

**“BREAKING THE SHACKLES OF PATRIARCHY” – A COMPARATIVE
ANALYSIS OF ANITA NAIR’S 2001 NOVEL *LADIES COUPE* AND VIKAS
BAHL’S 2014 FILM *QUEEN***

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Abstract

Patriarchy has been defined as “A system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line” or “A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.”(Oxford dic.) In both *Ladies Coupe* and *Queen* the protagonists are found straining against the shackles of convention in an essentially male-dominated society. This paper attempts to throw light on how they ultimately manage to free themselves from the shackles of Patriarchy. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila, after years of neglecting her own needs, sets off alone on a journey, in search of freedom. Similarly, in *Queen*, Rani decides that she will go on her honeymoon alone, instead of moping around when her fiancé dumps her two days before their wedding. In both the above-mentioned works, the journey becomes a voyage of self discovery for the protagonists.

Anita Nair is a committed and sensitive writer who effectively highlights the trials & tribulations faced by women in a patriarchal society. Her strength lies in her evocative language and descriptions which keep the readers engrossed till the very end. Her novels have been translated into over thirty languages around the world. She is the author of the best-selling novels *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005). She likes to connect with her readers by keeping her writing straight and simple. In an interview with Sheela Reddy, Nair says, “I like to write about ordinary people and don't want to write about characters larger than life.” The characters in *Ladies Coupe* are so real that most women would identify with them and their situations.

Vikas Bahl is an Indian film producer, screenwriter, and director, known for his works predominantly in Hindi cinema. In 2011, he co-directed *Chillar Party* and won the National Film

Award for Best Screenplay, along with Nitesh Tiwari and Vijay Maurya. The film also won the National Film Award for Best Children's Film. In 2014, *Queen*, his independent directorial venture opened to critical and popular acclaim. It is tipped to win awards both for its performances as well as direction. In an interview with Ankur Pathak, when Vikas Bahl was asked if *Queen* was inspired by a real Rani, he replied, “In India everybody's life is planned and they are seemingly happy living it, particularly girls. Once they are 20, family are in a hurry to get the girl 'settled'. Only for a fortunate few the plan is disrupted. Most don't recognize the benefit of the disruption, but only feel the agony. In Rani's case, because her plans went haywire, she discovered another side to herself. In the first half, Rani gets over the guy, and in the second, she gets over herself. Her naive notions are shattered, one by one, and in the end when she hugs her ex-fiancé, who'd dumped her on the eve of her marriage, there's no hatred, only gratitude!”(sic.)(Pathak TOI)

In *Ladies Coupe*, her second novel, Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy disguised as love and affection. She has made a bold attempt to give voice to the pain and anguish of a woman caught in the web of familial demands. Nair's heroine negotiates for her independence and fights for her rightful place in a male-dominated world. Akhila, the protagonist is like the salt whose presence in a dish is never noticed, but absence makes it tasteless. The novel revolves around the main protagonist Akhila and her journey, during which she meets Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu. Each one has her own story which is shared during their journey together. Akhila has many questions in her own mind at this time and she tries to find answers in these revelations. Nair devotes a chapter each, to the women's stories: Janaki, the elderly lady whose relationship with her husband has reached the “friendly love” stage; Margaret Shanti, the passionate chemistry teacher, who in her own way punishes her megalomaniacal husband; Prabha Devi, the rich wife who regains her *joie de vivre* through self-taught swimming because it gives her a sense of achievement; Sheela, the fourteen year old whose special bond with her dying grandmother paves the way for her own understanding of life; and Marikolanthu, whose physical violation coupled with extreme poverty transforms her into the stoical woman she has become.

The novel opens with Akhila eagerly waiting for her train at the railway station. She is a 45 year old income tax clerk, spinster, daughter, sister, aunt and the sole breadwinner of her family after her father's demise. Fed up with these multiple roles and upset about her life being taken out of her control, she decides to travel to Kanyakumari, away from family and responsibilities, a journey that ultimately makes her a different woman. She has never travelled by herself so there is a lot of excitement and also a strong sense of triumph. Throughout the novel the reader is taken back and forth through her life. Rani, the protagonist of *Queen*, is a 24-year-old Punjabi girl from Rajouri Garden Delhi, who leads a largely sheltered life and is escorted everywhere by her brother. Two days before their wedding, her fiancé Vijay meets her at a local café to tell her that he wants to call off their wedding. At first Rani thinks it is a joke, as Vijay was the one who chased her while she was a student, but when he tells her that he is serious, she is understandably shocked and heartbroken. She shuts herself in her room for a day and then decides to take control of her life by going on her pre-booked honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam. Like Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, Rani too has never travelled alone. At every step she liberates herself from the psychological bondage imposed on her by her overbearing fiancé. She discovers a version of herself she didn't know existed. From a starry-eyed young girl whose sole aim in life is marriage, to a woman who knows her mind and realizes there's much more to life, Rani's transformation is complete.

