

**THE JOURNEY OF SELF- DISCOVERY: A STUDY OF WOMEN
CHARACTERS IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE* AND SHASHI
DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS***

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Abstract

Indian women writing in English is being recognized as the major contribution in Literature. The earlier Indian women novelists have portrayed the traditional image of women as silent sufferers, tolerant, docile and silent observers of social taboos. The later novelists have explored the female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed to the women by the patriarchal society. The novels of women writers are significant by initiating awareness to women to identify their needs and demands through self expression and assertion. Against the background of contemporary India, they concentrate on the conflicts and predicaments of Indian women. They analyze the socio-cultural values of the past and the present, which offer them new image and roles. The women characters work hard to cope with themselves and their environment to create harmony, and set themselves as prototypes for the women in the society. In their journey the women characters are tossed between tradition and modernity. They have to deal with the dual tasks, for the family unity and for the assertion of their identity. The former concerns with the dedication and commitment of the people around them, that is of the external, public world; while, the latter concerns with their own selves, that is of the inner private world. Both are, however, arduous journeys. Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande have focused on the identity crises of Indian women, their dilemmas and their struggles to confront against to establish their identities.

This paper proposes to examine two novels, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to illustrate how the Indian women struggle to identify themselves in the tradition bound Patriarchal Indian Society.

Keywords : Self-discovery, Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande.

Indian women writing in English has been recognized as a major contribution to Literature that gives a new dimension to Indian literature. The earlier Indian women novelists have portrayed the traditional image of women as sufferers, tolerant, docile and silent observers of social taboos. The later novelists have explored the female subjectivity in order to establish

an identity, not provided to women by the patriarchal society. They have created women characters who set themselves as prototypes for the women in our society by identifying their needs and demands through self-expression and assertion. Indian novel in English has been enriched by several highly talented women novelists like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hossain, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, to name a few. These writers have analyzed the socio-cultural values that has provided Indian women new images and roles. Through the women characters they have explored the moral and psychic dilemmas of women in the society. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* illustrate how the female protagonists establish their identities through Self-discovery in the tradition bound Patriarchal Indian Society. Though women, the silent sufferers have played multiple roles in their lives, such as wife, mother, sister and daughter, they have never been able to enjoy individuality. In our society it is expected that an ideal woman should have the qualities of self-denial, sacrifice, devotion and remain docile. They are forced to live for their family only. Such rules are not applicable to men. But, the protagonists of Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande have dared to revolt against the stereotypical roles imposed on them by their family and society.

Anita Nair, who has written novels, short stories, poems, essays, plays and travelogues, is a bold and straightforward writer. Her best-selling novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* have been translated into many world languages. Her novel depicts real life characters without hiding anything from the readers. Her female characters are courageous enough to break the norms of the society in order to maintain their identity.

Ladies Coupe is the story of six women who meet on a train journey. Self-discovery is the central theme of the novel. The Protagonist Akhilandeswari, in short Akhila hopes to understand the meaning of life. The novelist brings together women of different age-group, education, diverse experiences and social strata to picture the struggle they encounter in discovering their 'self'. She employs flash back techniques to narrate the experience of fellow passengers. Akhila, a 45 year old spinster, is born in a conservative Brahmin family. When her father died accidentally, she becomes an Income Tax clerk and the bread winner of the family. She has lived her life as a daughter, sister, aunt and madam at the office, but no one called her by her name.

What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brothers and sister had always called her Akka. Elder Sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. All women were madam and all men were Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Amma... so who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? (LC84)

Her multiple roles have not allowed her to identify herself and have swallowed her personality itself. Even though she is the 'man' of the family, she does not receive the same respect given to a real man. Akhila, the silent member fulfills the needs of her family, but she is treated by them as a money lending machine. Even her mother, knowing well, carefully avoids her desire of getting married and having children of her own. For twenty six years, with her job, Akhila dutifully gives time, money and care for her siblings and mother alone, but has no time to think of herself.

