

Redefining self and Society in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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Abstract: The present paper aims to discuss the issues related with self in a patriarchal society with special reference to Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*. Anita Nair, a bestselling author of fiction and poetry occupies a prominent position in the world of contemporary Indian English writers. She has written about deeper enigma in people's temperaments and seizes the reader on a magnificent expedition. She portrays the characters reinforcing the rights and duties of women in their life. She expresses her views on the suffering of women in contemporary Indian society. She traces women's real position in both the family and society. Nair explores the agony of women and suggests a number of ways to fight back against these agonies in order to make their life fruitful and peaceful. She made an attempt to show strength of women and how they possess an impressive valour to fight back against social evils. Though they are intertwined by traditions and male domination, they are strong and adaptable in the pursuit of their intellect.

Keywords: *Coupé, oppression, predicament, emancipation, patriarchal, authoritarian, egoist, gender discrimination, equanimity, patriarchal oppression.*

Anita Nair has received awards such as the FLO FICCI Women Achievers Award 2008, the Women of Substance Award 2010 by the Times Group, JFW (Women's Magazine) Award 2010 and the Arch of Excellence Award 2012 by the All India Achievers Conference. She was also honored by Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 2012. In *Ladies Coupé* (2001) Anita Nair represents woman from different strata of society and their subjugation by patriarchal ideology. This novel depicts the conditions of women in a male dominated society. Though women face injustice, male-dominance, physical violence, still they fulfill their responsibilities. They undergo variety of painful experiences in the patriarchal society. There are independent episodes dealing with the life of women and the way they have fought against the patriarchal oppression in their life.

The novel *Ladies Coupé* is mainly the personal narratives of women of different ages and social status as they are travelling together in the ladies coupe. These women, with flashback, recall their experiences and narrate their life-stories, typical experiences as women in the contemporary Indian society. They faced different problems in their family. All these six women are interconnected by narrating their life stories. The personal stories and experiences highlighted women's predicaments in the male-dominated society. There are narratives of women who try to win resistance and self-reliance in the masculine world. There have been five women initially and the sixth one that joins them later in a ladies coupe on the train.

The story starts with Akhilandeswari or Akhila, the protagonist of 45 years. She is the eldest child in the family of Pattabhi Iyer. Due to accidental death of her father, as the eldest child, she has to shoulder the responsibility of her widowed mother, two brothers and the younger sister. She is only nineteen year old but she has to take up a job as a clerk in the Income Tax Office by leaving her education. She has to accept the responsibility out of compassion for her younger sister and brothers. She has to meet the needs of her younger brother's education, her younger sister's marriage and establish them in their lives. She has to play multiple roles such as a daughter, sister, an aunt and the head of the family to meet the needs of all. Her sister and brothers get married without little thought of Akhila. Her mother and siblings completely ignore her future. Noone asks her what she wants. Even her mother does not realize that her eldest child, should get married. She cares for her family but her own needs are ignored by the members of the family. She becomes 'Ammadi' for the mother, 'Akka' for the sister and brothers and 'Madam' in the office. She is the breadwinner of the family, yet she cannot be the head and occupy the central position in the family, because this place was reserved for a male in the family. If there is no father, even a younger brother occupies that center position. She is the dutiful daughter but her own dreams are suppressed. She was forty-five years old. Her family, including her mother, always tried to convince her that she, being a woman, couldn't survive alone. They didn't think of her marriage. Her interests and opinions weren't taken into consideration because she is a woman, a male can be considered important in any decision making. The members of her family, selfishly, ignore her feelings and her need. She undertakes this train journey to flee from the brutal routine which has extinguished her own desires. She revolts against her oppressive family and seeks escape from the conventional life and expectations of the family.

Akhila meets the other female passengers- Prabha Devi, Janaki Devi, Margaret Shanti, the young fourteen year old Sheela, and Marikolanthu. All these women are of different age-group, economic, cultural and social background. But being women, they have a common concern; as all of them in one way or the other have been baffled in their life being women. These women are fiercely confined in their life one way or the other. They are all subjected to the limitations imposed on them by the social and family relationships. Akhila poses a question before them, whether a woman can stay unmarried, live on her own, or as her mother used to say, whether a woman needs a man to complete her life. As she asks,

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?¹

Akhila's question is answered by the five women in their own way from their experience. From each of these characters she meets, she learns how women have to struggle to win their space within their family life dominated by the males. She learns that she must fight the patriarchal notions and find her own space, assert her individuality. *Ladies Coupé* reveals the emotional and practical problems faced by women in a patriarchal society in which women cannot even think of leading an independent life. Akhila comes to know the variety of experiences of these married women.

