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Anita Nair : Ladies Coupe – A Voyage Of Self Discovery

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Abstract:

Anita Nair, an Indian-English writer stands out prominently with her contribution to literature. Although born at Mundakottakurissi, near Shornur in Kerala, she is a voice heard all round the world. A fine writer that she is, has earned her international repute. Although being brought up in Chennai, she visited her grandparents in Kerala. These frequent visits helped her to know the heart and soul of Kerala, in all its colours and taste.

She took up the post of a creative director in an advertising agency in Bangalore and here began her first stint with literary composition. In addition to short stories and novels, Nair has also written a book for children on myths and legends (The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends). She has also edited a few works (“Where the Rain is Born” – [2003])

Her first novel 'The Better Man' (2000) saw her as an artist of immense talent and great content. With this book she also earned the credit of being the first Indian author whose work was published by Picador, USA.

Her first book, a collection of short stories called 'Satyr of the subway' (1997) won her a fellowship from the Virginia Centre for Creative Arts. Her second novel (third book) 'Ladies Coupe' (2001) being rated as 2002's top five books of the year went on to be translated into more than 25 languages around the world.

Her composition about Kerala has been included in “The Poetry India Collection and a British Council Poetry Workshop Anthology”. Among her other novels are 'Mistress' (2003) 'Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel' (2006) 'Living Next Door to Alise' (2007) and 'Magical Indian Myths' (2008). She has also written a few travelogues. Her evocative style and confessional mode of narration has mesmerized the reading public in more than 27 countries where her works have been published and translated.

Ladies Coupe (2001) was rated as one of 2002's top five books of the year. This novel portrays society and also brings to fore the novelist who possess great insight, solidarity and humour.

Men and women are created to complement each other and play parallel role. However, the patriarchal order into which they live designate women with a secondary status. Unable to voice her

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feelings and concern, all that a woman can do is swallow all the humiliation and suppression behind the mask of forged happiness and feigned concern. Being the epitome of patience and sacrifice, she is not supposed to move out of the arena created by the male-made society. However, times have changed and women no longer speak from the periphery. They do not merely want to voice their concerns but also want to be heard. Women who were considered to be dumb have become audible and coming out of the mask, wish to be recognised in their 'real attire'. Women wishing to come out of the age old shackles and releasing themselves of the burden begin to undertake a voyage towards self-discovery and self-realization.

Ladies Coupe is one such novel which deals with a woman's quest for strength and independence. At the end of the novel we realise that every person possess some fine qualities and inner strength which even they are unaware of. It is only in the face of certain untoward incident or circumstances into which they are thrown that these qualities begin to surface. Further these qualities receive a finer edge and gloss only when faced with predicaments.

Six women find themselves together in a ladies coupe, traveling, each for her own purpose. This ladies coupe becomes a comfort zone where each one begins voicing their tale and in the process is both comforted and convinced of greater things.

Akhilandeswari (Akhila), the protagonist is a spinster in her mid-forties. The unexpected death of her father reverses roles and she becomes the sole provider of her family.

“Anita Nair probably hints at the family's easy acceptance of her as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods” (Indra Devi, 220)

Both her brothers Narsi and Narayan soon get jobs and “Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?” (77) These thoughts throw light on the fact that Akhila was not given access to any kind of fanciful notions and all her feminine dreams were nipped in the bud. A brief love affair with a much younger man also turns out to be futile because more than her own urges she is concerned about what people will think or say. She finds life working its own mechanical way.

Although the bread earner, she was not recognised and designated the status of being the real 'head of the family'. Any person that she came across was deeply rooted within the patriarchal order and refused to look beyond it. Finally wanting to cool her nerves, she boards the train to Kanyakumari, a perfect setting for the unburdening of memories.

