

## Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*: A Journey Towards Self-Discovery

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**Abstract.** The post independence period attained a certain maturity in delineating socio- psychological problems of women showing a steady development from modernism to post- modernism. The new opportunities for education and employment, the emergence of new socio-economic patterns and the privileges of new and equal political rights for women are slowly changing the traditional conception of role and the status of women in contemporary society. The contemporary women writers turned upon the literary scene competing with their men counterparts in writing fiction in English. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001) is a completely gynocentric text. It deals with the Brahmin heroine, Akhilendeshwari. She is a 45 yrs old spinster daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family after her father's death. In this novel, Nair narrates the stories of six women who are travelling together in a ladies coupe of a train, each having a story to tell. The novel questions the status of women in a traditional bound social order that sees women exclusively in the role of an obedient daughter, a docile wife and a breeder of children. The journey in the novel ultimately makes them conscious of their self identity and dignity. This paper is an attempt to bring into focus the female self-discovery through various women characters in the novel.

**Keywords :** Modernism; post-modernism; gynocentric; self- identity; dignity; female self discovery; self-expression; assertion; emancipation.

I am too intelligent, too demanding and too resourceful for anyone to be able to take charge of me entirely. No one knows me or loves me completely. I have only myself. (96)

(Beauvoir, Simone De 1988 : 51)

The work of Indian women writers is significant in making the society aware of the women's needs and demands in providing a medium for self-expression and assertion. Traditionally, the work of Indian women has been underrated and devalued on mere assumption about the superior worth of the male. Majority of the contemporary Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and many more have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. Their works are significant in making the society aware of the women's needs and demands in providing a medium for self expression and assertion. Anita Nair is one of the eminent women novelists in contemporary

India; she has earned honour for her originality, propensity and for her societal dedication. She presents women characters in her novels with full of enormous courage. As an Indian woman she perfectly understood the societal-cultural problems of women. Anita Nair in her novels focuses only on the marginal section of society. Her characters revolt against the social set up of society. They manipulate and negotiate for propagating the middle class values. During the course of this journey, a subtle cultural transformation has been captured.

Self, the result of human's awareness of the individual as a separate entity in the social environment, enables humans to regard their emotional experience and their own integrity and identity in relation to their past, present and future. In the novel, Nair uses a special technique that weaves the past, present, and future of Akhila that reconstructs the socio-cultural values from a woman's viewpoint. Akhila recollects her past, listens to others and moulds her future. She goes through the experience of all ladies in the coupe. In the intimate atmosphere of the ladies coupe which she shares with five other women, Akhila gets to know her fellow travellers. The novel opens with "a sense of escape" for Akhila, an escape from the inevitability of her life which demands her to do "what is expected of her". (Nair 2009:1) Akhila has no life of her own except the one prescribed by her family and/or expected of her by the society. She can dream of her wishes but cannot translate them into reality, as it will subvert her role of an unmarried, independent woman, who is in charge of her family. Though dutiful and the eldest, she is not allowed to think of her own. Her dreams and desires always take a back seat when it comes to her family.

Akhilendeshwari is a protagonist and narrator in the novel. She is unmarried but at the age of 45 she becomes aggravated as "Dreaming for escape and space. Hungry for life and experience". (2) So she decides to go on a long trip by train in search of such an unrivalled question which obsessed her throughout her life, "Can a woman live by herself". (1) This one question troubled her all life. Anita Myles in her *Feminism and the Post Modern Indian Women Novelists in English* clearly stated that "Anita Nair refers to the avatar of the Devi Akhilendeshwari to insist on the many-headed but unitary subjectivity of women". (128) She joins other women travellers in the ladies coupé – Prabha Devi, Janki Devi, Margaret Shanti, fourteen-year-old Sheela, and Marikolanthu, all are of different age group and come from diverse economical, cultural, social environment but somehow all have been denied their natural self to grow. In the intimate atmosphere of ladies coupé, Akhila listens to their stories and shares her own with them. She is drawn into the most private moments of their lives, seeking in them a solution to the question that has been with her all her life – can a woman stay single and be happy, or does she need a man to make her complete? When she tosses the question to them, the wisest answer comes from Margaret Shanti. She

says, "You should trust your instincts... You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that". ( 21)

N. Kalamani in his essay. *The Fusing Horizons* treasures Nair an acclaimed writer as:

Anita Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they cannot avoid. She portrays women as not totally cut off from familial social ties but women who remain with those orbits, protest against injustice and humiliation.

(Kalamani 2008 : 146)

As an acclaimed writer, Anita Nair makes it explicable that her intention of writing novels is to give emphasis on the depressed situation of women in Indian society. She is very much anxious about the exploitation of women by the male members which encourages her to write for the exploited. Her novels contribute immensely to the construction of the female self. Her novels espouse and voice the need of emancipation and education of Indian women and hence the reformist objective is fore-grounded in her novels.

