

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe: Women As Individuals In Conflict With Society

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Abstract

The conflict between individuals and society is a very common phenomenon. Both are essential. Human beings cannot survive without society and society cannot exist without people. The relationship between individuals and society has been an interesting and complex problem at the same time. This paper aims to study the conflict between individuals and society in the novel "A Ladies Coupe" by Anita Nair. Here, ladies coupe means a reserved compartment for ladies in a train where all the female characters get a chance to share their conflicts with their family and society. The emancipation of women, their liberation in society and their escape from society due to narrow gender roles are not easily achieved. However, the female characters in Nair's story attempt to change the ambiance of their lives while maintaining their dignity during their ride in the ladies coupe.

Keywords

Society, Individual, Liberation, Self-discovery, Patriarchy, Gender roles

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Introduction

The conflict between individuals and society shows a struggle between an individual and larger social forces. Most often, this conflict arises when a community's commandments disallow the individual's choices or desires. This creates conflict between what a person desires and what society demands or expects. Individuals and society have a very intimate relationship. Factually, society wants people to follow the customs, traditions and rules. Society can never exist independently without individuals. Human life and society almost go together. A human being is biologically and psychologically equipped to live in groups or in society. It has become an essential condition for human life to arise and to develop.

Being an individual and becoming self-sufficient is not as simple as it may appear. In today's society and past societies, we have been told how to act, appear, talk, behave and even how to think. That is why the option of being an individual is much harder to achieve. After all, no individual has ever survived alone, apart from others. Family, neighbors, tribe, village, city, country and world- all form a vital feature of the life of every individual human being. As individuals, we need other people. At the same time, we cannot use our full human potential if our individuality is suppressed and restricted by the group of people who call themselves society.

Historically, society had a hard start when it came to resolving fundamental clashes between it and the individual. A person vs society conflict is an external conflict that occurs in literature when the protagonist or a character is placed in opposition with society, the government, or a cultural tradition or societal norm of some kind. Characters may be prompted to take action against their society by the need to survive, a moral sense of right and wrong, or a desire for happiness, freedom, justice, or love. Being an individual and not blending into society was considerably more difficult in the late 1800s than it is now. We can see this conflict between individuals and society in any kind of fiction, from novels and short stories to films and television shows.

This paper aims to study the conflict between individuals and society through the women characters in the novel, *Ladies Coupe* written by the famous Indian writer Anita Nair. She is a novelist, journalist, short story writer and famous poet also. Most of the 20th-century novels tell the women's issues and relate their status in Indian society and patriarchal families. In Indian English novels, great women writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anita Nair portray Indian society from a feminist perspective. In Indian English fiction, women writers write about issues of women, the complex relationship between man and woman, sexuality, gender inequality and the quest for identity.

Anita Nair who is born in Mundakkottukurussi near Shoranur in Kerala on 26 January 1966, is one of the notable writers in India. Her writing career started when her first work, a collection of stories, *Satyr of the Subway* got published in 1997. She is the bestselling writer of two novels, *Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* '. These novels have been translated into twenty-one languages. Her other notable works are *Mistress* (2003), *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007), *Magical Indian Myths* (2008), and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) and many other works as well. *Malabar Mind*, a collection of poems, was published in 2002, and *Where the Rain is Born- Writings about Kerala*, edited by her, was published in 2003. Her poems appeared in *The Dance of the Peacock: an anthology of English Poetry from India*, featuring 151 Indian English poets, edited by Vivekanand Jha and published by Hidden Brook Press, Canada. She has received Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for her contribution to literature in 2012.

She wrote in various genres like detective fiction, non-fiction, children's literature, travel writing, plays and poetry as well. "In the 20th century, the social reforms were helpful to remove the tyranny of social evils but the subordination remained in the society. So, a few educated women held the banner for emancipation and communicated to the world, their own bitter experiences through their writings" (Yadav, 2017).

The present paper focuses on the conflict between individuals and society (male-dominated society) and how they get self-discovery. For this purpose, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* ' is taken up. The main protagonist of the novel is Akhila or Akhilandeshwari who works as an income tax clerk. She feels that she has never got the chance to live her own life, always fulfilling the roles of a daughter, sister, aunt and provider of the family. She travels to Kanyakumari in her search for independence. In the *Ladies Coupe* ', she meets five other women on her journey. The compartment becomes a space far away from their patriarchal world, where all the women can talk freely and think freely. The text shows the comparison between individuals and women surrounded by human relationships. It follows the story-telling pattern of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Similarly, 'Ladies Coupe' tells the story of six female characters who ride together in a ladies section designed exclusively for women. The main thing in the novel is that they do not know each other still they are comfortable speaking their heart.

