

INDIAN FEMINISM IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE AND MISTRESS

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Postcolonial feminist literature has always carried the heavy burden of dealing with, not to say unraveling layers of misinterpretation of traditions and religions. The centre of this dilemma is the role of woman and her economical and social (in) dependence. In the traditional postcolonial society, the problematic question is of women's emancipation and its women writers are more passionate and serious about it. In thus writing, postcolonial Indian women authors have not only exhorted an exposition of the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies towards feminist growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of counteracting those attitudes. They analyze their varying ideals of feminist emancipation in relation to the roles, the communities play in aiding or in obstructing feminist freedom. Meanwhile we have to note both the first and second generation of Indian women writers have also contributed to the constantly evolving and often self questioning body of literature, as they have taken up various themes like that of language, identity-nostalgia, loyalty, and social and cultural adaptability. Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Nair is perhaps, the most perceptive explorer of women's world, especially that of Indian women, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness. The paper tries to focus how Anita Nair projects Indian feminism and attitude through women characters in her novels. "Ladies coupe" and "Mistress" seems to be championing the cause of according equality to women. The view embodied in her novels is that the same code of morality be applied to both men and women. In "Ladies Coupe" she has taken up for treatment the theme of estrangement in marriages, issues of pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. Whereas "Mistress" is a literary tour de force from man-woman relationships to complex kathakali aesthetics.

Ladies Coupe is a very powerful novel delineating feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this delineation is chiefly expressed through the projection of the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom. The Brahmin heroin Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is forty-five years old 'spinster', daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family after the death of her father. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, she decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities, a journey that ultimately make her a different woman. She tries to change the course of her life and family substantially. But it is not possible as she lives in a predetermined world. Neither she is free to realize her goals, nor to translate her dreams into realities. Akhila, with sans husband, children, home and family, is dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience, aching to content, she sets out for a journey. Anita Nair chooses a ladies-only, train compartment as the setting of the novel. In all female Ladies coupe she meets five other women, each of whom has a story to tell. The stories are all an attempt to answer Akhila's problematic question: Can a woman stay single and be happy at the same time?

Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the woman's story:Janaki,the old woman

whose relationship with her husband is a ‘friendly love’, Margaret, the Chemistry teacher, who succeeds ‘disciplining’ her narcissistic husband/principal; Prabha, the rich submissive wife who loves swimming because it metaphorically gives her a sense of achievement; Sheela, the fourteen year old whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for her own future liberation; and Marikolanthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class-exploitation is the culmination of all other stories.

Primarily *Ladies Coupe* is the story of Akhila, who happens to be the most subdued, rather crushed member of the family. Akhila is like a catalyst whose presence is never noticed, never appreciated and yet whose absence may make all the difference. Akhila is a woman lost in the jungle of her duties; sometimes to her mother, at other times to her brothers and still at other times to her sister. She is expected to be an obedient daughter, affectionate and motherly sister and everything but an individual. As a woman Akhila has her dreams, her desires, but when her dreams come in conflict with the comforts of her family it is she who has to sacrifice. She lives a life designated by the society or family. On few occasions she listens to the voice of her innermost being and then she appears a rebel. In fact, her character appears to be a continuum of nothingness and being. On this continuum, nothingness shades into her being very slowly and occasionally. Even Virginia Woolf was aware of the complexity of a character and therefore, she saw character as a flux and wanted to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind”¹. Like Akhila’s the other characters are also questioning the system and are “groping for their identities and their status both in the family set-up and the larger social structure”².

Ladies Coupe deconstructs that which is taken for granted the sacred, the traditional, and the ideological. Akhila is not given the opportunity by her family to get married and have a family; she is rather expected to provide. Akhila is still a spinster as she has to provide and the Brahmin traditions in this case become flexible. Marikolanthu, a low-caste woman is raped and unsurprisingly, she is to blame: “Why does a young woman walk alone?” It is pleasing to note that Anita Nair observes the uneducated, poor and rural women, like Marikolanthu, who boldly reject traditions that define their lives in dependent relationship with men more strongly than the educated and urban women reject those traditions. Through this depiction, Nair criticizes the rubric of formal education that reinforces the patriarchal conditioning in men and women. She asserts that education can empower and liberate women only when it is aimed at changing social attitudes. In fact, in Nair’s writing, the restructuring of male-female relationships that can bring changes in social and interpersonal attitudes, becomes the most important basis of feminist emancipation.

