

## The Journey towards Self-Discovery in Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe"

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### ABSTRACT

Enough ink has been spilt on the existence of women, the atrocities inflicted on them by the society. Here is a novel that goes beyond the mere projection of woman as a passive recipient and celebrates the womanhood in all its shades. Anita Nair exhorts the women folk to be proud of their femininity and explore their original pure 'self'. This retrieval of self is only possible through introspection and therefore, she brings together several women in a ladies compartment. In a way she builds a space which is exclusively feminine and allows the women to ponder over their situation. Each one of them recovers her own self in her own way and this introspective journey enables Akhila, the protagonist to discover the woman in her.

**Keywords:** womanhood, introspective journey, self.

Ladies Coupe talks about a female space where she can unveil and discuss her life and desires. Virginia Woolf urged the women folk across the world to have a 'a room' of their own. A room stood for a space that was exclusively meant for 'woman'; a place she could call her own. It was a clarion call for all women to unite and celebrate the "sisterhood". Now Anita Nair rocks another chord by bringing together women from different background and different agegroups in one compartment. Consistently being labeled as a feminist ever since her 'Ladies Coupe' made its first appearance in the literary world, Anita Nair is a prolific writer who steered her way as a novelist quite successfully. She rejects the label of feminist as it limits the scope of the writer. She is mainly interested in human beings: male/female and places them in a broader social context. Her humanistic vision, social reality and social context set her apart as a writer. 'Ladies Coupe' is a kind of introspective journey for all the five ladies who happen to be in the same compartment headed towards their different destinations. Travelling together in a ladies

compartment, they feel free to weed out the troubling elements of their life. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel is all ears to whatever they have to say. It seems that the novelist has deliberately chosen the women of different age groups so as to encapsulate the entire life cycle of a woman, the different roles played by her in a life time. May be, her protagonist needs this in order to understand herself in a better way. There is a teenager, middle aged housewives, an older woman and even a woman from working class as if the author wants to demolish all sorts of categories and wishes to address all women at once. She is not ready to miss even a single perspective and what finally emerges is an epic on womanhood.

The novel succinctly and quite frankly questions the patriarchal notions and the ambivalent attitude of the society. The age old Indian tradition has crippled the imagination of Indian women. They are so much accustomed to their situation that even the thought of revolt sends jitters to their entire being. They are scared to cross the line demarcated by the society. Anita Nair informs in an interview: “The fear of society is a great impediment to personal freedom whether it is for a man or a woman and in a country that has always considered women to be inferior beings; women are that much more hesitant to assert themselves or merely claim their rights. And this makes me eager to present Indian woman as she is rather than the doormat kind of person she is often projected to be as.”(Peporoni Saturday January 26, 2013.). Akhila’s mother strictly follows the traditional norms and treats her husband as the King of the House. Akhila is unable to decipher this divine power bestowed in males that belittles the existence of women. Her mother tells her: “There is no such thing as equal marriage. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband; that way there can be no strife, no disharmony.”(14) The silence of women is indispensable for the happiness of household. Nair sledges the hypocritical, misogynist society which trains woman to become a docile being forever dependent on man. Janaki says: “women like me end up being fragile.” (22) Nair discards the traditional concept of marriage where one leads and the other one serves. Simone de Beauvoir has beautifully elucidated the dubious role of marriage in subjugating woman. She writes: “Marriage has always been a different thing for the man and for the woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other but it has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them.... For the woman

marriage is her sole means of support and sole justification of her existence. Marriage is enjoined upon women for two reasons; she must provide society with children and second is her function to satisfy a males sexual need and take care of his household.”In India also marriage is a ‘sanskar’ and more often it is decided by the families; For girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community and that is why parents have so eagerly sought to arrange suitable marriages for them. Girls are given in marriage whereas men get married. Nair posits that the idea of companionship should be primary in marriage. That is why, when Janaki and Prabha Devi question Akhila about her marriage Margaret cuts in: “If you ask me those men are looking for a housekeeper- someone to cook, clean and fetch for them. If she is happy the way she is why should she marry. (20)

As for Akhila her entire struggle is to get herself accepted as a woman by her family. After her father’s death she became the breadwinner of her family and since she ceased to be a woman for them. It is here that Nair makes her strong point and faces the question, what does a woman want? Feminist thinkers laid major stress on the economic liberty of woman but is this all? Nair presents Akhila as steel from outside but the woman inside her is full of passion, a desire for freedom, companionship and love. But this woman is not even recognized by the people around her. Nair celebrates the womanhood in all its forms and sends out a message that women at large need to free themselves from the useless beliefs and live their life rather than leading a colourless, dry and uneventful life. One of Akhila’s friend Karpagam voices the novelists intention. She is a widow but refuses to drape herself in whites, wears jewelry and enjoys her life to the fullest. She exhorts Akhila to reclaim her femininity which she has forgotten already. She is not happy to see the “colourless and insignificant woman” (199) Akhila has become: “The way I look at it, it is natural for a woman to want to be feminine. It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not or whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men.”(202) Akhila had given up her desires long ago “from the gurukula stage of life, she had moved directly to the vanprastha” (86) the conversation with Karpagam exhorts the women hidden inside her. So far she had hated herself for her

womanly desires; the small interlude with Hari had thrilled her but she was too scared to voice her desires. As for amma Akhila had ceased to be woman after her father's death. For amma and her family she was a breadwinner, the woman in her only became visible when she wished to go out, then she was expected to take permission. She knew no one, not even her mother would understand what she felt: "In amma's world men married women younger than themselves. Women never offered their bodies to men before their union was sanctified by marriage. Women never went away with men who were not their husbands. Women never knew what it was to desire."(151)

