
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN LADIES COUPE WOMEN AS BUILDERS OF THEIR OWN DESTINY- AHITA NAIR

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Abstract: In the modern world, women have been expressive of the condition of their kind in literature, art, songs, and play. Indian women novelists of the twenty-first century have attempted to add new dimensions to the life of women thereby uplifting them to their deserved status.

Many women writers have attempted to usher in a feminist era by their confessional writing during this century. Even previous to the increase of novels, it is supposed that several women writers have self-possessed songs, short stories and dramas. In the mid-nineteenth century women, novelists gave expression of their inner aspirations in the form of narrative tales belonging mostly to the oral tradition. With the passageway of time, their writings have witnessed numerous changes in the writing pattern. Women writers have attempted to bring in the recurring female experiences in their writings. They have also attempted to bring in a stylized pattern to the gender question in literature. Sensitization to women's issues has been attempted by women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee and Bharathi Mukherjee and young writers like Kiran Desai. They provide a psycho cultural overview of women.

Among the new generation of women writers is Anita Nair who, with her gifted style of writing, portrays the inner conflicts, anxieties and tragic sense of ineptness that women's psyches are made up of. The loss of womanhood and alienation of self are some of the themes that keep recurring in her novels.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Dilemma, Inadequacy, Protagonists, Monologue, Unworthiness, Surplus, Suspicious, Womanhood, Predicaments.

Introduction: A realistic purview of women's lot in the modern world is brought out with bold and breathtakingly fresh approach. Her women come to life in the canvas of her books bringing to life the nuances of existence, uncertainties and despairs that belong only to the world of women. Her novels attempt to unravel the inner landscape of her protagonists as they continue to lead seemingly ordinary lives. Her novels are post-structural documents dedicated to bring about a social cause. Her fiction seems to set out to question accepted norms of concepts pertaining to women. Nair's fiction discusses the identity of women laid in an Indian context as they are caught in the turbulent waters of cultural norms. Her characters make an attempt to break away from traditional, religious and social codes to regain a sense of control over their lives. Nair's perception of power relationship is specifically women-centred.

Anita Nair describes situations and events, where women are placed in predicaments that question their identity. While in the past men, have been depicted to be strong and independent, in Nair's novels women stand out as strong, independent and at times aggressive women. They are capable of expressing opinions strongly and demand attention or action very forcefully. They stand as strong characters capable of attacking men in the male-dominated society. They forcefully attempt to make men see their point of view and if that is not possible, they try to dilute the domination that they display by defying them.

In society which is patriarchal, women seem to be colonized by the dominant male counterparts. This ends up into an unequal society with women being subjugated by men thereby leading to injustice. In

the Indian tradition of the past women have always enjoyed a superior role as lawmakers, decision makers and as brave and fearless women of substance. Many stories depict women as strong and worthy partners of men who dominated the scene as policymakers. However, as days have gone by women seem to have lost this status of importance to one of degradation. Today she is presented as an epitome of patience and suffering with her voice silenced by patriarchy. Women who voice their opinions fearlessly are deemed brazen and brash. The picture is dismal in society as in literary texts. Modern society in India has provided women education and political rights. However, this freedom is curtailed by tying women up to the domestic front which casts a stronghold over women's lives despite the so-called liberation and freedom accorded to them. Women are forced to fend for themselves, assert themselves through self-reliance and introspective measures. Self -discovery of their pathetic status in life and intelligent steps are taken to rectify their lives forms their crux of Nair's novels.

Ladies Coupe is one such attempt to unravel the path the protagonist takes from bondage to freedom. Struggle for self-hood, search for identity, fight towards making peace with one's inner feelings forms the central theme of this novel which is a collection of narratives of women representing different rungs of society. In an almost Chaucerian style employed in the Canterbury Tales, Nair throws together women travellers in a *Ladies Coupe* brought together by destiny in a train travelling to Kanyakumari. The characters narrate their stories, each different from the other, each representing women from different walks of life and different emotional statuses.

Six women travelling in a *Ladies Coupe* in a train begin to narrate their life stories. The chief protagonist Akhilandeswari is the narrator of the story and uses each narrative and examines it to find answers to her own dilemma of existence, can their lives answer her questions of life. She is in seek out of potency, sustenance and freedom, which she is unable to find in her mundane existence. Her search for a meaningful life forces her to leave her home in a flurry of haste. Search for answers and for happiness encourages her to examine the lives of women who willingly narrate their tales to her. She would like to appear intently for answer to the questions her life has to be had before her. She becomes one with the other women in that she is unable to find a suitable solution to her meaningless life that threatens to overwhelm her.

