Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe and Female Characters

Poonam Patil
Research Scholar
BVDU, Yashwantrao Mohite College,
Pune-411038.

Abstract:
Many Indian women writers in English with their newly acquired Feminist consciousness have given their writings a new dimension in the portrayal of the “new woman”. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair etc. have probed deep into the female psyche and have created an awareness of different kinds and forms of female experience. Their protagonists are mostly upper class and middle class women, educated and intelligent yet dislocated individuals who go through a crisis in life as a result of repression within the family, their constrained relationship with their husbands, their disillusionment in marriage, and their own lack of assertion and realization of self. Ladies Coupé is a novel by Anita Nair published in 2001. The novel follows the journey of a middle-aged Indian woman named Akhila as she travels to Kanyakumari in her search for independence and on the train's ladies coupe, swaps stories with 5 different women who inspire her to live her own life.

Anita Nair: Anita Nair was born at Mundakottakurissi near Shornur in Kerala. She was brought up in a suburb in Madras. Her father worked in factories. Her grandparents who lived in Kerala were the reason for Anita Nair to make frequent visits to Kerala and such visits made her to know the heart of rural Kerala. She did her B.A. in English Language and Literature in a small town Othapalam, in Kerala. At the age of twenty-four, she went to United States to study journalism. She was working as an innovative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories. Anita Nair’s “Ladies Coupe” has a journey motif. With a narrative that journeys backwards and forwards into the past and the present to determine the future, it deals with the diverse experiences of women as subalterns and exposes the diversity within and among women. Anita Nair’s characters Ladies Coupe have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle and have their own life in their society. Men and women are complementary to each other. But, even in this modern era, women are considered not as equal to men but as the weaker class. They undergo suppression in a male dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of the society. Anita Nair’s portrayal of women in her novel
Ladies Coupe (2001) brings out this fact clearly.

**Ladies Coupe:** The title of the book itself makes a point about the way the Indian society treats its women. It’s not very uncommon to find a ‘ladies only queue’ in a tickets reservation counter or ‘a ladies special bus’ or for that matter ‘a ladies coupe’. Why do Indian women get this kind of a special treatment maybe because it is presumed that a woman can survive only in an all women’s world which we know exists only in Venus and to survive in the kind of world we live in - a woman needs a man. Every Indian woman tries to escape this supposition but is it really possible for a woman to survive without a man’s protection?

Akhila, the protagonist of the Ladies coupe is a 45 yr old single women working as an Income tax officer. Born in a conservative Brahmin family Akhila was brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power and the people living in this society would never ever dare to rewrite its unfounded norms. Akhila’s mother belonged to the old school of thought, sometimes through her actions and sometimes through her words she taught Akhila that a perfect woman is the one who blends with the environment. *There is no such thing as equal marriage it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove ones 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 man’s role. Or the Gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage’ is what her mother tried to drill into her mind. But this very mother of Akhila on becoming a widow expected her daughter to play the man of the house. So from playing the role of the daughter Akhila progressed to being the provider and continued playing different roles all through her life. On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets five different women, her fellow passengers. Each with a story of her own but all of them had one thing in common and that was their search for the real denotation of life.

It is about the chance meeting of six women of different age, class, and experience Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, Sheela, Praba Devi and Marikolanthu in the Ladies Coupe, a second class compartment of Indian Railways. The Coupe is symbolic of their existence and the space they occupied in life and in society. They narrate their stories in an attempt to help Akhila, . Ladies Coupe is a very powerful novel
delineating feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this delineation is chiefly expressed through the projection of the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom. The Brahmin heroin Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, is forty-five years old ‘spinster’, daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family after the death of her father. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, she decides to go on a train journey away from her family and responsibilities, a journey that ultimately make her a different woman. She tries to change the course of her life and family substantially. But it is not possible as she lives in a predetermined world. Neither she is free to realize her goals, nor to translate her dreams into realities. Akhila, with sans husband, children, home and family, is dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience, aching to content, she sets out for a journey. Anita Nair chooses a ladies-only, train compartment as the setting of the novel. In all female Ladies coupe she meets five other women, each of whom has a story to tell. The stories are all an attempt to answer Akhila’s problematic question: Can a woman stay single and be happy at the same time?

Characters:

Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the woman’s story:

1) Janaki: The old woman whose relationship with her husband is a ‘friendly love’. The oldest of the women is Janaki with a story that many women of her age will identify with. Janaki is someone who learnt to love the man she married. She is someone who always had a man to protect her. Someone who was first protected by her father then by her brother then by her husband and after him it would be her son. Janaki believed that to be a good mother and a good wife are the only two duties of a woman and she made her home her Kingdom. It was too late to amend her life when she realised that even a strong and independent woman can make a good wife and a good mother.

