

**TRIBULATIONS OF AKHILANDESWARI IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE: A
FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

“A woman is like a tea bag-you cannot tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water” the sayings of Eleanor Roosevelt is served as a perfect example here. According to the Indian tradition, women are compared to goddesses. The attitude of men towards women decides whether she is Goddess Kali or the Goddess Kamala. Indians consider the lands and rivers as sacred one and they also treat them as woman by giving feminine names. But, the women are denied from acquiring their own rights. So, they have gathered together to raise their voice against the patriarchal society. In *Ladies Coupe* (2001), the protagonist Akhilandeswari has been suffered to a great extent due to the problems of identity, inequality and the societal norms and values. After bearing all the pains, she has come to a resolution that there should be a twist in her life. She has decided to lead an independent life. She wanted to break the norms of the society that a woman cannot live alone. Akhila as a woman of forty-five years old has also proved the saying that “the age of woman does not mean a thing. The best tunes are played in the oldest fiddles.” Akhila has destroyed all the hindrances and has begun to lead an independent life according to her own wish. She has gone to Kanyakumari as per her wish to break herself from all the responsibilities. She has made a vow to herself that she should find her lost identity. Hereafter, she has planned to live for herself and no one else. She has relaxed herself from all the burdens which she has carried for many years without concerning herself.

KEY WORDS: feminine, patriarchal society, identity, inequality, societal norms and values, hindrances and independent.

Indian writers have availed the English language to depict the Indian culture and spirit. Raja Rao in the preface of the novel *Kanthapura* (1938) has said that one has to convey in a language that is not one's but the spirit should be one's own. Indians possessed the gift of storytelling from the early periods which have paved the way to the growth of the novel. Then Indians novels have embarked to concentrate on the societal issues which have created a revolution in the technique of novel writing.

Anita Nair was born on 26 January 1966 at Palakad. She received her B.A English Language and Literature degree in Kerala. Currently, she is living in Bangalore. Her works include: *The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Malabar Mind* (2002), *Mistress* (2003), *Where the Rain is Born* (2003), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007), *Cut Like Wound* (2012), *Keeper of the Light* (2014), *Chain of Custody* (2015) and *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* (2016). Anita Nair has also been honoured by many awards and prizes such as PEN/Beyond Margins Award United States of America (2007), longlisted for Orange Prize for Fiction (2008), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2012) and shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize (2014).

Ladies Coupe (2001) narrates the life incidents of variegated people such as Janaki Prabhakar, Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Marikolanthu along with the experiences of Akhilandeswari, the protagonist. Akhila meets these people in a ladies coupe when she is travelling to Kanyakumari in quest of her identity. Being despair, she has got a chance to share her feelings with many new faces. For the first time in her life, she has expelled out her sentiments to the people who have surrounded her. She has remained a dumb for many reasons and feels separated from her family. She has burst out her emotions to the unknown persons in an assurance that she will never meet them again. Her burst out has also cleared her from the thoughts which are settled in her mind for so many years. She has also been expelled out from the chaos of her life. Due to the sufferings which she has faced, she is travelling to Kanyakumari with a one way ticket. Her experience in the coupe has given her some dauntlessness to face the toils of her life.

The Feminist Movement has augmented prominence during the twentieth century. It has been divided into three phases as political, cultural and academic. Tori Moi has classified the

three phases as female (biological), the feminist (political) and the feminine (cultural). The second wave of feminism has been characterized by the construction of the cultural identity of a woman. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) clearly defined that women have always been defined as the other or the lacking.

Akhila a forty-five years old woman is aggravated from her life as she has some responsibilities as a elder sister. She has sans husband, children and family. She is fed up with the duties and has lost her identity. She has considered herself as a serpent that has been dormant for many years. She is greatly in need to discover herself. She has even evolved a shell around herself to defend her from the material things which can give her pain. She would have gone insane if she has not created the wall around her. She examined the nook and corner of each thing before she has arrived to a decision. It is evident through the starched cotton saris which she wears. Women with orderly minds are suitable to wear the starched saris thus, Akhila perfectly suits for that as she has a strange character and a calm mind. "Akhila was not a creature of impulse. She took time over her every decision. She pondered, deliberated, slept over it and only when she had examined every single nuance and point of view did she make up her mind (*Ladies Coupe*, 2)".(Hereafter *Ladies Coupe* is referred to as LC)

Akhila has been distorted due to the circumstances which encircled her. She has converted her tears into anger which has helped her to overcome all the obstacles. Unfortunately, all the anger has converted Akhila as a woman who has lost herself as a being. "So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when it saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? Did the feel of rain on her bare skin send a line of goose bumps down her spine? Did she sing? Did she dream? Did she weep for no reason? (LC, 84)".

Akhila has met Karpagam in a supermarket unexpectedly. When Karpagam asked her about her happiness Akhila has answered that one should choose a life and live it according to her own needs. She has also added that one should love and should be loved by someone. Finally, she has also annexed that there should be a hope about the future. But, this is juxtaposed

in Akhila's life. She does not have an identity of her own. She was either Chandra's daughter or Narayan's Akka or Priya's aunt or Murthy's sister-in-law. She has never been a being of herself.