The six different women narrate their stories and experiences using the tool of memory as they recall important moments of their life that have cast an indelible imprint on their minds. Each woman has a different story to tell based on her perceptions of identity and meaningful existence. Each is transformed into a protagonist of her own story which becomes an unravelling of past experiences and observations. The technique of interior monologue wherein the protagonist recounts her experiences becomes an important strategy employed by the writer. All the women seem to be at a plateau of their lives where meaning becomes unclear unless they resort to some action that finally brings peace and well-being. The chief of the protagonists is Akhila, whose story lends unity to the threads of all the other stories. Hers alone binds the diverse accounts of women caught up in important facets of their lives that seek meaningful denouements. She, the fellow traveller seeks answers from the variety of experiences brought forth by her fellow travellers in the *Ladies Coupe*.

The story of Akhila is one of sacrifice and responsibility thrust on her young shoulders by a twist of fate. The death of her father Pattabhi Iyer a clerk in the accounts department of the Income Tax casts an overwhelming shadow on her otherwise normal life. As fate may have it she turns out to be the one who has to step into his shoes as the sole breadwinner of the family as she is the "eldest" child of the family. The onus of taking care of her depressed mother who survives on her memories of her husband, her erstwhile lover, and her siblings who are too immature to fend for themselves. Her younger brother's education, sister's wedding and the needs of her family become her first priority in life as she assumes the job of clerk in the same office her father had taken up some time ago.

She became Akhilandeswari, the donner of multiple roles, a sister, a mother, a breadwinner, a provider, a father but fails to find a meaningful role for herself. She has to play myriads of roles ranging from eldest child to employee at the Income Tax office. She is no longer Akhilandeswari but "ammadi" or

"akka "or "madam". This feeling of a sense of loss of identity is what triggers a sense of doubt and loss of self-worth in Akhila. Despite her sacrificial role as provider for her family, she fails to garner respect as only male members of the patriarchal set-up of families could do so. Hence she remains a shadow, a person of non – entity whom people could sponge off without any qualms. She fails to remain the decision-making head of the family as her father but becomes a doormat whom all could use and throw. She lives in fear, doubt and sense of unworthiness unable to assert her interests even with her own mother who continues to control her likes and dislikes .she finds that even her siblings were entities who could become blocks in her life preventing her from finding meaningful existence.

The patriarchal system of society prevents her from becoming assertive or becoming the head of the family as the central figure as would a father or brother. Being a woman she fails to occupy the niche status of head of the family as their position is usually reserved for the male sex. This feeling of inadequacy leads to loss of identity in Akhila. This is when she begins her inward journey of introspection.

Despite being a dutiful daughter who is forced to meet the needs of her family Akhila finds herself unable to fulfil the requirements of her own needs. Her needs, her dreams and her future remain a faraway hope which she knows. None can help her reach, not even her family. Hence they remain quietly suppressed under the stiff facade of a strict spinster who means business, work and duty. While care is taken to marry off her brother and sister when the right time arrives, Akhila finds herself without a partner to share the remainder of her life as nobody cares to find one for her. Her marriage becomes a lost dream as even her own mother forgets about this landmark **event** in her life. Her sister gets married under her loving care and her brother affirmatively seeks his own partner, but none even think about her future. Hence she remains single, a forty-five-year-old spinster who has surplus her rose-tinted spectacles and put on eyeglasses with metal frames.

Akhila's family have always instilled her the fear that she could not survive to live alone in the world. Her mother, sister and brother constantly reminded her difficulties for woman to survive in a male-dominated world. She was denied the right of taking decisions on her own. Her mother too, convinced her that she being a woman was incapable of surviving alone and even if she did it would be hellish. This question of whether a woman could survive on her own plagues Akhila for a long time and finally results in her leaving her home in search of her future. Akhila realizes that her family was trying to sponge off her and hence even prevented her from getting married. Her sister Padma often accused her of doing things that she liked to do in the guise of obedience to societal norms. She with her children became a hindrance to Akhila's quest for happiness. Her suspicious nature whenever she tried to go away from the family got on the nerves of Akhila. She thus became a prisoner in her own house with every member of the family overriding her own actions with selfish motives of their own. According to Doris Thomas Akhila is dominated and exploited by her family without any sympathy.

