

Suppression and Subjugation of Women in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

Km.Rashmi

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Dept. Of English, Chaudhary Charan Singh University Campus Meerut U.P.

Abstract - Anita Nair is a prolific Indian writer. She is one of the finest women writers in Indian writing in English. As a woman writer, she has a deep knowledge of women psyche. She goes into depth, in their psychological mind and brings to light their issues. Though she has refused to be labelled as a feminist. But when we go through the story of her bestselling novel Ladies Coupe, we find that it's a tale of women's suppression and subjugation in patriarchal society. It's a story-telling of six women characters and their experiences in a male-dominated society. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, who takes a train journey, meets five different women characters-Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanthi, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu. On their way they all share their life experiences with each other. Ladies Coupe is a story of women's search for independence and self-identity. The aim of the present paper is to show the subjugation of women character in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe. And at the same time it raises a question whether a woman can live happily without a man?

keywords - Self-identity, freedom, sub-alternity, submission of women.

Women in every age and religion are mostly regarded as marginalised, suppressed, submissive, emotional, frightened, and the deprived section of society. There are various aspects of woman discrimination and suppression, set by a particular group of male-dominated society. Women are always dominated by males in patriarchal society. In most settled societies of the world, women have experienced discrimination and biasness in every stage of life. They struggle for their rights and freedom from societal norms and want to establish their own identity. In 20th century feminist writers' like- Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Tara Sheghal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukerjee and so many others have shown a new dimension of women's search for freedom and self-identity in their works. Anita Nair, a post modern feminist writer depicts a true picture of women psyche in her works. Her most of the novels are female centred. And in her works she brings out female issues like-discrimination biasness, self-identity struggle for freedom etc.

Anita Nair is one of India's prominent female writers. She is best known for her novels and short-stories. She has also edited an anthology of writings titled "Where the Rain is born", which is about her birthplace Kerala. As a novelist she has gained eminent popularity with the publication of her bestselling novel Ladies Coupe (2001), which was rated as one of 2002's top five books of the year and was translated in various languages across the world. Nair has also written some other popular books like Mistress (2003), The Better Man (2005), The Skating Squirrel (2006), Living Next door to Alise (2007) and The Magical Indian Myths (2008). She is recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in (2012) for her writings. She has been called the best story-teller by The Hindu Literary Supplement-

"Anita Nair is a fine writer with a great sense of character-----and an eye for telling details. She can move from tender compassion to sensuality to raging hatred-----A compelling teller of stories."

---Hindu Literary Supplement

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe follows the journey of six women, who share their experiences with each-other. In narrating their tales, Nair follows the method of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, in which a band of pilgrims on their way to the Shrine of St. Thomas A Beckett share their tales. Likewise in Ladies Coupe Nair describes six women characters in a railway compartment, each having a story to tell. Through their stories Nair shows a woman's struggle for freedom and self-identity.

The central character of the novel is Akhila or Akhileshwari, a forty-five year old brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power. After her father's death, Akhila bears the burden of her family. Her brothers and sisters got married but nobody gives a thought about her needs and aspirations.

"She was always an extension of someone's identity; daughter, sister, aunt-----Akhila wished for someone should see her as a whole being" (p. 201-202).

So playing various roles, she never got to be herself. Until she realised that she has got nothing from her life not even sweet memories to look back to. And one day she decides to do something, to go for a trip to Kanyakumari, where on her way she meets five different women, her fellow passengers, who were devastated in their life under the cruel rule of society. Though these women belong to different class and age group but all of them had one thing in common and that was they were the victims of society. Each person's life shows the very suppression, subjugation and submission of women in male-dominated society.

Janaki Prabhakar, an obedient daughter, a faithful wife, and a doting mother. She is someone who always protected by a man-

"First there was my father and brother, then my husband when my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting, to take off from where his father self off-our men treat us like princess" (p. 22-23).

Janaki, the oldest of six women in the coupe is one, who learnt to love the man she married. Janaki is a pampered wife treating as “a fragile creature” (p. 31) by her husband Prabhakar, who is nine year older to her, at the time of their marriage. She was just eighteen and he was twenty-seven year old. Janaki is a dutiful and caring mother, who loves her son a lot. But her whole life was suppressed under male dominance, either her husband or her son. On one moment she says to her husband-

“You want to control everybody; you want everyone to do your bidding” (p. 30).

