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A FEMINIST READING OF ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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Abstract

The burden of gender has a strong influence on contemporary Indian fiction and it is reflected in the creation of women writers from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Women writers in India have, thus, made quite sizeable, qualitative and varied contribution to the Indian English fiction. Their fiction reveals complex vicissitudes in the life of the Indian women and illustrates their struggle to establish their identity and achieve their freedom. Most Indian writers deal with gender in their works. Indian women novelists have forcefully focused light on the psyche of women of different streak in contemporary times of never ending existential struggle in their life. The article is about Akhila, the major character in Ladies Coupe by Anita Nair. Ladies Coupé deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. Ladies Coupé is a novel in parts in which the lives and experience of six women are welded together by the novelist, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. Akhila struggles against the male dominated society and its age-old conventions which do not allow her life as she wishes how Indian women are exploited and used in human relationship is best discussed in this paper.

Keywords

Gender, Existential, Struggle, Conventions, Exploited, Vicissitudes.

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Nair's India suffers from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organization. Of course, patriarchy, in its different forms, has tried in many ways to repress, debase and humiliate women especially through the images represented in cultural and traditional forms. *Ladies Coupé* deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions that not only shake the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in a traditional society, but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. The novel raises the question whether the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to culture resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs.

Obviously, *Ladies Coupe* is a profound discourse of 'womanism'. All the characters of this novel go through the gruelling experience of domestic oppression at the hands of their families and every one of them acquires an implacable resilience not only to stay alive, but even to discover their inner source of dynamism and creative wellspring. The novel unfolds itself against the background of a train journey, and each of these characters narrates the story of her life as the train chugs, trundles and troops to its destination. Anita Nair has successfully and beautifully described the abilities that women possess in *Ladies Coupe*. In *Ladies Coupé*, the Brahmin heroine, Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is a 45-year-old spinster, daughter, sister 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 will ultimately make her a different woman. In *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair hints at two aspects—the reconstruction of female identity beyond the male-dominated society of India and secondly the assertion of female dignity and female desires to realize full individuality. The novel presents a voice proclaiming the voyage of self-consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the reaffirmation of female identity against male domination.

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Ladies Coupé is a compartment on a train that is reserved exclusively for women. This compartment is usually safe, quiet, and is preferred by women who travel alone. Ladies Coupé offers a narrative concerning the chance encounter of six Indian women belonging to different backgrounds and vocations in a train journey. Anita Nair brings together women of different ages, experience and social strata together. Ladies Coupé is a novel in parts in which the lives and experience of six women are welded together by the novelist, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to the story of one woman. But the stories clearly demonstrate the link between the stories in terms of Indian woman's journey in life under patriarchy: Janaki, the old woman whose relationship with her husband is friendly love; Margaret, the chemistry teacher, who succeeds in disciplining her narcissistic husband and principal; Prabha Devi, 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 Marikolunthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class-exploitation, is the culmination of all other stories. By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves them from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story of women rediscovering their bodies.

Akhila is placed in a situation of unfamiliarity and dislocation, precisely because her struggle for identity has to come out more clearly. To achieve this, Nair creates a space where disparate identities meet, clash and grapple with each other in situations or relations of domination and subordination. Akhila undertakes this journey as a form of escape, a desire to go away alone, a sense of excitement of being able to do something all by herself, not having to take permission, of taking an independent decision. Akhila's story is a story of desire, of memory and of loss. Akhila realises that she has wasted life all these sixteen years as she juggled with her career and family. In fact she is the only unmarried person in her office where twenty-four people work. The deprivations of her life impinge strongly on her psyche. Marriage, motherhood and child-rearing, she recognises as holding out possibilities. It gives a reason to live, she thinks. She becomes aware of the fact that she has been living life "without dreams". Akhila didn't want a husband. She didn't want to be a mere extension again. Akhila's childhood friend Karpagam, a feminist tells her that she can live alone in the world after the death of her husband and encourages Akhila telling her she would not feel lonely. Akhila has suddenly decided to take her life in her hands. At the age of 45, having achieved near anonymity working as a clerk in the Income Tax Department, she is suddenly filled with an idea of revolt. She decides to bolt, to take a long train journey to Kanyakumari. Akhila tries to search for her own identity and happiness. Akhila walks out of the family as a rebel and her response is rejection - the rejection of social standards, value and the traditional life pattern.

