

# PATRIARCHY AND WOMAN EMPOWERMENT IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE

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**ABSTRACT**—Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it accentuates a relationship between inequality and injustice. Though it seems that the colonial master has vanished from the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. It is obvious that only men are feasting the fruits of independence whereas women are still subjected to persecution by the male. To eradicate this, the women writers are writing about the predicaments of women in our society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is one of the notable writers in India. She always focuses on the problems of woman in our society. Her maiden novel "The Better Man" has placed her among the most self-conscious Indian novelists and her second novel "Ladies Coupe" has achieved a tremendous success in her career.

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".

Anita Nair's "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 herself for strength independence and answer to many questions that have disturbed her spinsterhood. In the ladies compartment she meets five other women. They are Janaki, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolunthu. As they are travelling, Akhila asks a problematic question to them: "can a woman stay single and be happy?" To answer her question, everybody starts narrating their own story. Through their stories, Nair has sympathetically explained the woman's agonies, endurance, sufferings, anticipations, etc. The protagonist Akhila in the novel "Ladies Coupe" is a forty-five year old spinster, daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family after the death of her father. When Akhila's father dies, all the responsibilities come to her shoulders. Due to her earning makes her younger brothers to pursue their education. Due to her financial support her younger brother Narayanan becomes a mechanic and Narsi becomes a teacher. Narsi decides to marry the college principal's daughter. But nobody in her family has considered about Akhila's marriage.

When Narsi told the family that he was going to marry the principal's daughter, No one could find fault with his choice and there was nothing any one could Say expect perhaps don't you think you should wait for your elder sister to get Married before you think of a wife and a family?

As her younger sister Padma grows up, her marriage is planned but no one seems to think that Akhila too has her needs. Though Akhila has done her duties, all that of a head, just because she is a woman. Amma expects Akhila 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 their permission, for that simply says "you might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family". Thus there rises patriarchal domination. Again when Akhila has thought to live alone, her sister Padma reiterates her to ask permission from her brothers because they are the men of the family. Padma says "do you think the brothers will consent this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?" Thus everyone including Padma, Narsi, Narayanan are strongly rooted of a woman living alone. But finally Akhila wants to empower herself. So she breaks their restrictions by boarding the train to Kanyakumari to discover herself.

Margaret Shanti is another example of how women are dominated upon by male power. Her life goes through man physical, mental and spiritual crises. Margaret, a chemistry teacher once adored her husband, an obnoxious headmaster but grows to hate him later. She marries Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice. Ebenezer Paulraj is dominating, mean and almost perverse. He is the worst example of male chauvinism in the novel. Initially, Margaret does not understand the deep rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her extreme love for him has made her blind. From an ambitious and brilliant student who wants to chart out a career on her own, she becomes a dutiful wife to Ebenezer.

He controls her completely. She is persuaded to do B.Ed through she wanted to do PH.d.. He says "what's the point of working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You will look nicer

with your hair in a blunt bob".she has to work wherever her husband works. A woman with brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality, she is reduced to a silent spectator. He becomes more and more overbearing after he becomes the principal of a school. He begins to nag her and finds fault in her house keeping and looking. Due to Ebenezer's insistence, Margaret aborts her first pregnancy. This is an unending situation for Margaret. The more cruel attitude of Ebenezer is that he does not allow Margaret to apprise her pregnancy even to her parents. As Ebenezer is becoming more and more egoistic, domineering and hypocritic, Margaret is unconsciously compelled to teach him a lesson. She chooses flattery as the weapon to bring down Ebenezer's self-esteem. She flatters and flatters and feeds him with fatty food, till fat finds its home on him and turns him into a fat man, a quiet man, and an easy man who seek her help for every task. As Dr. T. Vara Lakshmi says, "By making him fat. She erodes his self esteem and feels he is an easy man to live with now, in and out of health institute. She gains self esteem by eroding Ebe's self esteem".

Though Margaret suffers a lot, at last she empowers herself and makes herself to come out from the web and finds her way.

The youngest of the six is sheela.,fourteen years old who talks about her grandmother in whom we can see the manifestations of femininity. And sheela, is in the process of being moulded by patriarchal hands. As judes jalaja and shunmuga sundari observe. "sheela's retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older man". Sheela feels embarrassed 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 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, but she develops confidence to protect herself from it in future for it she says " thereafter she mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered enters Hasins's home". Even sheela's friend Hasina and her mother are unable to voice their contempt for his attitude because they are helpless. When once Nazar knots the bows in her sleeves, "she saw the hurt in Hasina

and her mother's eyes". Thereafter sheela takes the right decision that "she would never go to Hasina's home again". As a self-protection. Within sheela's story, Anita Nair has brought in an incident, where a girl named celine becomes a prey to a man's instinct. Celine becomes pregnant because of her friend's father and her family moves to a place where no one will know about her abortion. But it is said, "the friend's father went to a far away town where he would find plenty of young girls to ruin everyone said". Through this incident Nair has brought out the unjust treatment of women by man.

