



Gender Consciousness in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7076119

Abstract

The paper is a study on gender-specific issues about the patriarchal society. Anita Nair is a well-known Indian Feminist writer in English. She became popular through her novels A Better Man, Mistress and Lessons in Forgetting. "Ladies Coupe" (2001) is a story of Akhila who is travelling alone to Kanyakumari for the first time and communicates with other five ladies in a ladies' compartment. These five ladies Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanth reveal their stories to Akhila which teaches her to determine a life of her own. Being a spinster she was always haunted by a question 'can a woman live herself?' and finally, she finds answer to this. Hence, this paper pursues to ponder over the glimpses of gender consciousness found in the novel "Ladies Coupe"

Keywords: Gender Roles, Feminism, Patriarchy.

Self-knowledge is no guarantee of happiness, but it is on the side of happiness and can supply the courage to fight for it.

-Simone de Beauvoir

The study takes up a point that how women are subjugated and oppressed in the male dominated society like India in picturesque manner. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* has been the source for of inspiration and the perfect novel that have dealt with the women centric issues. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila is a spinster who hides in dab moth tones and does exactly what others expect from her. She is brought up in a traditional family and constantly she was scrutinised by her sister. Niloufer a friend of Akhila booked a railway ticket for her to Kanyakumari. Akhila who lived the life of a recluse is travelling alone for the first time in a crowded ladies' compartment. But it sets a life-changing turn in her life. When she entered the coupe she had her theories in mind which were ingrained from her childhood "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone". (LC 16)

Janaki an elderly lady narrates her orthodox story first. She had a long married life of forty years and was clueless about independent life. She acknowledges, "Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like a princess. And because of that, we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves." (LC 23) She was married at the age of 18 and was preached by her elders to follow her husband who is the master of her life. Prabhakar turned out to be a good caring husband who was always there by her side even in the kitchen. But she realizes her marriage and the importance of her husband only



after her son's marriage. When she witnesses a lack of understanding in her son she thinks he is selfish like her. She is shaken when her son treated her badly and takes the decision to leave his house the next day. The boredom in marriage had made her drift from Prabhakar and she had turned towards her son. But when her husband took her side and scolded her son she was shifted towards him. Janaki had felt captivated in her marriage and wanted to emancipate but she comprehends that "Now I know that even if I can cope, it wouldn't be the same if he wasn't there with me." (LC 23) Akhila is remembered for her mother after hearing to Janaki's story who had said "It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is waving and sparring all the time. It is also much easier and simpler to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man's role." (LC 14)

The next story is said by Sheela who is just 14 years is travelling with her father to witness her grandmother's final rituals. Her grandma had warned her to be careful and that she is smart. She is aware of Celine's incident that was raped and impregnated by her friend's father. Even she had stopped going to her friend Hasina's house after her father Nazar displayed bad touch. Sheela's grandma was a feminist "you must not become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (LC 68). Though she is young Sheela is aware of her father's intolerance and hatred toward her speech. As a young girl, she was allowed to speak like an adult but when she is growing up and wanted to speak her mind, she is objected to by her father. Her father wants to prepare her daughter in accordance with the acceptance of society, "teach her to swallow her words, make her mouth nice and pleasant, innocuous things kill her spirit and tame her tongue." (70) Sheela displays her free mind in doing what she feels right for her grandma. She had dressed her well even on her deathbed as she was very keen on her looks and she had aspired for graceful death.

Margaret who is married to Ebe thinks that woman doesn't need man, "That is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality" (LC 95). She had taken revenge on her husband in a different way and had come to drop him to health care to manage his weight. Margaret and Ebe's was a story of love at first sight, and even with the approval of their parents got married easily. Ebe was vice-principal of the school and handsome, and Margaret was an MSC gold medallist and pretty lady. She was infatuated and attracted to this thinking man. He was her life and it was easy for him to make her puppet in his hand. He took her decisions whether it is her education or eating Bhelpuri, going to Church or her haircut. It was his choice to do B.Ed, not a doctorate. She was shattered inside when he aborted their baby. He wanted a wife with whom he can sleep and boss her around, never caring about her feelings. But after some time it was very difficult for her to live with him. She was very unhappy with him but their family history had no cases of divorce and her mother had advised on her marriage day that a woman should put double efforts as a man to make a successful partnership. Margaret had tried her level best to cope with her. Her



nagging or her silence never made any difference to him. He was a very demanding and tough man. Margaret after much thought found her way from the only weakness he had which was towards 'food'. She cooked delicious dishes and made him eat, a year later Ebe was slow and became a fat man, a quiet man and an easy man. He became dependent on her for everything and a baby girl was born. Margaret confesses, "I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundation of his being" (LC 97). Her life changed after he became overweight and she took utmost care in not changing him to his previous self. Margaret's piece of advice to Akhila before she got down is, "Once you stop worrying that the world will think of you, your life will become that much easier to live" (LC 136). Margaret's love-hate story reminded Akhila of her love for Hari. Their love did not consummate into marriage as Hari was five years younger than Akhila. She broke up with him but was tortured by his memories. After her mother's death, she took a transfer to Bangalore as her sister was living there. She wanted to live alone in her quarters but her sister the Padma without her invitation came along and stayed with her family.