It is a difficult task for Akhila because she has always taken a well-worn path and has never traveled alone for such a long distance without a male member of her family. She is haunted by a question forever. All the time, she is being warned by her family that "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (Nair,2001.

p.16). She further says at this stage of life, "marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can't live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself?" (p.21) She asked the same questions from her co-travelers and in the reply gets the wisest answer from Margaret Shanti, "You should trust your instincts.... You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that" (p.21)

Margaret Shanti is another narrator of the Ladies Coupe'. She was married to Ebenezer Paulraj whom she loved. He is the principal of the school in which Margaret teaches. She wants to do a Ph.D. but her husband wants her to do B.Ed. In an Indian male-dominated society, a woman is not able to make her own decision about her career. Before one day of marriage, her mother advises her:

"How a good wife never says 'No', even she is not in the mood." (102)

Janaki is the oldest among them all. She was married at the age of eighteen and led a comfortable life. Prabhadevi, another women character is the wife of a rich diamond merchant. From her very childhood, she faces a patriarchal society and she clearly remembers how her father treated her. When she was eighteen-year-old, her father seeks a husband for her. But her mother was not happy. Then her father said:

"What do you want to do? Keep her with you for life? Have you ever heard anything sacrilegious? You were always a strange one." (171)

Sheela, another female character is a fourteen -years old girl. She also becomes the victim of this male-dominated society. Once her best friend's father, Mr. Nazar misbehaves with her by touching her lips and her body. She is sexually abused by him. But society does not believe in it. Society always says that it is women who attract men.

Marikonthulu, a thirty-one-years old woman, suffers a lot in her life. After her father's death, she works for Chettiar where she was raped by a member of that family. At the age of nineteen, she becomes an unmarried mother.

Relationship between Individuals and Society

Individuals and societies have a close interaction. But when a person clashes with societal rules and decides to act against them, this relationship becomes worst and conflicts arise from there. According to the social contract theory, society is an artificial structure to meet up people's demands. The supporters of this theory are Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke. The social contract theory is an attempt of the thinkers to justify the relationship between the individual and society. Individuals can't hold beliefs or act apart from against the background of particular social structures.

In the novel, Marikonthulu's story is tragic and as a child, she becomes the victim of society. A man raped her and makes her pregnant. She becomes a mother of an illegitimate child. Her mother takes care of her and her child but after her death, her brothers tell her to leave the house and she becomes helpless. Society blames her for all the misfortune but that is not her mistake. This affects the relationship between society and individuals.

Society and Individual: Irreconcilable Enemies

As we know that a person cannot live without society. According to Aristotle, "Man is essentially a social animal by nature". If a person does so, that is beast or God. We have to live in a society for our existence and welfare. In the novel, all female characters are part of this male-dominated society. They are suffering a lot because of society. So, there is a question... Our society and individual irreconcilable enemies?

If a society can't give women an atmosphere to grow and develop, that is not valuable for them. Due to this, there will be a conflict between women and society. In this novel, the protagonist, Akhila, forty-five and single, an office clerk-stands for all women who are forced to be stereotyped role players. But she denies the rules of society like marriage and decides her future course of action. Akhila dreams of a life with reversed gender roles- with no adherence to family and submission to male domination. She picks up a man and attempts to exercise her power upon him- "One final act to consummate her decision.... One feat of courage to tread where she has never gone before". (272)

Her attempt may be appreciated by many but the fact that Akhila in her feminist operation surrendered her body for a strange man's sexual gratification. According to society, this is not a crime for a man but for a woman, it's the biggest crime. Perhaps, this is an answer to the question.

Role of Society in Individual's Life

In one's life, society plays a critical role. In India, it is a male-dominated or patriarchal society. Due to this, women have to suffer a lot. They do not have any life outside the family. Anita Nair's novels have Indians as central -characters and she alternates between female-centered and male-centered narratives. Men and women are thought to be complementary to one another. Even in this modern period, women are still regarded as the weaker class, not as equals to men. They suffer suppression in a male-dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of society.

