



Research Paper

Female Subjugation in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe'

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the theme of female subjugation in the novel *Ladies Coupe'* by Anita Nair. The introduction of this article includes the authors biography and writing. The main aim of the article is to bring to the readers, an idea on the Indian society which still demands women to play a subservient role in the male dominated society. The question of whether a woman can be single and happy is reflected in the novel. Domination by family members leading to a situation of loneliness in women is understood through the characters in *Ladies Coupe'*. Each character portrays a different story that inspires the protagonist. The suppression and the physical and psychological victimization they face in an Indian society is also discussed about in this article.

KEYWORDS: Singlehood/spinsterhood, self subjugation, male dominance, suppression

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I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Nair is one of the best selling authors of fiction and poetry, born in Palakkad district of Kerala. She was educated in Madras before she returned to Kerala, where she gained BA in literature. Her first book was a collection of short stories "Saturday of the Subway" wrote while she was working as the editor of an advertising agency and the book won fellowship from Virginia center for creative arts. Her second work was published by Penguin books India. She is currently living in Bangalore with her husband and son.

Her best novels were *The better man* (2000) and *Ladies Coupe'*(2001) and both the novels have been translated into more than 21 languages around the world. In 2002, her novel *Ladies Coupe'* was selected as one of the best five novels in India. Other famous works are *The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends* (2004), *Where the Rain is Born* (2003), *Mistress* (2003), *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alice* (2007), *Cut Like Wound* (2012), *Magical Indian Myths* (2008), *The Lilac House* (2012) and *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* (2016). Her poems appeared in many prestigious anthologies like *The Dance of the Peacock*, a 2013 anthology of English poetry from India.

Most of Anita Nair's novels deal with the life experiences of women who face subjugation and traumatic experiences in their family life. The novel *Ladies Coupe'* talks about the middle class woman in urban India, educated and conscious of their identity but always moving on a quest for finding their place in family as well as in society. The conversations of the characters are challenging and brings into light the patriarchal oppression that married woman faces. *Ladies Coupe'* is a novel particularly about South Indian woman but it talks about universal factors of female subjugation in society and explores themes of alienation, and the loneliness and lost opportunities in a woman's life. It delves into subjugation and dominance within the confines of marriage. It analyse the emotions of single as well as married woman in South Asia. Nair portrays her female characters not just as meek sufferers but as strong women who struggle for their individuality, freedom from subjugation.

LADIES COUPE' : A SELF DISCOVERY FROM SUBJUGATION

The novel *ladies coupe'* by Anita Nair follows the journey of a spinster named Akhila. She is a 45 year old single Indian woman from a Tamil Brahmin family who have been forced to play subordinate roles as the daughter, sister, aunt and the provider. Women for centuries have been looked upon to emulate the role of 'Sita' who never had an identity of her own. She is always in the shadows of her husband. In the Indian society, women are portrayed weak, feeble, vulnerable and always dependent on the male counterpart. If she is young it would be her father, if she is married then it's her husband. Till the day she decides to break free from the

conservative Tamil Brahmin family she was born into, she tries to find the answer to a basic question which was always there in her mind. She becomes the man of the family after her father's death. Even though she sacrifices her life for other members of the family, none of them is worried about her life. The novel doesn't just revolve around her but is divided into eleven chapters where she points out the thoughts of other five women as well. It is clearly visible that the novel is about the female sufferings in a male dominated society. It is seen that once Akhila travels to Kanyakumari and meets the other five women, her life takes a new turn. The train journey helps her realize that she is also one of those women, who is in a quest for identity and independence. She gets inspired by the other women, to live her life the way she wants.

The life incidents she heard from her co-passengers made Akhila rethink about her own life and understand that she is the one who should move away from the traditional patriarchal norms and then only she will attain freedom. Akhila has devoted all her life to her family and eagerly waits for them to ask 'what about you? You've been the head of the family since father's death. Don't you want a husband, children and home of your own?', a question that nobody asks her. Soon after her father's death, she took the job as an income tax clerk. She always had the feeling in her mind that she never got the chance to live her own life, on the path of fulfilling her roles, she lost herself. The last chapter of the novel deals with how she makes a decision in life for the first time, neglecting all the social and cultural ideas that prevailed at that time. She decides to marry Hari, the guy she loved, whom she couldn't marry before as he was younger than her and thinking marrying a younger guy would affect her family.

Indians live in a society where they are continuously striving for acceptance and acknowledgement. In lifestyle, relationships and even in families, what people care more about than themselves is the opinion of the society. While most of the women writers (like Kamala Das) points out male ego as something that affects women's existence in society, it is often neglected that even women have the same idea as compared to men when it comes to marriage and personal life. This is where the question of Spinsterhood and female subjugation comes up.

