

## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MODERN FICTION: A STUDY OF *LADIES COUPE*

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### Abstract

*The contemporary Indian fictions speak volumes of the gender equality, rights of women, spread of education and the consequent awareness among women. However, it is penned down in a well-defined manner by the female writers. Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe depicts the conscious desire of Akhila to search for her identity against the mechanical life. Compelled by her impulses, she takes a defiant step to travel a long distance to take a pregnant pause for soul-searching. Apart from this, her novel gives a panoramic view of the contemporary society and gives a taste of diverse cultural and social backgrounds of a few other women stretched on a giant canvas of a ladies' compartment. This way, Akhila comes across the women who help her to overpower her inhibitions and take charge of her life in order to change the face of her destiny. Thereafter, analyzing her life, she emerges as a rebel by redefining her boundaries.*

*In a patriarchal society, women are made to submit their free will and transform themselves to meet the expectations of their family. Nevertheless, the protagonist here learns the art of self-expression and assertion. Desai has documented the ill treatment inflicted on the women and thereafter the ways devised by them to sail through it. The object of the present paper, thus, is to reveal the status of women and their survival strategies. It also brings to the light, their woes, like exploitation, suppression of desire and most importantly, the vulnerability of women in the life's hard knocks.*

Fictional narrative by women is a phenomenon that has faced many challenges and has been drawing attention of the critics and theorists particularly in India. The position of women has undergone tremendous change in the recent decades. Women, as a subject matter plays an important role in the Indian writing in English to represent any form of transformation in the society. Women's writing in particular has figured the woes of women and their resilience in a male-dominated world. Along with the socio-cultural developments in society, the approach of the writers have transformed and they concentrate on the representation of a wide variety of issues related to women and the society that has been significant in shaping up of the various images of women. Unlike the stereotyped image of women, i.e. submissive, victimized, fecund and muted by patriarchy, contemporary women are educated and progressive; they are aware of their exploitation and thus, have become conscious of their rights, identity and role in society. However, society is still not devoid of such conventional norms that act as a trap to woman's individuality and leave her with no choices whether she is married or not. Subsequently, the woman either emerges as a rebel or is thoroughly defeated for mere survival.

Women writers instinctively realize that the changing status of women has only fanned the possibility of conflicts in the families; and resistance is the only panacea. The archetypal image of women portrayed in the contemporary novels has consciously and smoothly shifted from 'invisible' to 'visible'. The writers' urge to express women empowerment triggered by the influence of other women and resistance to the patriarchy in the fictional form carry a didactic motive. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is a paradigm of women empowerment. It strongly depicts how a self-respecting and self-sacrificing woman Akhila, turns into a rebel in a patriarchal society. The realization of injustice inflicted upon her makes her feel isolated. She is the victim of gender discrimination and exploitation. Thus, it raises her voice to assert her identity, to liberate herself from the fetters of the opportunistic and egocentric family.

Another predominant aspect is denial of womanhood, in Akhila's case, by other women who are none other than her own mother and sister. None of them looked at her as a woman, disregarded her desires and moreover, considered her as the 'man' of the family. Later, after the death of her mother, Padma shifted to live with her sister Akhila as she believed that a single woman should not be left alone without even realizing that she wanted to live alone. For years, her sacrifice was never acknowledged and she quietly bore the twinge to become the 'man' until she decided to withdraw herself and set out to travel to Kanyakumari in search of answers to many questions that puzzled her. The insensitive and egocentric image of these women at the time of crisis plays a significant role in inciting hatred in Akhila. Gradually, she becomes unresponsive and seeks reclusion. This reflects the female consciousness and the justifiable transformation in woman from being voiceless and docile to vocal and assertive.

The novel also deals with various other images of women. In Indian society the women are so dependent on men that they become sufferers and incapacitated in the deceitful world and end up compromising. Shanti, who is survived by two daughters after the demise of her husband, faces economic hardships and being unable to cope up with the appalling circumstances, ends up forcing her daughter to prostitution. She did not have a grown up and educated daughter like Akhila to replace the earning male member of the family. Thus, she is unprotected and exposed to the perpetual darkness until hell freezes over.

