

# Depiction of Women in Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe'

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## Abstract

"Beauty in woman is that potent alchemy which transforms men into asses"-Abraham Miller

Anita Nair considered as "Microcosm of the female world", is a modern English writer in India.

'Ladies coupe' is one such beautiful novel deals with women's quest for strength and independence. It was published in the year 2001 which tries to expel how a silver fish struggles to escape from a Fisher man's basket. Nair uses the flash back technique in this novel in order to realize her objective of presenting a vivid picture of the protagonist's mind and the interactions with the other characters. Through this novel 'Ladies coupe' she encompasses psychological issues concerned with female characters in an Indian society. She also discusses widespread apathy among the maids and myriad problems of modern life. This completely portrays the nature of male dominating society where women plays the role of puppets perfectly. The critical perspectives used for this study is a sort of images of women where the writer presented and the way these images serve the feminist ends. It mainly exhibits inner personality of women in an Indian society. It also brings out the distinction between the roles of modern women and traditional women. In the mean time, Nair also voices her objection to male chauvinism as well as women's irresponsible behaviour which give rise to disastrous consequences. This particular study tries to convey that women are not a weaker sex until or unless they realize their own strengths in their veins and the present scenario of an Indian women in the society.

**Keywords:** Male Chauvinism, Objectification, self-identity, Self - discovery

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Beauty in woman is that potent alchemy which transforms men into asses"

-Abraham Miller

Literature has been a reflection of the human society over centuries. It has been the most powerful medium of provoking emotions and thoughts. Literature in India has flourished after Independence. Women novelist try to transmit their

experiences through their writings. They Potray their characters as human beings who also feel a longing for their own space and their worth as an individual. They also depict the sores in their souls and their agonies as an individual.

## 2. ANITA NAIR

Anita Nair, considered as "Microcosm of the female world", is a modern English writer in India. Her novels and short stories have won acclaim world wide. Most of her works encompass psychological issues concerned with female characters in Indian society. She delineates her female characters in adverse predicaments. The widespread apathy among the maids and myriad problems of modern life is also crucial to this study. AnitaNair's 'LadiesCoupe' is free from male - female dichotomy and it is the story of ladies who as human beings want to realize what they really require.

## 3. LADIES COUPE

'Ladies coupe' is one such beautiful novel deals with women's quest for strength and independence. It was published in the year 2001 which tries to expel how a silver fish struggles to escape from a Fisher man's basket. This novel has been translated into more than twenty five languages. The story of the novel is set in a railway compartment specially meant for ladies. Six ladies travelling in the coupe narrate their stories and share their secrets lying deep in their hearts. The train journey passes through various tunnels and wild vegetation, unfolds a backward journey helps them to understand the major bruises and injuries experienced by them.

## Nair's flash back technique in 'Ladies Coupe'

Flashback is a writer's technique in which the author interrupts the plot of the story to create an incident of an earlier time. Nair uses this technique in this novel 'Ladies Coupe'. This technique has been used in the novel in order to realize her objective of presenting a vivid picture of the protagonist's mind and the interactions with the other characters. The main

narrator is the third person and she is a middle aged spinster, Akhilandeshwari. She is the narrator protagonist and in her lies the central consciousness of the novel. It enables the narrator to explain her own perception on men and matters in a objective way. As the narrator narrates the story, there is an oscillation between the present and the past. The narration moves forward and backward in time and space. All the characters in the novel have come across the same experience that has taken place in the three periods of time : the past, the present and the future.

#### 4. JOURNEY THROUGH SELF DISCOVERY

An Indian woman normally goes through life with marriage and children as a necessary corollary. Marriage is a social institution in which live according to conventional life. Most Marriages are successful only because of the women. In certain aspects women are treated as angels and goddesses. In other aspects, women are predictable to be slaves, who are prepared to work for a man and his pay back and comfort. It is beautifully portrayed by Nair in this novel '*Ladies coupe*'.

Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila is the nerve centre of the novel. She is the only spinster who sacrificed her whole life for the sake of the family. Later she became the sole prop and pillar of the family. Akhila always cares for others but nobody cares for her. She is like the proverbial ladder which lifts others, itself remaining stationary. But occasionally, Akhila repressed instincts seethe and splutter. Akhila is slightly different. She is basically noble - soul but occasionally loses self control.

The novel brings into focus yet another important factor. At one point in the novel, Akhila's mother says:

"There is no such thing as equal in 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 one's 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 this about two equals in a marriage?

(*Ladies Coupe*, 136)"

Men and women are complementary to each other. But, even in this modern era, women are considered not as equal to men but as the weaker class. They undergo suppression in a male dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of the society.

#### 5. WOMEN ARE PUPPETS IN THE HANDS OF MEN:

Margaret Shanthi is yet another fellow traveller in this novel. She used to dress fashionably according to modern trend. She is working as a chemistry teacher where her husband is working as a Principal in a prestigious school. She wishes to do her doctorate but her husband is not ready to move further.

Most of her life ends up with compromise. She is forced by her husband to abort her child with great unwillingness. This completely portrays the nature of male dominating society where women play the role of puppets perfectly. Men simply think that women are made of attractive flesh and strengthened bones.

#### 6. MEN AND WOMEN RELATIONSHIP

In an independent nation, both men and women meant to be equal but actually they are not. Women are suppressive where men are aggressive in nature always. Men drags women to fulfill all their desires including sex. These features are wonderfully portrayed by the female character Janaki Prabhakar.