The second character Margaret Shanthi is a victim of male domination. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj who represents the class of colonizers treats his wife like a door mat. A gold medalist and teacher of Chemistry, she fails to comprehend the deep rooted male egoism within the persona of Ebe. Although hurt very often, she would say, “He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right” (109)

The male chauvinist that Ebe was, he interfered with everything including her career, higher education, choice of food, her hair style, how she dressed etc. She was shattered when he forced her to abort their first baby. Now it was time for Margaret to act and take her sweet revenge. For all this insults, she retaliated it with flattery. She fed him with fatty food, till he turned obese and almost good for nothing.

Dr. Varalakshmi confides, “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. Margaret gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe's self esteem. She succeeds in achieving her emotional fulfillment keeping the family ties intact” (69)

Margaret Shanti is a representative of all those women who seek some kinds of praise and appreciation from their male counterpart. But the typical Chauvinism of Ebenezer makes him turn a blind eye to all the worthiness of his wife. She blindly adores him and so swallows all his insults till the following words unconsciously rise within her “I hate him. I hate him” (131). To all the humiliation, she uses flattery as a weapon. This she uses very shrewdly and effectively till his ego and self-esteem ebbs down.

Through the character of Prabha Devi, Anita Nair hints at the gender discrimination which begins from the cradle. The news of the birth of Prabha is denounced by her father in the following words : “Has

this baby, apart from ruining my business plans addled your brains as well ? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (169)

As a child she is encouraged to play games suitable for a girl and as she grows up is groomed to be the perfect wife and home-maker.

However, as she grows up finds life very monotonous and refuses to define life in a mechanical way. Acknowledging her own weakness and timidity, she decides to flow along with the tide rather than being cast away on the banks.

Every Indian parent is more concerned about the male child when compared to the female child; and every home has different rules for them. The character of Prabha Devi is used to emphasis the distinction made between children of different gender. Although Prabha Devi's father is unhappy at her birth, her mother appears rather pleased. For her, a daughter is a person who would continue living the words, thoughts and deeds of the mother, even after she is gone. She is happy that there is someone to wear her jewellery and take her receipts to the other house. Prabha's mother loved her and preferred her company to that of all her four sons. In spite of all this concern and love for the daughter, she also realises that a woman is not supposed to voice her concern or opinion. “She had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell, to be shunned” (170). Prabha Devi is presented as a woman with her share of virtues and vices, but Anita Nair shows great respect towards this personality

The youngest co-passenger is Sheela, fourteen years old, who held her grandmother in high esteem as she considered her the manifestation of femininity. The issue of female child abuse is brought out very aptly through the character of Sheela. The need to assert the individuality of the self is finely portrayed here. It was Hasina's (Sheela's friend) father who tried to mess with her physically. For no reason her touched her.

“One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar (Hasina's father) reached forward and wiped it with her forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a longtime” (66)

Sheela was unable to talk to anybody about this but not to be bogged down by this incident, she decides to protect herself from such incidents and from people like Nazar in future. As a preliminary precaution, “Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home” (66) She also observed that Hasina and her mother were hurt by what Nazar did. Here Sheela, although very young and naïve took the right decision. She decided never to go to her friend's house again. This was a decision taken to protect herself from further physical touch and his family from humiliation.

Thus she exhibits indomitable courage and great strength in her defiance against physical abuse. Within the story of Sheela is interwoven yet another story of a young girl Celine who falls a prey to a man's lust, the consequence of which is an unwanted pregnancy. Through these incidents Anita Nair brings out the atrocities meted out on helpless women.

The next woman is Marikolanthu who cuts a very pathetic picture. Being oppressed right from the childhood, she never raised her voice or objected to any decision taken in her matter. She is not sent to study at the town school for her mother thinks,

“It's not just the money but how can I send a young girl by her self --- there is too much of risk” (215)

All her childhood innocence and gentleness is shattered with the physical brutality upon her by Murugesan. Least concerned about the inflication upon her tender mind, her mother is worried about who would marry her. No she sympathises with her and instead quips, “The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape” (245). The physical brutality leaves such an ugly scar upon her that it evokes a strong sense of aversion towards her son. Defining herself as an independent woman, she does not consider it significant to have the presence of a man in her life. Wrestling with life, she experiences a kind of happiness and is being content with herself.

