

## ANITA NAIR'S WOMEN IN *LADIES COUPE* AS VICTIMS UNDER PATRIARCHY

**Dr. Nirmal Sharma**

Asst. Professor of English  
SRM University, NCR Campus  
Modinagar, Ghaziabad (U.P.)

Anita Nair is one of the best Indian writers of English. In her second Novel *Ladies Coupe*, She focuses on different phases of suffering, the women undergo in the society. The story is an effort to explain how, in life, repression and subjugation do not always come in identifiable forms, but often under the disguise of love, protection and the assurance of security. The novel does not deal only with one story. It deals with the lives and experiences of six women which have been welded together by the author into a skillful whole, with Akhila or Akhilendeswari as a magnet in the centre. The story of Akhila reminds the readers about the Indian female situation where she is estimated to spend her time to execute the role of the daughter, sister and breadwinner of the family to gratify their requirements. Anita Nair does not only deal with the problems of women in this novel but tries to show them the path to lead on it.

Ruling of the male in the family can be considered patriarchy. All the decision about women, children, and property is taken by the head of the family. Sometimes this authority creates the feeling of superiority in that male head of the family. He considers himself superior to women. This type of attitude begins to create problem for female existence. As Sylvia Walby in "*Theorising Patriarchy*" defines it "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990)

Anita Nair is one of the well known writers in Indian Writing in English with an international reputation. '*Ladies Coupe*' is Nair's second novel which has been translated into more than twenty-five languages about the world. This novel *Ladies Coupé* throws light on the role of women in India. She focuses on different phases of suffering, the women undergo in the society. She does not take this subject matter as a feminist but, as a human being who opens up the realities of a human suffering. In an interview with Sneha Subramanian Kanta, she herself accepts:

The creating process begins for me when certain aspects of life trouble me.... I merely hold up a mirror to the society we live in. At no point do I delude myself that by doing so I will help start a social revolution. ...Hence to bind myself to a particular ideology or writing would mean gagging my thoughts and limiting my boundaries. ("Anita Nair Interview")

This novel is a profound discourse of women's problems in Indian society. All the characters of this novel without exception go through the strenuous experiences of domestic repression at the hands of their families. The story is an effort to explain how, in life, repression and subjugation do not always come in identifiable forms, but often under the disguise of love, protection and the assurance of security. The story moves from past to present and present to past

and bring out the complete panorama of female world. Sunita Sinha says, “Nair’s India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality” (149).

Though Patriarchy is a common concept in every woman’s life of the novel, Anita Nair depicts carefully the variety within each woman, as she does not want to put the lives of women to one ideal. Like Chaucer, Anita Nair introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinctive and apart in age, background, style, language, mannerism, beliefs and in particular how they choose a weapon to handle their situation. In *Ladies coupe*, there are five women along with the protagonist Akhilandeswari. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the women’s stories. The novel starts with Akhila who is introduced as a single forty-five year old, without rose-coloured spectacles, without husband, children, home and family, dreaming of escape and space, hungry for life and experience and aching to connect. She is an official in the Income Tax Department. One day she sets out to seek certain answers for herself, mainly to the question whether a single woman can live alone, away from her family. She buys a ticket to Kanyakumari and is placed in ‘Ladies Coupe’ along with five other women giving her company for the overnight journey. These women share their life experiences with her, thus helping her to gain her full potential as a woman and grapple with the answers to the questions she’s been asking so long.

The novel does not deal only with one story. It deals with the lives and experiences of six women which have been welded together by the author into a skillful whole, with Akhila or Akhilandeswari as a magnet in the centre. The story of each woman provides a learning experience for Akhila who contemplates upon the various aspects of her life after each session of tale-telling. It helps her to break free from manifold identities as daughter, sister aunt and provider. In the novel, this is the first time, she is thinking about herself. She has started a journey to Kanyakumari, which is according to her a place of Kanayakumari, the goddess, like her, had put her life on hold.(3) Through this external journey she has also gone through the interior journey and try to assimilate her scatter identity. She has spent the prime time of her life in thinking, caring and providing good life to her family (two brothers, sister and her mother) after the death of her father as she promised herself, “I provide for you tonight, I will have to provide for the family you abandoned so callously.”(59) As Indra Devi says, “Anita Nair probably hints at the family’s easy acceptance of her as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods” (220). Though she is the provider of the family, she is not considered as the head of the family and her needs and desires are least bothered. Being the eldest son and the man of the family Narsi, does not ask for anybody’s permission to get married but “decided” to get married for “Narsi decided he wanted to get married” (77). When he tells the family that he is going to marry the principal’s daughter, “No one could fault with his choice and there was nothing anyone could say except perhaps – Don’t you think you should wait for your elder sister to get married before you think of a wife and a family? But who was to mouth this rebuke?” (77). Both Narayan and Narsi have their weddings in the same hall, on the same day and time. No one come forward to reduce her burden of responsibility when they become mature. As she regrets that Amma and her brothers never ask something about her marriage, “What about you? You’ve been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don’t you want a husband, children, and a home of your own? In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster. (77).

