

TRACING THE PATH OF SELF-DISCOVERY: A JOURNEY OF EXPLORATION IN ANITHA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theme of self-discovery in Anitha Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe*. The focus of this paper is to examine the various stages of Akhila's journey, the protagonist of the novel embarks on a journey of self-discovery from her initial reluctance to leave her role as a breadwinner of the family to her eventual embrace of new experiences and perspectives of life. This paper highlights how ladies coupe stands as a metaphor, which explores the themes such as gender inequality, domestic violence, pressure to conform to gender roles, marriage, motherhood, and societal expectation imposed on women. Through the feminist perspective, this paper inspects on how women navigate these issues and try to find their voice and agency.

KEY WORDS –Arbitrator, Coupe, Journey, Self-discovery.

INTRODUCTION

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, women are often allocated a secondary role. However, in earlier days women were portrayed as the souls of dependence and this dependence can be effectively identified with a couplet from Manu, the ancient codifier of Hindu law:

The duteous girl obeys her father,
Husband sways the duteous wife,
Son controls the widowed mother,
Never free is a woman's life [137]

As women prefer others' happiness to theirs, women's identity is hidden behind the mask of Sacrifice and dependence. Their voices are no better than the voices of the dumb, not audible to the world. But nowadays women are courageous enough to exhibit their individualities at all levels. They are ready to undergo the most challenging journey of self-discovery to make the whole world recognize them. A certain percentage of women have successfully reached their destination and the remaining are on their way to the destination of "self-discovery".

INDIAN WOMEN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Indian women writers have made a remarkable contribution to the world of English literature. Some of the notable Indian women writers in English are: Arundhati Roy is a novelist and political activist who won The Booker Prize for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. Jhumpa Lahiri is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author whose works often explore the immigrant experience. Her notable works include *Interpreter of Maladies*. Kiran Desai is a novelist who won The Booker Prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Laws*. Kamala Das is a poet and novelist who is known for her bold and candid writing. Her notable work is *My Story*. Meena Kandasamy is a poet and novelist whose works often focus on feminist themes her notable work is *The Gipsy Goddess*. Shashi Deshpande's notable works such as *That long Silence* and *Small Remedies* are sensitive portrayals of women in the patriarchal world. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of middle-class educated women in various turmoil, conclusions, frustrations, and their long silence which has been their cultivated nature for many centuries. These are a few of the many Indian women writers who have contributed to the world of English literature

Indian writing in English by women is a distinct phenomenon today. The creative output of Indian women writers, especially novelists, is marked by the choice of English, the medium of expression and expression of a women's reaction to the varied situation in which tradition and modernity clash as well as synthesize. Indian women writers are dynamic witnesses to the peculiar socio-cultural historic, and political conflicts faced by women, especially Indian. These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They can sensitively portray a world that has in its women rich in substance. Their women are real flesh-and-blood protagonists who make the readers look at them with awe with their relationship to their surroundings, society, men, children, families, mental make-up, and themselves. They not only communicate with their society but also with global readers. The primary task is to attempt an imaginative mediation between the traditional forces of the Indian patriarchal joint family system and the new demands of modernity. They further seek to reconstruct the socio-cultural values from a woman's viewpoint and their works are significant in making society aware of women's demands.

Anita Nair is one of the finest writers in Indian writing in English with an international reputation. She was born in Kerala state. Her third book *Ladies Coupe* (2001) was rated as one of 2002's top five books of the year and was translated into more than twenty-five languages around the world. Her works have been widely published in twenty-seven countries to be precise and translated. Her work is not only critically acclaimed but also best-selling. She mesmerizes the readers with the evocative language and descriptions with which her novels abound. Renowned Indian writer Anita Desai through her novels explores the disturbed Psyche of modern Indian women. She also strikes a perfect balance between their instinctual needs and their intellectual aspects. She makes the psyche of the women revealed through flashbacks, diary entries, Self-analysis, and the description of the place they lived, visited, and also the people they met. Thus, this treatment of Indian women in a realistic manner can also be visualized in the works of many women writers including Anita Nair.

