akhila's future, both got married and settled in their life. No one was worried about her life and marriage, neither her mother nor her siblings. Instead of reflecting over Akhila's marriage, her mother took more concentration over Akhila's sister Padma's marriage.

Thus all of them seemed to have accepted the idea that Akhila was to lead her life as a spinster. Akhila worked hard for her family but no one seemed to capture the fact that she too needed to have a life of her own. Akhila's family was content while she stayed in the wings, she did not make any demands, orders inspite of her employee status. Due to her family burden, she even forgets her own likings in her life. Akhila got equal work but she did not receive equal pay for equal work but she did not equal respect even though the family survives only because of Akhila's covered pay condensed. Though she had labored for her family members did not recognize her:

Akhilandeshwari was mistress of all worlds but master of none.

What Akhila missed the most was that no one can ever call her
by her name any more. All Women were madam and all men sir.

Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? (LC84)

Akhila was the protector and silent worker, entirely behind the scenes. Her brothers got everything they wanted like education, marriage and a life of their own but her needs were taken for granted when her own sibling increased like parasites on her. Akhila sacrificed everything for the welfare of her family. She even refused her love affair with Hari who was younger than herself for the sake of her family and social customs. After her mother's death, she stayed with her sister Padma's family in Bangalore. But Padma did not consider Akhila's feelings and longings. Akhila was fed up with her routine life. Akhila's encounter with her school friend Karpagam awakened her sprit to think of life to live for her own. Karpagam was a widow but continue to wear the signs of marriage living a satisfactory life. "I live alone, I have many years now. My Daughter who is just twenty three does as well. We are strong Akhila. We are if we want to be..... Build a life for yourself where your needs come first" (LC202).

Thus Akhila's interaction with Karpagam helped her to find a voice will. And this meeting with Karpagam empowered Akhilato face this economical world alone. This conversation kindled her desire to explore herself. So she had decided to do something that she had never done before. She decided to go on a train journey away from her family and her responsibility to discover herself, a journey that would make her a different woman.

Though she performs the role of a provider perfectly, she is not allowed to live her own life. Tired of their high existing, she makes a decision to take escape. So that she can have time to think of herself



and her life ahead. And on the way of her lonely trip to Kanyakumari she meets different people. Through their experiences Akhila tries to analyze her own quest for a better life.

The first story was that of Margaret Shanti is one of the fellow travelers in the ladies coupe. Margaret's story is a woman who learns her own tactics to get her dreams true. Margaret's husband, Ebenezer Paulraj is an example for male domination. He drills Margaret into a position of dutiful silence, making her out to be an unnoticed and unremarkable girl. A girl, with a brilliant academic career and a warm and exciting personality is reduced to an average girl. His delicate brutality to the children in his school gets repeated with his wife too.

Once he was passionate with the girlish characteristics of Margaret. It was obvious even at their first meet. To retain the girlish charm in her, when she happily announced her pregnancy, he insisted on to aborting the baby. Margaret's felt confusion, anger, sorrow, pain and self-pity.

Tired of her submissiveness at her home, she finally takes her life into her own hands. With supreme will power she collects her hidden strength and sends the sphere to his court. Having learnt the tactics from his constant playing of games to get his things done, she takes her revenge by following the same tactics which are her husband's tools to rule her.

Margaret has gone through physical, mental and divine emergency throughout her life. She keeps on growing till she finds a state where she is happy and peaceful. Margaret's marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj is like a fairy tale for her. Ebenezer Paulraj loves Margaret Shanti from the bottom of his heart but not ready to accept her individual likes and dislikes, urges and fancies and dreams and aims. Margaret's state hands tied freedom, is excellently portrayed by Anita Nair. He loves her but he did not allow her individuality.