This restricting situation in her life leads Akhila to yearn to break away from her family. She decided to run away to Kanyakumari, the farthest distance she can imagine in a bid to avoid the pathetic plight that she has been forced into. She needs to brood over her life and come to a decision about how she needs to find peace. Hence this last flight to a faraway place. This impulsive action is taken as a spur of the moment decision as Akhila feels she has reached the end of her tether. Her patience and her forbearance reach their peak and these are broken when she desperately needs to find a solution to her life that threatens to overwhelm her. The patriarchal set-up that she is placed in threatens to overwhelm her and hence she needs to cross cultural boundaries by undertaking a journey. She feels that a displacement in her life would help her seek answers to her dilemma. The chance meeting of a set of women in the coupe' adds to the reinforcement of her idea that she could find an answer to her problems.

A seat in the *Ladies Coupe* seems to have endless possibilities as it is here that Akhila could meet women from different walks of life. The word Coupe' itself signal the meaning of a classified region and seems to represent the restriction of women by Patriarchy. Women, especially Older ones are restricted by the strict regulations lay down by men and are forced to obey the rigid rules stipulated. Restricting women

from seeking happiness, from deciding the course of their lives, from deciding where to go, from deciding what is right for them and other restrictions that steal their happiness force women to bond. *The Ladies Coupe* is an example of female sisterhood or bonding that enables them to freely discuss problems that bag them down and force them into secondary status. Examples from their life's experience serve as a learning lesson to other women. Limitations each one has faced in her own backdrop of family and society serves as a rich and rewarding example of womankind to learn from mistakes made by others.

The women who travel in the coupe' are drawn from differing social and economic strata of society and belong to different age groups proving that women without discrimination of age, sex or social set-up are victims of patriarchal society. The women who travel with Akhila also suffer serious constrictions in their existence one way or the other. They are women who are subjected to various kinds of subjecting forces and limitations that prevent them from seeking meaningful existence. Social and familial relationships Become strong forces preventing them from living a free existence. They are expected to be pure, chaste, obedient, subservient and traditional: The very idea of them travelling in a separate compartment reserved for them itself is a blatant example of sexual discrimination. In an interview, Anita Nair proclaims that the idea of a special ladies line being clubbed with the handicapped and elderly citizens had disturbed her. She was aggravated by the "blatant inequality" perplexing her and had resulted in her writing a story about this kind of segregating women considering them to be the weaker sex who needed to be secluded. (Cafedill com).

The Novel is a Study of male Tyranny that subjugates women. All the five women who travel in the coupe are subjugated to patriarchal Domination. Akhila Janaki, Sheila, Margaret, Marikolatha and Prabha Devi are unhappy with their status as women living under dominating or doting husbands, Fathers, brothers and other Familial members. Even the fourteen-year-old Sheila faces the woman question of whether men are not trying to subjugate and exploit women for sexual favours. "Can a Woman live alone?" This is the question that had Akhila start off on a journey towards the unknown. She seeks solutions to her Query from her fellow passengers who are women different age groups, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. However, one common factor is that all of them are women first. All of them have faced discrimination, subjugation or have had their dreams thwarted under the patriarchal hegemony. Akhila poses the question to each of them, whether a woman spinster could live on her own. She had been told by her mother that a woman desires a man to complete her life.

The women in *Ladies Coupe* seems to be grappling with the issues of womanhood. They all attempt to establish their identity. Each of them tries to find an answer to Questions of self worth and identity. Each of them is in a Quest for identity. Every one of the protagonists succeed in trying to find some meaningful answer to their condition. They rise up and become stronger and dominant. Problems they face are overcome with determination as in the case of Margaret Shanthi and Prabha Devi. Janaki in a traditional set -up rises stronger as she articulates her dislike for being considered weak and helpless. Women like Sheila are able to be mature women despite their tender age.

They stand out as examples of young women who become victims of male lust and dominance. Marikolanthu represents women who are victims of male lust but rises out of misery owing to sheer determination to survive. Each of the women attempts to establish their identity in their respective lives. Akhila herself realises that every woman has her own set of experiences that cannot serve as an answer to another's problems. She had begun her journey under the surmise that she could get answers from examining other women's lives. She then realizes that by using other women's lives as how-to books she had been wrong. The problems of others was no way like her own and hence the solution lay in her hands. Finally, she realizes that she had to decide what she wanted in life. Akhila's decision to call Hari and renew her association with him is the right resolution for her as only that could lend her true happiness. Her story is an example how even docile, and timid women living in modern times can create their own destiny provided they follow their heart.

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