She traces the real position of women in families as well as in society. Anita Nair has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society. She has a marvelous understanding of the psyche of women and therefore, she explores the world of special women with all their overwhelming problems and challenges in her

novel *Ladies Coupe*. She empathically purports a view that even in modern times with all socio-political as well as economic achievements, the graph of women exploitation is shockingly rising.

Anita Nair's engrossing *Ladies Coupe* rises what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India. *Ladies Coupe* deals with such issues by asking fundamental questions. The novel questions whether the role of Indian women as a representative of other women living under oppressive patriarchal systems concerning cultural resistance should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, a woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her desires and needs. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is a profound discourse on womanism. All the characters of this "female culture" without exception go through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of their families and every one of them acquires 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. *Ladies Coupe* is the story of a woman's search for strength and independence.

AKHILA, ARBITATOR OF THE FAMILY

Akhilandeswari, or Akhila as she is called in the novel *Ladies Coupe*, is seen at the railway station, as the novel opens, preparing to go to Kanyakumari. She is irritated by the way women and the handicapped have to stand together while men stand separately at the ticket counter. It is indeed humiliating for her that women have been categorized along with the handicapped.

As the novel unfolds, we come to know about Akhila's past. She was born into a Tamil Brahmin family, her father a government servant, was the only breadwinner of the family who had to support his wife and four children. However, Akhila is forced to take up the responsibility of her household after her father's death. She toils hard for her family, but no one seems to understand the fact that she too needs to have a life of her own. Her mother is more worried about Akhila's younger sister Padma's marriage and seems to have the notion that Akhila is the man, the head of the family, who has replaced her husband, Akhila's father. Akhila was not allowed to live her own life – always the daughter, the sister, the aunt, and the provider of her family after the death of her father.

Akhila was forty-five years old unmarried woman. She was a clerk in the income tax department. She was not a creature of impulse. She took time for every decision. She pondered, deliberated, and slept over it and only when she examined every single nuance and point of view, she made up her mind. Starched cotton saris always demand much planning and thinking ahead. Gauzy chiffons and ready-to-wear poly silks for the people who changed their minds at least six times every morning before they settle to wear. Starch saris need orderly minds and Akhila prided herself on being an organized person.

“What Akhila missed the most was that no one
ever called her by her name anymore. 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 Ammadi... so who was Akhilandeshwari?

Did she exist at all? If she did what was her identity?" (84)

As a child, Akhila had watched her father lionized by her mother while she and the other children were marginalized. Her favorite foods were made and offered first to him. It was only after he had eaten that the children were allowed to taste them. At the least annoying happening, he tended to announce a headache and had to be pampered and ministered to. After his father's death, Akhila as the eldest child took her father's place as the breadwinner of the family. She was not given the same sort of importance. She has got equal pay for equal work but she certainly had not received equal respect even though the family survived only because Akhila brought home a decent pay packet. In comparison, Nair shows a parallel situation. It was Akhila's neighbor's family. When the man of the house died, the widow was forced to put her eldest daughter on the street as a prostitute. Both families were Brahmins and lost the man of the family. The difference was that the neighbor's family made their survival in an undignified way. But, Akhila's great contribution to the dignified survival of her family was not appreciated by her family members.

