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CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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Abstract

Ladies Coupe's protagonist Akhila, forty-five years old, a spinster, takes an express train to Kanyakumari by herself for the first time in her life. She wanted to acquire more experience in life. It was an overnight journey in ladies' coupe with the other five ladies, Janaki, Margaret, Marikolanthu, Prabha Devi, and Sheela. The coupe is a symbol of their existence and the space they occupied in society. All the six ladies are different acquire each other in age, class, and caste. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales'* pilgrimages, these ladies are also narrating their stories. But their stories are an attempt to search an answer as to whether a single woman in a male-dominated society can lead a happy life or not.

Keywords: Feminism, women empowerment, male dominance.

Anita Nair is an emerging Indian author with an ability to put down her imagination in simple words. Born in Kerala and raised in Chennai, she has a

penetrating psyche. Her famous novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* are translated into twenty-one languages. Her novels bring forth a dominant predicament. She has adopted a broadly humanistic approach to life. She is a brilliant novelist and by the portrayal of her real-life characters, her writing touches the horizon of her self-assertiveness and dignity. She knows her responsibility towards the society and raises thought-provoking issues. Anita Nair is an innovative Indian female author who expresses in her novels the clashes of the postmodern age. According to her, in this uncertain world, women have to find their socio-cultural moorings and define their status as speaking and desiring subjects. In her novels, the readers can feel the dreams, hopes, fears, disappointments, and the traumatic experiences of Indian women. Her characters seem to represent the new generation of women in post-independence times.

Anita Nair's second novel *Ladies Coupé* from 2001, has turned out to be an even greater success than the first both among critics and readers in so far 15 countries outside India: from the USA to Turkey, from Poland to Portugal. When

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Akhila saw elderly Janaki and her husband, she remembered her parents who were also very fond of each other. They liked each other's company so much that Akhila sometimes felt like an orphan. Her father was her mother's uncle. When Akhila called it unnatural, her mother retorted her that it was a perfectly accepted norm in their community. She believed that a woman should be a devoted wife to her husband. A husband is always superior to his wife. They can never be equals in a marriage. In the coupe, all ladies were introduced to one another and became friendly, but Marikolanthu made them uneasy. She looked very different from them. When the ladies were curious about Akhila's being unmarried, she explained to them about her father's death and family's responsibility. And that now she is overage for marriage. Akhila said that she does not want to get married now. She wants to live alone but afraid of the questions coming to her mind, "How can I, who have never spent a week away from my family, survive a future alone. What do I know of running a household? What will I do when I fall ill? Who will I turn to? What do I know of life?" (Nair, 22). Then she requested them to help in finding her answers by telling their own experiences of life. They all narrated their lives as well as their views, desires, and limitations one by one to Akhila.

The eldest of them, Janaki Prabhakaran was a pampered wife. She was

naive and adjusting natured but she knew people called her inadequate, weak, helpless creature behind her back. She has been a supporting mother to her son and not a demanding wife. She always followed the orders of her husband and son and she thought it her qualities. But she was shocked to hear from her daughter in law Jaya, the real virtues of a lady of her age. In contrast to her, Jaya's mother was courageous, hard-working, and had the ability to make the right decisions for her and her children's life. They went to visit their son in Bangalore when Jaya became a mother. Siddharth asked Janaki many times about how she will live by herself after his father's death. He said to her to come to his house in Bangalore and that he has a friend dealing with real estate will help in selling the house, but she always ignored. Siddharth's behavior was gradually changing after his marriage.

He always disliked what his mother was saying or doing. Janaki was surprised to see his behavior, but unable to find a solution. He began to compare her with his mother in law. One day when Siddharth was saying to Janaki that she is selfish and not a caring mother while his mother-in-law was ready to give everything to her children, Prabhakar interfered with anger and said him to apologize to his mother. He then said to Janaki that they will not stay in Siddharth's house anymore and they immediately went back to their home. In

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this way, she was protected by her husband. Many times Janaki realized that she was a parasite, but ultimately she was content with her life. From Janaki's story, Akhila got the lesson that she should get married. But Prabha Devi said her not to reach at any conclusion, hearing Janaki alone.

Then Sheela, a student of ninth standard, told Akhila about herself. When Sheela was fourteen years old, her mother's mother came to live with her family for the first time. She was sixty-nine years old. She was different from other grandmothers. She did not like to be reminded that she was getting old. Sheela knew her very well because they spent most of the time together. Ammumma told Sheela's mother that Sheela is not a kid, but a grown-up girl now and should not be allowed to wander around. She also objects her to playing badminton with her father's friends, whom she calls uncles. One of them Naazar frequently puts his arm around her. She said that no one can be reliable and reminded her daughter of the incident of their neighbor Celine. Sheela knew how Celine used to go to her friend's home to play. One day her friend's father did wrong things to her and she became pregnant. After that both the families left the colony to avoid shame.