Next, is the story of Prabha Devi who looked confident and content in her life. Prabha hesitates to say that she was not like that before. She had ventured a long way and configured herself to be a confident woman. Prabha was born in a rich merchant family with four brothers. She had suffered gender discrimination from her father who thought a 'daughter is a bloody nuisance' (LC 169). Her father made a business deal through her marriage to a diamond merchant Jagdeesh. She was married at the age of 18 years and for many years she waited for her husband to come home, her unborn children to come. A business trip with her hubby to New York was an eye-opening for her. She changed herself moulded to a western style in her looks and attitude. As a result, Jagdeesh's Tennis friend Pramod tried to become close to her physically. This incident made a drastic change in her and she wanted to have babies. After Nitya, Vikram was born. She wholeheartedly devoted herself to her kids. After Vikram became 15 years old she decides to learn swimming and lies to her husband about that. Her husband was not so dominating but she allowed him to dominate. Simone de Beauvoir remarks that "women are complicit in their oppression; that is women internalize the consciousness of the male gaze and the expectations of gender roles". After learning swimming Prabha realized what she had made to her and her life. The encounter with Pramod had shaken her as she was afraid of losing her husband and secured life. Only when she conquered her fear of drowning she was able to learn to swim. This changed her perspective towards life and aids in restoring her 'self'.

Akhila describes herself as stiff and restrained, "I wasn't always like this, so stiff and restrained. I had to grow a shell around myself. To protect myself, To deflect hurt and pain. If I hadn't I would have gone insane" (LC 41). After her father's death, she became the breadwinner for her mother, two brothers and a sister. After his post-graduation, her elder brother decided to marry and nobody thought about Akhila's marriage so she made her younger brother also gets married on the same day. Next, she saved money for her sister's dowry and married her off but when also she was 34 but nobody asked her to marry.



Everybody had taken her for granted that she would remain unmarried and look after them. Even Akhila had never thought about her life unless she met her childhood friend Karpagam. Karpagam was a widow but never shed her symbols of femininity like kumkum, colourful clothes or jewellery. She strongly believes some man who couldn't bear the thought of his wife being attractive to other men after his death would have made the rules for widows. She does what she aspires to do, "I have as much right as anyone else to live as I chose" (LC 202). She lived alone and even her 23-year-old daughter was independent. Akhila determines to buy a one-bedroom flat for herself and never would she save money for Padma's daughter's marriage.

The sixth passenger is Marikolanthu and hers is a very tragic story about who had suffered a lot and worked from her childhood. Hearing the stories of other ladies she thought they were making unnecessary agitation for little things. Marikolanthu was raped by a rich male chauvinist Murugeshan and when she became pregnant nobody believed she was raped and wanted her to accept it as her fault. But Mari never felt ashamed of her any fault but she knew nothing could be worse than a man raping a woman. Though she tries to move away from the Chettiar Fort her mother's death gets her back to it as her substitute. She worked for the mad woman and Sujatakka. She had even become a lesbian partner for her Sujatakka who had told how she felt about her husband's touch. She felt like a lizard crawling up her skin. She knew about her husband's infidelity and hated him but allowed her husband to use her body as she feared he would have a mistress. Her mother-in-law had become mad because of her husband's extra-marital affairs. She was allowed to suffer alone and was locked up all the time. When Sujatakka's relationship with Mari was exposed she put all the blame on Mari for casting black magic and was sent out of the fort without giving her salary. Mari was diagnosed with a tumour in her womb and for the treatment, she had mortgaged Muttu to Murugasan, she had felt happy by selling a son to his father. But Mari accepted Muttu as her son and showered motherly love only after her rapist's death. She was fed up with her life being a surrogate housewife, surrogate mother, and surrogate lover. She wanted to live a real life with her son now. Mari is having the spirit to emerge strong even from the most dehumanizing circumstances. She says, "Women are strong, women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" (LC 210).

In conclusion, Anita Nair in her novel with six stories depicts how women struggle in male-dominated society in different forms in different sectors of the society. But what is noteworthy is that even though they are suppressed they all assert their identity as an individual. Chamanlal opines Feminism, "as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes". Travelling in a ladies' coupe is an epochal event in Akhila's life. Ladies Coupe is an empowering feminist novel which deals with feminism, patriarchy, sexism, misogyny and misandry. Anita Nair through her realistic stories gives an alarming call to every woman to make her life worth living. In



the words of Simone de Beauvoir “Change your life today. Don’t gamble on the future, act now, without delay”.

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Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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