

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

Prof. Manish K. Hole

Associate Professor, Dept. of English
J. D. Patil Sangludkar Mahavidyalaya,
Daryapur, Dist. Amravati-444803
(Maharashtra)

Email: manish.hole805@gmail.com

Mobile No.- 9922042487, 9284187120

Abstract :

Anita Nair is a celebrated Indian woman novelist known for her compelling novels and strong female protagonists. Her three major novels, viz, Ladies Coupe (2001), Mistress (2003), and Lessons in Forgetting (2010) showcase various feminist issues prevalent in Indian society. She delves into the inner psyches of her female characters and explores their desires, predicament, secrets, aspirations, anxieties and longings. Her protagonists often embark on journeys of independence and individual identity. Nair's second novel Ladies Coupe is a novel about women's search for identity and their yearnings for their space and independence in the male dominated society. Nair's female characters transform themselves from their roles of traditional Indian women into new women and represent Nair's conception of the new woman who is bold, independent and assertive. The present paper intends to examine how Anita Nair has depicted women's quest for independence in her second novel Ladies Coupe.

Key Words: Patriarchal, Male Dominated Society, Independence, Women, Space, Identity, Struggle

Introduction :

Anita Nair is an acclaimed Indian woman novelist writing in English. Her novels explore the themes of gender discrimination, social evils due to the patriarchal framework of Indian society and women's quest for identity and independence. Her novels, such as Ladies Coupe, Mistress, and Lessons in Forgetting delineate the challenges faced by women in male dominated Indian society and women's journey towards self-discovery. Nair has brilliantly portrayed diverse feminist issues in her novels and she valiantly expresses her views on women's sufferings in the male dominated Indian society. Her narrative style is marked by a blend of wit, strong visual quality and keen observation of social issues. As independence stands for the state of being self-reliant as well as freedom from the influence, control or manipulation of others, Nair's women fight against patriarchal norms and other social codes to redefine and discover their own terms. Her women fight against the traditional, cultural, socio-religious and patriarchal ideologies and search for their selves and struggle to gain independence. The present paper is an attempt to examine how Anita Nair explores women's struggle to assert their independence and space in her novel *Ladies Coupe*.

Women's Quest for Independence in *Ladies Coupe* :

Nair's second novel *Ladies Coupe* is a novel about woman's search for strength and independence. Nair traces the journey of the protagonist Akhila in the ladies coupe of the Kanyakumari Express from her bondage of familial expectations to her independence and self-discovery. She wants a solution to the question that has been with her all her life: Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete? During an overnight journey on the train's ladies coupe, Akhila encounters five different women - Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanti, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolanthu - who encourage Akhila to live her own life as all of them share their life experiences. The life stories of all these women show their struggle for asserting their space and independence in their respective lives.

The majority of female characters in the novel follow unique ways in their individual lives to assert their own independent identities. Victimization and marginalization of these women lead them to struggle for asserting their identity and seeking their liberation. As they no longer want to be the sufferers in the patriarchal framework, they struggle and succeed in discovering their veiled inner strength and vitality during the course of their respective lives. Sunita Sinha observes, "Evoking experiences from everyday life and endowing it with epic dimensions, *Ladies Coupe* relates the saga of a woman's search for strength and independence" (Sinha, 150).

The chief protagonist, Akhila is a forty-five-year-old discontented spinster from a Tamil Brahmin family who sacrifices her youth for her family for twenty-six years as the breadwinner of her family. Her father's untimely death compels her to accept the responsibilities of her family. She continues to carry out her responsibilities as the titular head and caretaker of her family while her siblings get married and settled in their lives. Her mother and siblings never think of Akhila's marriage, her needs and longings as a woman. As Akhila doesn't show any defiance and rebelliousness against her selfish family members, her steady marginalization continues. Afterwards Akhila finds emotional attachment and love in her brief love affair with her co-passenger, Hari who is much younger to her. Nevertheless, Akhila's constant fear regarding the socio-cultural incompatibility of age compels her to sever the ties with Hari.

Akhila resents for her monotonous life as she thinks, "...her life continued in its sedate, dull, spinsterish, constant way. No highs. No lows. Just seamless travel from day to day" (*Ladies Coupe*, 165). It is only after Akhila's encounter with her childhood friend, Karpagam in the supermarket that she realizes that she should live her life alone. When Karpagam learns that Akhila doesn't live her life on her own, she asks Akhila, "Doesn't your selfish family realize that you deserve some happiness of your own?" (*Ladies Coupe*, 200). Karpagam has been depicted as a strong independent woman who succeeds in asserting her self-identity. Being a Hindu Brahmin widow, she does not follow any taboos of her community. Akhila sees Karpagam as, "Barren of all the marks that proclaimed she was a wife – no thali sparkling on her bosom, no kumkum bleeding in the parting of her hair, no glistening toe rings bonding her to connubial bliss" (*Ladies Coupe*, 198-199). Karpagam urges Akhila to live alone as Akhila is educated and employed. Karpagam asks Akhila, "Get a life for yourself...stop looking

around every few minutes. What are you afraid of – what the world will say? Akhi, ask your sister and family to leave your home. That's the first thing you need to do" (*Ladies Coupe*, 201).