Janaki Prabhakar, another fellow passenger of *Ladies Coupe* is an example of age old belief of Indian society that a woman should always depend on some man in her life. Janaki and Prabhakar are harmonious. Their activities are like the movement of ballet dancers, synchronizing each other. If he cuts vegetables, she cooks. If he washes dishes, she stacks them. They used to share but never spared in their works.

Sex is a divine thing where both of their mutual needs are fulfill. In the case of Janaki, it is quite different. For instance in this novel, when her husband tries to caressing her in their first night, she is repelled. There it shows she is not ready for attaining sex but she is ready to fulfill her husband's sexual desires. The main reason is, she had a thought if she did not meet his needs, he would go to some other women. So, she faked responding joyfully. She 'opened her arms and parted her legs', though in a mechanical manner. Soon fakery was replaced by genuine pleasure in 'rituals of togetherness'. Thus the relationship between Janaki and Prabhakar, purged all of sexuality, grows serene and thick.

#### 7. A WOMEN-MAJOR SUBJECT IN THE SOCIETY:

Sheela, the next narrator of '*Ladies Coupe*', is a sensitive girl of fourteen year old, blessed with a deep insight. She looks at the family around her and relationship between her grandmother, mother and father and she understands the dynamics of life. Her grandmother teaches her practical life. She becomes attached to her grandmother until she dies and the attachment brings in a maturity to Sheela. Her conversation with other fellow travellers seems to be a matured one. The knowledge of three generation women can be found in Sheela; her mother's and her grandmother's and also her own. She knows that:

"Women turn to their mother 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" (*Ladies Coupe* 71).

Sheela's grandmother also teaches her the harmful picture of men who lead women bodily as well as sensitively. Sheela

is scolded by her father ceaselessly for using shit in every sentence, for speaking to boys and for being impolite. He has encouraged her to speak “with a razor-edged wit and a finely developed skill of repartee”

(*Ladies Coupe* 70). Sheela’s father always gives preference to her as his child. However, when she starts to talk like a grown up woman, he is completely changed and starts to control her whenever she begins to talk. When her grandmother dies of cancer and her body is prepared for funeral, Sheela dresses her grandmother in a good costume with her jewels. She does it 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”(Ladies Coupe 67).

Thus, Sheela fulfills the wish of her grandmother by tender her dead body with jewels. A fourteen year old girl’s internal search and adulthood are beautifully pictured by Anita Nair.

## 8. GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

Through the character of Prabha Devi, Anita Nair hints at the gender bias which begins from the cradle. The news of the birth of Prabha is denounced by her father in the following words :

“Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans added your brains as well ? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (*Ladies Coupe* 169)

As a child she is confident to play games suitable for a girl and as she grows up is groomed to be the perfect wife and home-maker. However, as she grows up finds life very tedious and refuses to define life in a mechanical way. Acknowledging her own weakness and nervousness, she decides to flow along with the tide rather than being thrown away on the banks. Every Indian parent is more concerned about the male child when compared to the female child and every home has different rules for them.

The character of Prabha Devi is used to pronounce the distinction made between children of different genders. Although Prabha Devi’s father is unhappy at her birth, her mother appears rather happy. For her, a daughter is a person who would continue living the language, opinion and conduct of the mother, even after she is gone. She is happy that there is someone to wear her jewellery and take her recipes to the other house. Prabha’s mother loved her and favored her company to that of all her four sons. In spite of all this distress and love for the daughter, she also realizes that a woman is not supposed to voice her concern or opinion. “She had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell, to be shunned” (*Ladies Coupe* 170).

Prabha Devi is an proficient woman “whose embroidery was done with stitches so fine that you could barely see them,” whose “ideas were light and soft,” and who “walked with

small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant, womanly” (*Ladies Coupe* 170). After her marriage with Jagdeesh, who owns a jewellery shop, she acts as a conventional wife.

For a brief period, she turns into a arrogant and teasing woman, but reverts back to her family with a difference in attitude. Using a swim suit and indulging in swimming gives her a sense of freedom and identity as wife and mother. Prabha Devi is presented as a woman with her share of virtue and vices, but Anita Nair shows great respect towards this individuality.

## 9. MARIKOLANTHU: AN INNOCENT PREY

Maraikolanthu was a silent observer of the stories of four women. She was the most pathetic and an innocent character in this novel. Her innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. She was born into a poor family and her mother Kanagamaram has been working in chettiyar’s house after her father’s death. She attains puberty and is raped by Chettiyar’s nephew, Murugesan. She becomes pregnant and is abandoned by him. Next ,she falls prey to the approaches of her lesbian mistress, Sujata and her sensual husband Sridhar. She becomes pregnant for the second time. Murugesan dies. Marikolanthu’s illegitimate son Muthu unknowingly participates in the funeral rites.

Here Anita Nair voices her objection to male chauvinism as well as women’s irresponsible behaviour which give rise to disastrous consequences. She also stubbornly supports the notion ‘instinctually starved women become perverts’ through the character Maraikolanthu.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Thus the paper tries to convey that women are not a weaker sex or a pitiable victims until or unless they realize their strengths in their veins. Through the five different characters like Akhila, Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Shanthi and Marikolanthu, Nair vividly picturizes the women’s wretched conditions in the Society. Their conversations with one another throw lights on inclinations and idiosyncrasies.

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