Akhila and her sheaf of life-negating experiences stood out as a symbol of feminine strength and grace. She listed out her problems with clarity and concluded that she required an education that could give her a sense of firm balance. She discerned her own needs and began to take care of herself. "On her thirty-fifth birthday, she decided to get herself an education. She enrolled in the Open University for a bachelor of arts degree. Akhila chooses history as the main subject." [85]

Akhila's routine was indeed restricted, it consisted of the office and home nothing more. She became a creature of routine catching the same train every day, she was still expected to ask her brother's permission to join an office outing. Akhila was the savior and silent worker, entirely behind the scenes, while all the younger children get their moments center stage. Her brothers asked for and they got what they wanted education, marriage, and a life of their own. Her needs were taken for granted when her siblings thrived like parasites on her. Akhila was left behind silently hoping they would consider her aspirations and desires too, at least once, when theirs had got satisfied but they were not. Akhila realized that life had slipped by her all these sixteen years as she juggled her carrier and family. She was the only unmarried person in her office where twenty-four people work. The deprivations of life impinge on her psyche. She became aware of the fact that she has been living life without dreams. Akhila's yearnings for tenderness, toughness, and erotic fulfillment were never verbalized. They exist only in her dreams and her unexpressed subconsciousness. In her dream, she had the guts to defy her parents and continue an entirely physically passionate love affair while they watched with horror and disgust, but in reality, she had no such courage. It was amusing that in the dream Akhila did not wear starched cotton but a flimsy chiffon sari which her mystery lover in the dream removed with a flick of his finger. The quest for the recognition of her womanhood was expressed through her dream. Akhila's longings are beautifully revealed through the dream. Through the constant flashbacks, readers come to know of Akhila's love affair in the past with Hari. The encounter with Hari marked the first phase of her transition to fulfillment and freedom. For the first time, Akhila enjoyed the feel of being touched and fondled and

she experienced "a vein of strength" As she yields herself to the finger tingling of Hari as Simone de Beauvoir aptly remarks,

“Sexuality most certainly plays a considerable role in human life; It can be said to pervade life throughout” Instead of finding mutuality and happiness in this love, Akhila decided to give it all up. She was older than him and it was a dreadful transgression of the conventional norms. Akhila was sure that people would point fingers and they would ultimately make Hari unhappy with his choice. She left Hari rather than face, confront, and answer the predictable verdict of the male gaze. She is disturbed when people stare at them. Wandering together and passing indecent comments. She decides to end the relationship though Hari is unwilling to. She is afraid of society and is not able to overcome this fear. Thus, she lives not for herself, but for her family and society though it means sacrificing her interests. She decides to depart Hari for the sake of her family and social constraints. She had no contact with Hari, but she had his contact number. Meanwhile, Akhila’s mother died. Padma, Akhila’s younger sister stayed with Akhila with her two daughters. Padma had not cared for her sister's feelings and longings. Akhila was fed up with all the routine work and people who failed to understand her. She also met Karpagham, her school friend in a supermarket. Karpagham’s husband died and she lived alone with her daughter with self-confidence and courage. This meeting with Karpagham gave Akhila a kind of inspiration to face this competitive world alone. She had decided to do something that she had never done before.

Akhila is fed up with her routine life and decides to go on a train journey to Kanyakumari, away from family and responsibilities-seeking an escape, hoping to discover her identity. Akhila who was “excluded” and “dislocated” gradually discovered what life and love are. She sensed that she was very close to some deep experience and mused happiness. She felt that she was successfully journeying toward the source of fulfillment.

SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH THE FELLOW-TRAVELERS

Anita Nair has chosen self-discovery as the central theme for her novel *Ladies Coupe*. Self-discovery here is more a guide for assertion and realization of one's interests, certainly not selfish in the narrow sense. As Akhila’s journey progresses, she meets her co-passengers, all women. All of them can be termed her own alter egos. As they, in one way or the other, present her own need for independence and self-discovery. Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers and their stories Akhila tries to find an answer to the question which has haunted her all her life.

“Can a woman stay single and be happy or

Does a woman need a man to feel complete?”

The fellow travelers are from different backgrounds and every single story helps her with her quest for self-discovery.