Though Akhila has done her duties, all that of a head of a family to her brothers and sister, she is not recognized as the real head, just because she is a woman. Amma expects her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, “Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first” (150). When Akhila argues that she is their elder sister and why she should ask their permission Amma simply says, “You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family” (150). On the other hand they are taking her journey otherwise. As Padma’s eyes glints with doubts that “Is she traveling alone or is some one going with her? A man, perhaps.”(5) So she tries to warn her “I don’t know what Narayan Anna and Narsi Anna will say when they know of your going away suddenly and all by yourself too...” (7) Padma is taking this decision in this way because she belongs to very orthodox Brahmin family where all the decision are taken by male as their mother once told them about their father’s nature: “...Don’t you know how strict he is? He told me when we were first married I want my wife to take care of my children and me.”(13) Their mother told them also that in marriage, there is no equality. It is best to accept that “the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man’s role. Or gods would have made her so.”(14) What Akhila misses the most is that no one ever calls her by her name any more. Her brothers and sister have always called her Akka (Elder sister). At work, her colleagues call her Madam, “All women are Madam and men are Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Ammadi.. As though to call Akhila by her name would be an affront to her head-of-the-household status.” (84)

The story of Akhila reminds the readers about the Indian female situation where she is estimated to spend her time to execute the role of the daughter, sister and breadwinner of the family to gratify their requirements. But when she begins to ask about her right, happiness and identity, she is taken otherwise. As Akhila gets out of control and ask over her, “So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when she saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? Did the feel of rain on her bare akin send a line of goose bumps down her spine...?” (84) This negligence makes her revolutionary as she chides Padma, “This is my house and if I wish to eat eggs here or prance around naked, I will do so. If someone doesn’t care for it, they are free to leave.”(162) The same happens with other women’s case in the novel.

The story of Margaret Shanthi reminds the readers how women are dominated by man-power. Men like Ebenezer Paulraj are not able to see and admire the value of his wife. Margaret marries Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice and at the immediate eagerness of her family. She is a Chemistry teacher not a normal teacher but the one who has been a gold medalist. Initially Margaret does not understand the deep rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her great love for him has made her blind. Though at times she feels the pain of it she convinces herself saying, “He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right” (109) Ebe is simply a male-bigot who takes the power to ask Margaret to abort the baby off, the first baby off, when she conveys him the good news with all happiness, “just think of this as a tumour that has to be removed.”(106) Not only in that, but he continues to push upon his supremacy over her in deciding her higher studies, career and even simple things like choice of food and her hair dressing for he says, “What’s the point of 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” (105). Margaret begins to feel suffocation in this authoritative

environment and asks herself like Akhila, “Where was I in all this? Margaret Shanthi, the women. In Ebe’s eyes, had I ceased to be? What did he see me as? A little girl he could rule and mould, make love to and jolly around?”(111)

Even parents are more concerned about the boys than the girls. Anita Nair has chosen the character of Prabha Devi to emphasize this issue. When Prabha Devi is born his father sighs, as it would be an obstacle for his business growth as he says, “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) Even Prabha Devi’s mother is delighted when a daughter is born as her thoughts are confined that a daughter is some one who will take her recipes to the other house and treasure her jewellery and some one who will say that she did this and that in her mother’s house. She is bought up as a traditional Indian girl and after marriage she is supposed to be a good house wife. This treatment of her parents and husband compels Prabha to think, “Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else’s personality? Jagdeesh’s Mrs and no more.”(180)

