

Victimization of Woman in The Novel of *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair

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Abstract:

Anita Nair is a feminist with difference. Her novels explore the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her primary focus of attention is the world of women and the struggle of women to establish their identity and independence in the context of modern Indian society. She traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the societies. This article focuses on the psychological sufferings and oppressions of the frustrated woman whose only option is to suppress within the inevitable existential dilemma in a male dominated society. It represents the woman's struggle to define and attain an autonomous 'selfhood' and how she suffers a lot to free herself from stultifying traditional constraints.

Key words: *male-domination, suppression, victimization, survival and exploitation.*

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Anita Nair is a popular English writer and born in Kerala. She is a living postmodern Indian writer. Unlike the novelists of the thirties Anita Nair exhibits confidence in tackling new themes and experiments with new techniques and approaches. Anita Nair is a bestselling author of fiction and poetry. She always had an affinity towards writing and the courage to pursue it under all the situations. Nair relates to the many roles women play in their lives and it is reflected in her works too. She writes with great energy and creates amazing works.

Nair's *Ladies Coupe* was written in the year 2001. It was her second novel and has been translated into twenty seven languages. It was elected as one of the five best novels in India in 2002. This novel gives voice against female suppression, the problem of women and sufferings who want to find out their own identity in the male dominated society. It is a profound discourse on womanism.

Her marvelous understanding of the minds of women is depicted beautifully in her novel *Ladies Coupe* which captures women's overwhelming suppression and challenges. She emphatically puts forward the view that the graph of women exploitation is not showing signs of relenting; on the contrary it is shockingly rising notwithstanding our modern times.

All the characters of this "female enclave" without exception go through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of their families. Every one of them acquires an implacable resilience not only to stay alive, but to discover their inner source of dynamism. This novel is a typical example of different roles of women from different backgrounds in India and their attempts to attain an essential identity in the family and in the society.

Akhila, the protagonist of this novel, is a forty-year-old woman who is single. She is working as an Income tax officer and is born in a conservative family. Akhila is brought up in an atmosphere where the society is considered to have the supreme power. She is playing many roles as a woman in this novel. She is fed up with all these roles. She wants to dissociate from all these responsibilities and she wants to find a way to life's and especially to woman's problems. For this, she decides to take a journey to Kanyakumari.

When Akhila takes journey, she meets five different women. They are her fellow passengers. Each chapter starts with a woman's story. Their stories speak about their life, childhood, their husbands, their sons, and their lovers. But it is clear that all the five women are dominated by the male-dominated society. They all struggle to get their own identity. Some fail and some succeed.

The story starts with the old woman Janaki and she has been married for forty years. She is devoted to her husband. She learns how to love the man she has

married. She marries him to protect her. In the beginning, she is protected by her father and then by her brother now by her husband and after her husband, her son will protect her. According to her, her obligation is to be a good wife and a mother. She tells Akhila about her wedding night, her daily routine and her married life, and about her son and daughter-in-law, and her fights with her son.

The second story is about the life of Sheela who is a teenage girl. She is one of Janaki's fellow passengers. She returns after attending the funeral of her grandmother. She accepts her grandmother's death because she feels that death is the relief for all her suffering. Sheela shares with them about her grandmother's rules, strange behaviour and her hospitalization. Since she dies of cancer, she is able to accept her grandmother's death.

The third story deals with Margaret Shanti. She is a chemistry teacher. As she is a chemistry teacher, she makes a comparison between people and chemicals. She marries the principal of the school where she is a teacher. Her marriage is a love marriage. When she is pregnant, her husband wants to abort the child. Here the clash starts between them. Basically, her husband is a disciplinarian and students are afraid of him. On the other hand, Margaret is so kind and compassionate. This makes them fight with each other. Her husband has a lean body about which he is proud of himself. He is always finding fault with her. So, Margaret wants to take revenge on him. She decides to give him more food and makes him forget his diet which finally changes him into a food gorging. As a consequence, he loses his lean body and becomes slow moving which makes him lose control over the school students.