After the prolonged frustration instigated by the family responsibilities and having performed multiple roles, she decides to go out to a far-off place from her demanding family and compelling duties where no one knows about her. This of course, is a temporary shift which will not help her mentally. But, such a relief from her monotony initiates self-awareness in

her. While travelling in the train to Kanyakumari, she meets another five women in the coupe. By listening to the experiences narrated by these strangers, she could gather herself and pool her inner strength. Each one of the characters, by a sort of confessional talk reveals her identity. Such an open-talk seems to have a therapeutic effect, as it eases out the mental-knot that holds their 'self' tightly. The talk loosens the tightness in Akhila also, makes her relax within and take note of herself. She finally draws courage to break the barriers of culture and tradition that hold her fast. The physical journey by train is the journey of self-analysis and of self-discovery for the women in the coupe.

Janaki, an elderly woman is a typical Indian wife. She is a pampered wife and confused mother. The next woman in the coupe is Margret Shanthi, a Chemistry Teacher, marries a man she loves and later learns that he is an insensitive, tyrant who is always determined to dominate and control her. The third woman in the coupe is Prabha Devi, the perfect daughter and wife of a rich family, achieves self-realization when she learns swimming by herself. The next member fourteen year old Sheela has an ability to perceive what others cannot and Marikolundhu, the last quiet passenger, whose innocence has been destroyed by the lust of a rich man. They all have experienced different problems and their self-discovery solves them. They have longed for a sympathetic listener and have wished their story to be heard. Their stories have disclosed their individuality which help Akhila to discover her 'self'. Jaya Thekkayam in the book review of *Ladies Coupe* says that women are able to define their 'self' by learning through the experience from others:

Anita Nair's inventory of tales in this text, the narrative voice preserves not only its consistency, but its inherent philosophical and cultural nature. She attempts to frame the human condition in a sharp all-around edge: it helps the characters to define themselves while situating that self definition in a wider and ever widening landscape of women discovering new meanings in other women's worlds. (318)

Such a coming-together of women is acknowledged as "Female Bonding". Feminist Studies emphasizes the need of such bonding among women, since the amity and open speech amidst them create a free space for them to remain as they are without any inhibition. Female bonding is the formation of a close personal relationship and patterns of friendship, attachment, and cooperation in females. The common experience of oppression urges women to interact and form bonds to fight back the impact of class and gender. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy but it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. Though the friendship formed in *Ladies Coupe* seems to be temporary, it certainly leaves a bearing in these women's psyche.

Before boarding the coupe Akhila had many unanswered questions. After hearing the stories of the fellow passengers, she is able to find numerous answers. They are all women who want to be independent and they are in search of their lost identity. Prabha Devi's swimming experience motivates Akhila to embark on new experiences. Margret's strategy directs her to turn the negative aspects into positive ones. Janaki's life motivates her to select a partner for her life. Through Sheela and her grandmother's stories she learns the importance of practical life. Marikolunthu's struggle and her acceptance of deceased son enlightens Akhila to explore the meaning and values of life. Akhila realizes that all these years how her family members have ruined her life and have never allowed to live for herself as 'Akhila' an individual. She also fails to realize her 'self', because of the responsibilities and duties loaded upon her shoulders. The coupe, in reality is an eye-opener to her to embark in search of her own identity and happiness, giving her an opportunity to rebel against the ideas of her family members:

...why shouldn't I live alone? I'm of able body and mind. I can look after myself. I earn reasonably well. Akhila paused when her voice choked with tears, and began again. Has anyone of you ever asked me what my desires were of what my dreams are? Did anyone of you ever think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do? (LC206)

She steps out of her family and rejects the traditional life pattern. Akhila is drawn into the private moments of her life which help her to recognize her 'self'. Y. Vidya and G. Baskaran in their article, "Epitomising women through a Vociferous Protest: A deconstructive Reading of Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe" in *Native Visions and Alien Voices: Essays on Commonwealth Literature* opine: "Akhila...exhibits this determination and attain state of autonomous selfhood defying and overcoming their dilapidated and opprobrious state in order to live a purposeful live and to be content with themselves." (203-204).

