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JOURNEY INTO THE SELF: A READING OF ANITA NAIR'S "LADIES COUPE"

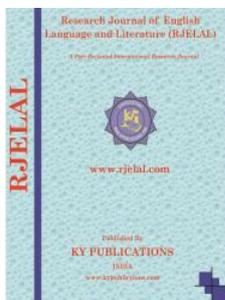
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ABSTRACT

In the wake of feminist movement in India, themes like women's search of identity, quest for selfhood, relocating the self and awareness to seek a balance between tradition and modernity became popular in the works of male as well as female writers of the post-colonial Indian English fiction. With the turn of the century, the Indian English women novelists have surpassed their male counter parts outnumbering them quantitatively as well as by maintaining a high standard of literary writing, experimenting boldly with not only technique but also by incorporating tabooed subject matters in their novels and short stories. To this group belongs Anita Nair who has produced some remarkable works and in a little span of her career she has gained an international reputation. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is the story of a woman's search for strength and independence and focuses on the inner strength inherent in every woman. It is a voice to appreciate a voyage of self-consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the reaffirmation of female identity against male domination.

Key Words: female sensibility, self consciousness, journey, womanhood etc.

Indian fiction in English since its inception in the later half of the 19th century till date, along with other issues, has also been dealing with the changing place, position, roles and problems of women in various relationships and areas. In the wake of feminist movement in India, themes like women's search of identity, quest for selfhood, relocating the self and awareness to seek a balance between tradition and modernity became popular in the works of male as well as female writers of the post colonial Indian English fiction. With the turn of the century, the Indian English women novelists have surpassed their male counter parts outnumbering them quantitatively as well as by maintaining a high standard of literary writing, experimenting boldly with not only technique but also by incorporating tabooed subject matters in

their novels and short stories, the result being that Indian women of all categories – rural or urban, rich or poor, aristocratic or bourgeois, high caste or Dalit have been studied with an intensity and concern never attempted earlier. To this group belong writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nargis Dalal, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Nair, all being well equipped both emotionally and intellectually to treat the situation appropriately.

Anita Nair has produced some remarkable works and in a little span of her career she has gained an international reputation. With *Satyr of the Subway*, a collection of short stories as her first publication, she has received acclaim with two novels, *A Better man* and *Ladies Coupe*. Her poetic

sparks have been realized with *Malabar Mind* and she has also edited a collection of writings on Kerala. Her latest release, *Puffin Book of World Myth and Legends*, make readers realize Nair's concern for all classes and groups of people.

Were it possible for us to wait for ourselves to come into the room, not many of us would find our hearts breaking into flower as we hear the door handle turn. But we fight for our rights, we will not let anybody take our breath away from us and we resist all attempts to prevent us from using our wills. [Rebecca West]

This is quoted by Anita Nair just before she begins her novel *Ladies Coupe* and that is what she deals with while she takes us on a journey into a woman's psyche --- rather a crisscross of female experiences that cover the various roles that a woman plays in her life. *Ladies Coupe* is a novel that basically deals with female sensibilities but in no way does it show women as battered, bartered and abandoned on the shoals of self-worth.

Basically, *Ladies Coupe* is the story of a woman's search for strength and independence and focus on the inner strength inherent in every woman. The background is South India because it is a familiar terrain for Anita Nair. The idea to write the novel came to Anita Nair twenty years back when she was travelling by train in a ladies coupe. She was on the top berth, when she heard the other occupants of the coupe talking among themselves. There was an air of intimacy in the coupe so these women talked openly to strangers knowing there was nothing judgemental about them. She used this experience in the novel, making it a journey of sisterhood, displaying a variety of female experiences that are not just of the character concerned but of all women at some juncture or the other in their lives. The subtitle of the novel is "a novel in parts" perhaps because the lives and experiences of six women have been welded together by the writer into a consummate whole with the main protagonist Akhila as a magnet in the centre. The stories of the other five passengers are interwoven into the story of Akhila.