Her mother rejected this notion, but Sheela knew that her grandmother was right. She realized that her friend Hasina's

father Naazar tried many times to touch her, when Sheela went to her home to play. Sheela proved that, she is more sincere than her age, by deciding not to go to Hasina's home. She felt her Ammumma more foresighted and experienced than her mother. Her mother trusts easily on anyone, which is not good. Ammumma liked to be perfect woman with feminine qualities. Even in the last days of her life she applies cream, talc and then puts on her heavy gold jeweler, before going to bed. She says to Sheela, "You musdon't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (Nair, 73). She loves herself and her body and this was the secret of her remaining always happy and cheerful. She teaches Sheela also that to be beautiful means to be her and one does not need to be accepted by others. She says to Sheela that if she will not love herself, then she will never aware of how valuable she is.

Akhila became the head of the family when her father died, and was appointed as clerk at haa place in his income tax office. By the time her younger brothers became men and got jobs for themselves. When Narsi the younger brother said that he wants to marry a girl, he chose, Akhila wanted someone to talk about her marriage. But no one thought about her. She got both her brothers

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married. Then it was the turn of Padma. Akhila arranged a good dowry for her. All went to other places. Only Akhila and her mother were spending their lives in the same house.

Then Margaret, slim and modern lady, told Akhila that she is coming back from Bangalore after dropping her husband in a health clinic to reduce his weight. They do it every year. Margaret Shanthi was twenty-two years old when she met Ebenezer Paulraj. He was tall and attractive with a dark complexion, dressed up differently from others. She fell in love with him and he also looked at her with the same emotions. Soon they were married. The first year of their marriage was very good. They loved each other very much. She realized herself too much fascinated with Ebe that she agrees easily whatever he said. When he told her to do B. Ed. instead of a doctorate, she agreed.

When he wished her to keep her hair short, for long hair does not suit her, she agreed. He said there is no need to go to the church every Sunday. When Margaret came to know about her pregnancy, she was happy but Ebe was not. He argued that they both are to build their careers first and after then they should think of the child. After many days of abortion, her mind was occupied with the memories of that incident. A sense of guilt for killing her child was always there. She began to realize

that Ebe wants her to be like a little delicate girl, not a woman, physically and mentally both. She was supposed to be in the role of a child who should obey his orders and he, in the role of daddy. Slowly she began to discover real Ebe imbibed into the layers of a humble and perfect man.

Margaret planned a very different kind of revenge. She noticed that Ebe is a punctual man, and too much conscious about his physic and looks but he has a weakness for rich food. He liked to eat more when he is served fatty and oily food. Margaret who was suffering from her husband's mental and emotional tortures, makes a plan. She started to cook good food, especially oily and fatty to make Ebe gain weight. In the beginning, Ebe denied to eat rich food but she cajoled him that a man like him with a broad personality needs a perfect meal. Her flattery gave her expected result within one year and Ebe was a fat man now. Margaret told Akhila that she has one talent at least of ignoring people's opinions about her. She advised Akhila also to not to care what people say about her. In this way, she can make herself even happier. After all, one has to take care of one's life; people will not come to help. When Margaret left, Akhila thought of her strange and scary vengeance.

Prabha Devi's father was not happy to know that a girl is born. He expected his fifth child would also be a boy to enhance

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his jewelry business. But Prabha Devi's mother was happy, "I have someone to leave my recipes to. Someone who'll treasure my jewelry. Someone who'll want to be like me. Someone who'll say – in my mother's house, this is how we did it.." (Nair, 179). Prabha Devi's life was a perfect one from childhood to adolescence. She played with expensive dolls. She got all those expensive dresses and other things that a girl can wish. Prabha Devi gets married to Jagdeesh, a good looking, smart businessman in diamonds. Everything was going well, she was proved to be a good wife and good daughter-in-law. Prabha Devi felt lucky to have good people in her life.

At the age of forty, she again started to search her real self which she left far away in her life. She doesn't want to define herself within a more mechanical and monotonous life of a homely wife and a mother. She is not satisfied with this life and craves for something more. Her daughter was in college now, who has no time for her mother in her busy schedule. Her fifteen-year-old son started to play games in the club. When she went to pick him up, had time to wander in other sections of the club. She reached in the swimming pool area. When she touched the water, she was excited like fifteen-year-old suddenly she got the reason for happiness again after many years. She decided to learn swimming. She realized that she is

going to live her life again. Learning new things was the passion of her life.