Why can't a women be single in society? If she feels capable of being alone, why is others around her so worried about her life? Doesn't she have the freedom to live her life the way she wants? If men aren't questioned on being bachelors their whole life, why is a woman choosing to be single being questioned? These are certain questions often neglected by most of the writers who focus on feminist discourse and gender studies. In the novel, there are instances where it is noticed that the impact of male dominating mindset on the society and particularly on women hasn't changed much during the past decades. Akhila's sister asks her not to travel alone when she says she is going away as part of her job. The idea that 'you are a woman, it's not safe for you to travel alone' is reflected here. Anita Nair even points out the fact that Akhila sister told her to ask their brother's permission, both of whom are younger than her. Female subjugation in an Indian society could hence be associated with what is taught in families among the generations. Just like men are asked not to cry, women are ask to be obedient daughters and wives who are considered incapable of living a life alone. It is clearly understood that in most cases, the idea of woman as a subordinate to men or someone who please him and takes care of his family, begins in the family. Generalizing this is not fair as there are families who prioritize their daughters wishes and interest above what the society expects her to be. Most of the instances in the novel shows how much struggle the characters went through and how even women during the the writers times thought about men and patriarchy.

The first woman introduced in the novel Ladies couple other than Akhila is Janaki. She is a pampered wife who is portrayed as a happy woman always taken care of by either her husband or her son and the reader is brought to a point where it feels like she is satisfied with her life. She is an obedient daughter, uncomplaining, who is quite comfortable the way she is and never questions anything. She is a dutiful, caring mother and wife whose whole life is suppressed under male dominance. She has learned to love the man she married who treats her like a fragile creature as she is nine years younger than him. She says she have developed a friendly love with her husband throughout the years but when her husband tries to control her son, she loses her temper and says he control everyone which is contrasting to the ideas she put forth while speaking to the other five women. She always thought she needs a man to complete her, but there are points where she felt confused about her life and the way she lives.

The second tale talked about is of the fourteen year old Sheela, who is disappointed by the ill treatment and female abuse she face from the men around her. She talks .about how she had been mentally and physically assaulted by her friend's father who tried to touch her inappropriately and tried to tie the knots of her blouse's sleeve in front of her friend Hasina, which made her feel embarrassed. Even though it was not her fault, Sheela felt very humiliated and never went to her friend's house again. She loves her grandmother who always told her to stay away from men as they all are having bad intentions and would take advantage of women if they get a chance.

The successful story of Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher is different from the others as she takes an ingenious method to make her life better. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj, makes her feel that she is a subordinate

to him once he becomes the principal of the same college. She herself is very intelligent and was a gold medalist in chemistry, who wanted to pursue her dream of gaining a doctorate. But her husband manipulates her and says there will be no point in it and instead she should do her B. ED and become a teacher. Like every other woman, she gained weight after marriage and when Ebe asks her to abort their baby convincing her that they are not ready for it, she is shattered into pieces. Even though she goes through a lot, she was able to make him love her again, by feeding him tasty food and making him fat. A woman obviously gain wait when she is carrying and some of them are able to be back to their normal routine through diet and a balance in life. But what about the rest of them who are taking care of the family on their own? She is a housewife, a mother and a worker at the same time. She doesn't blame anyone else, neither ask anyone to help her.

Self subjugation among women is also something that should be talked about. In the beginning of the novel, the character of Akhila is a huge example of self subjugation in the Indian society. She keeps others life and happiness above her own which leads to them taking her for granted. Its strange how the society demean women and judge them despite the fact that all are the same ans it's shocking how damaging the idea of idealization can be. Every individual is just an individual with innumerable amount of flaws in him or her. It isn't necessary to sit on the pedestal that society has made for women. A women can make her own place in the world is something seen in books, but never talked about. The system of patriarchy and the grips of it are so strong and so entangled in human minds that society even hate to think of someone stepping a mile away from the "good girl" line , and if a woman brave and courageous chooses to go her own way, even the womenfolk fails to understand her thoughts and feelings. Be good in everyone's eyes, be answerable to all questions asked, a good mother, a good daughter etc are like the basis of reputation of the family handled just by women and not men. Even in the novel when Akhila says she wants to travel, her own sister says it'd be dangerous for her to travel alone, rather than supporting her and her decision. If a woman doesn't feel like doing the domestic chores someday, its fine. But do they have a choice, is always unanswered and neglected, as if only men have a choice in their life. Prabha devi shares her story of living a normal life ,being a good daughter and how her mother was very happy that she had turned out exactly the way she wanted her to be. After fourteen years of her married life she feels a jolt when she questions her identity and how she has forgotten who she really is. She aims to find a balance between what is ideally expected of her and how she really wants to be.