As a child Akhila witnesses the clearly defined gender-specific roles of her parents. Her father is the provider and her mother is the nurturer, who literally worships the ground he treads. He comes across as a very dissatisfied soul who always feels victimized by his colleagues and almost always has a headache. Her mother meanwhile, revels in her role as the subjugated, submissive housewife, whose world revolves around her husband.

At quarter past ten, Amma would stand at the kitchen door wiping her hands on a rag. He would glance up from the newspaper and stare at her appraisingly. When her lips parted, it was with an invitation that excluded everyone else. ‘Aren’t you hungry? You must be. You have had nothing to eat since you woke up.’ (Nair 45)

She believes that the sole purpose of a woman’s life is to take care of the needs of her family. Here, one is reminded of Kasturi, Virmati’s mother in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*, who is also cast in the same mould. As we see in her reminisces of her own younger days.

During Kasturi’s formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued in the home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by the impeccable nature of her daughter’s qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws. (Kapur 62)

Both Amma in *Ladies Coupe* and Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters* are content being dependent on their husbands economically and socially. They both believe that a woman’s duty is to get married; to be a good wife and mother. To them, home is a woman’s kingdom. It is beyond their comprehension why a woman would want anything else. When Virmati hesitantly approaches her mother with a request to postpone her impending wedding, Kasturi is appalled,

What had come over the girl? She had always been so good and sensible. How could she not see that her happiness lay in marrying a decent boy, who had waited patiently all these years, to whom the family had given their word? What kind of learning was this, that deprived her of her reason? She too knew the value of education, it had got her her husband, and had filled her hours with the pleasure of reading. In her time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one’s parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation? (Kapur 60)

The ever-suffering demeanour of her father prompts Akhila to compare him with their neighbour Subramani Iyer, who despite being a mere peon is always cheerful and full of life. Akhila enjoys going to their house because she likes the carefree atmosphere there. It is on one of her visits to Sarasa mami’s house that she learns of her father’s sudden demise. It is not clear whether it was an accident or suicide. This tragedy changes Akhila’s life dramatically. From a carefree young girl she suddenly has to don the role of the provider. She now puts her own life on the back burner and dedicates her life to being a dutiful daughter, sister and later, aunt. The family, while enjoying the fruits of her labour, never considers her needs and aspirations. This is most evident at the time of her brothers’ marriage.

Although both her bothers are younger, they never give a thought to the fact that Akhila might want a family of her own. It is taken for granted that she would remain single all her life. She is the provider but is never considered the head of the family. Her mother expects her to take permission from her brothers when she wants to go out of town for a weekend. “Perhaps you

should ask your brothers for permission first” (Nair 150). When Akhila retorts that she is their elder sister, Amma simply says, “You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family” (Nair 150). All the members of the family are so strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure that the mere thought of Akhila living or travelling alone is unbearable to them. She feels trapped in a restrictive Hindu Brahmin society but never rebels openly even when her younger siblings take advantage of her generosity. We see traces of the same attitude in *Queen*, when Rani first expresses her desire to travel to Paris and Amsterdam by herself. After the initial hesitation, she is however allowed to go ahead by her family, as they feel it would do her good to be away from her hometown.

Akhila becomes the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs. She becomes so engrossed in her role of bread-winner that she forgets that she too is human and has certain biological needs. The woman in Akhila is awakened when she feels a man’s touch for the first time on her way to work.

Five fingers. Slightly coarse skin. Closely cut nails except for the nail of the little finger which stretched about an inch long, slightly curved, a frisson of savagery on an otherwise gentle hand. It drew lines as it let itself dribble over the skin of her midriff. Akhila felt a warmth rush over her...She had never known anything like this before. An unfurling. Beads of sweat. A rasping edge to her muted breath. A quiet flowering. (Nair 139)

At one point Akhila bumps into her childhood friend Karpagam at the supermarket. Karpagam is a very well-etched character who has a profound impact on Akhila’s life, forcing her to question the way she has led her life thus far. It is she who shows Akhila, through her own example, that a woman need not have a man in her life to experience fulfillment and happiness. In fact, when Akhila first sees her, she thinks that Karpagam is a happy, contented, married housewife who would never understand her situation.