In *Ladies Coupe* each of the six women characters possesses some fine qualities and inner strength which even they are unaware of. Through the example of six women characters Anita Nair tries to demonstrate what women should do for their liberation and how our society can become conscious about them. The second character Margaret Shanti is a victim of male domination. Her husband Ebenger Paulraj tried to control her body, mind and spirit and never gave a space of her own. She is portrayed as a well-educated lady and a gold medalist in Chemistry but still dominated by her husband, Ebenzer Paulraj who is a school Principal, gives first importance to her career rather than her desires. He never tries to respond to her feelings. Margret wants to do doctorate but he always compels her to become a teacher. He tells her to cut her long hair because it doesn't suit her. As a good wife she always obeys her husband but a deep burst of storm comes in her life when she conceives and her husband tells her to abort their first baby as revealed by her, "He dismissed me as someone of no significance". (Nair 2009:96) Margaret chose flattery as weapon to bring down Ebe's self esteem, she decided to avenge the self absorbed narcissist husband by making him fat and less arrogant through the food she fed. The one thing she tells to Akhila becomes the crux of the novel:

You 'll discover that once you stop worrying what the world will think of you, your life will become

that much easier to live. Just remember that you have to look out for yourself. No one else will. (136)

The next striking character is Prabha Devi. Anita Nair strikes at the gender discrimination which begins from the cradle. She is brought up to become a good bride, the perfect wife and home maker. When she turned forty, she started feeling emptiness in her life and decided to do something for herself to bring back excitement in life. She learned swimming without anyone's knowledge and help and this brought back her self-confidence. Janaki, the oldest of the six women in the Coupe, grows up in the traditional family of being groomed into an obedient daughter, a loyal wife and a doting mother. She has been looked after all her life by men :

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 left off. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat as like princess. (23)

She is someone who always had a man to protect her. Someone who was first protected by her father, then by brother, then by her husband and after him, it would be her son. She recognises the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother and the need to assert self-identity and freedom to live one's own life.

Anita Nair has not only brought out the need to assert the individuality of the female selfhood but has also finely brought out the issue of female child abuse through the character portrayal of Sheela, the youngest of six women characters. It was Hasina's father who tried to mess with her physically.

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

So Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her, but developed confidence to protect herself from it in future, for it is said, "Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home". (66)

Anita Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring an awareness to the society of women's demand and their need for self-expression. Karpagam is portrayed as a strong woman striving for self-definition in a patriarchal social

organisation. She asserts herself as a woman without any guilt. It is she, who plays a catalyst in Akhila's life and prepares her to look for a new dimension. She says to Akhila that she wears colourful clothes and jewelry though she is a widow. When Akhila asks how her family reacts, Karpagam says emphatically,

I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose...It has nothing to do with whether . . .her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some men who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive . . .(202)

Clara Nubile in her *Danger of Gender* stated that,

*Ladies Coupe* is a perfect example of contemporary women's identities and their conflictual relationship with tradition, male dominated society, gender discrimination and class and caste constraints. It is a novel in which fiction merges with reality and where female voices are authentic. (Nubil 2003 : 74)

The novel provides a deep insight into the lives of women in modern day India, illustrating their tough battle for an opening and the restrictions which are still exerted by tradition, religion and convention. In narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves from a state of submissiveness into a state of active presence. She brings them out from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. The stories together make a single story of women discovering their "female self". The coupe' becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterised by false binaries. Akhila consciously takes an action at the end of the novel, an action that aims to overcome the contradictions that are characterisation of the 'traditional world'.

Anita Nair gives an answer to the question whether a woman can survive alone by presenting an insight into the way women live in India. The novel remains an uplifting tale of womanhood, love and survival. It brings out the choices women make for themselves and choices made for them. The character of Akhila is symbolic of all those who are in quest for female self. Her experience teaches that a woman can survive and get her identity and space not by keeping herself isolated from male- dominated society, but by co- operating with them. *Ladies Coupe* serves a microcosm of female world and the train journey ultimately makes the women conscious of their self-discovery. The novel ends with a note of self-realisation revealed by Akhila and artistically portrayed by Nair in the following words:

And so it was Akhila. Elderly spinster. Older sister.  
Once the breadwinner of the family. Still the cash  
cow. But Akhila is certain that she won't let her  
family use her any more. Look at me, she would  
tell them. Look at me – I' m the woman you think,  
you know. I am the sister you have wondered about.  
There is more to this Akka. For within me is a  
woman I have discovered. (Nair :284)

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