The story of Marikolanthu is sad compared to the other two and can be put forward for a discussion on the way women who are uneducated and belonging to the lower class are seen by the men in the society. Marikolanthu is sexually abused, physically harassed and tormented all her life. She was born into a poor family, and after her father's death she started working at Chettiar kottari with her mother. She is raped at such a young age by Murugesan, one of the relatives of Chettiar family. She found it difficult to be a good mother to her child until the day her rapists funeral pyre is set. The usual trend of women being blamed for rape is clearly visible in Marikolanthu's case. Despite being a young girl, she is blamed by the society for walking alone at night. Nobody actually question Murugesan for what he have done and in fact it is as if the girl is the only one who is blamed responsible for all that happens with her. It can be said that society plays a huge role in molding a girl child's mind and instead of teaching how to be stronger, even the family teaches how to run away from the situation or how to not create it and this eventually leads to her being a victim and looking down on herself. It is seen that Marikolanthu couldn't love her son or accept him as every time she looks at him, it reminded her of the incident and it remained a huge scar on her for years. Nobody can blame her for this and people blame because they don't try to put themselves in the other person's shoes. Murugesan thought it's okay to ruin her off her dignity as she belongs to a poor family. She had to sell her child to Murugesan for five thousand rupees because she needed the money for her uterus surgery. Her uterus had to be removed as it was damaged because of frequently getting pregnant. She was exploited not only physically but economically and socially too.

II. CONCLUSION

Women are always considered weak and the society has already made their standards. The notions like being a mathematician or a technician as jobs exclusively assigned to men are still prevalent in the society. If there is anything dangerous or electrical, the male figure will help out assuming that the woman don't know how to do it or she's not supposed to do it. By the parameters set by the society, women are being judged and the family force them to be the idealistic version of femininity. Research says, there are only four percent of ideally beautiful people in the world. What about the rest ninety six percent? Well, the quest to look beautiful is often followed by a pretension to be someone else, following the trends blindly, applying beauty products and being what the society expects her to be. It is surprising to notice how women subjugate themselves by putting them in a box and looking like a doll that all men would adore. Women started body shaming other woman in today's society and this not only makes them feel inferior but also makes them lack confidence. Most of the social media websites promotes open harassment and body shaming and unless women start supporting other women, the trend will stay as it is. Of course there are inherent differences between a man and a woman but unless the society treats men and women equally people will never know the natural abilities of both the sexes.

Female subjugation is the action by any individual or society in general to keep women lower than men in the social and economic strata. In this novel it is seen that the journey of five women who share their stories on a train journey and then conversations they share helps the protagonist discover what she actually needs in her life. As the story moves forward it is noticed how each woman is suffering from male dominance in one way or the other and they share their experiences in the ladies compartment. And as they begin to tell their stories, the main character Akhila feels a kind of connection to each of them and the conversation helps resolve the unanswered questions in her heart. After listening to all the stories, Akhila found herself in a different place with her life than she was till then. She realized how she was always giving everyone else the power of ruling her life. These women gave her a new sense of belonging and knowing deep down within herself that she can be complete without a man too.

In India, women used to have equal status as a man in the early Vedic period. But in the later stages child marriages became prevalent and the ban of remarriage of widows too. There were customs like Jauhar and sati, In Jauhar women were voluntarily burned to death after the death of their husbands in order to save their honour from the enemies of the state. In sati, the widow was burned on the funeral pyre of her husband. The story goes on to the purdah system in which women used to wear a burqa, which was a way to conceal themselves from evil eyes. This was a way to restrict them to interact, making a shield in front of them, tying their souls. Even in the religious sense, Eve is considered guilty for Adam's fall. Talking about Hinduism, Manu Smriti clearly dictates in some places that women are not allowed any education. Also, adultery is fine in the case of men but if a woman does it, there is heavy punishment written. It is seen everywhere even in Indian history; the same Ramayana and Mahabharata that is so highly reputed, show women in a demeaning light. Sita is under the societal expectations and Draupadi is gambled in a bet that her husbands make, after which she is humiliated in front of the whole court because Kauravas try to disrobe her.

The novel Ladies coupe' is a story about an outer journey as well as the inner journey of all these women coming from different backgrounds and different age groups. It is a process of life changing realizations that suddenly grips a person and she feels like the life that she had been living until now was bound in so many restrictions and fake relationships. The past of social repression of women is very huge and dynamic and unfortunately is still persisting. This is a problem that will take its time to be completely rooted out. Society has to stop enforcing age old ideas that have no meaning now on the modern women. We sure have given women the right to vote and also own property but it's just a gender fight now. Society has to realize it's more than that, and has to give basic human rights to the women of the world. A search for self identity of six women, who want to break free from the patriarchal norms is portrayed through the novel Ladies Coupe'.

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