That while Akhila did ache to be with a man and yearned to allow her senses to explore and seek fulfillment, that while she wished to be loved by a man who would fill her silences and share all of himself with her, she didn’t want a husband. Akhila didn’t want to be a mere extension again. (Nair 201)

When she learns that Karpagam had lost her husband some years ago, she wonders how her friend still wears colourful clothes and kumkum which are normally taboo for widows. Karpagam’s reply to her friend’s query is what shakes Akhila to the core.

‘I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me, didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It isn’t a privilege that marriage sanctions. 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 and 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.’ (Nair 202)

Her interaction with Karpagam makes Akhila realize just how much she has sacrificed her own happiness for the sake of her family. She is reminded of her friend Katherine. It was Katherine Webber who brought an egg into Akhila’s life (Nair 85). To what extent Akhila had to

suppress her desires is evident from the way she reacts when she tastes a hard-boiled egg for the first time.

The yolk crumbled in her mouth, coating her tongue, clinging to her palate even as it slid down her throat spreading a pure sensation of delight in its wake. (Nair 88)

This situation immediately brings to mind the scene in *Queen*, where Rani is on her way back to the hotel in Paris, after having the time of her life at a nightclub. In the taxi, a heavily-drunk Rani delights in belching. In fact she even exhorts Vijayalakshmi a.k.a. Vijay to belch. She reveals to her that belching is something that is frowned upon, back home in Rajouri. Vijayalakshmi is to Rani what Karpagam is to Akhila. She teaches Rani that living life to the fullest can be truly liberating and is not a crime. Rani is at the nightclub with Vijayalakshmi, when she hears a Hindi film song being played. She cannot stop herself and dances with gay abandon. It is then that she realizes that she has never felt so carefree in her entire life. She feels liberated. She remembers the time when her fiancé berated her for having danced at a friend's wedding. He reminds her that girls from respectable households do not dance in public. In fact, it is during the night club scene, after a few drinks that Rani starts revealing her past to Vijayalakshmi. While doing so, she realizes that her fiancé is in fact, an insecure, patronizing chauvinist who never really cared for her happiness. She recollects his reaction when she informed him that a family friend had offered her a job. He effectively put an end to any aspirations she might have had. This scene instantly brings to mind Margaret Shanti's life story in *Ladies Coupe*. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj is an overbearing person who is narcissism personified. He is the Principal of the school where she is a Chemistry teacher.

What's the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob. (Nair 105)

Akhila feels a close bond with each of the women as they shared their most intimate fears and experiences. She realizes that all of them are ordinary individuals who overcame the odds with their extraordinary will power.

There was a silence in the coupe. For a moment, Akhila had thought they had established a connection. Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other's lives, aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls wouldn't go beyond this night or the contained space. (Nair 22)

In the space of one night, Akhila's thought process undergoes a sea-change, forcing her to think for herself. Likewise, in *Queen* we see the gradual transformation of Rani, when she becomes friends with her roommates in Amsterdam, where at first she was horrified at the thought of having to share a room with three men.

In Kanyakumari, Akhila has a brief relationship with a young man called Vinod. It is in fact she who initiates the relationship, which is very unlike the old Akhila. For both of them there is no emotional involvement. She is now not bothered about what others would say. She has overcome her fear of society. In *Queen* we see a normally timid Rani in Amsterdam, indulging in a fleeting lip-lock with the Italian restaurant owner, on whom, by her own admission, she has a crush. After Vinod leaves, Akhila telephones her old flame Hari and we are given to understand that a man replies at the other end. It is not clear whether they will get back together. What is clear towards the end of the novel is that Akhila's journey of self-discovery is

complete. Similarly, in *Queen*, on her return to India, we see a confident and completely different Rani, who, on her way home from the airport, stops at the home of her fiancé to return the engagement ring. There is no bitterness, only relief and gratitude, when she hugs him one last time. Her self-actualization is complete.

It is when Akhila and Rani are pushed to their limits, that they realize their true potential. As Eleanor Roosevelt said famously, “A woman is like a teabag, you can’t tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water”. In *Ladies Coupe*, it is the inferiority complex and overbearing behavior of Akhila’s younger sister Parma, which is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. In *Queen*, it is the unceremonious rejection of Rani by her fiancé, two days before their wedding that prompts her to take charge of her life. Anita Nair and Vikas Bahl strive to highlight social issues through their choice of themes. They create characters that move from being victims to self-asserting individuals. They have sensitively portrayed the lives of middle-class women, their hopes and aspirations and the extraordinary inner strength which exists within ordinary human beings. Although *Ladies Coupe* came in 2001 and *Queen* in 2014, there is a lot of similarity, prompting one to ask, “Can a woman be single and happy?” Indian women’s writing has for long focused on issues concerning women. The fact that a film like *Queen* is conceptualized, released and above all, accepted by the audience in India is indicative of the winds of change sweeping across the country.

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