



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

30

Akhila's Journey to Explore 'Self' in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English. As a woman writer, she goes deep into the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and brings to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's psyche and emotional inequalities in a male dominated society. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* has turned out to be a great success. Her novel provides a realistic description of continuous efforts of women for the establishment of their identity in male dominated society. It is the story of a women's search for freedom and wish to live desired life. The novel raises the questions whether the role of an Indian woman as a representative of other women, living under oppressive patriarchal systems in relation to cultural resistance, should be restricted only to their roles as wives and mothers. In such a world, woman's role is limited to reproduction regardless of her own desires and needs. The present study was aimed on exclusive focus on Nair's major concern in her novel i.e., theme of agony and pain of women in the patriarchal society to explore self.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Akhila, Quest for identity, Resolution.



Now a days, image of women is painted on a wider canvas, namely fiction. Modern women novelists have chosen to explore the hitherto unknown sides of female experiences and female psyche. They try to explore problems ranging from disturbed behaviour to cold assertiveness, existentialist attitudes, and violent circumstances. Most postmodern Indian women novelists are interested in exploring the feminine consciousness of the women characters, their evolution towards an awakened conscience and how eventually this leads to enrichment of their inner self in a male dominated society. Female writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Desphande, Shobha De, Bharathi Mukherjee, Sudha Murty and some others have denied any sort of feminist bias in their writings but an in-depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issue pertains to be the chief concern of their plot.

Among the post-modern women writers, Anita Nair stands out as the most promising and prolific writers of the new generation of Indian women novelists in English. Her aim is to open a new dimension of space to allow women freedom of movement without diffidence or apprehension or complication through geographic and political spaces but more basically through cultural conceptual and imaginary spaces in this male dominated world. Far from taking a feminist concern, thereby fighting against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has taken a balanced view of life from a woman's point of view by bringing in all the feminine sensibilities.

Ladies Coupe is the story of a women's search for strength and independence and focuses on the inner strength inbuilt in every woman. It confirmed the promise that Nair had shown with her first novel 'A Better Man'. The subtitle of the novel is a novel in parts perhaps because the lives and experience of six women have been welded together by the writer into a consummate whole with the main protagonist Akhila as an attraction in the centre. The stories of the five passengers are interwoven into the story of Akhila.

In her novel *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair traces the journey of the protagonist, Akhilandeshwari (henceforward Akhila) from her bondage of family expectations to her freedom and self-discovery as she undertakes a literal journey away from home to Kanyakumari. What inspired her to go there was the legend of Kanyakumari,



“The goddess, like her, (who) had put her life on hold.”

(Ladies Coupe 3)

Akhila, knew how Swami Vivekananda had swum across to a rock in the sea here, in search of answers to his questions. Akhila, too was looking for an answer to her stagnant life, saddled with the family responsibility suddenly imposed on her after her father’s death.

The present paper analyzes the exploration of the psyche of female leading character in the novel. Akhila, the protagonist of the Ladies Coupé is a 45 yr old single women working as an Income tax officer. Born in a conservative Brahmin family Akhila was brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power and the people living in this society would never ever dare to rewrite its unfounded norms. From the beginning the novel portrays her as a martyr who sacrifices everything for the lives of others. After the death of her father she becomes the bread winner of the family. She never considers what she wishes to do and listen her own self. She is enmeshed in the responsibility of her mother and younger sister as well as of brothers, who happily get married, and enjoy their individual life with scant thought of their sister, who has grown up into spinsterhood. At this point Nair portrays Akhila’s desire to have her own settled life when her all siblings settled well. She thoughts,

“Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are man, can I start feeling like a woman again?”

(Ladies Coupe-77)

But none of the family members ever thought about what Akhila wants in her life. For them she is grown up into spinsterhood and only bread winner of the family. Even her mother is blissfully unaware of or deliberately blind to the need of getting her daughter married.

One day on her way to office, she meets a man on a train and falls in love with him. The passion in her catches fire when she meets Hari. She now experiences the flow of life, as she yields herself to the finger tinkering of Hari. He possesses a special sensitivity to fan the dying embers of love’s flame. He adores her and wants to get married to her. In spite of finding mutuality and happiness in this love, Akhila decides to give it up all. She refuses him because he is younger than her. She desires him but thinking of what society would say, afraid to break the stereotypical frame in which she has been enclosed. She lets the



relationship die away. She is sure that people will find fault and make fun of her and make Hari unhappy with his choice. Utterly lacking all confidence in her, Akhila leaves Hari rather than face, confront and answer the predictable verdict of the male gaze. She gives him up for her ungrateful family.

Akhila's life is governed by her brothers. She is advised to take any decision, only after consulting with her brothers. However, the irony lies wherein Akhila wants to go on two-day trip but her mother told her to ask for her brothers's permission as she is 'a woman and they are the man of the family'. She lives with her mother and after her death; though she wants to live alone she is forced by her brothers and sister to live with Padma. In fact, Padma lives with her and continues her parasitic behavior and her family sponges off her. But she continues to tolerate the invasion of her space and privacy by Padma and her family. Akhila lives not by her own desires but according to the expectations she senses. She has become a useful instrument, a faceless provider for her family and a complete product of the society shaped by the male gaze.

Akhila progressed to being the provider and continued playing different roles all through her life. Sometimes a sister, sometimes an aunt but she never got to be herself. She never was Akhila until one fine day when she realised that she has got nothing from life not even memories to look back to. To change the course of her life Akhila decides to do something she had never done before. She buys a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari to escape from the norms that stopped her from being Akhilandeshwari. On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women, her fellow passengers.

Nair portrays the psyche of the women characters from various backgrounds. There are six women characters in the train who shared their life experience with the protagonist, Akhila. These women characters resemble the typical house wife from south India. Voices of these women raised freely in the ladies compartment. It is in India women get confined themselves with the frame of familial bonding and societal rituals. Each with a story of her own but all of them had one thing in common and that was their search for the real denotation of life.



After discussing with those women Akhila started to think what about her own self and her role in her own life. She remembered what Margaret Shanthi said her about life. Margaret Shanthi advised her to stop worrying of what world thinks and start to think for her.

“But you will discover that once you stop worrying what the world will think of you, your life will become that much easier to live.”

(Ladies Coupe 136).

Akhila also learned the role of instincts in one’s life from the case of Sheela. Akhila makes her destiny and got highly influenced from lecture of her co-passengers. One night in the Ladies coupe and her interaction with the five women - Janaki who had a happy marriage though it was an arranged one, Margaret Shanti though married to the love of her life suffered from the agony of an unhappy marriage, Sheela, a teenager who had the ability to look beyond things, Prabha Devi who after years of marriage learnt to strike a balance and Marikolanthu different from all the four women did not succumb to the norms of the society just to gain a right place in the social order helped Akhila realise that she had given the society superfluous power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question – “Can women stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?”

Finally, Akhila emerges as a free and fearless entity. She decides to call back Hari, as she has no fear in her mind. This new Akhila is out to demonstrate the potential of being woman, who is characterized by her silent suffering and meek acceptance, of being incomplete without a man in her life. She has now her own voice, her own will, and like men she can take active part in life rather than be a silent sufferer.



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