

PLIGHT OF STRUGLES TO GAIN SELF-ASSERTION AND SELF-IDENTITY OF WOMEN PROTRAYED IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*.

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair the living writer of this century is an English Feminist writer a creative artist bestowed with immense proficiency and scholarly panorama, regarded as one of the leading novelist argued brilliantly by the scholars and labeled as a Feminist writer to prove the merit of his fictional world . Anita Nair's novels have an in-depth narration, and the main thrust in her novels is the confrontation between self-actualization and family responsibilities of an individual. Her works explored with focus on post colonial theory, modern criticism, feminist human relations, quest for identity and assertion.

In this novel she explores the freedom of women to fulfill herself basically as a human being independent of her various traditional roles as a daughter, wife, mother and so on. This paper deals with the theme of self-assertion and self-discovery. The novel *Ladies Coupe* exhibits the external and internal identity of her female characters.

KEY WORDS: Self-identity, self-assertion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Men and women are complimentary to each other. But in this modern world, women are not treated equal to men but as the weaker and submissive class. They suffer suppression in male dominated society. These women are unvoiced beings of the society. Anita Nair's portrayal of women in her *Ladies Coupe* (2001) brings out this fact clearly.

Any relationship is beautiful bond that links people to share pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, success and failure. A strong and healthy relationship assures a person that she is not left alone in the earth. Everyone is surrounded by such relationships as marital, parental, siblings and friends. Trust, commitment, adjustment, sacrifice and above all love are the primary pillars of a healthy relationship.

Marginalization and centralization are common in women's life. Veneration and isolation both do not help her to mingle with the realities of life. "An Indian Women has been either venerated as goddess or rejected as a siren. The modern Indian Women has to compete against these two extreme images. She is striving to lead the life of the normal human being with normal desires" (Manohar 22)

Anita Nair's characters in *Ladies coupe* have their pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle and strive to assert themselves for their identity in the society. The protagonist Akhila, lies as a source of magnet making the other women in the compartment to share their life story. Through these stories of other woman the central character Akhila tries to rediscover the

possibilities of reality in life. As each of the women narrates their experience of life, Akhila feels that every woman including her is standing on the edge of the threshold of self-discovery, a new destination in life. Nair handles this technique very effectively as she herself believes that there is a lot of power and strength in a woman which comes through certain extra external pressure.

During her train journey, she happens to hear her fellow passengers stories and experiences her unconscious desires finds a solution for her question whether it was possible for a woman to live by herself, and at last she takes a decision, the turning point of her life. Akhila is in her mid-adulthood which is a period that brings financial security, emotional maturity and satisfaction from family growth. But in Akhila's case it is different; she was unsatisfied with her mid-adulthood. It is the period when a person experiences marriage and children which Akhila is deprived of. Thus her family fails to do its responsibility and it deeply affected Akhila.

Akhila hails from a Brahmin family; she was the eldest daughter to her parents. After the death of her father the responsibilities of her family were given to her. Akhila was the head of the family, and she had to settle all as she is the eldest daughter of the house. It is the tradition and custom of Indian societies that the eldest one should bear the burden of the family. The death of her father totally upsets the life of Akhila. It transformed her into a serious person whose action and words were loaded with stiffness. This became her nature. She devoted her life for her family. Now Akhila's position evolved from that of a young and energetic college girl into a dutiful and responsible woman. But she completely lost her assertion. As Sunita Sinha says: "Akhila is a frustrated spinster who has spent her youth by taking care of her mother, siblings and their off spring".

Akhila worked hard for her family's welfare but went unrecognized. The members in the family went selfish and merely use her off and bother nothing about her choice and desires. She understands the natural situation and finds that they shamelessly left her. She is exhausted of taking various roles as a daughter, sister and aunt. Hence she decides to get rid of her family responsibilities and picks up a train journey as a means of escape from them hoping to seek her newer world. "This is the way it has always been. The smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape...Akhila has often dreamt of this, of leaving, of running away, of pulling out, of escaping" (LC ,01)

Akhila changing her mind to escape from her routine, witnesses a mixture of emotions among the crowd, which teaches her many a lesson about life. "Reunions, farewells, a smile, tears, anger, irritation, anxiety, boredom, stillness, Akhila sees them all" (LC, 02). She places herself in the centre with her fellow travelers and as the train moved, all the five shared their agony in life publicly but with Akhila. Initially Akhila lies reluctant to share her story with them but pours down as she was sure she would never see each other again.