The first wave feminists have struggled for the equal rights of women. Women have occupied a secondary position when compared to men. Akhila's father has died one day and all the burdens fell upon her shoulder as her siblings are not yet grown. Akhila has become the man of the family. But, she wanted to be a woman who is funny, warm and capable of solving all the problems and should be loved by all. Moreover, she wanted to be a perfect wife and mother but she has remained as a spinster even at her forty-fifth age. As years passed by, Narayan has begun to work as a machinist and Narsi has become the first graduate of the family. Akhila has found a relief within her and has begun to dream about herself. "Narayan joined the tank factory as a machinist. Narsi became the first graduate in the family and then, the first postgraduate. He found a teaching job. Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again? (LC, 77)".

Akhila's dream has been shattered as Narsi selected a partner for him. Akhila has also arranged the marriage of her brothers who are younger than her. Her little sister Padma's responsibility has again fallen upon her. Some years later, she has also arranged her sister's marriage. Thus, Akhila's machine life has continued again. She has continued her work by travelling through train. She has been punctual in the office and honest in her works. By seven in the evening, she returns to her home and after dining with her mother she goes to bed early. Once in a month, they have also visited a hotel and they ate whatever they need. Akhila's mother felt comfortable with that hotel as the Brahmins are working there. Few years later, Akhila's mother has also passed away. Then, Akhila has begun to live with her sister Padma. Akhila has to look after the needs of her sister's family. Akhila has become tired due to the responsibilities and especially the inequality among the family members. Akhila has gathered all her courage and has arrived to decision that she is going to lead her independent life. The family members have rejected her decision. After some years, Akhila raised her voice and has spoken for her.

“For twenty-six years, I gave all of myself to this family. I asked for nothing in return. And now when I wish to make a life of my own, do anyone of you come forward and say- Its time you did this, Akka. You deserve to have a life of your own. Instead you worry about what it will do to your individual lives (LC, 206)”. Akhila wanted to get back to her rights as none of them have ever asked her desire. They have not considered her as a woman who has her own needs and longings. Akhila added that she will look after herself and she can do that. She has already done that when they were not grown. Now, she has prepared her mind to do for herself.

Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), has explained that the social norms, values, law and cultural practices demanded, imposed and recommended particular forms of behavior from women, which made them as monsters and witches. The norms are followed even in drawing a kolam. A sloppily drawn kolam suggests that the woman is careless, indifferent and incapable. Whereas, an elaborately drawn one indicates self-absorption, a lavish hand and an inability to put others needs before theirs. The daughters-in-law are even selected by drawing kolams.

Sarasa Mami, a widow of Subramani Iyer, has been isolated from the Brahmin community as she has made her daughter a whore. Akhila felt pity for them and she wanted to talk with them but her mother has restricted her and also has added that she should not be unkind like this. As a Brahmin girl, she should not indulge in such activities. Akhila has been shocked by the words from her mother and has begun to shout: “Are you accusing me of being unkind? Not me. It’s you and your Brahmin cronies who have ostracized that poor woman and her family (LC, 83)”.

Akhila has also fallen in love with a younger man Hari, who is twenty eight years old. She at-first, has accepted him and has dreamt a lot with him. But, all the dreams were destroyed due to the societal activities. She consoled herself that she should consider him as his younger brother and there is nothing more than that. Hari is not interested in that as he loves her deeply. She wanted to tell him that he should not see her as a women, she is just a friend and no more. But, as a woman she is kindled by her instincts. She has convinced herself and believed that they could bridge the years between them through their love. Whenever they have gone outside, all the people around them showed queer reactions on their faces. A question always runs on their

minds that what is the relationship between the young-man and the older woman. Akhila has begun to think that this relationship will not last forever as, she is older than him. Akhila has been much worried that whether Hari will regret for this relationship in the future. She has changed her mind and decided to break the relationship between them. She has also promised that she will never love anyone but, this relationship is not meant to be. After many years, Akhila has thought a life for herself but, it has been demolished by the society.

Finally, Akhila has become revolutionary and has decided to change everything around her. She has gone to Sarasa Mami's house murmuring that she should have done this before. Eventhough, amma and the whole community have avoided them, she should have supported them. But, when she has visited their house a new tenant has been living there as they have vacated the house so many years ago. Akhila came back in disappointment. Akhila, has witnessed the second change, when she met Karpagam. She has advised Akhila to live her life independently. Karpagam has also found out the fear which prevailed within Akhila as she roamed her eyes her and there. There are many questions on the mind of Akhila that how a woman can live alone. Karpagam has explained her that if she has the ability to live alone then how Akhila cannot lead her life. Akhila sensed a great life as if the goddess has come down and shown a path to lead her life.

Akhila has read suicide news when she has been staying in Kanyakumari. A man has poisoned his wife and children and hanged himself as he suffered from deadly disease. At that time, she is reminded of Sarasa Mami who has not done any stupid things. Akhila admired Sarasi Mami that she lived in the best way. She knew but felt sorry that why Akhila cannot lead the life in a positive way.

Akhila decimated herself into ten entities such as Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Chinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhumathi, Bagala, Matangi and Kamala. The next day Akhila woke up energetically with the thoughts of Hari and ranged him. She has introduced herself as Akhilandeswari. Akhila has taken a in her life depending on her wishes. She has bravely travelled the obstacles and has finally achieved her goal. Similarly, there may be many

hindrances in the life of each women. Women should overcome all the impediments which have surrounded them. They should gain all the strength and should go right up to the impossible.

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