

MOVING TOWARDS EMANCIPATION AND STRENGTH: A READING OF ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is a well-known novelist who concentrates on the predicament of women in a male dominated society and her struggle for emancipation and empowerment. Her novel Ladies Coupe presents the personifications of new women who have been trying to find out their own identity in their lives. They have followed the conservative norms of patriarchal society for a long time but there comes a point when they realise and revolt against oppressions and suppression that they have been subjected to. Finally, they free themselves of the dependence syndrome and emerge as strong and powerful women.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, emancipation, identity, power, individuality*

The recent years have witnessed the emergence of a fresh awareness of the woman situation which has brought about an unprecedented shift in the appraisal of women's novels. Women writers, after years of struggle for recognition, have moved from background to the topmost front of the literary world.

Anita Nair is one of such popular contemporary Indian women writers whose works are being admired all over the world. The present paper is an attempt to study her famous novel, *Ladies Coupe* in the light of change that has taken place in women's attitude towards life.

Ladies Coupe is the story of a woman's search for independence and power. It focuses on the change from traditionalism to modernism that has gradually occurred in the women of our times. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, is a middle aged woman who works as a clerk in the income tax office. She is a spinster who has been forced by circumstances to live a rigid disciplined life in which there is no room for her own desires and needs. After the death of her father, she bears all the responsibilities of her family very sincerely. She neglects herself completely until the day she travels all along to KanyaKumari for the first time in her life.

During her journey, Akhila comes across five other women of different age groups who open their hearts to one another and feel relaxed. It is this communication in the cozy atmosphere of the ladies compartment that helps Akhila clear all her doubts and apprehensions and arrive at a certain decision in her life. She realises that life is very precious and she should not sacrifice it for the sake of people who have no thankfulness at all.

The stereotyped image of a single women is presented through Akhila. It is revealed how society is almost inhuman and cruel toward a woman who does not have amale in the form of a husband. A single woman is looked at with suspicion if she moves out all alone. Akhila's own sister Padma is shocked to know that alone, she would go on a train journey. She doubts that someone is accompanying her:

“ A man perhaps, Padma's nostrils flared as if she could smell the stench of illicit liaisons” (p. 4).

Anita Nair highlights the problems that a single woman has to face in the patriarchal society- the humiliation and injustice she is forced to undergo. However, Akhila is unaffected by all the adverse comments and decides to undertake the journey all alone. She says, “ 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?” (p. 21).

The five other women apart from Akhila, in the ladies coupe are Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha Devi and Marikilanthu. These women narrate their own tales of subjugation and suffering which helps Akhila find out answers to her own queries and have a better understanding of her own situation. The train journey gives an opportunity to these six women to analyse their lives and find out a better management of their problems. These women characters are from different social backgrounds; they are from different age groups and therefore, they offer different shades of women's life. However, one thing that remains common in each case is the fact that woman has to suffer a lot. She is not allowed to have independence; she has no identity and dignity and she is ill-treated by men even within their own families. This issue of gender inequality is raised by Anita Nair and being a woman herself, she is able to present the women's psychology in a convincing manner.

Janaki, who has completed forty years of her marriage realises that she has been controlled so much that there is no personality of her own, She is a non-entity. She is tired of being this 'fragile creature' (p. 23). Through the character of Jananki, the novelist tries to suggest that even the conservative and so-called ideal type of woman has an urge to have her own identity.

Sheela, another passenger in the train, has her own impression about life. She is told that a woman's life is different. Her grandmother represents the traditional approach and tells her that a woman should always try to look beautiful because physical appeal is the basic quality required of a woman. In society, preference is given to a male child inspite of the fact that girls are more loyal to their parents.

Through Margret, Nair has exposed another facet of women' exploitation. Through her character, it is revealed that a modern educated woman is intelligent enough to come put of the trap of male-slavery.

Prabha Devi is representative of that class of women who are making a conscious effort to emancipate themselves from their own weakness of dependence syndrome. Initially she suffers from a sense of insecurity and seeks male protection but after constant efforts, she conquers her deep-rooted fears and complexes and experiences an ecstasy that comes after independence.

Marikolanthu reflects the physical exploitation of women in the society. She has been the victim of rape and despite many attempts at abortion, gives birth to a boy called Muthu. She undergoes a lot of insult and humiliation in her life but after a long period of wretchedness and misery, she emerges as an empowered mother who devotes her life to the proper development of her son.

Anita Nair depicts the predicament of Indian women in the patriarchal order. Suresh Kumar and Leema Roy right comment, "Patriarchy shows its ugly face from cradle to grave." In *Ladies Coupe*, Nair raises questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India. She depicts women as victims of domestic as well as social oppression but then shows how they revolt against it and establish themselves as powerful, strong women.

After listening to the lives of various women in the coupe, Akhila comes to the realization that all of them have had their desires and fulfilled them. She becomes conscious of her own unfulfilled life as a spinster. She thinks that she too has got every right to live life in her own way. Why should she leave the cup of life untasted? After her father's death, she spent all the years of her life bearing the responsibilities of her family, bringing up her sister Padma and two brothers Narayan and Narse. She has settled them, got them married but no one thought about her life and marriage. No one realizes that she sacrificed her whole life for them. After her mother's death, she wants to live alone separately but her brothers don't allow her and she is forced to live with her younger sister Padma because she is married. Anita Nair points out sarcastically that in Indian society, a single woman is considered incapable of handling her own life. T.N. Singh elaborates the same idea thus:

"Even today an average woman feels uncertain about her identity as a social being. Conditions of life have no doubt improved a tremendous deal since the days of Jane Austen. Women today have a greater share in social responsibilities. They also have an infinite number of avenues open before them. We have examples of women outshining men in many spheres. Notwithstanding all this, the general notion about woman as a shadow figure to a male caretaker, be her father, husband or son, continues to persist. The situation calls for a concerted effort to demolish such notions and affirm the dignity of the woman in the family as well as her wider social circle" (Singh, p.12).

Akhila feels that as a single woman, neither her family nor her society gives her due honour. It is at this time when social and familial pressures become unbearable for her that Akhila undertakes this train journey all alone. This journey helps her a lot in analysing her own situations and bringing about a total transformation for her personality. She becomes an altogether different person. Sharing others' experiences imparts her wisdom and maturity of perception. She emerges as a stronger woman and overcomes her fears, illusions, confusions and apprehensions, and decides to start her life afresh. She is now bold enough to defy the hypocritical false norms of the society. She resolves the dilemma

on her own. Why should she be ashamed of her natural desires? She makes up her mind to marry Hari, her old boyfriend and live a life of her own choice. At this point, she is an empowered woman. Nair sums up her personality in these words:

“Akhila is Sakthi. Akhila is Akhilandeswari decimated into ten entities- Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumanthe, Bagla, Matangi and Kamala.” (p. 274)

Expressing her opinion about feminism, Nancy F. Cott says that it denotes “individualistic, liberal and right consciousness.” Interpreted in the above mentioned way, *Ladies Coupe* is no doubt a feminist narrative in which all the major characters refuse to be subdued by the norms of patriarchal society.

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