The second tale to unfold is that of the youngest Sheela, a fourteen year old sensitive girl, who talks about the ill-treatment and the female abuse by men. Sheela was very close to her grandmother (Ammamma). Who was a practical woman always teaches her and advised her that all men are not good persons, so maintain a distance from them. One day when Sheela goes to her friend (Hasina)'s house, she felt ashamed and hurt by the unwanted touching of her father Nazar,

“One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip. Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time”. (p. 66)

And when once Nazar knotted the bows in her sleeves-

“She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother's eyes, shame wrapped itself around her. Sheela never wore that blouse again”. (p. 66)

After that Sheela decided that in future she will never visit Hasina's house. Amamma, her grandmother always teaches her male psychology, who dominates women mentally, psychologically and psychically. Through the character of Sheela Nair presents the abused behaviour of men and their ill-treatment against women.

The next story is of a successful chemistry teacher Margaret Shanthi wife of Ebenzer Paulraj vice-principal of a prestigious school. Margaret was a bright student, “A gold medallist in M.Sc. Chemistry” and next to want doctorate. But Paulraj forced her to pursue B.Ed. He says, “What is the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.ed, so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together”. (p. 105)

This is her first compromise, secondly, when she got the news of her pregnancy, Ebe (nickname given by Margaret) complex her to abort herself, saying that they are not yet settled. Every time she compromise to herself. Ebe says,

“Long hair doesn't suit you, cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob”. (p. 105)

Ebe is very insensitive, self-absorbed and indifferent towards Margaret. Though Margaret want to take revenge on him, she would like to divorce him. But doesn't to do so because she is afraid of society, but she used a very ingenious method to take revenge. She formulates a scheme to feed him oily food and make him a fall and dull person.

Parbha Devi, the next characters is one of six women passengers. She took birth in a rich family and has a very perfect childhood. Her mother filled with pride when Parbha Devi turned eighteen, because in all aspects she was just like her mother, a complete woman.

“In all other aspects, Parbha Devi turned out to be the kind of woman her mother had envisioned, she would be when she was born”. (p. -170)

She was everything that a girl ought to be. Soon she was married with Jagdesh, a diamond merchant. After fourteenth year of her marriage she realised that in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother, she forgets to be herself and that's when she learns to strike a balance between being what she want to be and what she expected to be.

Next and the last, but the most heart rending tale is that of Marikolanthu. She is thirty-one year old and born in a poor family in a little village called Palur near Kanchipuram. She is a widow lady and has a son. She works as a helper in a mission hospital. Nair describes Marikolanthu's character with a deep insight and shows a true life of an Indian woman in a male-dominated society. Marikolanthu, a victim of man's last and a mother of an illegitimate child, she has experienced poverty, rape, lesbianism and physical torture. Through her, Nair portrays a real picture of a deprived woman. After her father's death she worked at Chettair Kottari (a richest family) with her mother. Sujata Akka helped her but her husband gave sexual torture to Marikolanthu. So Sujata removed her from her household chores. But Marikolanthu was brutally raped by Murugesan, one of the relatives of Chettair family. Marikolanthu gave birth to a male child and before leaving for another town to work for two foreigners. She left her child in custody of her mother but after her mother's death, her brothers refused to take his custody and Marikalanthu to take away her son. But her unfortunate time does not stop here; she also had to remove her uterus which was damaged because of frequent pregnancies. She does not have enough money for the operation and was compelled to sell her son to Murugesan in five thousands rupees. But after the death of Murugesan she decides to collect money in order to buy her son back. Marikolanthu had seen it all from poverty to lesbianism. She is socially exploited, sexually abused and physically tortured all her life.

One night in the Ladies Coupe and after her interaction with five women helped to realise Akhila that she had given the society superfluous power of ruling her life. And then she decides to do something for herself. These women and their stories helped Akhila to find an answer to her biggest question- can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?

In Ladies Coupe Anita Nair has woven five different tales around it's protagonist Akhila. And through their tales she presents an Indian traditional woman's life style that is full of difficulties. In her works Nair shows man-woman relationship, women exploitation, struggles, physical and psychological problems and the very miserable condition of female in male-dominated society.

Though in one of her interview Nair says-

“I am not a feminist, I enjoy being in the house. I likely to be treated nicely and pampered. I don't think this book is about feminism. It's about the inner strength which I see in so many women that overwhelms me.”

(Bhel, Suchita: An Interview. The Hindu)

She clearly refused to be called as a feminist. But one thing is very clear from her works that she goes into depth of the inner mind of her characters and brings out their social issues like-gender problem, self-identity, freedom, sub-alternity and struggle for independence etc.

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe can be called a journey towards self-realization, a search for independence and identity of six women, who struggle for their true identity. Ladies Coupe portrays the sensibility of a woman and her suppression and subjugation in patriarchal society.

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