

**Vortex of Sufferings, Subjugation and Gender Proclivity: A Study of Anita Nair's Novel *Ladies Coupe***

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**Abstract**

*It is generally believed that an artist's mind is filled with glorious ideas and always keeps watching what is happening around. He possesses a penetrating insight into the reality of things and tries reflecting on his own way to better things around. An artist never remains unaffected by what he sees but, being the most sensitive soul, is possibly the first to feel the pulse of the moment. In Indian society, among other issues, the issues and problems of women faced by them in the male dominated setup need a voice. Anita Nair, besides others writers, is one of such devoted Indian writers of the present times who valiantly express her views on women's suffering in contemporary Indian society. This study is an attempt to deliberate on the theme of sufferings, subjugation of women and gender predilection in her novel Ladies Coupe. Nair's being an Indian woman herself and a witness to the experiences of women around her enabled her to perfectly understand the societal-cultural problems of women.*

**Keywords:** Artist, Indian society, Male dominated, Women's suffering, Anita Nair, Subjugation, Gender predilection

**Introduction**

Bangalore based author Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe*, (2001) depicts six women in a railway compartment, each having a story to tell. The novel by narrating the stories of six women, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, has turned out to be a great success. It is the story of a women's search for freedom and women's conditions in a male dominated society. The novel shows the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to cultural resistance, restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. *Ladies Coupe* traces the lives of six women as they travel in the ladies compartment.

It is about a train journey taken by the chief protagonist, Akhila to search within her strength for independence and answer to many questions that have disturbed her spinsterhood. In the ladies compartment she meets five other women- Janaki, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolunthu. As they are travelling, Akhila asks a question to them, "Can a woman live by herself?"[p21]. To answer her question, everybody starts narrating their own story. Through their stories, Nair has sympathetically explained the woman's agonies, endurance, sufferings, and aspirations. This novel is an attempt by the novelist to show how, in life, suppression and oppression of women come in unrecognizable forms under the guise of love and protection. "These women's life stories give an insight into expectations of married Indian women, the choices they make and the choices made for them." [The Punch]. The stories portray the sensibilities of a woman, how a woman looks at herself and her problems.

### **Discussion**

In the train Akhila receives a seat in 'Ladies coupe, a compartment specially reserved for the ladies passengers. In that coupe there are five other passengers. Akhila asks them about the condition of women in Indian society. They all enthusiastically tell their story to each other as they all are the strangers and never going to meet again. Besides, they all are the victims of Indian male dominated society. Mishra says that "Their backward journey helps them to understand the major bruises and injuries experienced by them in course of their life" (Mishra102). Akhila herself is the magnet for their stories. She has suddenly decided to take her life in her hands. Born in a middle class Brahmin family, at the age of 45, having achieved near anonymity working as a clerk in the income tax department she is single, her family's sole breadwinner, whom everyone takes for granted but without whom they would all be lost. Though Akhila has done her duties, all that of a head, just because she is a woman her mother, Amma expects her to get permission from her brothers to go on an office tour as she says, "Perhaps you should ask your brothers permission first". When Akhila argues that she is their elder sister and why she should seek their permission, to that she simply replies "you might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" is a sign of subjugation, patriarchy and gender-bigotry. The novelist tries to affirm that women are only biologically different from men but it doesn't mean that a woman should be subjugated and demoralized only on the basis of this difference. Ignoring completely her daughter's wishes time and again, the mother of Akhila gives dry and hackneyed lectures to her as to how she could be a good wife:

First of all, no good wife could serve two masters- the masters being her father and her husband. A good wife learnt to put her husband's interests before anyone else's,

even her father's. A good wife listened to her husband and did as he said. 'There is no such thing as an equal to marriage,' Amma said. 'It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to husband. That way there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one's situation in life and live accordingly (p14).

Akhila wished her mother should take music lesson as Karpagam's mother teaches dance, but she disapproves of it telling "I don't approve of what Karpagam's mother is doing" (p13). She reminds Akhila what her father has told her when they were first married. "I want my wife to take care of my children and me. I don't want her so caught up with her job that she has no time for the house or for taking care of my needs" (p14). Anita Nair gives emphasis on the depressed situation of women in Indian society. She is very much anxious about the subjugation of women by the male members which encourages her to write for the exploited. She is a powerful writer, who through this novel shows great understanding and compassion for women.