First among them is Janaki, who was brought up traditionally, believing that a woman's duty was to get married and have children. At the age of eighteen Janaki was married off to Prabhakar, a twenty-seven years old man she has never met before and who is a stranger to her. Prabhakar and Janaki are considered to be a “Golden Couple” by their relatives and friends, but she starts understanding that she melted her identity into his. All her life

her husband is been like a shadow never leaving her alone. Her long marriage had transformed Janaki into a very meek and fragile creature. However, now she understands that a woman must be able to walk on her legs and take decisions alone. Janaki rebels against the sweet and sugary world she has built around herself and late in her life she questions her beliefs finding out that most of them are now meaningless. Janaki has finally discovered the power of being a strong and capable woman, a woman who decides on her own. When Janaki expressed her liking for the smell of food wrapped in banana leaves, Akhila then discovered that she too liked it. As Akhila toiled for the welfare of her family members like a robot, she forgot all her likings in this life. Only her co-passengers helped her to discover her hidden wishes.

The second story to unfold was that of a fourteen years old girl, Sheela. She is the youngest woman in the compartment. She is at the beginning of her life journey but she has already realized that women are discriminated against on the grounds of gender. During the journey, Sheela rethinks about the death of her grandmother Ammumma, and how her joint family has reacted afterward, robbing the corpse of the grandmother and thinking greedily of her jewels and belongings. Ammumma was a self-confident and non-conformist woman who taught Sheela to be always herself, never pleasing others. When Ammumma dies, Sheela adorns her corpse and puts makeup on her face because she knows that her grandmother would have liked to be dressed up for her funeral instead of looking diseased and decaying. However, Sheela's parents do not like what their daughter has done to the body of Ammumma and they reproach her badly Sheela does not care: she knows that Ammumma is a character who stresses the importance of being feminine in every moment of a woman's life, even in death. Sheela tells Akhila what her Ammumma used to say that women should groom themselves for themselves, not for others.

The third story was that of Margaret Shanthi, she is a chemistry teacher, married to the insensitive and dull Ebenezer Paulraj. Margaret hates her husband and she tries to destroy his arrogant self-esteem by making him fat. Making her husband fat is Margaret's revenge for a life of sadness and absences. Ebenezer made his wife abort their first child against her will and this painful experience marred their relationship forever. She is a very powerful and destructive woman. A kind of modern Kali although Margaret is disillusioned with her marriage, she did not leave her husband after the disgusting episode of the abortion because she could lose her family by divorcing him. Therefore, Margaret is forced to stay with her husband. For Margaret, love is just an illusion and her scope in life is vindicating the abortion of a baby girl by making her husband fatter and fatter. She is an excellent cook and she adds more sugar, more ghee, and more fats, to the food she cooks every day for him. In the end, Ebenezer transforms himself into a fat man "A quiet, easy man" deprived of his boasting behavior. Margaret is even able to get pregnant and have a baby girl she fulfills her revengeful dreams and satisfies her motherly instincts. Margaret is water and an element that can be very powerful and destructive. She uses cunningly her chains-the chains of being a wife and a housewife-to free herself from her unbearable husband. Margaret is an unforgettable character in the life of Akhila. The only thing she tells to Akhila becomes the crux of the novel.

“You'll discover that once you stop worrying
 What the world will think of you,
 Your life will become that much easier

to live. Just remember that you have to look out

for yourself, no one else will".

[136]

