



A STUDY OF ASSERTION OF DIGNITY AND DESIRES TO AUTONOMY IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is a contemporary Indo-English novelist who has presented the quandary of Indian woman. Anita Nair is an Indian bestselling author of fiction and poetry, with her prominent novels, The Better Man and Ladies Coupe translated into 21 languages. The common themes dealt by her are centred on women's distress, suppression, repression, disappointment, sexuality, freedom, estrangement, identity crisis, caste discrimination, transgression, mother infidelity, emotional insecurity, social, psychological and emotional issues. Anita Nair is very keen in probing and exposing the inner strength and desires of women. She sketches the status of women in the families as well as in the society. Anita Nair, through her famous novel, Ladies Coupe, elegantly projects trials and tribulations of the protagonist and her final self-assertion, along with, five women characters. The present paper reveals the truth that the women should retain their dignity and fulfil their desires to attain autonomy.

Key Words: *Suppression, Identity, Dignity and Desires, Autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

Modern feminist tendencies in the west have moved beyond the trivial politics of equal rights and opportunities. We see that 'Feminism' or Women's liberation is a term that escapes clear definition, as it depends on the individual's, one's culture, the place one belongs to, and how far one is able to practice one's feminist ideals. In my view, Indian feminism seems to follow a middle path that stands between the extreme radical feminist stance and the liberal, individual, socialist and cultural feminist stances.

The elongated and excruciating affliction of women, the bitter struggle for the exclusion of the idea of equal pay for equal work, the continuing battles for the assertion of dignity and

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aspirations are some of the visible marks to attain autonomy that has persisted and that woman had to fight for inspire of the commitments they were made under circumstances. Feminist situation in India possess a disparate dispensation. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. The several hierarchies within the family concreting age, sex and ordinal position, affable and fine relationship or within the community referring to the caste lineage, learning, occupation and relationship with ruling power have been maintained very strictly.

It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the existing feminist principles evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern. The spotlight of the literary studies was shifted to women's writing with a view to re-reading, re-visioning and re-interpreting it in the light of long existing gender bias and sexual politics in history, culture, society, family, language and literature .

Women's writing and feminist critical theory go hand in hand for the precise reason that women's writing has produced literature of aesthetic value; literature that can fulfil the twin purposes of education and pleasure. Women's writing talk, for the conservative dominions of the family, marriage, society and through an intrinsic mix of the real and the imaginative, has created an image of the 'self'. The image of the 'self' opposes the 'other' and moments of just positioning of the 'self' and the 'other', overpowering the 'other' and finally the 'self' ruling the 'other' marks the tremendous emotional development of women authored texts as well as of the gripping powerful effect these texts have on readers. Therefore, early feminist critical theory in favour of women being able to mother texts which can stand tests of time, hold much ground.

Many Indian women novelists have probed female subjectivity. The theme is from childhood to womanhood. Majority of the contemporary Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Kamla Das, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and Anita Nair have focused on the psychological sufferings, oppressions of the frustrated unmarried woman protagonist, housewife, whose only option was to suppress the storm within, the inevitable existential dilemma of women in a male dictated society. The neglected women as characters in their novel attempt for better way of life mentally and physically.

Anita Nair is without doubt one of the finest writers in English today and with an international reputation. Widely published in 27 countries to be precise, and translated, her work is not only critically acclaimed but also best selling. She has been publishing regularly for the last seven years. She has written two critically acclaimed novels, *The Better Man*(2000), *Ladies Coupe*(2001). Anita Nair's novels are concerned with women's quest for self and exploration in the female psyche. All the characters in Anita Nair's novels reach their destination as an independent human asserting their freedom after their protest against the



male dominated world. The study of such writings is aimed to explore the extent to which they serve the purpose of giving voice to women and support their struggle for rights. It also exhibits inner personality of women in Indian society regarding the novels of Anita Nair.