Anita Nair has consciously portrayed the existence of the women as individuals through varied experiences shared by five women who happen to be the co-passengers of Akhila. Breaking the tradition, redefining identity and realization of the self is common in the contemporary women characters like Janki, Margaret, Sheela, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu of *Ladies Coupe*. Janaki got married at an early age. She was pampered by her husband but was in some way dispirited and pretends to be contented. She grew up learning to accept life as it comes but always felt unsettled. The responsibilities of a wife and her husband's control over her life irritated her. Janaki therefore is disgusted by the thought of her dependence on her husband and son and retaliates in front of her son while seeking solace by her husband's side. Thus, she learns to value the man-woman relationship. As Beena Agarwal states, "Nair admits that social conventions and their strong hold on consciousness makes a woman weak and helpless. It is through Janaki that Anita Nair expresses her own contempt for the traditional identity of women." In the male-dominated world, a woman like Janaki is perceived to be a feeble and indistinct creature, whose survival is difficult by herself but she is no longer willing to live a life of subjugation which is assertively expressed in the novel.

Janaki's life reminds Akhila of her docile and submissive mother who spent her life happily under the control of her husband. Her Amma's life changed entirely after the death of her Appa as she believed that the survival of a widow in a society is possible only by living up to its expectations. Akhila could visualize her future in

her mother's image. On the other hand, Nair has drawn the sketch of a young character Sheela who rejected the conventional ways of society by applying cosmetic to her widow grandmother's dead body despite her parents' disapproval. In Sheela, Akhila finds her own reflection and remembers when she too despised the dress of widowhood and had protested against the orthodox norms set by the society for the widows. Thereafter, she realized what it is to be a woman.

Nair delves deeply into the plights of domesticated women. She examines the tortures and torments inflicted on the female psyche by the crippling forces around her. Nair justifies it by holding man responsible for a woman's streak of retaliation, as represented in the case of Margaret who fiercely encounters emotional crisis and impending emptiness after getting married to Paulraj. Margaret called herself water as it is a universal solvent that can easily be destroyed. Her life was dictated by Paulraj in every aspect and she was forced to terminate her first child. In such circumstances she developed a contemptuous feeling for Paulraj and felt suffocated in the hostile environment; thereafter she tried to overpower his domination by taking revenge in a subtle manner through his craving for food. In the end, Margaret liberates herself from the shackles of her husband's control over her desires. Margaret's disclosure about the agonies of her personal life made Akhila realize her existence as an individual and her right to take decisions. Akhila's chance meeting with another aspect of man-woman relationship makes her aware of the fact that dependence on man leads to subjugation of a woman.

While adequately reflecting the lives of different women, Nair significantly throws light on yet another dimension of women's struggle in the man-made world, i.e. identity crisis. Prabha Devi, a woman in her forties tries to break away from the grip of conventional norms simply by fulfilling her desire to stay afloat and overpower her inhibitions. She has a confident bearing, is conscious of how beautiful and desirable she is and feels fortunate to be herself. Just like Akhila, she too is locked within the traps of identity crisis. She was never allowed by her family to take decisions for herself, not even about her pregnancy, and contemplates, "Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality?" (180) Prabha Devi's narration about how she conquered life reinforced Akhila's will to recreate her new identity. Akhila too interrogates, "Did anyone of you think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do" (206).

Akhila, through her endurance and passive suffering learnt the true meaning of her existence in the male chauvinistic world. The company of these women in ladies coupe not only enlightened her soul but also awakened it to the core. Later, she mused, "If Prabha Devi could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to afloat, she could do the same...I must learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks" (206).

The last co-passenger Mariakondu who belonged to a poor family, is a victim of child-abuse, and was always deprived of the protected and pampered life. She had so much to learn from her appalling circumstances and unlike Prabha Devi, she had to take all the decisions alone in her life with nobody to bother about the consequences. As a child she was raped by one of the relatives of the Chettiar family while she was taking care of the grandson of the Chettiar. The child's mother Sujata Akka too was helpless, as a result of which she gave birth to a male child and was eventually deserted at the hands of destiny. This woman had shown Akhila the cruelties of society to which she belonged and had offered her a precious source of motivation i.e. her lessons from her experiences. Akhila could never forget what she said, "I am 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).

To cut the story short, we can say that Nair's novel thus offers a vivid panorama of women's struggle against the destructive social threats. Through these images it is justified that suppression and exploitation of women leads to disintegration of personality. Akhila's life is thus, on one hand, surrounded by women who inflicted pain on her and on the other hand women who inspired and enlightened her. Hence, unlike such women, Akhila urges to emancipate herself from the reproaches of her family by refusing to be mere extension of someone else's identity; and her desire to carve a new identity gives a new dimension to her life and eventually she emerges as a new woman.

#### **Works Cited**

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