Anita Nair's monumental novel *Ladies Coupe* is a voice to appreciate a voyage of self

consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the reaffirmation of female identity against male domination. Akhila's journey in the train is the declaration of her independence against chaos and disorder but it is a symbolic journey through her own consciousness in which, she not only seeks her freedom but also gathers confidence to protect her individuality and womanhood. She travels in a train with six women of different ages and status. Akhila's interaction with them makes her realize that all of them have suffered in the hands of the repressive forces of society, taken recourse to oppression and resolved to discover their own hidden potent to assert their identity against the oppressive social order. In spite of oppression, they resolved to redefine their identity in patriarchal social order. It is attributed: "Anita Nair has done a commendable job in bringing out the positive role and positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood" [Singh 29].

Akhila or Akhilandeswari is the main protagonist of *Ladies Coupe* who is a single forty five years old income-tax clerk. Akhila is the eldest of four children who has to bear the responsibilities of her family after her father's death. Her brothers and sister got married but neither they nor her mother is concerned with her marriage. After her mother's death, her sister Padma comes to stay with her because she felt a woman cannot be left alone otherwise she would go astray whereas Akhila wants to live alone. One day Akhila sets out by herself to seek some answers for herself mainly to the question whether a single woman can live alone, away from her family. She buys a ticket to Kanyakumari and is placed in a ladies coupe along with five other women giving her company for the overnight journey. These women share their life experiences with her thus helping her to realize her full potential as a woman and also to find answers to the questions that had been troubling her for so long. The journey becomes a learning experience for Akhila who ponders upon her own life after each story-session. It helps her to break free from the claustrophobic multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt and provider and makes it a soul-searching journey for Akhila as she arrives by

degrees to how she should live her life and assert her identity. The five passengers with Akhila are Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha Devi and Mariakonthu. Akhila starts up a conversation with these women who tell her of their lives.

Janaki, one of the passengers, opposed to Akhila's ideas, considers the basic purpose of a woman's life is to get married. Woman, according to Janaki, is a subordinate self and as her horizon expands, her sole satisfaction lies in being with the male counterpart. Janaki's assertions fail to assert Akhila. What Janaki says, appears to be obsolete in today's changing times: "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and brothers; then my husband; when my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile; our men treat us like princesses." Janaki believed that a woman's role was to keep the family intact and reach out to every family member. But she finds herself at a certain age, a victim of all sorts of taunts and derisions when she comes to help her son's wife Jaya admitted for the Cesarean. Unable to bear the insults, she decides to go home and live her life with her husband.

With Janaki's revelation, Akhila begins to make a search of her own self and her memories take her back to her childhood experiences to reconstruct the life of her mother. Appa, her father was a man of his own choices and resolutions, "I have to live with myself and this is the only way I can do it" (43) and Amma managed everything according to the choice of father. She insisted on looking every meal herself. Amma taught Akhila, "A true wife is she whose virtues match her home" (49). However, Akhila expresses her contempt for the preparation, waiting and devotions of her mother because in her insignificant existence, she finds the reflections of her own futures. However, after the death of her father, the dress of widowhood was put on Amma's body; Akhila cried because she knew that this was "what is meant to be a woman?"(59). Amma's humiliation and Appa's death and apathy to the family, made her conscious of a new identity, secure and independent. It was left to Akhila's lot to take on the mantle of provider for the family as she got a

job in her father's place and now had to bear all her father's responsibilities.

Her train of thought is broken when Sheela, a fifteen year old girl enters the coupe near midnight. Sheela was grappling with the shock of the death of her grandmother. Dying of cancer, she had to live with her daughter Sheela's mother due to her quarrel with her sons. Sheela knows her grandmother's fondness for feminine things like make-up and jewellery. When she died, Sheela's uncles came and took matters in their hands; it is only Sheela who realizes how her grandmother would have hated to see the condition in which her body lay. So inspite of the protests of her parents and uncles, Sheela decked her in costume jewellery because she knew how her grandmother would have been pleased.