The fourth tale to open up was that of Prabha Devi. Prabha Devi is a forty years old woman. Her husband Jagadeesh considers her to be a good wife and an excellent mother. On the contrary, her father thought of her as a “bloody nuisance” who had ruined his business plans. During her youth, Prabha Devi did everything to show her father that she was not “a nuisance” thus doing her best to become the perfect wife and mother. Prabha Devi is a very beautiful and exuberant woman who loses interest in life and her body when Pramod one of her husband's friends, harasses her by trying to kiss her. Her husband accuses Prabha of having provoked him with smiles and coy looks. Prabha turns herself into a shy girl, who asks for little and gives all of herself after the incident with Pramod. To avoid any future “Incidents”, she has forced herself to be shy, submissive, and passionless not to provoke other men. Then all of a sudden, Prabha decides that she wants to learn to swim. In the beginning, the swimming coach makes fun of her: she is the only adult woman in a pool full of children, afraid of the water and the water awakens her old self. She learns to swim thus conquering fear. Now Prabha can be again the “Spirited sensual creature” (190) her husband desires. She is not afraid of making passionate love to her husband. Jagadeesh is surprised by the sudden change in his wife’s behavior, but he is happy because he was tired of his obedient and submissive consort. Prabha Devi regained her sensations when she joined swimming classes. Water renewed her desires and she longed for a flowering of senses. Now, thanks to the swimming lessons, she has conquered fear and she can leave her body again. Being able to stay afloat is a metaphor for being able to cope with life by standing on top of it. Prabha's story moves Akhila and she tries to reassess and reevaluate herself. Akhila had sacrificed all her aspirations for the welfare of her family members who could never think of her. Prabha Devi’s experiences inspire Akhila and she thinks that she too could learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks. Prabha's struggle created in Akhila a desire to live.

The last story is that of Marikolanthu, she is a Tamil lady who does not utter a single word during the night confessions shared by the other travelers. This woman has indeed been excluded by other passengers. At one point, Marikolanthu tells Akhila that they have shut her out from their conversation because they thought that she did not belong: her clothes and her face marginalize her from the rest of the women. Marikolanthu is a low-caste woman who had suffered a lot during her life: when she was young, she was raped by Murugesan, an upper-caste man. She is now thirty-one and has a thirteen-year-old son, the fruit of her rape but she is not married. Marikolanthu works for a foreign doctor and she has learned many lessons from life. She tells Akhila that the other women in the compartment were making such a fuss about little things and they do not know how cruel the world can be to a woman. Marikolanthu is a victim of gender, class, and caste discrimination. She tells Akhila that the heart is a glass bangle that can be shattered in one careless moment and that she went through many careless moments in her life. However, Marikolanthu has not been bent down by the tragedies of her life, on the contrary, she is strong and self-confident. Women can be strong if they can find the strength hidden in their depths. One of the common features shared by the female characters of *Ladies Coupe* is that most of them have forgotten to be women. Some of them

are wives, mothers, widows, and spinsters, but not women. They tend to repress their womanliness because of social or personal pressure: like in the case of Akhila. These five women of different ages and different family background together weave their world. One thing that was common among them is the search for the real meaning of life. The characters through their revelation find an outlet for their suppressed feeling and they are on the threshold of self-discovery.

The Ladies Coupe gives the women travelers a sense of courage and sisterhood and also a clearer idea about their destination in life. These women have spent their lives being confined into male-dominated and male-related spaces. Some of them have been physically and psychologically abused by male figures. The only way to cope with their suffering is to discover their inner power and to be strong, regardless of family ties and societal prejudices. All these women, in the Coupe one or another, advise Akhila to go against societal pressures and to discover herself. Most of the characters in *Ladies Coupe* thus seem to find the ray of happiness only when they become aware. This awareness is created only when one looks at one's self. This witnessing of one's self can make us stress-free. The awaking in almost all the characters, including Akhila, is similar to what Anjali Mishra states:

“Awareness that we suffer from stress.
Awareness that this stress is caused by
the fact that we become the situations
that this habit can be changed.... We,
In actuality, are not the situations
or the feeling or the thought,
but are only witnessing them.”

Akhila realized that she must take the reins into her hand, take her own decisions and live for herself. It was the right time to relegate to the wings and assume the stellar roles in her life. Too long had Akhila seen herself as an object. All these lives of five fellow travelers form a kind of mirror in which Akhila sees her reflection made whole, she is clear about grasping the happiness she has a right to. Indeed, in the end, Akhila feels she has her own life to live and becomes confident and empowered to reclaim her lost love. Her decision to break that long silence and her desire to think of Hari and the yearning to connect the lines of communication she has swapped symbolizes her discovery from her fellow travelers.

