

## A JOURNEY FROM IMITATION TO AUTONOMY: A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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“Existence precedes essence; hence one is not born a woman, but becomes one (The Second Sex)” “It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her –by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically in order to more than her self. (The *Life of Medusa*)”

“A woman doesn't really need a man. That is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality” (95). This line from the text sets the entire tone and tenor of the protagonist, Akhila's journey from imitation to autonomy. There was a deep seated belief that a woman can't live without a man. She does need a man to achieve the completion and perfection of her life. But, now there has been a paradigm shift in attitude and approach of women. Women have started challenging this age old assumption and have proved that they can't only live but also thrive and flourish without men. My paper is an attempt to explore the journey of women in general and the protagonist of the novel, Akhila in particular from conformity to questioning, from being a victim of social and cultural norms endorsed by patriarchy to a victor who chooses to lead her life on her own terms and conditions.

The genesis of the idea lies in Elaine Showalter's groundbreaking essay “Towards a Feminist Poetics” where she traces three phases of history of women's literature. Feminine Phase: the phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition. Feminist Phase: the phase of protest against the male standards and values in favour of autonomy. Female Phase: the phase of self discovery and of a search for identity. These phases of evolution are exactly found in Akhila's life. She first of all conforms to the societal norms and traditions, then starts protesting and revolting against male sovereignty. She finally sets out on a train journey all alone which is symbolic of her voyage of self discovery. She doesn't allow anyone to trample her aspirations and ambitions. In Helen Cixous's phrase she longs to realize the “infinite richness of their individual constitutions”. This is exactly what even the Humanist Psychology believes that self exploration is the inherent drive of every individual; it is an integral part of the human psyche. Here, the novelist seems to bring out the latent urge and intense yearning of women to set free of the shackles of patriarchy and to assert their own uniqueness and individuality and to know their worth of being women. Here, Chaman Nahal's concept of feminism appears to be in perfect consonance with Anita Nair's portrayal of feminine sensibility. Nahal says: “I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When

women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes”(17). Helen Cixous, a noted French literary theorist in her book *The Laugh of Medusa* holds the same radical view about the emancipation and empowerment of women, she points out: “Women should break out the snare of silence. They shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem (P).”

Here, it is highly pertinent to understand and analyse the word ‘autonomy’ in its right purport and perspective. Whereas, the sense of ‘imitation’ in the given context is amply clear, it means an unquestioning conformity and compliance to the social and cultural norms promulgated and propagated by the male chauvinistic society. The concept of ‘autonomy’ needs some elaboration and elucidation because this term has different implications for different women. The word ‘autonomy’ comes from the Greek, *autos* (self) plus *nomos* (law), to produce the idea of giving law to one self. Autonomy is the principle that ensures individual and collective fulfilment. Autonomy requires an individual capacity for self-reflection and self-government and the ability to exercise that capacity within social conditions that enables its flourishing. Individual autonomy broadly refers to the capacity to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces. In other words, to be autonomous is to be one’s own person, to be directed by considerations and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one but are part of what can somehow be considered one’s authentic self. Autonomy, thus, is a condition of self-governance and the power and right to self-rule. The concept of ‘autonomy’ has different meaning for different women, but the common idea is the idea of self determination-the right of all women to make individual life choices freely and independently without any form of external influence or coercion, in a self-reliant manner.

Indian women novelists have added a new dimension to the Indian literature. They have surpassed the discourse that regulates the “phallogocentric system”. They have carved out their own distinct mark. Women novelists have created their own canon. Indian women writing do not rely on approval, applause and admiration of male writers and critics for its sustenance and survival. The domain of literary endeavour is no longer exclusively run and dominated by libidinal and cultural- hence political, typically masculine economy. Women novelists have incorporated very authentic picture of female experiences which male writers either failed to portray or they depicted the distorted, inadequate and incomplete picture of female anxiety and anguish. Helen Cixous, thinks that the writing gives women access to their “native strength”. That means through writing they discover the hidden and unexplored territories of their being. Cixous says “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then the immense resources of unconscious spring forth”(P). Women novelists have brought enormous changes to the thematic and stylistic sides of Indian literature. Recurring themes are women’s struggle for self-realization and self-definition, women’s quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom. The themes that run uniformly across all the major women novelists’ writings are women’s suffering, subjugation, oppression, frustration, sexuality, freedom, alienation, identity crisis, discrimination at multiple levels and emotional insecurity. The books written by female writers reveal feminist ideologies in the society in general. They decry and denounce prevalence of patriarchy system in the male dominated society and fight for women’s due rights and privileges in society. Feminist ideologies are deeply embedded in their writings. Women writers use literature as a tool to subvert the social structures and catalyse the emancipation and empowerment of women who still remain at the periphery. The writings of women authors did not flourish in the beginning as it does now; the prime reason was that they were denied access to opportunities and avenues

which are requisite for creative endeavour. To put it precisely in Virginia Woolf's words: "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction"(126). Money symbolizes economic independence, power and strength and a room of her own is to have intellectual liberty and freedom to consider, contemplate and communicate.

