

Quest for Self: An analysis of the major women characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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ABSTRACT

Indian women-writing in English is notable for the extent to which it has challenged patriarchy and has opened up a lot of ways of questioning and interpreting social life. Anita Nair is one of the finest writers in Indian Writing in English with an international reputation. Her third book "Ladies Coupe" (2001) was rated as one of the top five books in 2002 and was translated into more than twenty-five languages around the world. The novel depicts the life of six women who meet during a train journey and each of them shares their woes, in fact, their life itself. Patriarchy appears in our society through various forms, not just as an oppressive concept, but even in the form of honey-coated care and protection. Women all around, have to work twice as hard to create an identity of their own. In spite of all their struggles in life, their efforts remain in the category of the least appreciated.

This article is a reading on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* that portrays the journey towards self-realization undertaken by Akhildeswari and other six women characters, who happen to travel in the same ladies compartment. The Latin phrase *Quo vadis* could be considered the driving force of this novel. Each of the women characters are born into a patriarchal society that creates various hurdles in their smooth journey of life. However, the train journey helps them to rediscover their self. From the elderly Janaki to the teenager Sheela, all share their woes, thus helping Akhila to find her self. In this modern era, even though men and women are considered complementary to each other, unlike early times, there still exists certain sort of marginalization all through her life. Anita Nair brings out this fact clearly in her novel, *Ladies Coupe*.

KEYWORDS: Quest, Self-discovery, Voyage, Oppression, Identity

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Anita Nair, a post-colonial Indian English writer was and was brought up in a suburb in Tamilnadu. Her father was with the ordnance factories. Her grandparents lived in Kerala and she made frequent visits to Kerala and these trips enabled her to know the heart of rural Kerala.

Anita was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called "Satyr of the Subway" (1997). Her second book was "The Better Man" (2000) published by Penguin India. She has also written "The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends" (2004), a book for children

on myths and legends. She has also written a few other novels. Her works also include many travelogues. In fact, her works have been widely published, critically acclaimed, and best-selling too. Her novels abound with her evocative language and descriptions. Her portrayal of characters in her novels are worth appreciation.

Anita Nair, as could be seen from her work *Ladies Coupe* (2001), is a feminist with a difference. She traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the society. She has created a cross-section of the society through the characters in *Ladies Coupe*. Her attempt to exhibit the plight and dilemma of her women characters is remarkable.

A VOYAGE TO SELF-DISCOVERY

Literature reflects society and we can learn about any society through novels that give an insight into its culture. The study of society through novels deals with a deep understanding of the socio-economic and political life of the people living in a particular milieu. In order to understand a society through fiction, it is essential to find out what issues and problems the novelists raise in their works. These may be social, religious, economic or political issues. The contemporary women novelists are closer to the complex structures of women's inner life. Their writings are marked by freshness and sensibility that are recognizably Indian and yet international in their implications and significance.

Quo Vadis, the Latin phrase meaning, "Where are you going?" could be seen as the driving quote of *Ladies Coupe*. This phrase serves as a recurring symbol throughout the novel. The phrase, as it is, symbolises the need to escape for each character present in the ladies compartment of the train to Kanyakumari. The novel tells a story revolving around the confessions of five women from different backgrounds. The characters as well as their stories are indeed very different. The protagonist, Akhilandeswari, is travelling in a ladies coupe and in the same coupe are the five other women. Each character has a story to narrate that depicts different facets of society. All of those characters are victims of various factors, be it family, relations, patriarchal society or else fate. Akhilandeswari, who is on a quest for self, after listening to these tales arrives at a conclusion for the questions that raises in her mind. All these years she lived for her family and relatives, not for herself. Towards the end, we find Akhila making a call to her first love and the story ends there.

Anita Nair presents the life of Indian women stuck in an orthodox hypocritical society. Though the backdrop in the novel is of south India, the situations could be related to any close-knit society in India. The principal character in the story, 'Akhila'-Akhilandeswari, is a forty-five year old single woman. Akhila spends her entire youth fending for her family after the untimely death of her father. She eventually becomes the bread-winner of her family for the betterment of her three siblings and a naive mother. For more than twenty five years, her life passes silently witnessing the life of her family while she continues with her monotonous routine. She has secured the life of everyone around her but is still single and exploited. She has spent her life providing for them and now is taking an impulsive vacation to decide what she should do with the time left to her. Her siblings are shocked that she wants to live alone; she should be with the family, contributing her salary to their well-being. Akhila, however, is tired of their

greed and self-absorption, and wants to live as she pleases. Even then, she could not make up a decision on her own as she is not considered the head of the family. Her family, including her mother, and the society takes her for granted and she is advised to seek permission from her younger brothers for every decision she takes. Listening to the narrations of her co-passengers, Akhila soon realizes that her feelings are not unusual. Between each story, Akhila adds her own: her brief affair with Hari, a younger man; a Christian friend who introduced her to eggs, a food her devout Hindu family thought unclean; and her thwarted efforts to live alone after her mother's death.