Margaret is initially a little girl who says 'yes' to whatever her husband says and ready to do anything for him. She is jolted out of this role when she has to go for an abortion. He controls her completely. She is forced to do B.Ed., though she wants to do Ph.D. She is made to work only for her husband and he nags her all the time. She starts to hate him and the day she realizes her hatred towards him, she feels liberated from some unknown clutches:

"I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZER PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. HATE HIM. I waited for a clap of thunder, a heaving fireball, a whirlwind, a dust storm... for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps violating revelations" (Ladies Coupe 98)

When Margaret understands that she is isolated, she finds consolation through eating a lot of food. She puts on weight. Ebenezer, on the other hand, who is aware of his health and fitness, makes her feel guilty about her weight gain. She leads a routine life until the day James, the golden fish and floats dead. The moment proves to be a turning point in her life. She does not want her life to float like dead fish. She identifies herself with the golden fish. In the words of Anita Nair, among the five elements that constitute life, "I classify myself as water. Water that sprinkles. 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" (Ladies Coupe 96).



Ebenezer's love for food and sex becomes a tool for Margaret. She starts spoiling Ebenezer with sex and food he likes the most in his life. The result he becomes fat, loses his vanity and needs her more and more. She once controlled by him earlier, now holds him completely in her hands. A unique way adapted by Margaret helps her to go back into the society, changes her parents outlook and attitude of her husband.

The tactic, finding and attacking the weakness of the challenger to win him, is artistically handled by Anita Nair. The heavy depression of Margaret, her silenced voice, her physical and mental sufferings, and the effort she takes to make her strong are the places where Anita Nair proves to be a notable writer of Indian Writing in English.

The second story of Janaki is another fellow passenger of *Ladies Coupe* is an example of ancient belief of Indian society that a woman should always depend on some man in her life. The comparison of woman with Sita or Savitri epic characters of Indian Literature also insists this motive. According to Indian tradition a woman is always identical with good wife. A good wife should be faithful, obedient and virtuous. Janaki is expected to take up this traditional role of women. She plays various roles such as a daughter, a wife and a mother but not an individual who claims her life to be her own. The secondary position becomes permanent for her. This is mainly due to the patriarchal pattern of her society, which is accepted as a natural sensation.

The problems of adjustment with the husband and his relatives have been the most widely treated problems in the novels written by Indian women novelists. This has been treated for instance by Nayantara Sagh, Antia Desai and Shashi Deshpande. These writers suggest that wives must be given more rights and not to be treated as inferior to their husbands they should have a more positive outlook than the one they already have the damaging should be invalidated. Janaki gets married to Prabhakar, when she is eighteen year old and leads a happy, comfortable, long married life for forty years.

Janaki's husband is a caring partner and she has a son and daughter-in-law. Janaki leads a happy life until she realizes her modesty. She feels some string of revolt when she finds her husband controlling everybody even their grown up son. She says to her husband, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding."

Prabhakar's arrogant, dominance, exactness, and precision irritates Janaki. The life which has gone smoothly starts to find its ups and downs. She discovers herself and her true happiness that lies in her, but she is not able to take off the web under which she is covered for a long period. Her initial response to Akhila's query "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always man willing to be with her" (*Ladies Coupe* 21). I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Woman like me end up being fragile (*Ladies Coupe* 22).

The third tale was that of fourteen years old girl Sheela. She is a sensitive girl of sacred with a deep insight. She looks at the family around her and relationship between her grandmother, mother and father and she understands the dynamics of life. Her grandmother teaches her practical life. She becomes attached to her grandmother until she dies and the attachment brings in a maturity to Sheela. Her conversation with other fellow travelers seems to be a matured one. The knowledge of three generation women can be found in Sheela, her mother's and her grandmother's and also her own.



Sheela's grandmother also teaches her the negative picture of men who dominate women physically as well as psychologically. Sheela is lectured by her father continuously for using 'shit' in every sentence for speaking to boys and for being rude. He has encouraged her to speak "with a razor-edged wit and a finely developed skill of repartee" (70). Sheela's father always gives preference to her as his child. However, when she starts to talk like a matured woman, he is completely changed and starts to control her whenever she begins to talk.

When her grandmother dies of cancer and her body is prepared for funeral, Sheela dresses her grandmother in a good costume with her jewels. Sheela does it because she remembers the words of her grandmother, "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (Ladies Coupe 67). Thus, Sheela fulfills the wish of her grandmother by affectionately dressing her dead body with jewels. A fourteen-year-old girl's inner search and maturity are beautifully pictured by Anita Nair.