Because of some erroneous patriarchal notions and assumptions, the work by the Indian women novelists have always been undervalued and underrated. The utmost priorities were given to male experiences. But, now the situation has taken a different turn, the last two or three decades have witnessed a phenomenal thriving in feminist writings of Indian English literature. Today is the generation of those female writers who have both money and good education. They make other women, who still strive to come to the mainstream realize that they are not helpless, meek, submissive and parasite creature rather they are equally competent and capable as men. As Cixous says "In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations." They have their own voice, their own ideas and ideologies. The women of modern era think on different lines and that is what is depicted in the novels of Indian women authors. These facts are incorporated by the women writers. Authors like Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Geetha Hariharan, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor and many others have left an indelible imprint on the reader of Indian fiction in English.

Anita Nair, undoubtedly one of the finest and most celebrated writers in English today, is enjoying the national and international recognition and reputation. Nair's fiction explores the unceasing quest of the woman to fulfil herself basically as a human being independent of her various roles as daughter, wife, mother and so on determined by male patronized tradition. Nair seems to be highly influenced with Simon de Beauvoir's idea that "the fact that we are human is much more important than our being women". Search for self is the predominant theme with many writers especially in the postmodern writings. The theme of quest of true identity is found in other novels of Anita Nair. For example in *The Better Man*, Nair discusses every individual's endeavour to have some degree of inner peace and satisfaction in life.

In the very first page of the novel the word 'escape' recurs several times signifying the protagonist's yearning to discard all that which constricts the blooming of her real self. Akhila has earnest desires and dreams for space and has craving for life and experience. She does what is expected of her. She mutely conforms to the already defined and determined social and cultural norms. The title 'Ladies Coupe' itself is amply revealing as it means a compartment on a train that is reserved exclusively for women. This is the place where a woman has absolute independence to speak up her minds and to unveil her innermost desires and dreams. She does not have to be conscious or concerned about intrusion or imposition of male's point of view. It is here Akhila; the protagonist of the novel begins her journey of self discovery. The ladies coupe provides her with the favourable climate to begin her search for self discovery. The coupe gives her contemplative and thinking space which is indispensable for realization of one's integral identity. *Ladies Coupe* shows how, in life suppression and oppression do not always come in perceivable ways, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Men mostly enjoy the position of colonizers and women have been relegated to the position of the colonized. Here, it is amply pertinent to mention Simon de Beauvoir who says the position that women occupy in the society is "comparable in many respects to that of the racial minorities, inspite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race" (Qtd. in Preface, Parshley 7). Women have started interrogating the age old oppression and domestic colonization. Akhila does her best to break away the fetters of orthodox tradition. She

tries to redefine female role to expose the hollowness of male hegemony and seeks to occupy the centre. She questions the system which sidelines the existence of women as human beings.

Anita Nair takes up the issue of social conditioning or stereotyping of the girl child and its adverse effect. Social conditioning irreparably damages the all round growth and development of a girl's personality as it legitimizes the inculcation of pre-defined feminine traits-self-abnegation and effacement, servility, endurance, patience and forgiveness. Women are taught and trained to mould and change themselves to suit the interests and inclinations of their male counterparts and standards of social behaviour as manipulated and manoeuvred by male members to maintain their status quo. In this process women become completely oblivious of their self identity. Male dominated society uses different tricks and techniques to propagate its ideologies and to maintain its hegemony. The subjugation and suppression of women has been irrefutable fact of history. They have always remained marginalized and never been allowed to enjoy the privileged position of the mainstream society. Women were not recognized as individuals and autonomous beings.

Nair uses the character of Amma to bring out the fact of some women internalizing conservative beliefs endorsed by patriarchal society. Akhila's mother Amma is a conservative and orthodox woman having her own strange theories about traits of a good wife. She says "First of all no good wife could serve two masters...A good wife listened to her husband and did what he said"(14). Further she has very odd notion about marriage-"there is no such thing as an equal marriage. It is best to accept that wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time...A woman is not meant to take on a man's role" (14). The idea that a woman can't live alone, a woman can't cope alone is infused and injected in Akhila's mind right from her childhood. Though she has discharged her duties as the head of the family quite successfully, she is not recognized as the real head, just because she is woman. Amma expected her to take permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, "Perhaps you should ask her brothers for permission first." 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." When Akhila declares before Padma about her decision to live alone Padma promptly says, "Do you think brothers will consent to this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?" When Akhila says, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent", Padma makes fun of her telling, "They are the men of the family." Everyone including Padma, Narsi and Narayan are strongly rooted in the patriarchal set up of society and hence unable to digest the thought of a woman living alone. What Akhila longs for is not marriage but companionship or friendship. She wants to live by herself, but social conditioning has let it deeply ingrained in her psyche that a woman can't live alone. This question has been troubling and torturing her mind for long. To lighten her burden and to get a suitable reply she asks one of her companions in the compartment-"Can a woman live by herself?"(21) She takes up the train journey all alone to convince herself that a woman can live alone. She does not have to depend on a male counterpart to complete her and to make her happy and whole. One of the characters in the novel, Janaki says "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone there will be my son...Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves (22-23)". Janaki's statement highlights the fact that a woman is under male dominance from cradle to grave. Before marriage her brother and father and after marriage her husband and son, the oppression continues throughout her life. A woman is never