The older women in the house feel that an unmarried woman's life is incomplete as there is none to

protect her otherwise she should be financially secure as a good job is a near compensation to a 'male protection'. This incident makes Marikolanthu fear the institution of marriage and decides not to be tied down to the dictates of any man. She wrestles with life and not wanting to be a burden upon anyone takes up to working as a domestic maid. This is her definition of an independent status and appears content with herself.

Karpagam is the embodiment of sheer courage and determination. Although a widow her sense of dressing and appearance do not display the same. She stands as a representative of all women seeking to define themselves in the patriarchal social order. Her 'I care less' attitude is displayed when she blunts, "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." (202)

This woman is an embodiment of great mental courage. Her words, "Tell me didn't we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a 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? Some man who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men" (202) is truly thought provoking. One cannot help but wonder at the significance of her words. There is no hypocrisy or falsehood in what she says but every word uttered is true to the core.

She stands as the spokesman of Anita Nair and lends words to her voice while saying. "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" (202)

It is Karpagam's words which instil a strong desire within Akila to live life on her own terms. She is wonderstruck and the powerful words uttered by Karpagam and says : "Karpagam are you real or are you some goddess who had come here to lead me out of this---" (202)

Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Nair has done full justice in portraying the character of Karpagam, who succeeds in breaking through the shackles of the patriarchal order while asserting her rights.

These are the six women who share their lives with each other in the ladies coupe and permit us a glimpse within their private arena. The revelation of each ones life actually enlightens the others. Akhila is actually surprised to realise her empowered self and seeks to rediscover her life and reclaim her lost love.

One question keeps looming large through out the novel and that is Can a women survive alone? The answer is a definite 'Yes'. The security and care provided by marriage very often is nothing but an illusion. Every women possess the strength to live life as per her own terms and conditions. However, many of them do not realise their inner strengths. Many other fail to acknowledge due to the pressure of the social norms. Very often it takes a Karpagam to help other women visualise things in the right perspective.

There are a few other minor characters who but strongly portray the patriarchal order and the myriad socio-political economic restrictions upon women.

One such character is Akhila's mother who is not only a devoted wife and mother but also very conservative and orthodox in her upbringing and thinking. She not only believed but also supported the concept of women's subordination and inferior status. She also believed that women are not capable of talking their own decisions for that is entirely a man's forte. Her simple theory of life is, "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 he 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 station in life and live accordingly" (14) She remembers the words of her husband when there were first married and hence has never violated his 'advice'. She reminds Akhila of the same when she suggests her mother to take music lessons.

"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". (14)

Even after the death of Akhila's father, circumstances force Akhila to take up a job. Although the sole provider of the family, her mother does not permit her to take any decision regarding the family or

herself, for according to her decision making is the sole domain and authority of a man.

Anita Nair's voyage in life her also been long. Moving on from being a journalist to the worlds of advertisement, films and then actually becoming a writer, Nair has voyaged life on her own terms and conditions and appears truly content.

When asked what she aims to portray through her writings, she says, “See, it's not really an issue I'm trying to answer. Only that I try to understand what disturbs me, be it things to me or things and people around me. And by the time, I finish writing a book, I know there are some answers that I'll have” (outlook)

Nair does not aim at preaching or moralizing issues. She is sure that there are certain virtues and strengths deeply instilled within each person. She only aims at helping each character achieve this. Confessing that although she is not a feminist, she is aware of the quality of strength in a woman. Very often strength is not associated as a feminine quality. But then there is a lot of strength in a woman that does not come out naturally. Only some event, person or circumstances into which she is thrown into actually forces out this quality.