Finally, when Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari, she is a New Akhila. She has **now** the courage to confront the world. The novel ends not only by identifying Akhila with Goddess Durga, indicating the hidden potential of womankind, but also by indicating the erasure of the patriarchal image of woman as a silent, imperfect and incomplete being. She plans to call Hari, her lover. Once she has rejected him because of her family responsibilities and her fear towards the society to marry a man who is younger to her in age. Her self-discovery hauls out to renew her relationship with her lover Hari. Akhila books a call to Hari and she awaits for his answer to join him. Hari answers the call, but Anita Nair does not reveal to the reader what his answer is. But the changed and confident Akhila is ready to build a good life according to her desire.

Shashi Deshpande also delineates emphatically women's self discovery in her novels. Her protagonists rise from self-pity to self-discovery. Initially they are victims and they have undergone conflicts within themselves because they hide their real feelings. Sarita of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is one such victimized woman accepting all challenges. She depicts the journey of a modern woman towards economic independence and social recognition.

Sarita a successful doctor, is the wife of Manohar and the mother of two children. She returns alone to her parental home after her mother's death to stay there for an unspecified period of time. Having stepped out against her mother's wishes she marries a man whom she loves. Her professional success creates friction between the loving couple. Her husband Manohar, is a temporary college lecturer in a second grade college and his low salary converts him into a different person. The immediate crisis of Sarita to return her father's house is marital rape. The time she spends at her parental home provides her a chance to make an assessment of herself and others. This self-discovery provides better understanding of her problems and gives courage to face the hurdles. Sarita assesses her relationship with her husband Manohar and also dwells upon her relationship with her mother, father, younger brother and her own children Renu and Abi. Sarita always disagrees with her mother. Like any Indian mother, she treats Sarita secondary and loves her son Dhuruva more. In Indian social set up girl becomes the victim of gender biased discrimination. As S. Anandhalakshmi in her article "The female Child in a Family Setting" in the *Indian Journal of Social Work* opines: "The birth of a son gives a woman status and she invests herself in her son's fixture, creating a deep symbolic bond." (31) Kamala's blind love on her son Dhuruva pushes her daughter away from her.

Sarita is blighted by her mother for her brother's death due to drowning. Her mother even curses Sarita to be dead: "you killed him, why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?" (DHNT191) This attitude makes Sarita develop hatred towards her mother. Sarita's determination to become a doctor is to prove her capacity to her mother, to her own self and

also to the entire world that she is not inferior to anybody and she has a reason to live. Sarita decides to have an identity of her own. She is rebellious by nature and unwilling to accept her mother's choice of getting an ordinary education and marriage. She is confident and determined to come up in her life through education. She chooses medicine. She does not like to live in her hometown and decides to pursue her career in Bombay. That Sarita holds high her Self-esteem is seen obvious in her temperament. Self-esteem is one of the concepts of the 'Self' schemata, that has undergone an in-depth research by the Developmental Psychologists. Self-esteem reflects a person's overall subjective emotional evaluation of his / her own worth. It is a judgment of oneself as well as an attitude toward the self. Self-esteem encompasses beliefs about oneself, as well as emotional states, such as triumph, despair, pride, and shame. Christopher Mruk, a well-known Developmental Psychologist, in his book *Self Esteem Research, Theory, and Practice -- towards a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem* (2006) observes thus:

. . . self-esteem is intensely personal, in part because it says something about who we are and how we live our lives. . . . understanding self-esteem will help us to learn things about ourselves: important things such as who we are as unique individuals and how we are faring in life in terms of the meanings of our actions, our short-and long-term goals, our relationships with others, and the direction in which our lives are heading. . . . it is one of those rare human qualities that is active in both negative and positive situations, experiences, and states of being, making it relevant to a wide range of behavior. (3)

This explanation of Prof. Mruk defines Sarita's behavior, but it is a pity that such a potential woman suffers low self-esteem in the hands of a sadistic husband.