far from role functions. It is instilled in a woman's mind that her duty is to get married, to be a good wife and mother. All through her girlhood, marriage is a destination a girl is groomed for. There is one more archetypal example in the novel which throws flood of light on the subtle tactics and tricks employed by men to maintain their hegemony. A kind of subtle politics is played on women to subjugate and suppress them. Margaret Shanti's husband Ebenezer Paulraj tells her "I love it when you call me Ebe, Ebe, just like you did now. Like a little girl...I never want you to change. I want you to remain like this all your life". Margaret questions "Where was I in all this? Margaret Shanthi, the woman. 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? It was as if he had negated all that was grown-up and womanly about me...What would happen to us when I changed? (111)" As we read the story of Margaret Shanthi, it is obvious how women are dominated by male power. But she is not the woman who is going to be silent victim of this perverse social order; she deflates the inflated ego of her husband in her own subtle way. Margaret's story is the story of a woman who devises her own ways to materialize her dreams. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj is an embodiment of male dominance. He concocts various strategies to perpetuate Margaret's position of submissive silence. He does his best to decimate her true identity and to give her false and illusionary identity. Paulraj manages well in reducing Margaret, a girl with brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality to an average and ordinary girl. The new woman realizes that to men, she is merely a "sexual being...absolute sex, no less" (Beauvoir 1949: 17) and the Sita, Savitri myths so religiously perpetuated by the patriarchy are merely strategies to keep her away from the power structure. Another character Prabha Devi asks "Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality? (180)" This is rhetorical question, the answer of which is obvious. A woman is complete and whole by herself; she doesn't need any male to make her complete human being.

Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring awareness to the society of women's demands and their need for self-expression. She is portrayed as a strong woman striving for self-actualization and self-fulfilment in patriarchal social order. Being a widow, she is expected to be dressed in white wear no kumkum and colourful clothes, but she defies those societal rituals and conventions, she says "I don't care what my family and anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose...Who made these laws anyway? Some men who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men (202)." She exhibits exemplary courage when she says, "I live alone. I have for many years now. We are strong Akhi. Whatever you think you want to. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first." Karpagam's words instil the courage in Akhila to carry forward her dream and desire. Karpagam asks Akhila to define happiness for her, Akhila replies "Happiness is being allowed to choose one's life; to live it the way one wants. Happiness is knowing that one is loved and having someone to loved. Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow"(200). What Akhila hates most is not having an identity of her own. She has always been an extension of someone else's identity. She wishes for once someone would see her as a whole being. She most desires in the world was to be her own person, to be in a place that was her own, to do as she pleased, to live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure. At one point in the novel Akhila asks her brothers and sisters: "Has anyone of you ever asked me what my desires were or what my dreams are? Did anyone of you ever think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just as you do?" (206) All she earnestly yearns for is complete independence "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's

mother”(206-207). Akhila wants to rise above tradition to float, wants to discover woman within her and tread the path where she has never gone before.

To sum up, the oppression, anxiety and anguish of women in general have been shown through the experiences of six different characters of Nair. Women neither want to be object of veneration or worship nor to be object of abject humiliation and neglect. They just want to lead a normal life with their human desires and dreams. The novelist also shows that women have the potential to rise above the tradition. Karpagam, a widow does not conform to the behavioural patterns as defined by male dominated society which is symbolic of change women have undergone. At the end of her journey, Akhila walks all alone at seashore but the people around her get astonished or rather shocked at the sight of a single woman as they are not used to the sight of a single woman all by herself. Akhila does not care anymore. She tells herself “For within me is a woman I have discovered”. Akhila discovers that she likes being alone. She has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone. It may not be what she dreamt it to be, but at least she would have made the effort to find out. She is quite confident and capable to tread where she has never gone before. “If there was a mountain, Akhila would try and climb”. She thinks anything is possible. Nair does not to forget to highlight one fact that women are in transitional period where they are caught between the pulls and pressures of tradition and modernity. There is lurking fear in Akhila’s mind which corroborates to the fact that women are not fully independent they still have to go a long way. To put in Cixous’s words, the central message of the novel which Nair seems to disseminate “We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.”

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