

***Ladies Coupé* an archetypal story about Indian subjugation of women by Anita Nair**

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Gollapudi Varalakshmi*

ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is a staunch demonstrator of feminism of this age and through her books she had proved, especially in *Ladies Coupé*. In this particular work she brings out the life of 5 differently disposed women, who have been victims of the male dominated society. Their life brings out the circumstantial issues of the gender segregation of the society. The place they possess in family and societal frame work draws us towards the life of women a decade ago.

This 2001 released sensational piece of work has been very successful in understanding how society has been crucial and cruel in designing the life of these 5 main characters including protagonist, representing the majority of victimized women. The books takes off as an account of the story of these 5 women but ends with a ray of hope displaying the imaginary individualization a women can experience in her life sometime in future. Every character faces different challenges and different problems. Their fight to sustain and stand is a great inspirational aspect of this fiction. It stands as a reflection of Anita Nair's beliefs and ideology.

No feminist would like to see a woman struggling all her life, going down without fight, for such people this book gives relief. It especially being set in Indian background gives deep insight into value system implemented by this multi-cultural society. Being in advanced 21st century, the place of women in society didn't move an inch. The whole narrative is divided in 5 different sub-plots each representing their life and connected to the main theme/plot. Their travel in train resembles their journey of unending life of ages past, present and future.

Key words: women subjugation, in(dependence), *Ladies Coupé*

INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* follows the journey of 5 middle-aged women along with the protagonist, Akhila who is in search of independence. This book was published in 2001 and earned applause. It represents the life of women in India, who are defeated by fate and society resulting in the consequential activities of their life.

She is the author of bestselling novels "The Better Man" and "Ladies coupe", poetry collection of "Malabar Mind", a collection of short stories "Satyr of Subway" and Eleven other stories and has written two children's books –'The Puffin Book of world Myths and Legends'. She has also edited an

anthology of writings about Kerala titled "Where the Rain is Born." Anita Nair is a novelist, poet, travel writer, essayist, short story writer and writer of stories for children. Anita Nair was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in [Bangalore](#) when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway*, which she sold to Har-Anand Press. The book won her a fellowship from the [Virginia Center for the Creative Arts](#).

In 2002, "Ladies Coupé" was elected as one of the five best in India. The novel is about women's conditions in a male dominated society, told with great insight, solidarity and humor. *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.

Nair has also written a few other books, such as *Mistress* (2003), *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007) and *Magical Indian Myths* (2008). Nair's works also include many travelogues.^[8] With the play *Nine Faces of Being*, best-selling author Anita Nair has become a playwright. The story, is adapted from Nair's book *Mistress*. She was recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in May 2012 for her contribution to Literature and Culture, Arch of Excellence Award by the All India Achievers' Conference, New Delhi for Literature. She was also appointed as Global ambassador for Women for Expo May 2015.

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Anita Nair is one of India's popular female writers. She depicts through her expression, the present condition of women in society, with wit and humour. Story telling is an art and she does it exceptionally well. She delves deep into human psyche and allows the reader to enjoy a wonderful journey by presenting absorbing stories that have colourful and unique characters. She evokes experiences that are drawn from day-to-day life and her approach often enables the readers to suspect the character to be one of their neighbour's or of a friend.

The title of the book itself makes a point about the way the Indian society treats its women. It's very common to find a 'ladies only queue' in a tickets reservation counter or 'a ladies special bus' or for that matter 'a ladies coupe'. Why do Indian women get this kind of a special treatment maybe because it is presumed that a woman can survive only in an all women's world which we know exists only in Venus and to survive in the kind of world we live in - a woman needs a man. Every Indian woman tries to escape this supposition but is it really possible for a woman to survive without a man's protection?

Akhila, the protagonist of the *Ladies Coupé* is a 45 yr old single women working as an Income tax officer. Born in a conservative Brahmin family Akhila was brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power and the people living in this society would never ever dare to rewrite its unfounded norms. Akhila's mother belonged to the old school of thought, sometimes through her actions and sometimes through her words she taught Akhila that a perfect woman is the one who blends with the environment.