In the introduction of her book, *The Second Sex* (1949) Simon De Beauvoir writes that women are brought up by women and their normal destiny is marriage and marriage is a kind of subordination to man itself. So, she urges us to study

women's traditional destiny carefully. She also tries to find that how a woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences that and what kind of an escape mechanism she has with her. (Beauvoir and Parshley, 1956)

The same, we find uttered by the women traveling in the ladies coupe in Nair's work. All the women come from different cultural backgrounds or classes based on their status and education, preventing them to take any drastic step which deviates from their patriarchal lives. In the present novel too, we find the mindset of the people when Margaret's mother advises her on how to be a good wife.

In this regard, we find in the novel that Akhila is someone who can never take her own decisions by herself. She always feels that she is just a provider of the family. She cannot take any decision even if she is the provider. After her father, the decision-makers are her brothers who are younger than her in age. Because they are men, they got this position automatically. This is the women's psyche; they are taught to be dominated since their childhood. If they become financially independent, they can never stand equal to men. Even they cannot decide for themselves.

Role of Travelling in Realization of Self-Identity

The status of women in society, their role and the treatment they got in the society are always focused on as a matter of question- Do they have the right to live life as human beings? Or they are the dolls in this male-dominated society.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* 'develops the story from their train journey which symbolizes the patriarchal system. The novel begins with the line-

"This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape....." (p.1)

These are the opening lines of the novel. These lines pointed out the protagonist of the novel who desires to travel alone.

By analyzing the lives of all female characters, one shall find that it is the journey of their lives that change them as a person. Traveling plays an important role in their lives. They all are disturbed by this male-dominated society and its culture to be only a mother, a daughter, a wife. They do not have their own identity. Even if they can't make their decision. In the novel, Margaret wants to do a Ph.D. but her husband refuses. In the modern age, women are capable to make their decision but after marriage men have the right to make decisions for their life too. After marriage, a woman does everything for her husband's happiness. After the eighteenth of her marriage, she had been pregnant but her husband was unhappy and insisted on an abortion. She has to abort her child for her husband's happiness. She suffers a lot but now she becomes independent and seeks her own ways. This journey signifies

an emotional, psychological journey as well as a physical movement. The journey helps not only Akhila but her co-travelers in transforming or at least realizing their true selves.

During the process of her journey, Akhila tries to find out an answer to the basic question which has been in pursuit throughout her life- “Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?”

The importance of traveling is also seen in the life of Prabha Devi when she is changed after the visit to New York. It changes her physically and psychologically. She aspires to be a physically and mentally Western woman. Her dilemma to become someone else shows how trapped she is in her to live freely. She keeps taking pride in her life thinking, “How lucky I am to be me!” (p.130)

Thus, traveling plays an important role in life the of all female characters in the novel. Though it was a drastic step, the result was good.

Conclusion

It can be said that the women in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* ‘ are brave and independent and they try to show their ability to society or the family. The story shows the conflicts between women with society. It is the story of searching for her own identity beyond the boundaries of male domination. All the women start this journey for themselves after breaking the bondage. They fight for individuality. It is compulsory for society to point out them because this society never considers women independent sex. For society, a woman is an object which gives them pleasure and a source of entertainment but Anita Nair proves that women can have real self-realization. They can fulfill their desires and still be accepted.

We find that all the women come from different cultures, ages, classes and financial backgrounds. They need to step out of their doll-type model and move beyond their mental boundaries, hence the title- *Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe: Conflict Between Individual & Society*. Women’s life and their sacrifices prove that they are not weak creatures or pitiable victims, but they can achieve everything through their hard work and individual identity. They don’t need men to complete them or to be happy. This paper shows that women’s nature at a social, familial and financial level that is the reason for their identity. Women in this novel, can remove obstacles and preserve their dignity in their society and their personal life. In the case of women, traveling helps them to explore a new world, full of possibilities and in which they can think freely and talk freely. The novel provides answers to Akhila’s questions which she found in her questions. Anita Nair has portrayed the central character of the novel as a woman who searches for her own uniqueness and role in society.

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Anita Nair's second novel upholds the promise of the first.... Each of the women is finally drawn (as are their men), each caught in a net of relationships partly of her own and partly one that is "made" for her.... Anita Nair's low-key, sometimes funny and sometimes hard-hitting book...is definitely worth a read.

Urvashi ButAliA. (Nair,2001, Cover page)

This statement is given on the cover page of the novel. It is a comment on the novel that it has portrayed the real mirror of society. Every woman who is traveling on the train is showing their conflicts with society and searching for their own identity in this male-dominated society. All the women shared the pain of their life and started to travel in search of self-identity and their own life, they all wanted to live.

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