Each co-passenger in the ladies compartment shares, in fact, confesses their woes and lives, with Akhila as a silent listener. Janaki is the representative of that era where the existence of women solely depended upon that of the men in their life at each stage—father, brother, husband and son. But she does not play the role of an individual, who claims her rights and that becomes a secondary role throughout her life. Janaki recalls, how a visit to her son convinced her to live only for her husband, whom she loved deeply, rather than her selfish children. Janaki is an example for old age tradition. She believed that a woman should always depend on some man in her life and she must be a good daughter, wife, mother and so on. Her identity is through her husband and son because that is the way life always had been for her. Later as she realizes her inner voice, it was too late for her to get out of that patriarchal web in which she has grown up. Her reply to Akhila explains this fact:

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. Women like me end up being fragile (Ladies Coupe 22)

Sheela, the second narrator who is a teenager, remembers her closeness to her imperious grandmother, who has just died. It was her grandmother who taught her the practical life and about the negative aspects of men, who would try to suppress them physically as well as psychologically. The psychological oppression usually comes in the form of care and over protection from the family. Sheela's father had encouraged her to speak "with a razor-edged wit and a finally developed skill of repartee" (70). But as she grew up and began to talk as a woman of her age, her father tried to control her. When her grandmother died of cancer, Sheela adorned her corpse with jewels reminiscing her grandmother's wish. "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (67). The author thus depicts the inner voice and thoughts of a fourteen-year-old girl, who is a modern young woman who understands life in a matured way, just like her fellow passengers.

Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher, is the next passenger who narrated her tale of victory over male dominance. She is a character in the ladies compartment who had liberated herself from the clutches of dominative forces. Margaret's marriage to Ebenezer was like a fairy tale. Ebenezer Paulraj was a person who was amiable to Margaret and her whole family as well. But he later appeared as a man who could not see beyond himself. He wanted his wife to be under him in spite of the fact that Margaret was a gold medallist and had better career options before her. It was his dominance that won over everything that even his wife's desires, hopes, likes, dislikes,

fancies and aims seemed diminutive before him. He loved Margaret but wanted her to be as he desires. The perverted male-ego could be seen at its height in the character of 'Ebe'. He denied the individuality of his wife and forced her to do various deeds like doing B Ed instead of PhD, aborting their first child and nagged her all the time. Margaret who came to see the condition of the fish floating dead on top of the water, identifies herself with it and decided to start her life afresh. She used various strategies to make Ebenezer under her control using his own tools of pampering against him and it proved to be a success. She takes life in her own hands, thereby making him dependent on her. Thus she realizes her self by making her dreams come true even though the steps were too drastic.

"Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance"(169). This utterance by Prabhadevi's father, who was unhappy at his daughter's birth clearly pictures a woman's conventional as well as to-be sacrificed life that begins at the cradle itself. A woman is taught to be an obedient being, starting from her own family and as time flies, she has to become a compliant wife, doting mother, grandmother and so on. What she has to care is just about her family; this was what Prabhadevi had to do just like any other girl. She was married into a wealthy family but later she realises that being a dormant wife is not really her cup of tea. She goes for swimming classes and regains her independence. The character, Prabhadevi, thus gives the message that it is never too late.

Marikolanthu, the last passenger, is at first looked down upon by other passengers and she too holds back till others get down until Akhila becomes her sole listener. Among the other narratives told so far, it is this tale that captures the reader's attention. Marikolanthu aka Mari was born in a poor family and her mother raised her and her siblings by working at Chettiar's household. Raped and exploited in Chettiar's household, Mari feels comfort in her relationship with Sujata, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar's household. The author also clearly portrays lesbian relationships through the two doctors of Vellore, where she works as a maid servant. While at Vellore, Mari was educated and trained to be a professional nurse. She hates her own son, Muthu as he is the result of the sin committed by Murugesan and which led her life to destruction. She even mortgages him at his father's loom for work. But later, the crossroad in her life comes when she sees Muthu tending to Murugesan's pyre. Her hatred towards her son diminishes, feels guilty for her deeds towards her innocent son and she resolves to be "MUTHU'S MOTHER". This act led her to be a new character. The author however brings out the diverse forms of exploitation of women – sexual, mental, physical as well as emotional through the solo character of Marikolanthu.

CONCLUSION

Anita Nair has woven a novel discussing various facets of oppression existing within the society. The socio-economic and political problems in the novels portrays the reality within the Indian social framework. This work of fiction is of course a novel in parts as each tale is entirely different from each other. Each character has its own life to narrate, thereby enabling the protagonist to get answers for the queries raised in her mind.

The explorations of the author throughout the novel has certainly raised serious questions and their replies as well. It has created a sort of consciousness that would make a healthy change in the society. The protagonist is on a quest to self-exploration and the narrations by each character helps her to obtain insight to her own life. Akhila contemplates the life of each character and their stories turn out to be an experience for her, aiding her to find answers to the questions that stirred up in her mind and thus seek her identity.

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