The defiance of tradition by Sheela reminds Akhila how she herself became the woman of the family after her father's death at the young age of nineteen. In that capacity, she had forbidden her widowed mother to shave off her hair or change her saris. Since then she has been caught in the whirlpool of family responsibilities and had already become a spinster. Even when her brothers settled down with jobs and family, they never thought of Akhila's marriage. She was expected to get her younger sister married by providing a good dowry for her. Her only act of rebellion and defiance was her indulgence in the pleasures of eating an egg, introduced to her by her Anglo-Indian friend, Katherin. Self indulgence lands to guilt in her psyche and she is assailed by erotic dreams but is woken by the ashamed faces of her family members. She gives in her desires till her dream is shattered by the banging of the coupe door. It was Margaret who had already declared to her that "a woman doesn't really need a man. This is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality" (95).

It is Margaret who tells Akhila the story of her life, her marriage to Elbenzer Paulraj, to make her aware that 'a woman needs a man but not to make her feel whole.' Margaret Shanti is a chemistry teacher and her husband Eb is the principal of the school she teaches in. Theirs was a love marriage yet now Margaret hates her husband. He was always

finding fault with her and after the initial euphoria of marriage had worn off, she became disillusioned. Her first pregnancy was aborted due to her husband's wishes and she was beset by guilt and emptiness at her state. Margaret now sees her husband as he actually was-an egoist and a bully, a sex pervert. She takes revenge in a unique manner, i.e. through his love of food. She becomes a perfect cook and stuffs him with gourmet dishes so much so that soon his body becomes covered in layers of fat. As a fat man, it becomes easier to live with him as now it has blunted his 'razor edge'. She became pregnant again and gave birth to a girl. She was returning from Bangalore after putting Eb in a health clinic to shed off his extra kilos. Margaret feels that she has to stop her husband from reverting to his earlier self as she has her daughter to think of. Margaret leaves the train at Coimbatore without bothering about what others will think of her. With Margaret's story Akhila comes to the realization that every woman is a suppressed human being who persistently fights to justify her own identity.

Margaret's repression can be called one of gender/sexual stereotypes. She was forced to live like a model wife and daughter. Jean Baker Miller analyses gender attitudes as a part of attitudes common to all dominant and subordinate group:

Subordinates are described in terms of and encouraged to develop psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominant groups. These characteristics form a certain familiar cluster: submissiveness, passivity, docility, lack of initiative, inability to decide, to think and the like...If subordinates adopt these characteristics, they are considered well adjusted. [6-7]

Knowing about the life of Margaret, Akhila starts reflecting on her relationship with Hari and she ignores the relationship out of the consideration of social inhibitions. The protest against patriarchy also invites the revolt against sexual colonialism. Like a male, woman has every right to assert her sexual desires. In his company with the sensation of the body, she becomes conscious of her womanhood, "she had seen in his eyes everything a

woman dared hope for from a man" (147). In spite of her desires, she becomes conscious of the fact a woman is not expected to offer her bodies to men before their union was sanctified by the institution of marriage. Akhila realizes that she lost Hari and the companionship only out of the panic of social sanctity. In the process of reconstruction of female identity, the rational and unconventional vision is essential. Modern women admit healthy sexual needs and seek a suitable outlet of them. In feminine psyche, the sexual desire and intense desire of love are two distinctive variables and they should not be treated as identical.

Prabha Devi had her life in comfort and luxury as a daughter and daughter-in-law. However, her visit to New York makes her conscious of her own beauty, own dreams and freedom. She tries to recreate herself with a new zest of life and makes efforts for the expansion of intellectual horizon. She gathers awareness of her sexual needs. In this renewed identity, she encounters Pramod. At the age of forty, she learns the art of swimming with steady determination. Her desire to stay afloat is perhaps not only learning the art of swimming but also breaking free of tradition and keeping her identity intact. All her decisions were taken with the desires of her husband and parents, including her pregnancy. Even the identical authority and reflections of discrimination adopted by Pramod haunted her consciousness "Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality?" She not only reconstructs herself and redefines her identity but also sets a direction for the identity of her daughter. She exhorts that it is only through self confidence and self awareness that a woman can reconstruct her identity:

Daughter show him you are incapable of doing anything beyond the periphery of your home and he will manage your life, from sending postal orders to balancing cheque books to booking railway tickets to managing household expenses. He will pet you and sure you at first, for after all you are appealing to the male in him to protect and have safeguard. But it will be only a matter of days before he turns into a tyrant who will want, to control you, every thought. (188)

Akhila is impressed by the confidence and renewed interest of Prabha Devi. She thought, "she hated the most was not having an identity of her own. She was always an extension of someone else's identity. Chandra's daughter, Narayan's Akka....Akhila weighed for once someone would see her as a whole being" (200). She finds that the laws of society are not eternal. All the members of her family have fears of the social conventions, the happiness of other without acknowledging his individuality and womanhood. She interrogates, "Did anyone of you think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do?" (201).

Akhila realises that in order to go beyond self, she has to resist the authority of traditions and social images. It is not a question of being single or married but a question of her own selfhood. She comes to the realization, "If Prabha Devi could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float, she could do the same....I must learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks" (208). Swayed by these notions, the appearance of the sixth woman Mariakonthu, strengthens her will and confidence. She asserts: "I am 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" (210).

The life of Mariakonthu was a witness to the fact how life can take its fall and how cruel the world can be to a woman. As a child she became a victim of rape at the hands of one of the Chettiar family. It is her widowed mother who seeks a job in Chettiar 'Kottai' who finds a place for her as the caretaker of the grandson of Chettiar. Mariakonthu is infatuated by the patronizing attitude of Sujata Akka. She was warned by Akka not to be so free and unaware. Sujata Akka warns, "because you are a woman and a good woman is one who safeguards her virtues" (225). As soon as she gains maturity, the hungry looks of Chettiar males start capturing her. Having a realization of the horror of the situation, Sujata Akka sends her to other town to work for other women. Dressed in the finery that Sujata Akka has given her on the occasion of the Pongal and

amidst all celebrations, she is dragged to a lonely corner and brutally raped by Murugesan, the brother-in-law of Chettiar's elder son. She turns for solace to Sujata Akka, who is unable to help her and Mariakonthu gives birth to a male child. Things changed a lot in her life. She takes the job of caring mother of Sujata Akka. She has no feelings and lives her life through a haze all the time avoiding meeting her son growing up in her home. After lots of trials and tribulations, she discovers that she has got a tumour in her uterus which has to be operated upon and it will cost her five thousand rupees. Mariakonthu sells her son to loom factory for a sum of rupees five thousand, the loom merchant is none other than Murugesan, the father of her son. It is only after the death of Murugesan that her thwarted motherhood blooms and she decides to collect money in order to buy her son back. Mariakonthu's story makes Akhila aware of the apathy of life.

Akhila ultimately comes to the realization that she has equal right to assert her femininity, her desires of womanhood beyond traditional guilt and shame. She gathers strength to assert her choice. Akhila learns to control her emotion and get the realization of the hidden primal strength inherent in every woman to assert her desires. She is encouraged to ring Hari to get rid of the oddities of life. She was to reconstruct her life at her own accord beyond the compulsions of familial relations, gender constructions and professional weaknesses. She gets an awakening: "I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about it. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered" (270).

Through this wonderful spectrum of female experiences as related by her co-passengers in the ladies coupe, Akhila finds the strength to emerge from the prison of her old self. Nothing will have changed when she returns superficially but she has evolved clearly on a mental level. She discovers power within herself and is no longer swamped by thoughts of what life is going to be. She has thrown off her inhibitions in the ladies coupe where five women shared some of their life's intimate moments with her about their childhood, their husbands, their sons and lovers. Anita Nair is able to

convert the dilemma of her characters with a freshness and charm that makes her story more than just a feminist. It is an insight into the expectation of Indian women, the choices they make and the choices made for them. It is accepted: "...no woman wants to be dominated. The most important need is to live---from the moment of our birth, we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this stray world" [Deshpande 137].

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