Interacting with the five women, Akhila realizes that she is extending the society an unnecessary power to govern her life. These women and their stories help her to find the answer to her biggest question, whether a woman can stay single and be happy, or she needs a man to feel complete. So she comes to the conclusion that she gets back in touch with the guy she felt in love with, someone she didn't accept because of the society's fear. *Ladies Coupé* does not contain only the stories of these women but intends to focus on the real self of the women represented in it.

Janaki the oldest of the group, has lived forty years of married life, can hardly be able to answer Akhila's question. She illustrates the necessity of man in a woman's life. As a conservative wife she thinks that the duty of woman is to please her husband. She was tired of being a frangible animal; dependent on others. She was brought up by her mother to be an ideal wife and to believe that for girl's marriage is the destination in her life. She was groomed by her mother to be a traditional Indian woman, who carries out her household responsibilities as an obedient housewife and worships her husband. She is immersed in her marital life, in bringing up her children and doing her household duties. She feels like rebelling against this subjugation as she once shouts at her husband saying:

That's not helping. You just want to control him. You want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding.² But like a traditional Indian Hindu wife she sacrifices herself by doing what her husband wants her to do. She says to Akhila

Why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her?³

It shows that women, knowingly or unknowingly, are subjected to domestic slavery in a patriarchal society. Man enjoys a superior position as an earning member in the family, and woman's exertion in the household duties is ignored as it has no pecuniary value. Janaki recognizes the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother and the necessity of asserting self-identity and freedom to live one's life.

Margaret is a gold-medalist in chemistry at her M.Sc. degree. She wants to do Ph.D. and wishes to go to America. It was her dream but she falls in love with Ebenzer, her husband baffled her ambition making her a teacher in his school. Thus all her ambitions are defeated by her husband. She does not realize this as she is self-deceived. Her love for him blinds her. She did not realize how she is being enslaved in the name of love. She feels suffocated by her dictatorial husband. She tells Akhila,

The truth as I know it and as I live it is that a woman needs a man but not to make her feel whole.⁴

Ebe is an egoist by nature. He depreciates her in the company of his assistants whom he invites at his house every month. He even belittles her subject chemistry. He makes Margaret slave at the house by making her release the maidservants. He does not leave any opportunity to belittle her. He makes her abort the first child. He makes her cut her long hair. He doesn't allow her to do research and insists her take up a teacher's job under him. She begins to hate him. He loves only himself. He makes Margaret sacrifice her own career, he forces her to do B.Ed. She doesn't have an opportunity to express herself. Margaret, initially consents with everything he says. Later on, she realized how he systematically imposed his ideas on her. Margaret tries her best to save her marriage, compromises for the sake of her parents. He forces her to play the role of a model wife. It appears that saving a marriage is the burden only for a wife. A woman has an adjuvant role in the married life. In other words, woman must accept submission. Germaine Greer says,

Women ought not to enter into a socially sanctioned relationship, like marriage... If women are to effect a significant amelioration in their condition it seems obvious that they must refuse to marry.⁵

In patriarchal society, the laws and regulations of marriage are different to the standards of feminists. For Margaret her own family was an ideal before her, because in it no one had divorced and considered as respectable family in which women worked very hard to preserve the family. But what is interesting in Margaret's story is the way she gains her freedom remaining within her married life. As a chemistry scholar, Margaret knows how food brings about change in the body and the health. She feeds Ebe rich and heavy breakfast, lunch and dinner. In about six months, he turns into a fat man. He cannot walk fast any more. He develops a second chin, a round belly and gasps as he goes up the stairs. His rounds in the school corridors and on the ground altogether stop and there are no more parties at home with his sycophant assistants. He becomes a quiet man, easy to handle and he needs his wife Margaret more and more for everything. She says,

When you add water to sulphuric acid, it splutters at first. But soon it loses its strength, it loses its bite. The trick is when to add it and how much.⁶

Margaret cleverly practices the lesson on her husband. It illustrates that women can win their freedom within their married life, triumphing over autocratic husbands like Ebe. Margaret is a teacher, economically independent. But socially she is frustrated because of the social and moral burden imposed on women in general in the patriarchal society. Margaret seeks her way of escape from the patriarchal oppression by exhibiting Ebe futile to function as an authoritarian.

