



Victims and Survivors in the Sugar Sticky Web of the Family: A Study of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Anita Nair's is one of the notable writers in Indian writing in English. She mainly focuses on the problems of women in the society. Anita Nair was born at Mundakottakurissi in Kerala. She was brought up in suburb in Chennai. Her father worked in a factory. She frequently visited Kerala her grandparent's house, which made her to know the heart of rural Kerala. She worked as an innovative director in an advertising company in Bangalore, when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories.

Ladies Coupe is a story of Akilandeswari, Akhila, a forty five year old spinster. Being an income tax officer, she has never been permitted to live her own life. Akhila is supposed to play different roles suppressing her desire to submerge her identity as per the expectations of the society. She acts as a dutiful daughter to her parents, a sister to her brothers, an aunt to her niece and nephews and also provider and the earning member of the family after her father's death. Her brothers and sisters always call her "akka", the elder sister of the family. Her colleagues call her madam because in a work place all women are madams and all men are sirs. Amma addresses her as "ammadi". So there is no one to call her by her name Akhila, after becoming the provider of the family. The identity of her is lost. Nobody in the family is ready to look after the family, for she gets fed up with these multiple roles, She decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities, a journey that ultimately makes her a different woman. She tries to change the course of her life and family substantially. Though She is from a renowned Brahmin family, she tries to deviate herself from the traditional habits and eats boiled eggs with her friends. She is never free to realize her goals or translate her dreams into realities. Hungry for life and experience, she sets out for a journey.

Anita Nair chooses a "Ladies only" train compartment as the setting of the novel. In *Ladies Coupe* Akhila meets five other women and each of them has a story of their own to tell. In a way, these stories attempt to answer Akhila's problematic question: Can a woman stay single and be

happy at the same time, Sunita Sinha states in her work *post colonial women writers new perspectives* that:

Nair's India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality. (149)

Each chapter of the novel is devoted to the study of one of the women. Akila gets to know about her fellow-passenger, Janaki, a pampered wife and a confused mother. Janaki represents the age old belief of Indian society that a woman should always depend on some man in her life.

In Indian tradition, a woman is always synonymous with good wife accordingly a good wife should be faithful, virtuous and obedient. Nair is fully aware of the male domination in the society. In the biography she speaks about it.

Manu the Moses of Hinduism gave women an inferior role and this has imprinted itself very strongly in the Indian Psyche. For instance in a Hindu marriage ritual the bride walks behind the man. This is an indication of the fact that he is to lead her through life and she who is not his equal will willingly submit to be led (Monti and Goglio 41)

Janaki is also expected to play all these roles as a traditional woman. She plays different roles such as a daughter, a wife and a mother, but not an individual. Janaki gets married to Prabhakar when she is eighteen years old. She leads a happy, comfortable, and a long married life for forty years. Her husband is a caring partner. They have a son and a daughter-in-law. She revolts against her husband when she finds him controlling everybody even their grown up son.

Domination by family members and loneliness are the essential features for the life of South Asian women. This loneliness depends on with time and seems to defy solution. Prabakar's overbearing precision and exactness irritate her. He is self centered and egoistic. She lost her identity in trying to be a perfect wife. Her marital life doesnot bring her any fulfillment.

Janaki discovers herself that her true happiness lies in her, but she is not able to take off the web under which she is covered for a long period. The crisis of life in a married woman who has allowed life to pass her is expressed in the description of Janaki as a woman who had gotten to a certain age.

Margaret Shanti is one of the fellow traveler in the *Ladies Coupe*. Margaret Shanti s story is a story of a woman who learns her own stratagies to get her dreams come true. Shanti has gone through physical, mental and spiritual crisis throughout her life, her marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj is like a fairy tale for her. Paulraj loves Margaret from the bottom of his heart, but he is not ready to accept her likes and dislikes. Ebenezer Paulraj loves her but he does not allow her individuality. Margaret, a girl with brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality, is reduced to an average girl. Ebenezer's cruelty to the children in his school gets repeated with his wife too. Margaret initially says 'yes' to whatever her husband says and is ready to do anything for him. Once he was obsessed with her girlish character. To retain the girlish charm in her she happily announces him about her pregnancy, but he insists on to abort the baby and thus, he controls her completely. She is forced to do B.Ed, though she wants to do Ph.D . She is made to work only for her husband while he nags her all the time. She feels confused, angry, sorrow, pain and self – pity.