Akhila and her fellow travellers argue that marriage is not imperative. Their independence helps them to get over a dominated existence in the hands of men in society, because each of them has a spinster older sister, once the breadwinner and the cash-cow to the family. The first partner is Janaki, a pampered wife and confused mother who got married at the age of eighteen and had

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led forty years of comfortable married life. When Akhila sees Janaki and her husband she gets the idea, "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone". (*Ladies Coupe* 39) She reverses to the victim position two and is tormented by the question "Whither goest thou?" (*Ladies Coupe* 39) Akhila is very perplexed about whether she is going in the right direction. With Janaki's revelation, Akhila begins to make a search of her own 'self' and her memories take her to her childhood experiences to reconstruct the life of her mother. Akhila's second companion is Margaret. Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher. She compares people to chemicals. She is married to the principal of the school she teaches in. Hers is a love marriage. When Margaret gets pregnant, her husband coaxes her into aborting the child, thus triggering the friction in their relationship. She has gained control over her husband by making him lose shape. Her suppression turns into rebellion and it subsequently gives birth to revenge. She begins to question her feelings for Ebenezer Paulraj who appears to be a "bully" and "tyrant". Margaret's story makes Akhila think about her own relationship with Hari whom she had met on the daily train to work. She broke off her relationship with him because he was younger to her. Akhila realizes that she lost Hari and his companionship only out of the panic of social sanctity. In the process of the reconstruction of female identity, the rational and conventional vision is essential. Modern women admit healthy sexual needs and seek a suitable outlet for them. In feminine psyche, the sexual desire and intense desire for love are two distinctive variables and they should not be treated as identical. Man-woman relationship should not be hampered. It is part of the evolution in Nature. Akhila views marriage as an oppressive structure which takes away her self-identity and what she longs for is self-generative identity. The struggle of Akhila, Karpagam and her daughter is from the periphery moving towards the centre. They crave for identity for which they need not depend on any entity or factor other than their own being. This they cherish because it makes them happy. At the periphery they have no identity. Akhila's next companion is Prabha Devi. She has led her life in comfort and luxury as a daughter and daughter-in-law. Her visit to New York makes her conscious of her own beauty, her own dreams and her freedom. Akhila is impressed by the confidence and renewed interest of Prabha Devi to construct her own life. Akhila gets a better perception of life from Prabha Devi's confession. She learns that one's freedom is in one's own hands and not in the hands of others.

Sheela is a fourteen year old girl who is of a different generation to Janaki's, but she possesses a mental maturity that quite surpasses her age. She describes the death of her maternal grandmother due to cancer. The matriarch turns mad, eats all the food left in the house and speaks her mind. She accepts her grandmother's death with an air of a person who has seen it all and done it all. Marikolunthu is subjugated to the pinnacle of victimization. She is raped and becomes the mother of an illegal son. She represents the lower class of Indian society and is thwarted by a series of disappointments. Her life is very pathetic and miserable. She transforms into a mature lady by accepting her son, Muthu. Marikolunthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasant woman upon whom male oppression is continually forced and allowed to go on, unquestioned by all.

By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves them from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the

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world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story, of women discovering themselves. The coupé becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by false binaries. Hence the conscious action taken by Akhila at the end of the novel, an action that aims at overcoming the contradictions that are characteristic of the traditional world and its essential determinant, that is alienation. Anita Nair mirrors the society in her literary endeavours. Her writings delve deep into the contemporary obnoxious condition of human beings. She explores the colossal proviso of human experiences and expresses them with full flow of her emotions. In addition, her works are a blend of realism as found in Indian culture with universal appeal.

Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they cannot escape from. She portrays women as not only totally cut off from familial, social ties but women, who even while remaining within those orbits, protest against injustice and humiliation in the novel *Ladies Coupe*.

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