Prabha Devi is a married woman of the same age as Akhila. Prabha Devi was groomed to be a good wife under the guidance of her mother. She marries to Jagdish, and enjoys all comforts and luxuries. She performs the duties as a daughter, then as a wife, and a daughter-in-law. Her own expectations and desires come next. But this equanimity of her mind changed when she visited the US with her husband, she is fascinated by the Western lifestyle and tries to modernize herself.

The exposure to the American women's life style, their swinging hair and a confident stride was a revelation to her. They seemed to know exactly where they were going and once they got there, what they had to do. Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Such poise, such confidence, such celebration of life and beauty. Prabha Devi wanted that for herself.⁷

She was consciously brought up by her mother to be a good wife. This is typical of a patriarchal system of family life. A girl-child must be brought up in a particular way. When Prabha Devi was born, her father was displeased because a girl-child is seen to be a liability and a girl would not be of any use in his business. He expressed his displeasure saying to his wife.

Has this baby apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance.⁸ Prabha's mother makes her play the typical games like cooking and baby-sitting, and participates with the daughter in the games playing the role of a girl-child. This is generally the expectation in a patriarchal family that a girl child should be groomed to properly suite the role of a good wife and a good daughter-in-law.

In portraying Sheela, Anita Nair brings out the issue of child abuse. Sheela's grandmother reinforced her to fight against patriarchal oppression. Her grandmother gave preference to her daughter and ignores her son due to his ill treatment. It enlightens the importance of womanhood in a family. Her love and respect for her grandmother made her decorate the dead body of grandmother. In this way she rebelled against the old tradition.

The last person left in the compartment with Akhila is Marikolanathu, who is from a poor family and has served as a maidservant. When she was just nine year old. Along with her mother, she has to go for work in the Chettiar House, the rich landlord. One of the serious issues of the patriarchal system is denying women equal rights whereas men are given all sorts of facilities and independence. It deals with the concept of gender discrimination where she is the victim of the patriarchal society. She is denied to have education. This sort of gender inequality restrains the development and capability of women. Women have to struggle throughout their lives to survive in patriarchal society. This projects how tradition bound women live within the limits of old conventions and compresses their dreams about life. After the rape, her life had been changed. She emerges as a really strong woman, who decides finally to live for her son, Muthu. Marikolanathu, being a poor dalit woman reveals the multiple layers of exploitation she has faced in her life.

Along with all these characters, Karpagam was a widow who refuses to lead life of a widow cloistering herself in four walls. She enjoys hotel food, puts on Kumkum Tilak without caring for people. The story of Prabha Devi shows her ability for accommodation and acceptance. Margaret quietly uses her knowledge to defeat her aristocratic husband. Akhila's mother is an example of these orthodox points of view. She never takes her own decisions.

There are independent episodes of women fighting for their own space and winning their battle against male-domination and injustice. Either women are from the higher class society or lower class, they have to face autocracy of patriarchy, a male domination. All these women in this novel are the victims of patriarchal system. It is taken for granted that women are subordinate to men and they must be reliant on the male in the family. In a patriarchal society men often exploit women to make them feel subordinate and oppress them. It is often seen in the Indian family lives that women are subjected to violence for stepping beyond the boundaries fixed for them socially and culturally and to infuse fear in their mind. It is a plan used by men to ensure subjugation of women. Modern woman is ready to fight the evils of patriarchy. Education and economic independence matter in the lives of women to a great extent, if they have to conflict the evils of life in a stiffly patriarchal society. The stories of women in this novel are trying to discover their own self. Every woman is trying to discover the meaning of their life. Nair focuses on the problems of Indian women and tries to understand her identity as a wife, mother, daughter, sister and as a human being in a tradition-bound ideology and a male dominated society. This search for self discovery is the predominant theme in Anita Nair's novels. Everyone has a better understanding of themselves. This journey helps to realize the self. A train journey symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibility that makes them aware of their self-respect, dignity, self discovery in a male dominated society.

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