Suresh kumar and Leema Rose say, "patriarchy shows its ugly face from cradle to grave". Even parents are more concerned about the boys than the girls. And Anita Nair has chosen the character of Prabha Devi to emphasise this issue. When Prabha Devi is born, his father sighs, as 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". 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". After her marriage, her husband urges her to have a baby and says "My parents are getting impatient. They talk of a grandchild all the time". After her marriage, her life changes in to a machinery life. She do all the household chores. Usually she first waits for her husband to come home and then waits for babies. Thus Nair's version version of the old nursery rhyme of Prabha Devi's condition must touch a raw nerve in every subaltern woman.

Prabha Devi, Prabha Devi, where have you been? I become a woman, neither heard nor seen Prabha Devi, Prabha Devi, what did you do there? I waited and waited till ash speckled my hair

When she becomes forty years old, she has begun to realize that she missed something in her life. After that she craves to learn swimming. But her husband Jagdeesh does not give his consent towards her pleading request. Because he wants his wife to be submissive. He is a typical conservative make. But out of great desire, Prabha Devi ultimately learns swimming without anybody's help. Thus she empowers herself and molds herself to achieve her desire.

Marikolunthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. 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.." (LC215) when she was nine years old, unfortunately her father died of cancer. After that poverty rules and reins their house. Then she has begun to work in Chettiyar house as a main. But Murugasen, one of the relatives of Chettiyar is a wicked person. Basically, he has a baleful opinion about girls. He is searching for a good occasion to seduce Marikolunthu. Ultimately, she fell in his trap, Murugasen brutally seduces her. This incident mars her lift completely. She lost everything. Sujata Akka, daughter in law of Chettiyar, tells her to conceal this issue. Though her rapist is known, he is not punished. She gives birth to an illegitimate baby called Muthu. After that Muthu is taken care by Marikolunthu's mother. After her mother's death, Nobody is there to support her, even her younger brothers tell her to leave the house with her child Muthu. But After that, she decides to live on her own. She does not depend on any other person. She joins the mission hospital as a helper. She defines her as an independent woman. Through she does not have anything, she does not relinquish her hope. Thus finally, she empowers herself and proves to the world that she can lead a good life. As Indra Devi observes, "In the end she decided to measure happiness as Muthu's mother" (55).

Anita Nair uses certain characters like Akhila's mother, to express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal structure that framed strict social, political and economic limitations on women. Akhila's mother is conservative and orthodox mother, and devoted with her own theory that a wife is always inferior to husband. She is a sort of woman who never takes decision on he own but left all decisions to her husband for she believes, "He knows best" (LC14). According to her, "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 she said. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the 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 (LC14)

When Akhila wants her mother to take music lesson as Karpagam's mother teaches dance, she disapproves of it telling "I don't approve of what Karpagam's mother is doing" (LC13). 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" (LC14). After the death of Akhila's father, her mother let her eldest daughter Akhila, to shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family. Anita Nair brings in Sarasa mami's family that faces similar situation. As Subramani Iyer, Sarasa mami's husband dies. Sarasa mami goes to every step demanding to be taken as a servant maid. But every neighborhood just gives her a handful of rice if she is a beggar and this makes her to sell her daughter Jaya for the sake of their living. Anita Nair chooses this family as a complete contrast of Akhila's family to interpret how the more dilemmas of women are trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against oppression and destiny.

Anita Nair has used the character called Karpagam as a great example for woman empowerment. Besides, she has used this character to bring awareness to the society of woman's demands and their need for self – expression. Karpagam is portrayed as an strong woman striving for self-definition in a patriarchal social organization. She is a widow but unlike other widows, she wears kukkum and colorful clothes. She is a courageous woman who breaks the shackles of patriarchy when she says. I don't care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me didn't we as young girls wear colorful clothes and jewellery and bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway (LC202).

## II. CONCLUSION

Her defiance is outstanding when she says, "I live alone. I have for many years now. We are strong Akhi., Whatever you think you want to live alone, Build a life for yourself where your needs come first"(LC202). More than any other woman, Karpagam and her words instill a strong desire to live of her choice. Thus Anita Nair portrays the

character of Karpagam as one who courageously breaks the larger frame work of patriarchy that denies personal freedom to women.

Thus listening to the lives of various women in the coupe, Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari as an empowered woman to rediscover her 'self'. She decides that she has to live for her not for others. Ultimately, she breaks the chain of patriarchy which have haunted her for nearly a decade. She empowers herself and makes a call to Hari, her past lover to make a new life with him. Thus the novel comes to an end.

Thus in the novel "Ladies Coupe", Anita Nair has dealt with the themes like patriarchy and woman empowerment. Though her characters have struggled due to patriarchy, at last they empower themselves and successfully redeem themselves from a web called patriarchy.

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