Women writers in Indian writing in English are good in analyzing complex issues like complexities of human relationship, woman's psyche and her potential. Menakshhi Mukerjee states in her work *women creative writers in Indian English literature between spaces of silence* that:

The changing pattern of man-woman relationship is presented not only in the novels, but also in films and television serials. Bold themes and diverse issues are now being taken up by the media. The mosaic of stories highlights the fact that man-woman relationship is a very complex and subtle issue. (Mukerjee25)

The changing pattern of man-woman relationship can be traced in the works of writers such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Shagal, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Shoba De show how the modern Indian women attempt to free themselves sexually, economically and domestically from the male dominated society. Margaret is a woman with brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality. She is reduced to a silent spectator. The worst attitude of her husband starts from when he becomes the Principal of the school and he finds fault in all her work of housekeeping. This becomes an unending situation to Margaret. So Paulraj becomes more and more egoistic, dominating and hypocritical. Margaret is unconsciously forced to teach him a lesson:

I mouthed the words: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZAR PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. I HATE HIM. I waited for a clap of thunder, a hurling meteor, a whirlwind, a dust storm...for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelation (LC 98)

Margaret leads a routine life until the day James, the golden fish, float dead .The moment proves to be a turning point in her life. She does not want her life to float like dead fish. She identifies herself with the golden fish. Paulraj's love for food and sex becomes a tool for Margaret. She starts to pamper him with sex and food he likes the most in his life. As a result, he becomes fat, loses his vanity and needs her more and more. She was once controlled by her husband, but now holds him completely in her hands. The mental sufferings, the effort she takes to make her strong are the places where Anita Nair proves herself.

Sheela, the next narrator of '*Ladies Coupe*' is a sensitive girl in her teens .She is the youngest of the six. She talks about her maternal grandmother in whom one could see the manifestation of femininity. Sheela is blessed with a deep insight of the family around her and their relationship of her grandmother, mother and father. She also understands the dynamics of life. Sheela's grandmother teaches her the practical way of life. Her attachment to her grandmother till her death brings maturity to her. When she converses with the fellow passengers, her maturity is revealed. The knowledge of three generations, is found in Sheela; her mother's, grandmother's and also her own. She knows that, "Women turn to their mothers when they have no one else to turn to. Women know that a mother alone will find it possible to unearth some shred of compassion and love that in everyone else has become ashes" (LC 71).

Sheela, though only a girl, feels that the male authority cannot be questioned. She was encouraged to be witty when she was a child. Her father considered her funny when she was cheeky in childhood. He even encouraged her to speak like an adult. But as a grown up girl, she has to suppress herself. Her being witty is treated as rudeness. And any argument is considered as the questioning of her father's authority.

Sheela's father always gives preference to her as his child. However, when she starts to talk like a matured woman, he is completely changed and starts to control her whenever she begins to talk. When Sheela's grandmother dies of cancer and her body is prepared for funeral, Sheela dresses her grandmother in a good costume with the jewels. She does so because she remembers the words of her grandmother, "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (LC 67). Thus, Sheela fulfils the wish of her grandmother by adoring her dead body with jewels.

Sheela's grandmother also teaches her the negative picture of men who dominate women physically as well as psychologically. Sheela feels embarrassed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar. Nazar, on one Sunday afternoon when Sheela had gone to their house, rushed in from the heat with a line of sweatness beading her upper lip. Nazar reached forward and wiped it with his finger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time. But Sheela is unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her. A fourteen year old girl's inner search and maturity are beautifully pictured by Anita Nair.

Prabha Devi, apparently there is no suppression to suffer from, is free. She is taken to America for tour. She is allowed to dress like Americans. But things change for her when Promod, whom she tries to attract, comes to her house and makes physical advances towards her. She is very much shocked to think of the consequences, if someone sees what Promod does. She decides to be a docile home wife living within the protection of the house. Herein lies the oppression of woman. She has to bear the brunt of male aberrations. It is woman who has to be above all suspicion.

Marikolunthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. She thinks about the previous women passengers who have all led such sheltered lives. She asks "what do they know of how cruel the world can be to women" (LC 209). Marikolunthu is a working class woman, a domestic, who works at a doctor as helper.

When she was nine years old, unfortunately her father died of cancer. After that poverty rules and reins their house. She has begun to work in Chettiyar's house as a maid. Murugesan, one of the relatives of Chettiyar, is a wicked person. He searched for a good occasion to seduce. Marikolunthu, unfortunately falls into his trap, is brutally seduced by him. Sujatha Akka, daughter in law of Chettiyar, asks her not to disclose this issue, even though her rapist is known. Marikolunthu gives birth to an illegitimate child called Muthu. Muthu is taken care of by Marikolunthu's mother. After the death of her mother, nobody is there to support her. Marikolunthu's younger brothers tell her to leave the house with her child Muthu. She does not want to depend on any other person and so she decides to live on her own. She joins the mission hospital as a helper. She defines herself as an independent woman. She empowers herself and proves to the world that she can lead a good life.

Thus in the novel, *Ladies Coupe* Anita Nair deals with the themes of patriarchy and women empowerment. Though her characters struggle due to patriarchy, at last they empower themselves and successfully redeem themselves from the web of patriarchy.

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