The fourth story is about Prabha Devi who is born to rich parents. She gets everything as a girl. She is very beautiful, a good cook, and a good singer. She has many talents. She is forty year old and has a son and daughter. She is married to a diamond merchant's son, Jagadesh. She wants to be a modern woman but this makes her husband get the wrong kind of attention. So, she changes herself as her husband wishes. For that, she even wears saris. After her children are grown, she wants to change herself. For that purpose, she learns swimming. By this, she gets confidence and she becomes a new woman. Finally, she balances herself between how she should be and what is expected of her.

This paper mainly focuses on the story of Marikolanthu because her life was destroyed after a forced moment of lust, drags to a clichéd plot and dull narration even the last chapter is a bit loosely wrapped focusing only on one aspect of freedom of a single woman. Among other women, the story of Marikolanthu is the most poignant of all. Marikolanthu is the most pathetic woman among the six women characters. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable woman. She is

suffered by the male oppression which is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, "It's not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself..." (215).

To ensure her mother's fear, her childhood innocence is destroyed when Murugesan attempts physical brutality on her. When she is found pregnant, her mother and Sujata, regret it as they feel it is too late to insist Murugesan to marry her. Even when the matter is taken to the Chettiar's son Sridhar, where she works, he with little reluctance says, "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape" (245). For her mother and Sujata, a woman's life and protection lies in her husband, as Sujata says, "But if she has a job, that will replace a husband's protection" (246). But Marikolanthu is able to raise the question within her about the so called "Husband's protection". She is sure that neither her mother nor Sujata had their husbands look for them, but for them, "a fulfilled woman was one who was married" (246).

Marikolanthu is raped and it changed her life completely. She comes from a poor background and her mother works as a cook at the Chettiar household. As a child, a victim of social and economic repression, she suffers. She looks after her house, later she is employed to look after Sujata Akka's son. She adores the child and showers him with love but hates her own child, the boy Muthu who is born after many attempted abortion. He is the result of her rape by Murugesan. Even though her rapist is known, he is not punished life-long. She also ends up a helper like her mother at the Chettiar household, after a brief stay at Vellore with two lady doctors. They had promised her nursing training but after the rape episode they feel that she has no compassion and so she cannot become a nurse.

Marikolanthu looks after the mad Chettiar Amma; then Sujata Akka seeks her for physical fulfillment in the afternoon and her husband seeks her at nights. After Sujata Akka realizes her husband's escapades with her, she pushes her out of the Chettiar household. She gets the responsibility of the child after her mother dies. Maliciously she mortgages him at one of Murugesan's looms for Rs.5000/-which she uses for her operation at Kancheepuram. She gets odd jobs and lives on in Kancheepuram.

The turning point in her life comes when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre and she sees Muthu left to tend to the pyre. She is shocked at the realization that she had reduced her son to a chandala for no fault of him. All the hatred she had felt all her life went in the flames. She felt guilt and love for her child. She decided to look after him and makes up him for all she had lost. Marikolanthu would no longer be "content to become a sister to the real thing surrogate housewife,

surrogate mother, surrogate lover” (268). She would be the real thing and she would be different from the “long line of people who had used her and discarded her” (268). Marikolanthu suffers social, familial, and financial repression. It is ultimately love that brings her on the hate track where she will find happiness and fulfillment. Her struggle has been one of hate for herself and accommodating with humiliating relationship thereafter. Her resolve to bring up her child shows her forming into a new character.

Her narrative comes at the very end of the novel and she is aware of that the disruptive element of her narrative would shock her listener out of their middle-class complacency. Primarily because it has elements that stray farthest from the ideal of exploited in the household of Chettiar in her village in Tamil Nadu, Marikolanthu gets some relief from Sujata.