Liberty is something women desire for very dearly. They are not the ones who gain much freedom by the nature of society. In earlier fiction, the women who cherished space usually become outcaste, or suffered indubitably for her desired enfranchisement. Indian women's identity is usually associated with and defined by society and cultural customs of a patriarchal familial code. Her identity and space is defined within the parameters of her social relationship and space to men. The Indian women are a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity of the ancient spirit that is India.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, deals with the stories of six women who travelled together in Ladies compartment. This novel depicted the concept of female defiance against patriarchy. Mainly it explores the women's search for self-discovery and women's desire. The main custodian are Akhila, Janaki, Sheela, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi and Marikolandhu who were affected by patriarchy in different ways the first and foremost character of patriarchy are used here is Akhilandeshwari as Akhila. She was a main protagonist in the novel. She was completely subjugated by her whole family that is her mother Chandra her two brothers (Narashiman and Narayanan) and her sister Padma. Though she was a provider and man of the family, she was repressed by them because she was a single, unmarried women. Her mother continuously insist her that,

"There is no such thing as equal marriage. It is best to accept that wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on the male's role or the Gods would have made her so, so what is all this about two equals in a marriage." (*Ladies Coupe* 4).

After her father's death she took all her family duties and responsibilities as soon as her brother's grown up they got married as their wishes without getting anybody's permission in the family and they hardly think about Akhila's desire, wishes and demand. Akhila's dream has been destroyed completely by her entire family. She has never lived with her own identity at any cost.

"She was always an extension of someone's identity. Chandra's daughter, Narayana's Akka, Priya's aunt, Murthy's sister-in-law [.....] Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being." (200-201)



Akhila was suddenly struck by the condition of individual lives. All these women, she thought, all these women, Janaki, Sheela, and even Margaret who wears her self-sufficiency as a radiance, are trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen. She feels that, she too was the same. She tried to define the reality of her life, justify her failures and also own sense of hopelessness by preying on the fabric of their lives, seeking in it a similar thread that in some way will connect their lives with hers, make her feel less guilty for who she is and what she have to let herself become.

Margaret, a chemistry teacher represents the women who are forced to lose their self-identity by their husbands. A fourteen year old girl Sheela's portrayal depicts the modern young women who are aware of their need of individuality. Marikolunthu, pictures the rural women who lose their life because of illiteracy and ignorance. Janaki, a pampered housewife's posture is common to be found in India.

Indeed, at the very end, Akhila is authorized to regain her lost love. Nair's evocation of the ordinariness of a middle-class Brahmin family struggling to keep itself afloat in Chennai, hanging on to the rigid pattern of their lives, as exemplified in the patterns of kolam traced in front of their houses and expecting an unquestioning sacrifice from the women in the family to underwrite this myth, is what powers her narrative. Akhila and her friends are on the threshold of self-discovery. The manner in which Nair relates these transformations is in turn revelatory and redeeming. Her tale is light enough to relieve the tedium of a long journey and yet filled with the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek a new destination and intention. The novel moves on a strong note that women can be strong if they are able to discover their inner strength and possess strong determination.

For Akhila the quest for an answer to the troublesome question becomes the quest for her identity. At the end of the novel, Akhila, ultimately takes some significant resolutions about her life and she starts behaving according to her instincts, desires and passions without bothering about rules and norms which becomes the source of autonomy. The night journey on the train becomes a way of rediscovering and reviving of the women characters and their hungry femininity by sharing their secrets and desires.

In conclusion, The *Ladies Coupe* gives the women travellers a sense of courage and sisterhood and also a clearer idea about their destination in life. These women have spent their lives being confined into male – dominated and male – related spaces. The only way to manage with their suffering is to ascertain their inner power and to be strong, regardless of family ties and society prejudices. Most of the characters in *Ladies Coupe* become aware of themselves through the ray of happiness. The awareness is created only when one looks at one's own self. This witnessing of one's self can make us stress- free.



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