Every woman in the novel is seen revolting against patriarchy in their own way. Anita Nair posits the opinion that the destiny of woman lies in her own hands. She does not require a man to dictate how to live her life. The sooner the women realize this fact the better. That is why all the women in the novel rise up sooner or later in their lives. Prabha Devi was the only daughter of her parents and her mother devotedly trained her to fit in the role of wife and mother. Her mother had never voiced her opinion: "long ago she had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell. To be shunned."(170) Anita Nair splits open the hypocritical ideologies of patriarchy; Prabha Devi loved to style herself but she realizes the dangers quite soon. If a woman is friendly men end up looking at her as an object. They feel that they have every right to use her. That is why, when Pramod a friend of her husband tries to indulge with her snail like she curls back into her shell: "...Prabha Devi made a decision.... She would lock away that gay spirited woman who had caused her such anguish and unlearn every single mannerism she had worked so hard to acquire....She would withdraw herself from life."(182) While learning swimming she reclaims her lost and forgotten self.

Margaret Shanthi also takes charge of her life in her own hands; her story also exhibits the strong hold of tradition and society on the psyche of women and how difficult it is for her to go beyond and realize her 'self'. She is introduced as simple, intelligent and obedient girl who falls for a misogynist man Paul Ebenezer Paulraj: "the destroyer of blades, grass and human alike."(98) He was approved by her family the moment they got to know about him; young, successful, and dignified he was perfect. The hues of love sometimes deprive one of one's own reason. Anita

Nair is at her best while narrating the story of Margaret. The way she uses the names of the chemicals to describe people is simply outstanding: “Love demands you drink of it. And then love burns the tongue, the senses....Love separates reason from thought. Love kills. Love is methyl alcohol pretending to be ethyl alcohol.”(111) soon after her marriage she realizes that she was married to a man who wished to be treated like a God. Their relationship is quite akin to the master slave narrative derived by Hegel. She realizes it for the first time when she is pregnant. Her husband doesn’t want a child moreover he doesn’t wish her to become a mother ever. She is an object in his house just like other things which give him pleasure. She had no right to take decisions and was welcomed only if she would comply with his wishes. Every aspect of her life was in the supervision of her husband: “What’s the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed....Long Hair doesn’t suit you. Cut it off.... Do we really have to go to church every Sunday?”(105) again like many other women she is aware that she will have no support from anywhere and that no one would understand her problem. So many times she had heard from her mother that it was a woman’s responsibility to maintain her marriage. Besides she is scared of the stigma of divorce. She knew that leaving Paul would also deprive her of her parents and family. She decides to take away Paul’s pride. She makes him eat large sumptuous meals and soon Paul became fat: “ Ebe slowly became a fat man.... A man who no longer needed the coterie or defaced books. A man whose fondness for eating blunted his razor edge.”(134) He grew more and more dependent on her and finally she gets pregnant and delivers a daughter. The arrival of daughter is symbolic of her victory as well as the retrieval of her self.

Sheela’s amamma’s story is delight to read and a food for thought. She adores her femininity and through her Nair explicates that age and generation is immaterial as far as the freedom and emancipation of women is concerned. She has lived her life in her own way. She comes to stay at her daughter’s house at a time when she has but a handful of days to live. She chooses her daughter’s house as she wishes to show her anger at her sons who didn’t take proper care of her: “Sheela knew why amamma was in their flat....Amamma wanted her sons to know that they had driven her away from her own house. She wanted them to squirm in guilt when they thought of her.”(64) Even though she was dying, the zeal for life never abandoned

her. She should be taken as a model for new women. She tells Sheela that she does not require to please others. She loves her own self and goes to bed after putting makeup and tiding herself. She wishes to look beautiful and elegant even when she dies. Sheela has been a smart girl and was encouraged by her father to speak her mind when she was a little girl. But now he got ferocious at her if she was blunt. She failed to decipher his behaviour. Now he saw her as a woman and the adorable doings of her little daughter became abnoxious as she grew up. That is why, whenever she saw a daughter being cuddled by her father she wanted to shriek out: “kill her spirit and tame her tongue. So that when she grows up she won’t be... wondering what it is I said wrong....”(70)

All these revelations help Akhila reclaim her forgotten self. She is no more apologetic about how she feels and what she thinks. People at the hotel in Kanyakumari find it difficult to see a forty five year old Indian woman all by herself but Akhila is a changed woman now, she has gone beyond the boundary where people’s opinion do not matter. She has no more fears; she is Ahilandeswari: kali(the destroyer), tara(the embryo), sodasi(youthful dream and hope), bhuvaneshwar(the material world), bhairavi(fulfillment), chinnamasta(the naked one), dhumati(misfortune personified), bagala(the crane headed, the ugly side) matangi(seeking to dominate) and finally Kamala(the pure consciousness of the self). “This is who Akhila is together or separate.”(275) Her mind is clear and nobody, not even her family would be allowed to exploit her: “Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I’m the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered.”(270)

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