

UNIT- IV
Ladies Coupe
--Anita Nair

Anita Nair narrates the stories of six women who are travelling together in a Ladies Coupe of a train. In “Ladies Coupe”, Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies inequality in relationships. Her novel raises questions about the role of woman in contemporary postcolonial India. Nair’s India suffers from a system of sex role stereotyping and oppression of woman that exist under patriarchal social organization. The woman characters in the novel “Ladies Coupe” seems to be the personifications of new women who have been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions they have carried for ages. They go through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of the repressive forces of society but finally they revolted against the oppressions and resolved to discover them and establish them in society. As Flavia says The “Ladies Coupe’s story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love and protection. Mainly it depicts the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom.

Akhilandeswari alias Akhila forty-five, single and working as a clerk, has been brought up in a conservative family of Tamil Brahmins. Akhila bears the burden of her family after her father’s death. Her brothers and sisters grow up and get married and they hardly think about Akhila’s needs and aspirations. She has never been able to live a life of her own or passes an identity of her own. ‘She was always an extension of someone’s identity; daughter, sister, aunt.... Akhila wished for once someone should see her as a whole being’ (P.201-202). On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women – **Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu**. Though, they met for the first time they share their life’s experience with each other. Even though they differ in age, educational background and cultural upbringing, their stories have a common thread, the tragic predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal social order.

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” (P.22-23). She is a 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 recognizes 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.

The Youngest of the six is Sheela, fourteen-years-old who talks about the female child abuse by men. Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of 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 forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time” (P.66). When once Nazar knotted the bows in her sleeves, “She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother’s eyes” (P.66). After that Sheela took the right decision that “She would never go

to Hasina's house again" (P.66) as a means of her self-protection. Through this character, Nair has brought out the ill-treatment of women by men.

Margaret Shanti, another woman in the Ladies Coupe, is a successful chemistry teacher, embroiled in an unhappy marriage with Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of the school she works in. He is intensive, self-absorbed and indifferent towards his wife. Margaret would like to divorce him, but does not do so because she is afraid of society. Her way of taking revenge is to feed him oily food and make him a fall and dull person.

Prabha Devi is an accomplished 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' (P.170). After her marriage, her life swished past in the blur of insignificant days till one day a week after her fortieth birthday. When she realized that somewhere in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother. Prabha Devi forgets how it is to be herself and that's when she learns to strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be and a shufti of a swimming pool helps her realize the need for the balancing act.

The most heart-rending tale is that of Marikolunthu, thirty-one years old and an unwed mother who is a victim of a man's lust: her poverty forcing her to do things that violate traditional social, moral injunctions. Now, she is a mother to an illegitimate child. She has experienced poverty, rape, lesbianism and physical torture. "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).

One night in the Ladies Coupe and her interaction with the five women, helped Akhila to realize that she had given the society an unnecessary power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question- 'Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?'. Hence, she comes to conclude that she gets back in touch with the gay who she felt in love with, someone who she did not accept for the fear of the society.

Ladies Coupe 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. Women in post-colonial India boldly defy such delimiting roles and assert self-dignity and personal freedom. They are to pen their basic physical and emotional needs and acts un-inhabitingly to satisfy them. The train journey in fact symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make them conscious of their self-esteem and dignity. It is a journey towards self-discovery Akhila travels with the question that has been haunting all her adult life. She meets five women characters in the novel and travels with the same question. This wonderful atmosphere, delicious, warm 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.

Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe" brings into focus the issue of self-realization. Though Anita Nair is not a feminist, her stories portray the sensibilities of a woman, how a woman looks at herself and her problems. (*K. Bhuvanewari, Ashvamegh, V2 Aug 2016*). Throughout the novel we are continuously

made conscious of the women subjugation by the male figures directly or indirectly. Every character brings out the stories of victimization physically and psychologically. A woman is always treated low, thinking that they are incapable and cannot handle life without the help of men in family as well as society. This traditional ideology had been sowed in the mind which has made life of women depend on their companions unwillingly. The modern technologically and socially developed society failed to realize the women's role and this novel is a clear picture of it. The arrival of 21st century has not brought any noticeable changes as expected in the life of women. But the most optimistic aspect of the novel has been the ending, which tried to display the possible independence and freedom to women in future through the protagonist. (*credit: Samaikya K*). Discrimination towards women in India is going on for a long time. It wholly affects a woman's life. Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupe* attempts 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. Nair enforces women to have their own identity in the society where they live. Through these women characters she encourages women to raise their voice and express their feelings so that they would be able to make other people understand the value of their existence. On one side Nair explores women's agony and on the other side she suggests a number of ways to fight back against these agonies to make their life a fruitful and peaceful one. Her women characters are not weak; they are courageous and possess an impressive audacity and will power to fight back against social evils. Anita Nair's novels can be considered a microcosm of female world.