2) Sheela: The Second story to unfold is that of a fourteen year old. Someone who is generations apart from Janaki but still with a mental maturity that quite surpasses her age. She is someone who accepted her grandmother’s death with an air of a person who had seen it all and done it all. What makes Sheela different from others is her ability to look beyond things and her knack of perceiving what others cannot.

3) Margaret Shanthi: The third story to unfurl is that of Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher married to Ebenezer
Paulraj, the principal of the school she works in. Margaret compares herself to supercritical water which is capable of dissolving just about anything. Soon after marriage Margaret realised that her husband was not the knight in shining armour that she expected him to be but on the other hand he was this insensitive, self obsessed despot who couldn’t care less for his wife. Ebenezer’s every action gradually transforms Margaret’s love into hatred and to avenge him Margaret uses a very ingenious method. *She formulates a scheme which would not only save her marriage but also eat into his amour proper and shake the very brass tacks of his being.*

4) Prabha Devi: The fourth tale to open up is that of Prabha Devi, born to rich parents she had the perfect childhood. Her mother beamed with pride when Prabha Devi turned eighteen. She was everything that a girl ought to be. She was beautiful, docile, a good cook, a good singer, her needlework was perfect. Soon this demure girl was married to a diamond merchant’s son. After marriage her life swished past in the blur of insignificant days till one day - a week after her fortieth birthday when she realised that somewhere in the process of being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law and a good mother, Prabha Devi forget how it is to be herself and that’s when she learns to *strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be* and a shufti of a swimming pool helps her realise the need for the balancing act.

5) Marikolanthu: The fifth and the most heart-rending tale is that of Marikolanthu who only when grown up realised that circumstance never let her be a kid. As a kid she worked at the Chettiar’s house to help her mother raise her brothers and when she grew up her innocence was destroyed by a man who was determined to have her carnal knowledge sans her consent. This one unpleasant incident changes Markolanthu’s entire life and destroys her verve. From being a kid who worked hard to help her mother raise her brothers to being a maid to two lady doctors who were foreigners, Marikolanthu was now a mother to an illegitimate child. Marikolanthu had seen it all from poverty to lesbianism but all through her life though she was untutored and bucolic she stood up for what she believed in, not caring for the society.

One night in the Ladies coupe and her interaction with the five women - Janaki who had a happy marriage though it was an arranged one, Margaret Shanti though married to the love of her life suffered from the agony of an unhappy marriage, Sheela, a teenager who had the ability to look
beyond things, Prabha Devi who after years of marriage learnt to strike a balance and Marikolanthu different from all the four women did not succumb to the norms of the society just to gain a right place in the social order helped Akhila realise that she had given the society superfluous power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question – “Can a women stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?

There was a time when a woman needed a man for protection but today she needs a partner who would share her ups and downs. She is not in need of a breadwinner but in need of someone with whom she can share the bread. So, does this realization make Akhila get back in touch with the guy she fell in love with, someone whom she did not accept for the fears of the society?

This book though a work of fiction is very close to reality. The language is simple and gets a little poetic in a few places. The dilemma that a woman goes through at every point of her life is shown in a beautiful way. Comparison of life with chemical elements in Margaret Shanti’s episode is very interesting. Though the story contains a few unpleasant incidents the author has expressed pity in a way that it passes on the right message without spoiling the readers’ mood.

In spite of the difficulties and obstacles caused by the patriarchal society, these five women endeavor to channelize their emotions in different ways because of their strong urge to survive. Having entered a chakravyuha from which there is no escape, they want to make the best of their given life by hardening themselves to face the harsh realities of life.

Anita Nair’s Art: Anita Nair presents the existential struggle of woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self. The woman emerging out of such situations is a defeated individual who undergoes much pain and suffering. Such characters exhibit a sense of insecurity due to their traumatic psychic experiences and also due to the collapse of one value system and the absence of enduring values. Thus in Ladies Coupe (2001), Anita Nair traces a woman’s journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice is heard throughout the novel. Anita Nair has thus offered an affirmative vision thereby upholding the ultimate goodness, beauty and truth of life in Ladies Coupe educated and urban women reject those traditions.
References:


Rose, M. Stalle, 2004, “From Periphery to the Center: Anita Nair’s Ladies Coup”