'There is no such thing as equal marriage it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove ones equality that there is

warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on the man's role. Or the Gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage', is what her mother tried to drill into her mind.

But this very mother of Akhila on becoming a widow expected her daughter to play the man of the house. So from playing the role of the daughter Akhila progressed to being the provider and continued playing different roles all through her life. Sometimes a sister, sometimes an aunt but she never got to be herself. She never was Akhila until one fine day when she realised that she has got nothing from life not even memories to look back to. To change the course of her life Akhila decides to do something she had never done before. She buys a one way ticket to Kanyakumari to escape from the norms that stopped her from being Akhilandeshwari. On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women, her fellow passengers. Each with a story of her own but all of them had one thing in common and that was their search for the real denotation of life.

In her travel she meets 5 other women who were devastated in their life under the cruel rule of society. Though these women have different stories, all of them are connected to one thing i.e. they are the victims of society. Each life we hear make us examine what kind of life women had lived under the umbrella of male dominated society.

The oldest of the women is Janaki with a story that many women of her age will identify with. Janaki is someone who learnt to love the man she married. She is someone who always had a man to protect her. Someone who was first protected by her father then by her brother then by her husband and after him it would be her son. Janaki believed that to be a good mother and a good wife are the only two duties of a woman and she made her home her Kingdom. It was too late to amend her life when she realised that even a strong and independent woman can make a good wife and a good mother.

The Second story to unfold is that of a fourteen year old, Sheela. Someone who is generations apart from Janaki but still with a mental maturity that quite surpasses her age. She is someone who accepted her grandmother's death with an air of a person who had seen it all and done it all. What makes Sheela different from others is her ability to look beyond things and her knack of perceiving what others cannot.

The third story to unfurl is that of Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher married to Ebenezer Paulraj, the Principal of the school she works in. Margaret compares herself to supercritical water which is capable of dissolving just about anything. Soon after marriage Margaret realised that her husband was not the knight in shining armour that she expected him to be but on the other hand he was this insensitive, self obsessed despot who couldn't care less for his wife. Ebenezer's every action gradually transforms Margaret's love into hatred and to avenge him Margaret uses a very ingenious method. She formulates a scheme which would not only save her marriage but also eat into his amour proper and shake the very brass tacks of his being.

The fourth tale to open up is that of Prabha Devi, born to rich parents she had the perfect childhood. Her mother beamed with pride when Prabha Devi turned eighteen. She was everything that a girl ought to be. She was beautiful, docile, a good cook, a good singer, her needlework was perfect. Soon this demure girl was married to a diamond merchant's son. After marriage her life swished past in the blur of insignificant days till one day - a week after her fortieth birthday when she realised that somewhere in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother, Prabha Devi forgot how it's is to be herself and that's when she learns to strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be and a shufti of a swimming pool helps her realise the need for the balancing act.

The fifth and the most heart-rending tale is that of Marikolanthu who only when grown up realised that circumstance never let her be a kid. As a kid she worked at the Chettiar's house to help her mother raise her brothers and when she grew up her innocence was destroyed by a man who was determined to have her carnal knowledge sans her consent. This one unpleasant incident changes Markolanthu's entire life and destroys her verve. From being a kid who worked hard to help her mother raise her brothers to being a maid to two lady doctors who were foreigners, Marikolanthu was now a mother to an illegitimate child. Marikolanthu had seen it all from poverty to lesbianism but all through her life though she was untutored and bucolic she stood up for what she believed in, not caring for the society.

One night in the Ladies coupe and her interaction with the five women - Janaki who had a happy marriage though it was an arranged one, Margaret Shanti though married to the love of her life suffered from the agony of an unhappy marriage, Sheela , a teenager who had the ability to look beyond things, Prabha Devi who after years of marriage learnt to strike a balance and Marikolanthu different from all the four women did not succumb to the norms of the society just to gain a right place in the social order helped Akhila realise that she had given the society superfluous power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question –

“Can a women stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?.”