By her choice, Sarita marries a man of lower caste whom she has loved. She is revolutionary by nature, competes and fulfills her ambition. Like any other newly-married couple, their initial days of married life is heaven on earth. But her success in practice changes her loving husband as an intolerable sadist. The financial ascendancy of his wife makes him feel insignificant and impotent. He ventures to prove his potency and masculinity by giving her sexual torture during the night. Sarita is compelled to perform dual roles: a successful doctor at daytime and terrified animal during the night.

...each time it happens and I don't speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has already begun and what I am is a creature only half alive. And it seems I can do nothing to save myself. (DHNT96)

She is helpless, desperate and is in a state of turmoil. She feels that had her mother not been against Manohar or against their marriage, if she has not cursed her, their marriage life would have been happier. She lives in the state of confusion, unable to seek help from others because of her social status. Unable to consult a psychiatrist or to divorce him, she bears all the cruelties of her sadist husband silently. To escape from the chaotic situation she returns to her parent's house after fifteen years. But escape is not the way to resolve the tangled knot of her problems. Her stay in her father's house gives Sarita a chance to review her relationship with her father, husband, dead mother and brother. Her Self-esteem directs her to perceive the situations in the proper way. She gains a better understanding of herself and others. This self-discovery provides her courage to confront the hurdles. In other words, as Mruk views, she could now turn the negative features into positive modes.

She realizes that escaping from the dark or cursing the darkness will not give the solution, rather light a candle and declare that the dark holds no terror. She comes to

a conclusion that her dead brother and mother, Manohar and her daughter Renu are mere illusions of terror. She has to rise up to the situation boldly and let the terrors vanish out. Earlier, she finds fault with her better half, but later she realizes that her own inadequacy has been the cause of her untold sufferings, in spite of owning self-respect. This self-discovery supplies her courage to face and tackle the problems. Sarita is the typical representative of the present-day Indian woman, who is torn between the two horns of dilemma, that of tradition and of modernity. Finally, she accepts the hurdles and challenges to prove herself as an affectionate daughter, lovable wife, caring mother, a successful physician and a good woman, who can be a role-model to others. Her self-discovery transforms her and takes her from a state of self-pity to self-assertion. She visualizes herself as an archetype of Suddama who gets support from his powerful friend Krishna, when she meets her father for support. Initially she does not avail any help from him but later she receives the support, which gives courage to face her husband and resolve her tangled problems. Viji.M.J in her article "The Feminine Perspectives and the Discovery of Women and Self in the Literary Corpus of Shashi Deshpande" in *Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literatures* views about Shashi Deshpande's heroines:

The heroines of Deshpande strive for and obtain certain autonomy and thereby realize their immense potentialities for action and self actualization. Their return home is not defeatism, but the triumph of the independence women. They learn to live in the modern society with self identity and self realization. (34)

Sarita attempts painful choices in order to assert and retain her sense of 'self'. She reacts against the challenging situations and discovers her strength by probing into her 'self'. In spite of her oppressing situation she is able to define her identity in the society. Through her medical profession, she maintains her individuality, and by self-introspection and self-discovery, she established her identity. The process of self analysis helps Sarita to realize that it is her sense of superiority over her husband and also her denial to empathize with him that has been responsible for the discord in their relationship. She decides to take care not only of her issues, but also of her partner, and this decision to accept her husband with all his blemishes, creates confidence in her and makes her look at herself in a new perspective. This is the 'Self-discovery' education she receives through her own experiences. She agrees that the mutual trust, confidence and care alone bring the lost heaven again.

Both Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande have shown how Self-discovery of women in their novels, help them to face their sufferings bravely. Akhila and Sarita both recognize their strength, potential and maturity through their journey of self-discovery. Their self-discovery provides them self confidence to handle even critical situations and mend their lives in a better way. At the end there is a note of determination from both Akhila and Sarita, who resolve to take the reins of their life in their hands with a positive hope.

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