The fourth story was that of Marikolundhu to comment upon the erotic abuse of Indian women from rural background. Marikolundhu's story recalls her encounter with men and arranges that most men take advantage of women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. They never hesitate to blame the woman at the end. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that a woman's responsibility towards the family is total while as any sort of other authority is conveniently denied to her.

This society rejects to think that the woman is strong-willed to create dreadful concerns of she is completely ignored. Marikolundhu undergoes degradation and debasement, which result in negating her son Muthu. Marikolundhu's character reveals the physical as well as mental suffering due to ignorance. She comes from a poor background. Her mother works as a cook at Chettiar's house, which is one of the richest families in their village. Even as a child she is the target of social and economic suppression.

She loses her education by this. She looks after her house when her mother goes for work later when her mother is seriously ill, she is employed at the Chettiar's house. There, she is assigned with the work of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. She showers love and affection upon the child. She takes care of him well, but hates her son Muthu, the one who escaped many attempts of abortion. He is the result of her seduction by Murugesan. She does not want the child which is the result of seduction but the situations do not help her. So she leaves her son at her mother's care and takes care of the household of Chettiar family.

Marikolundhu, deprived from the society, and Sujata Akka, deprived from her husband, find mutual happiness in their nearness. Later Sujata's husband also uses Marikolundhu to fulfill his sexual desires. When Sujata Akka comes to know this, instead of punishing her husband, she pushes Marikolundhu out of her household. She gets the responsibility of her own child after her mother's death. Mercilessly she mortgages him at one of Murugesan's looms for Rs.5000. The anger she has on Murugesan, the society which saves him from punishment, her inability and the hatred of her son, everything comes to an end only at the death of Murugesan.

The turning point in her life comes when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the fire and she sees Muthu tends to the fire. She is shocked at the realization that she has reduced her son to a very lower state for no fault of his. All the hatred she has on him goes with the flames. She feels love for her



child. She decides to look after him and makes up her mind to call him back to her. Marikolanthu is surrounded by social, inborn and financial problems. Her resolve to bring up her child enables her to begin a new chapter. Finally Marikolanthu, a voiceless victim, forced motherhood and lesbianism, finds peace only after accepting her responsibility of the child, whom she has invalid and neglected. Marikolanthu's continuous search for meanings and values of life ends here.

The last story was that of Praba Devi. She was born to rich parents. She had the perfect childhood. She had everything that a girl ought to be, She was beautiful, Police, good cook and singer. Soon she was married to Jagadeesh a rich man. But she found her life empty after her marriage. She had a passion towards swimming but her husband restricted her in learning swimming. But ultimately she had broken his restrictions by learning swimming without anybody help. Thus at last she discovered her passion and got fulfillment in achieving it due to empowerment.

Thus all co - passengers narrated their stories to Akhila and departed one by one as they reached their respective stations. Akhila finally reached her destination of Kanyakumari. All these women advised Akhila to go against societal pressures to discover her. Akhila wondered how she had let her family members to rule and rein her life. Akhila had failed to realize her 'Self'. She discovered herself. In those days women needed a man for protection. But today a woman needs a man for companionship and also to share the ideas and thoughts. So at last, she rang up to Hari, her past lover. Hence the story comes to an end. Therefore Anita Nair had impressively sketched how Akhila had empowered herself through her journey of self-discovery.

Anita Nair presents the existential struggle of woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. The woman emerging out of such situations is a defeated individual who undergoes much pain and suffering. Such characters demonstration a sense of insecurity due to their painful emotional experiences and also due to the collapse of one value system and the absence of enduring values. Anita Nair traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self - realization, self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice is heard throughout the novel.

To conclude that novel Margaret, a chemistry teacher represents the women who are forced to lose their self-identity by their husbands. A fourteen year old girl Sheela's portrayal depicts the modern young women who are aware of their need of individuality. Marikolundhu, pictures the rural women who lose their life because of illiteracy and ignorance. Janaki, a pampered housewife's posture is common to be found in India. Prabha Devi discovered her passion and got fulfillment in achieving due to empowerment.

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