The struggle of educated and rich women for emancipation is not the same like that of an uneducated and poor woman. Marikolanthu’s greatness lies in her struggle for emancipation in spite of being poor and illiterate. She can be called as an Indian version of Ibsen’s Nora. None can fail to admire her gradual growth through experience from docility to defiance, defiance to full confidence. Although not formally educated in a school or college, she is rigorously trained in the University of Adversity. Thus she succeeds in her flight with the preconceived notions of gender-roles and develops the existential. In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these five women endeavor to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive. Having entered a chakravyuha from which there is no escape, they want to make the best of their given life by hardening themselves to face the harsh realities of life. Anita Nair has thus offered an affirmative vision thereby upholding the ultimate goodness, beauty and truth of life in *Ladies Coupe*.

Mistress

The novel explores the depth of relationship between Shyam and Radha. In their relationship we find that Radha's role as a wife blocks her freedom. Beauvoir believed that the institution of marriage has marred the spontaneity of feelings, between the husband and wife by "transforming freely given feelings into mandatory duties and shrilly asserted rights"³. A woman is more than her body. She is not only a Being-in-itself but also a Being-for-itself. Radha's alienation under the rubrics of sexuality is on account of Shyam's cold intellectuality. The entire pulsating and throbbing world around Shyam serves to deepen her love for Chris. Radha's contact with Shyam never went deeper than skin. She is unable to satiate her sexual urge because of Shyam's aloofness, and this leads her into Chris arms. Nair, who is a sensitive writer, can delve deep into people's personalities and take the reader on a wonderful journey of relationship.

Radha rejects her husband's oppressive environment and she rebels against the false materialism and vulgarity of society. She even virtually rejects her marriage. She distrusts love as a form of male possessiveness and does not want love to be an aspect of male domination. Radha who had a pre-marital affair with a married man, had an abortion, Later her post-affair with Christopher, she grapples for the true sense of love, completely divorced from the sense of guilt. As she travels back to her uncle life she confronts many harsh truths of her own past. To the agitated self of Radha who is fed up with ugly life, she has a strong desire to find out an order. She tries to explore the past of her uncle, as well as, Christopher who are so closely connect with her mysterious past. She wants to understand the secret behind Christopher's visit and her uncle's procrastination to narrate his own life story. She plunges to the past and many realizations occur to her. The shocking revelation that Christopher, with whom she had extra-marital affair is her cousin leaves her devastated. In the process of knowing her past, she is transformed into a new being. This transformation gives her the inner strength to submit to Shyam's wish to take her back to home.

Mysteries are an indictment against men who believe in holding their women in their grip. It is a statement against women who take pride in their servility; it's again an indictment against men who trade in marriages as a means of increasing money and power. It is a strong statement male-chauvinism, female apathy and reluctance and it is a woman's voice for freedom and emancipation. In cultural firmament of India which is undergoing vast change, now one finds that there are good, bad, monstrous and erratic specimens of women ranging from film actresses, models, house-wives to the fallen sisters of Gandhi. In this background, women like Radha in *Mistress*, Janaki, Prabha and Margaret in *Ladies Coupe* occupy a unique place. Being sensitive and having spent their childhood in comfortable conditions of parental care, it was expected that their marital life should be wholesome and happy. But, it could not come about, mainly on account of their sensitiveness and an inner urge to carve their own identity.