The women sharing their life experiences with her helped her to realize her full potential as a woman and also to find answers to the questions that had been troubling her for so long. The journey becomes a learning experience for Akhila. It helped her to break free from the multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt and provider and makes it a self asserting journey. The five women in the coupe includes: Janaki Prabhakar, a pampered wife and confused mother; Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher married to Ebenezer Paulraj, an egoist tyrant who failed to acknowledge her inner feelings, desires and needs; Prabha Devi, a perfect daughter and wife who keeps afloat in life by a glimpse of a swimming pool; Sheela Vasudevan, a fourteen year old girl, who has an ability to perceive things; and Marikolunthu, whose innocence was destroyed by one

night of lust. Every character's confessional talk reveals their identity. Such an open-talk eases out the mental-knot that holds their 'self' tightly. The talk loosens the tightness in Akhila, she makes her relax within and take note of herself. She finally draws courage to break the barriers of culture and tradition that hold her fast. The physical journey by train is the journey of self and of self-assertion for the women in the coupe.

According to Indian custom, a woman is always synonymous with superior wife. A good wife should be realistic, subservient and righteous. Janaki is likely to take up this customary role of women. She plays various roles such as a daughter, a wife and a mother but not an individual who claims her life to be her own. The secondary position becomes everlasting for her. This is mainly due to the patriarchal pattern of her society, which is accepted as a natural occurrence. The problems of adjustment with the husband and his relatives have been the most broadly treated troubles.

Janaki, one of the passengers, opposed to Akhila's ideas, considers the basic purpose of a woman's life is to get married. Janaki gets married when she is eighteen year old. She leads a happy, contented, long married life for forty years. Janaki's husband Prabhakar is caring partner and has a son and daughter-in-law. Janaki leads a content life until she realizes her meekness. She feels some rope of revolt when she finds her husband controlling everybody even their grown up son.

With Janaki's revelation, Akhila begins to make a search of her own self and her memories take her back to her childhood experiences to reconstruct the life of her mother. Amma's humiliation and Appa's death and apathy to the family, made her conscious of a new identity, secure and independent. It was left to Akhila's lot to take on the mantle of provider for the family as she got a job in her father's place and now had to bear all her father's responsibilities.

Sheela's grandmother teaches her the negative picture of men who dominate women physically as well as psychologically. Sheela is reprimanded by her father incessantly for using shit in every sentence, for speaking to boys and for being rude. He has encouraged her to speak "with a razor-edged wit and a finely developed skill of repartee" (LC 70). Sheela's father always gives preference to her as his child. However, when she starts to talk like a matured woman, he is completely changed and starts to control her whenever she begins to talk. When her grandmother dies of cancer and her body is prepared for funeral, Sheela dresses her grandmother in a good costume with her jewels. She does it because she remembers the words of her grandmother, "The only person you need to please is you. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (LC 67). Thus, Sheela fulfils the wish of her grandmother by adorning her dead body with jewels. A fourteen year old girl's inner search and maturity are beautifully pictured by Anita Nair for inner search for self -Assertion and identity.

Marikolunthu was once a self-sacrificial woman who measured her happiness by making others happy. In later years she had transformed herself into a woman who could find supreme happiness and contentment by seeking a life of for her own along with her son Muthu. Kahake expresses the feelings of Marikolunthu as: "If I detach love from myself, life becomes empty and without substance. I lose my own self-hood" (LC 05). As a new born woman who starts loving her life she starts her life with her son Muthu and asserts her identity of self-determination.

The life story of all the five women made Akhila strong both in her mind as well as boosting energy in her spirit. Interaction with other women gives Akhila an individuation from personal to historical. She realizes that other women have also experienced similar things. These women add to her sense of being as an individual and also as an Indian woman. This helps Akhila understand how she shares communal pressures with these women and also shows how she can make a place for herself in the existing hostile community. In Akhila's case this literal and metaphorical journey serves as an educating experience, which gives her strength broadening her horizon of Self-Assertion.

In *Ladies coupe*, Anita Nair presents various women character's , who won way or other struggles to break the shackles of traditional conventions to achieve their dream of Self - Assertion.

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