Marikolanthu’s girlhood is comparable to that of the other women in the novel such as Akhila, Sheela, Prabha Devi, and Margaret. Marikolanthu has to help her mother to earn a living after her father’s death. To Marikolanthu, Sujata seems the apotheosis of womanhood-desirable, adored, beautiful, mother to male heir, the cynosure of the Chettiar household:

The Chettiar had said that Sujata’s Akka’s every whim and desire had to be fulfilled. She was special. She was a city girl. She would come from Coimbatore and she had even gone to college for two years. And Sujata Akka had given birth to a son. Next to the Chettiar, Sujata Akka was the most important person in the house. (212)

In her perception of Sujata’s exalted position in the Chettiar household, Marikolanthu overlooks that Sujata’s apotheosis is in fact a reaffirmation of the patriarchal structure of the Chettiar family; her beauty and intellect handpicked for the consumption of the Chettiar’s son and for the production and nurturing of the Chettiar heir.

However, Sujata’s desire for Marikolanthu does not stay beyond the limits of Sujata’s bedroom. Explicit in the erotic details, Marikolanthu’s reminiscences of her intimacies with Sujata never actually construct their involvement as a reciprocal relationship. Marikolanthu admits to, and is content with this asymmetry: “Her fingers slid through my palm. That is all she would do for me. It was I who had sought to give her pleasure and in her pleasure lay my reward” (261). Sujata ends the liaison when she finds out that Marikolanthu had simultaneously seduced her husband Sridhar whose sexual attention she had claimed as being unwelcome and repulsive. But at

the same time, Sujata wants to hold on to her heterosexual privilege, just as she is unwilling to relinquish the distinction conferred by a privileged class and caste position. The class hierarchies position the two women differently.

This particular narrative in *Ladies Coupe* explores class hierarchy and the absence of a language of desire. Nair positions the narrator Marikolanthu within a class that has access neither to the language nor to any westernized notion of lesbianism. This class induced hiatus is widened by the inability and the lack of willingness to name the liaison; When Sujata finally spurns Marikolanthu, she indicts her as a false friend, using the façade of homosociality to cancel out the erotic desire. Sujata's language falters as she attempts to name Marikolanthu's unnatural vices; "I know you used black magic to make me your slave... make me do things no woman would... but not anymore, it won't work anymore" (264).

In *Ladies Coupe*, same-sex relationships cannot ultimately transcend the implied respectability of social institutions. However, Marikolanthu attempts to spatially situate transgressive desire within the hetero-patriarchal limits of the Chettiar household and not only aligns her narrative with those of the other fellow passengers, but actually makes it more potent. If the other women assert their corporeity by emphasizing their desiring selves, Marikolanthu pushes the very limits of admissible desire by moving into the territory of transgression.

Slipping into a lesbianism relationship with Sujata Akka, Marikolanthu knows and realizes how easy it is to please a woman. Marikolanthu asks for little except that "she is treated as a desirable woman, that she be wooed with abandon and loved gently..." (260). Until Marikolanthu is called "Whore" (263) by the very same Sujata Akka who once solicited her attention for herself and for her husband! Devastated and confused Marikolanthu changes and emotionally looks for support and finds it in Muthu, whom she had rejected, after seeing him in the role of chandala. She is different from the other women in the coupe because her experiences are more painful.

As women, all the women characters except Marikolanthu have had their own perspective about life. Among those Marikolanthu is uneducated and has lost all the fruitful life because of man and her supportive and conservative relations. She is suppressed in three facets, as a poor woman, as a working class woman and as just a woman. So long, her life resembles her name, 'a sister to the real thing' but in the end, she realizes to be the real thing. She remarks, "Not that women are weak. Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" (209). Every day she dreams of independence and dignity.

For Marikolanthu nothing is more cruel than a man's raping of a woman and so she finds little fault in the missy's love for each other and experiences a kind of content happiness to give her love for Sujata, more than her husband did. Marikolanthu never wants to tie up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty-one she lives alone and wrestles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to rely upon her brothers nor wants a penny from Sujata or her husband but decides to make her living of her own, working as a servant maid in a house. She defines as an independent woman. Her strong aversion for the physical brutality attempted on her, evokes a strong version for her son Muthu. But at the end she feels ashamed for having rejected him and even using him. As Indra observes, "In the end, she decided to measure happiness as Muthu's mother".

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