Fed up with the varied roles of the daughter, the sister, the aunt, the provider, the sister-in-law, Akhila resolves to go on a train journey, away from the city and family. She decides to go to Kanyakumari as she hopes to discover her identity and space. During her journey in the S7 compartment of the Kanyakumari Express Akhila meets five different women who share their life experiences with Akhila and she gets a new perspective to judge her life and live for her own self. The life stories of Akhila's co-passengers also depict the issues of identity crisis and quest for independence in their respective lives.

Janaki, the eldest among the five, considers herself as a fragile creature in her life. She thinks that a woman's duty is to get married and to become a good wife and mother. Janaki feels that she doesn't have individuality and that her identity is her husband and her son. Although Janaki desires strongly for a change but then finds herself incapacitated within the patriarchal structure. Nevertheless, her remarks "I thought if I were to lose it all, I would cope. If I ever became alone, I would manage perfectly. I was quite confident about that" (*Ladies Coupe*, 23) show her strength as she considers that a woman can cope alone in life. Although Janaki realizes the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother, her decision of leaving her son's house and preferring her husband's company shows her feminine identity.

Sheela Vasudevan, the youngest in the coupe, has been portrayed as a bold independent girl who has the ability to perceive things better than others. She follows the ideals of her grandmother, Ammumma who was a great one for manifestations of femininity. Nair has shown Sheela as a fourteen-year convent girl who understands life in a matured way. Her attachment with Ammumma helps her to imbibe practical lessons of life. Ammumma wants her to be a strong and good-looking woman having curvy figure that suggests femininity and fertility. Ammumma expected that Sheela mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others as once she counseled Sheela, "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy. I tried to teach this to your mother and aunt. But they are silly women. They don't understand what I have been trying to tell them. You...you, I hope won't be such a fool" (*Ladies Coupe*, 67-68).

Sheela displays her matured individual identity at the age of fourteen as she becomes aware of the sexual abuse by her friend's father and decides that she will never go to her friend's home. Although she seems to be a victim of verbal and emotional abuse through her father's constant disapproval of her conduct, she does not lose her composure. Sheela's understanding of her dead grandmother facilitates her own future liberation. Akhila learns from Sheela's story that she should not bother about others, but rather she should please her own self. Akhila outlines Sheela as, "And that girl Sheela...even she had allowed her instincts to rule rather than do what was expected her – the sober dictates of good conduct" (*Ladies Coupe*, 137).

Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher, tells Akhila how she succeeds in avenging her marginalization by her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj in her unique ways. Determined to erode Ebe's self-esteem and shake the very foundations of his being, she finds out her own unique

weapons of love and flattery as she wants him to make overweight. She makes him eat tasty, oily food, flatters him to eat and also pampers him with sex. She flatters and encourages Ebe to eat breakfasts, lunches, dinners, evening and late-night snacks. Almost a year later, Ebe becomes a fat man and he no longer struts but only waddles. Margaret is able to shatter Ebe's pride, arrogance and pretentiousness as she makes him dependent on herself, "He needed me like he had never before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again" (*Ladies Coupe*, 134). Margaret succeeds in asserting her individuality and becomes independent woman in her life. Anju Jagpal remarks, "It is she whom he needs to manage his weight every year and Margaret gains her life and confidence back. Her taming of her shrewd and cunning husband through equally sly and devious means is also representative of her grit, determination and self-worth, the characteristic traits of the independent new woman" (Jagpal, 193-194).

Prabha Devi, another co-traveller in the coupe, tells Akhila how she is able to cope with her identity crisis and becomes aware of her potential. By learning swimming independently without the help of a swimming coach and without the knowledge of Jagdeesh, Prabha Devi is able to overcome her innate timidity and fear and emerges as a bold, assertive and independent new woman. Her venture of swimming gives her sense of freedom and she asserts her individuality: "When Prabha Devi's fingertips touched the other end of the pool wall, she straightened. And Prabha Devi knew that life would never be the same again. That nothing else that happened would ever measure up to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had stayed afloat" (*Ladies Coupe*, 195). After Prabha Devi's departure, Akhila thinks if Prabha Devi could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float, she can also do the same and Akhila decides that she should must also learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks.

Marikolanthu is the last co-traveller of Akhila who has a horrifying story to tell. Marikolanthu tells Akhila, "I'm 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" (*Ladies Coupe*, 209-210). Though Marikolanthu has been victimized and marginalized in her life, she is able to assert her identity as she wants to be the real thing rather than a sister to the real thing.

After getting substantially influenced by Karpagam and her co-travellers, Akhila reaches Kanyakumari where she discovers that she has got enough strength to stop her exploitation by her family. Akhila is seen as an empowered woman at the end of the novel as she telephonically contacts her former lover Hari.

Conclusion :

Thus, Anita Nair has depicted how women like Akhila, Karpagam, Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu are successful in asserting their independent identity in the male dominated society. These women break up the image of submissive and diffident women and emerge out to be assertive and self-reliant and empowered women in the course of the time. They have to struggle to assert their independent identity and claim their space in the male dominated society.



References :

- Jagpal Anju. *Female Identity: A Study of Seven Indian Women Novelists*. New Delhi. Prestige Books, 2012. Print
- Nair, Anita. *Ladies coupe*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001. Print
- Sinha Sunita. 'Journey of Self Discovery' in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. *Post-Colonial Women Writers New Perspectives*. Ed. Sunita Sinha. New Delhi. Atlantic Publishers, 2012. Print