We come to know 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. From her childhood she had been taught that a husband is an equal to God and it is her duty to serve him "He is your husband and you must accept whatever he does" (p.25). She realizes that her life is not her own life as it's wholly dedicated to her husband and to her son. She says "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left". (p. 22-23). She is always snagged between home and society. Nair believes that women are not supposed to think about their own freedom they still feel themselves trapped under the chains which emotionally, physically and intellectually affect them.

Margaret Shanti, a gold medallist in Chemistry, is another example of how women are dominated and subjugated by male power. Her life goes through many physical, mental and spiritual crises. Margaret, a chemistry teacher once adored her husband and dry headmaster but grows to hate him later. She marries E. Paulraj an insensitive tyrant too self-absorbed to recognize her needs. He is the worst example of male chauvinism in the novel. When she gets pregnant he does not find any fault in suggesting her to abort her first baby and shamelessly wishes her best of the day as if she would be doing a good work. Shanti is cut to the quick by this and says:

"For the first time, I felt angry. All the best! What did he mean by that? Was I going to write an exam or recite a poem? Was I going to run a race or perform an experiment? All the best for what? I had nothing to do but lie there while they scraped my baby off the inside of my womb" (p. 109)

The crueler attitude of Paulraj is that he does not allow Margaret to apprise her pregnancy even to her parents. A woman with brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality, she is reduced to a silent spectator. Anita Nair through the example of Margaret's character reflects that not even an illiterate woman but also a well educated woman feels herself trapped in such a society. Their low social position can be seen in their homes where they are still treated like as an object to fulfil men's sexual desire.

Through the tale of the youngest of the six, Sheela fourteen years old we can gauge the cruel patriarchal forces. She feels embarrassed and hurt at the unwanted touching of her friend, Hasina's father Nazar as "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 finger". The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time". But Sheela is unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her. Even Sheela's friend Hasina and her mother are unable to voice their contempt for his attitude because they are helpless. Through Sheela, Nair has brought out the ill-treatment of women by men.

One feels dejected to know that Prabha Devi's birth comes as a bolt from the blue to her father as he thought it would be a hindrance for his business progress as he says "Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance" (p169). Only Prabha Devi's mother was pleased when she had a daughter. When Prabha Devi is eighteen years old, she is persuaded to marry Jagdeesh because he is "the only son and heir of a prosperous diamond merchant". Anita Nair tries to show that how people in India still treat women as inferior and how they get a substandard position in the society just because of their physical distinctiveness. Her husband Jagdeesh does not give his consent towards her pleading request of learning for swimming because he wants his wife to be submissive. He is a typical conservative man. Nair shows that women are now and then ground under the mill of greed patriarchy, subjugation and gender bigotry.

Marikolunthu is the most pathetic low-caste woman whose innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry women on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says "It's not just the money but now how can I send a young girl by herself.." (p.215) When she was young she was raped by Murugesan. The rape resulted in the birth of a child Mathu. She is a victim but everyone blames her. "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape" (p.245). Marikolunthu has experienced poverty, rape, and physical torture as she herself says "I was a restless spirit warped and bitter. Sometimes I would think of the past and I would feel a quickening in the vacuum that existed within me now" (p.266). Nair

makes a valiant approach to elevate her tone against the aggression, violence, oppression and exploitation of women. Nubile 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. (Nubile: p.74). The novel “questions the traditional bound social order”( Bhuvaneswari:2016) and through the stories, it brings out the miserable condition of Indian women who are always suppressed and oppressed.

### **Conclusion**

As a woman writer, Nair goes deep into the inner mind of the depressed and subjugated women and brings to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women’s psyche and emotional inequalities in a male dominated society. The novel highlights that the condition of Indian women living under oppressive patriarchal systems, is that they are restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. They suffering are heart rending. The novel takes reader into the heart of women’s life in contemporary India, revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships with husband, mothers, friends, employees and children shatter their own desires; deprive them of freedom and rights which in turn lead them to the absurdity of their existence. They are the victims of subjugation and gender predilection. Their sufferings remain unvoiced only because they are women and supposed to suffer silently and differently as “their suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love and protection”. Anita Nair shows that in such a world, especially in Indian society, woman’s role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs.

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