Marikolanthu was a spineless wooden creature subjected to male domination. Thirty-one years old Marikolanthu's childhood was a happy one until her father died leaving her mother and two brothers behind. Her mother requested help from Chettiar, the richest family in the village. She started earning their living by cooking food in their big house. So Marikolanthu had to do all the household chores. After the fifth standard, she had to leave her studies for there were no higher classes in the village school. She became a baby sitter for Chettiar's daughter-in-law Sujata's son Prabhu-papa. One day on the eve before the Pongal festival she was going home from Chettiar's house, her mother told her to take one of her brothers. Mari tried to take Shivkumar with her, but he wanted to be present in Chettiar's courtyard with the other villagers when they will light the bonfire.

So she started to go alone to her house. When she was crossing the mango orchard, Murugesan, the younger brother of Chettiar's elder daughter-in-law Rani, caught her and dragged her deeper into the bonfire. She cried but all the villagers were busy celebrating the festival. Murugesan was sure that no one can hear her in the noise of the festival and raped her. When Mari said that she will tell his crime to

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everyone, he threatened her, “No one will believe you. You might think that you are our equal, but you are not. I’m the Chettiar’s nephew, his daughter-in-law’s brother, and you are only the cook’s daughter. No one will dare question me” (Nair, 252).

She thought of going to Chettiar’s house with torn clothe and show them what Murugesan did with her. She should have demanded justice, but she thought about her mother. How will she reacts when she came to know about the incident. Mari was sure that she will blame her for ruining her own life forever and nobody will marry her. When she became pregnant and told the whole incident to her mother, she did not believe her. They went to Sujata, seeking her help for justice. But she denied saying that when she explained this story to her husband, he shouted at her.

Being hopeless her mother took Mari to her old aunt living in another village. She believed that Perriamma must have the right solution to this problem. Her Perriamma fed Mari the special food made for abortion. They waited every day for it. But when nothing happened she asked her about what to do next. Perriamma assured her that the child will be born dead. And if is born alive, she will keep the child with her. She was happy with the thought that the child will help her in old age. The day came when her son was born. Her mother took the child’s responsibility while Mari

did not want to see him, “How could I forget what had happened as he grew before me, a reminder of what my life had turned out to be” (Nair, 263).

Her mother died and her eight-year-old son, Muthu was her responsibility now. When she needed money for her disease, came to Kancheepuram with the boy, where Murugesan’s looms were. He was now a rich man. She mortgaged the boy in his looms for the next two years in return for five thousand rupees, “A perverse satisfaction flared within me. Murugesan might not know it but I had sold him his own son” (Nair, 278).

Marikolanthu found a job of cook in a house at some distance from the looms. After one year Mari read in a newspaper that Murugesan died of a heart attack when he was on a business tour to Singapore. His body was brought to his home first and then to the cremation ground. She watched his funeral procession and her son among the urchins. When Murugesan’s legitimate son lit the pyre, the body was not burning. People said that due to the use of chemicals to preserve the body, it will take time. So they all went to their homes after some time, and ordered Muthu to keep an eye on the men who were trying to burn the dead body of Murugesan. Mari went there and saw her son; “I felt a great sadness wash over me. I had reduced the boy to this. A chandala. A keeper of graves, the overseer

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of the dead. He didn't deserve this. Or any of what had happened to him. As the flames leapt, my hate burnt with them. What was left in this world for me to hate, I thought. Murugesan was a shouldering heap of ashes. There was Muthu. But what could I hate him for?" (Nair, 281)

She was ashamed of herself that she used the boy for money, but she resolved not to punish him anymore for the crime that he had not done. So she anyhow relieved the boy from the looms. Before leaving the train, Mari told Akhila, "For so long now, I had been content to remain a sister to the real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother. Surrogate lover. But now I wanted more I want to be the real thing" (Nair, 282). Finally, Akhila reached to Kanyakumari and enjoyed her loneliness for some days. She was confident now that she has the courage to pick up from where she left off and begin again.

To conclude, Women have entered various spheres of life. They are no longer confined to the boundaries of the house. They no longer resemble the old generations. Our typical Indian society praises the women who devote themselves to their families and never care for themselves. People criticize those women who take care of their needs, health, beauty and hobbies also. Akhila in *Ladies Coupe*, took the responsibility of her family at a very early age, but in her forties, she

began to think for herself and chose to live alone in a flat separate from her married sister after her mother's death. *Ladies Coupe* questions the status of women in a traditional-bound social order that sees women completely in the of an obedient daughter, a docile wife and a breeder of children. Women in modern India boldly defy such narrow roles and assert self-dignity and personal freedom. This novel is an exploration in many ways. Each character has been taken from different fields and phases of life. Thus Anita Nair's characters are conscious of their existence as an individual who have their own rights and wishes. They create a new place for themselves in the society. These characters want to find new horizons of self esteem and liberation by coming out of their own emotional perplexities and disturbances.

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