It is very interesting to watch how an individual is an ever a captive of his attitude and intentions. Radha's search for physical interaction and gratification or that of Koman-her uncle-for recognition is no different from Akhila's search for meaning in life. They want an alternative definition of this world, its inhabitants and their own life. The crisis that Nair presents is that of the whole, "women" race. It is the difference between 'is' and 'ought'. We may supposedly define 'is' but the 'ought to' part always evades clarification. Radha's and Akhila's character she depicts the compromise between what 'is' and 'what ought to be' the struggle before us and the efforts which we should harness to surmount the struggle. This approach to her novels truly point out Anita Nair's place as a forerunner to fight for the cause of women's liberation movement in

India and abroad.

Ladies Coupe and Mistress: portraitures of Indian women

Ladies Coupe and *Mistress* are a great contribution to the construction of the female self. Her novels espouses and voices the need of emancipation and education of Indian women and hence its reformist objective is fore-grounded in her novels. Anita Nair's woman characters in her novels rebel against patriarchal community in order to explore their own terms, regardless of the consequences that such a rebellion may have on their lives. They take the position of "outsiders" to fight and criticize those cultural ideologies that come in their way of becoming free individuals. Anita Nair has also projected her own Indian sensibility and attitude through her women characters in her novels. Most of the Indian women living in an orthodox and conservative family feel inhibited to raise their voice against aggressive dominance of the male person of the society owing to their inferiority complex and rigid code of conduct imposed on them. Their ambitions, desires, sense and sensibility are faithfully expressed in Nair's novels. Her novels show how such women in spite of being highly educated undergo psychological suffering due to inferiority complex and dead sense of inhibitions. She not only limits her writing to upper class urban people, but also picks up characters from all stratum of society. Her theme is not only restricted to domestic problems, but it is variegated in nature. Besides, her novels represent what is authentically Indian or native.

Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress* are about the possibilities of exploring changes within oneself. Her woman protagonist like Akhila and Radha are always willing and receptive for redefining attitudes and relationships shorn of undue romantic embellishments. They want to free themselves from the stultifying traditional concerns and cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. One can trace the struggle of a woman protagonist to seek a meaningful definition of life. She vociferously puts forth the private truth about what woman want. Her women feel their emotions strongly, yet retain a constant value judgment, about themselves as well as, about other relationships they have to live through. Though they belong to different stratum of society, they do possess an inner independence to experiment with their life. In the process, life yields self-knowledge which imparts them the strength of accepting that a woman desire to succeed like an individual is not incompatible with her desire for love or small pleasures of domesticity. However Nair is excellent in depicting the inner furies of women and their rising tone for emancipation and empowerment.

One can say Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress* are portraitures of Indian women who rebel against the tradition bound old mode of life. Anita Nair, through her two novels, *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress* questions our hopeless certainty at our imagined knowledge of worldly wisdom, our false joy in unproductive routine of life, in short, our state of being. Anita Nair's characters are so real and close to life. We do not find many who live a life advertised by existential philosophers. Priyanka Sinha sounds right when she mentions the commonness of Anita Nair's characters: "Hers are commonplace, everyday characters. They are alive, their tears real, their exasperation genuine and undramatic and their dilemma understandable. It could very well be a story of anyone of us. We could be them, they us"⁴. Geeta Doctor also reiterates Priyanka Sinha observation; "Nair's characters are singularly life affirming"⁵. Even Anita Nair in an interview with Sheela Reddy express the same feeling, "I like to write about ordinary people and don't want to write about characters larger than life"⁶.

Nevertheless, the one theme that underlies Anita Nair's novels is the question of finding, and then asserting the identity, then a constant search mainly by the protagonists, for the answer to

the question like “Who am I?”, “Do I have a personality of my own?” or “Do I have just to be what others want me to be or what I imagine myself to become?”. Moreover, we witness a conflict, internal and external, in this process of defining, discovering and affirming their self-identity, once they realize what they actually stand for. Although the degree may vary, the female protagonist of Nair’s novels exhibit eventually an assertion; a direct or indirect statement of they being self-styled, self motivated and independent thinking individuals, geared up for facing all the consequences of that assertion and never give up. This quest for assertive identity has been a continuous process evolving with each novel Anita Nair has come up with.

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