The youngest of the six members of coupe is Sheela, fourteen years old. Anita Nair has not only brought out the need to state the individuality of the female selfhood but also finely brought out the issue of female child abuse through the character depiction of Sheela. As Judes Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, “Sheela’s retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men”. (122) Sheela feels embarrassed and hurt at the unnecessary touching of Hasina’s father Nazar as, “One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time.” (66) So Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her, but developed confidence to protect her from it in future for it is said, “Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina’s home.” (66) Even Sheela’s friend Hasina and her mother are able to understand the man’s attempt to touch her unnecessarily but they are helpless. Once Naazar tangled the bows in her sleeves, “She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother’s eyes.” (66) Thereafter Sheela takes the right decision that “She would never go to Hasina’s house again” (66) as a means of her self-defense because she comes to know about an incident through her grandmother, where a girl named Celine became a victim to a man’s impulse. Celine became pregnant because of her friend’s father and her family moved to a place where no one would know about her abortion. But it is said, “the friend’s father went to a far away town where he would find plenty of young girls to ruin everyone said” (65). Through this incident, Nair has brought out the unfair treatment of women by men.

Marikolanthu is the most pitiable woman among the six. She represents poor and miserable peasantry class women on whom male brutality is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is deprived of to be sent to the town school as her mother says, “It’s not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself . . . there is too much at risk..” (215) To make sure her mother’s dread, her childhood innocence is crushed when Murugesan attempts physical cruelty on her. When she is found pregnant her mother and Sujata, regret it as they just feel it is too late to insist Murugesan to marry her. Her mother is least worried about her feelings but worries that no one will marry her. Even when the issue is taken to the Chettiar’s son Sridhar, he with little unwillingness says, “The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she’s making up a story about rape.” (245) For her mother and Sujata, a woman’s life and guard lies in her husband, as Sujata says, “But if she has a job, that



will replace a husband's protection." (246) But Marikolanthu is able to raise the question within her about the so called "Husband's protection. She is sure that neither her mother nor Sujata have their husbands' look out for them, but for them, "a fulfilled woman was one who was married" (246). For Marikolanthu nothing is crueler than a man's raping of a woman and so she finds little fault in the missy's love for each other and experiences a kind of content and happiness to give her love for Sujata, more than her husband does. Marikolanthu never wants to attach up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty – one she lives alone and struggles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to depend upon her brothers nor wants money from Sujata or her husband but decides to make her living of her own, working as a servant maid in a house.

Thus Anita Nair has touched all the major aspects of female world in this novel whether it is the case of girl-child, physical humiliation, rape and the dominating role of male in female's decision. She has discussed all the problems of all the facets of female life and portraits pragmatically how their desires, rights and happiness crush in disguise of duty. Neither she advocates that women will remain subjugated or the victims under patriarchy system nor in favour of rejecting the existence of male's importance in female's life. But they should react in their own way against the wrong treatment from male side. Janaki Prabhakar, the old woman in the coupe whose relationship with her husband is a "friendly love", she tells about herself, "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father, and my brother; then my husband, when my husband is gone, there will be my son."(22) She is happy with this treatment because she thinks that "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her."(21) Prabha Devi, the rich docile wife who loves swimming because it symbolically, gives her a sense of achievement. As she confesses "for the first time in many years, you are doing what you want and not what everyone else thinks you ought to want, she told herself sternly!"(87) Margaret Paulraj, the chemistry teacher who succeeds in "discipline" her egotistic husband and changes him according to her choice Now "he needed me like he had never before and Ebe became a man I could live with once again."(134) Sheela, the fourteen year old girl whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for own future freedom and Marikolanthu, whose rape, plainly and symbolically, attached with extreme poverty and class exploitation is on the peak of all other stories.

Anita Nair has not only depicts the realistic picture of women's condition but also delivers the message in the novel through many characters as Karpagam. Who is a widow but unlike other widows she wears the kumkum and colourful clothes. She is an audacious woman, who breaks the chains of patriarchy when she says,

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 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. (202)

.She tries to wake up Akhila and says firmly "If I can live alone, why can't you?"(201)She influences Akhila so much that she realizes: "Karpagam, are you real or are you some goddess who has come here to lead me out of this."(202) Margaret also advises Akhila that "You 'll discover that once you stop worrying what the world will think of you, your life will become that much easier to live."(136) Marikolanthu, the worst victim of patriarchy puts the best examples in

front of Akhila. She tells her “What do they know of how cruel the world can be to women? I am not telling you that women are weak .Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally.”(210)In the coupe, after exchanging the feelings with one-another Akhila feels very light and decides to live according to her own way. Thus the journey by train freshens up not only Akhila’s daily routine but also her inner self.

### WORKED CITED

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