There was a time when a woman needed a man for protection but today she needs a man for companionship, she needs a partner who would share her ups and downs. She is not in need of a breadwinner but in need of someone with whom she can share the bread. So, does this realisation make Akhila get back in touch with the guy she fell in love with, someone whom she did not accept for the fears of the society? This book though a work of fiction is very close to reality. The language is simple and gets a little poetic in a few places. The dilemma that a woman goes through at every point of her life is shown in a beautiful way. Comparison of life with chemical elements in Margaret Shanti's episode is very interesting. Though the story contains a few unpleasant incidents the author has expressed pity in a way that it passes on the right message without spoiling the readers' mood.

In *Ladies Coupe* Nair has resorted to one of the oldest ploys. She has taken a leaf out of Chaucer's mixed crowd of pilgrims travelling to Canterbury telling tales to each other. He himself, as is well known, borrowed from Boccaccio who had his well-heeled cast of characters relating stories to each other while sitting out the plague. Nair's characters too are singularly life affirming. Though they do not confess their life stories publicly to each other while sitting in what used to be a regular feature of rail journeys, the "ladies compartment" or coupe of the title, the manner in which she has them sharing their experiences with the protagonist, Akhila or Akhilandeswari, as she becomes towards the end, assuming her full potential as a woman, quite often sounds like a female version of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Postcolonial feminist literature has always carried the heavy burden of dealing with, layers of misinterpretation of traditions and religions. At the center of this dilemma is the role of woman and her (in)dependence, economically and socially. The more traditional a postcolonial society is, the more problematic the question of women's emancipation is, and, therefore, the more passionate its women writers are. No wonder, then, that Anita Nair's engrossing *Ladies Coupe* raises what many readers might consider *taboo* questions about the role of woman in contemporary postcolonial India.

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 Coupe* 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. Put differently, the novel questions whether the role of 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.

The Brahmin heroine, Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is a 45-year-old "spinster," daughter, sister, aunt 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 family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman. In the all-female Ladies Coupe she meets five other women each of whom has a story to tell. The stories are all an attempt to answer Akhila's problematic question: can a woman stay single and be happy at the same time? Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the women's stories: Janaki, the old woman whose relationship with her husband is a "friendly love;" Margaret, the chemistry teacher, who succeeds in "disciplining" her narcissistic husband/principal; Brabha, the rich submissive wife who loves swimming because it, metaphorically, gives her a sense of achievement; Sheela, the 14-year-old whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for her own future liberation; and Marikolanthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class-exploitation is the culmination of all other stories. What comes under speculative pressure in Nair's novel is the opposition between ideological

appearance--represented in a mythic and metaphysical understanding of the material world---and reality--represented in the material oppression of women of low caste and their sexuality.

Ladies Coupe deconstructs that which is taken for granted: the sacred, the traditional, and the ideological. Akhila is not given the opportunity by her family to get married and have a family, as "traditions" dictate; she is rather expected to provide. Brahmin traditions, in this case, become flexible, but Akhila is still called a "spinster!" Marikolanthu gets raped and, unsurprisingly, she is to blame: "Why does a young woman walk alone?" 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. The coupe 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 to overcome the contradictions that are characteristic of the "traditional" world and its essential determinant: that is, alienation.

Throughout the novel we are continuously made conscious of the women subjugation by the male figures directly or indirectly. Every character brings out the stories of victimization physically and psychologically. A woman is always treated low, thinking that they are incapable and cannot handle life without the help of men in family as well as society. This traditional ideology had been sowed in the mind which has made life of women depend on their companions unwillingly. The modern technologically and socially developed society failed to realize the women's role and this novel is a clear picture of it. The arrival of 21st century has not brought any noticeable changes as expected in the life of women. But the most optimistic aspect of the novel has been the ending, which tried to display the possible independence and freedom to women in future through the protagonist.

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