LADIES COUPE: THE METAPHOR

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* told by a band of pilgrims on way to the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury are a collection of stories in a frame. Ladies Coupe too, depicts six women in a railway compartment, each having a story to tell. As the stories unfold, the central character rediscovers the possibilities of life. They discover that they have never been living for themselves, but for others governed by social pressures. Thus, this novel deals with how the characters shed off their masks discover their selves and start living for themselves. According to Haidar Eid, the Coupe

“Becomes a metaphor for a utopian world
That is liberated from patriarchy, one that is

In other words, the Coupe allows these women a free medium to vent their true feelings about their current situations in their lives without their husbands and brothers hovering over them and compelling them to wear a mask in front of society. In addition, they are not judged by other women in the Coupe. The Coupe almost acts as a vacuum allowing these six women to freely discuss their situations.

The word Coupe has two varying pronunciations: one with the rising stress on the last vowel, which is a common pronunciation, and the other with no pronunciation of the last letter e, similar to the pronunciation of coop, meaning a confined area such as that used for poultry. Anita's choice of the locale for the major part of the story, especially relating to self-discovery and the word Coupe to describe the locale, seems to be a deliberate choice. In whatever way we look at the meaning of the world, there is a suggestion of confined or restricted or closed space. Akhila's world, indeed, had been a confined space and the story of self-discovery breaks out in yet another confined place, the ladies compartment as usually called in India, taking her to a wider world outside of it. The metaphor of the journey was further developed into the metaphor of the destination. Kanyakumari was a seaside town with a grand vista of the meeting of three seas. At Kanyakumari, three seas meet. The Bay of Bengal, The Indian Ocean, and The Arabian Sea. The openness of the scene symbolized the range of possibilities open to Akhila. Three oceans meet and mingled at her feet, she realized with exhilaration. Her realization of her independence was an epiphany. When Akhila arrives in Kanyakumari, she reaches the end of her real and metaphorical journey. The narratives of Akhila's co-passengers in the Coupe fairly tumble out of them, revealing the need of each woman to speak to a sympathetic listener. Each woman had been cocooned in her silence and longed to be heard. When she got off the train at Kanyakumari, she was a new Akhila and she was grown into her selfhood. The novel comes to an end by identifying Akhila with Durga, as Shakthi, indicating the potential for womanhood. From an image of absence and silence to one of confrontation and assertion, Akhila had come a long way. Shedding the patriarchal image of women as silence and as an absence, as imperfection and incompleteness, Akhila appropriated the voice and the will that had been the provenance of men and took an active part in life. Having discovered her true self in shared love, Akhila experiences a sense of pure sensations. The new woman in her was manifested by her body language. She exulted in her newfound identity and liberty. She could not hide her exuberance. But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her anymore. Look at me she would tell them. Look at me:

“I'm the woman you think you know.
I'm the sister you have wondered about.
There is more to this Akka. For within me
Is a woman I have discovered.” [270]

The aura of the new-found confidence made her book a call to Hari.

CONCLUSION

Anta Nair, the great dame of Indian English literature, seems to rise to great heights in her art of characterization of women who engage themselves in finding themselves or attaining a state of self-realization. From the traditional roles of daughter, sister, wife, and mother, but emerge as individuals in their rights they achieve not by being brazen feminists or iconoclasts but by the process of introspection and self-realization. The women characters are neither rebels nor conformists. They are neither trail-blazers nor self-effacers. Faced with the dilemmas of life they seek a path that allows them individual freedom and growth even with the constricting environs of a traditional upper-middle-class family. In their reaction to role conflict in a patriarchal society, they show the strength to achieve their goals of self-realization from the state of passive acceptance they move to one of active assertion. Struggling hard with hardships, facing exploitation and defeat at different steps, sometimes with tear-filled eyes while at other times like a tigress, they challenge society to turn the tide in their favor. Women break all barriers to assert themselves. Thus, their journey of self-discovery, no doubt, their indomitable will, and their undefeatable spirit compel them to carry on their lives.

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