Nair is happy being a writer. Writing for her is both a necessity and addiction. She says, “The best thing about being a writer is to be anonymous in one's writing, being genderless, ageless, classless. It's a challenge writing about people completely different from myself and my kind of life” (Cafedilli.com)

Anita Nair a fine writer with an eye for telling detail can move from tender compassion to sensuality from subtle emotions to raging hatred.

This compelling teller of stories “like a ragpicker with an eagle eye, she (Nair) observes the ordinary lives of maid-servants, masseurs, vendors and other women who course through daily life. It is the strength and resilience of the everyday woman that Nair brings out--- Nair's women are fleshed out to the last detail. You can visualise them clearly – their faces, their bones, their desires----

'Ladies Coupe' is a masterpiece by Anita Nair a prolific writer. This novel presents the life of 6 women, all caught in the flux of tradition and the social order. The patriarchal society into which they are born places a number of hurdles and obstacles in the path of their smooth progress. The future appears bleak and dark with an air of nothingness being spread about. With great courage and determination the women face the odds and even fight them out. The journey undertaken by the women is not only a physical one but more emotional in nature, at the end of which each has a better understanding about themselves. This voyage also helps in the realisation of the self and many other things not comprehended so far.

Nair deals with the various problems of women and takes up all those issues that most women would not dare to voice in public. Some of the issues that she so skillfully deals with are gender discrimination, lust, the 'male-made' society, breaking the patriarchal order and much more. All women face similar problems all around. However, things are specially difficult for those coming from the lower strata of the society. Those coming from the upper class and those financially independent definitely find things easier. A woman inspite of all her talents and skills has to work twice as hard to prove her credentials, and inspite of all her struggle and endeavour is in the least appreciated.

Nair successfully provides a glimpse into the women's world. The female psyche and the feminine experience is brought out very successfully. The women that Nair portrays are distinct and different from those of the past. The prevailing social structure, economic condition, modern education and western influence have all helped women to change her attitude, her way of thinking and her total persona. Successfully coming out of the traditional wraps the effects of the change in women is seen in almost every sphere of human activity. This change has greatly influenced the man-woman relationship too. This was one area not fully explored and people shied away from brining private and personal issues into public. This positive change in women is helping them to define and redefine themselves in a positive way.

Another interesting thing that Nair tries to do is giving her women a solution to the many problems they face. She is of the opinion that if problems arise, can solutions be far behind. Being a believer in traditional values, her women are also true propogators of values and ethics. In spite of having marital problems, they realise that it is not so easy to break up marital ties and go against social order. Not willing to

mar things, they look at it with a new sense of interest giving it a different dimension altogether. It is the attitude of the Indian society with its mindset that Nairs women wish to break through. They rebel and revolt (very often silently), but not to break or undo the social order. Living within the frame work of the society with its values, morals, ethics and tradition, they crave and carve an identity for themselves by asserting for equal righter and opportunity.

Every writer has a message which is brought out through their composition. Nair is no exception. She has a lot to say to her readers.

A very, superficial reading of the novel 'Ladies Coupe' brings to fore the following elements: the predicament of women her awareness of the same, her desire to be recognised as a person and not merely a woman and her urge to have an independent identity.

However, on reading the novel with a deep insight one realises that there is much more. A women who is the sheer embodiment of patience and selflessness is ready to make numerable sacrifice and all that she seeks in return is her husband's trust and appreciation, children's unconditional love, parent's life long support and the companionship of friends.

“It is necessary for women to live within relationship. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy”

(Vishwanathan, 230)

Nair's message to her women and readers at large is very similar to that of Shashi Deshpande who borrows the words from the Dhammapada in her novel 'The Dark Holds No Terrors'.

You are your own refuge
There is no other refuge
This refuge is hard to achieve

(The Dhammapada)

Nair's objective and message is that every woman should seek to find a refuge within themselves, and not elsewhere. Every woman is strong enough to assert and ascertainment that she has a solution to all her problems, instead of being subjugated and subordinated by someone. One needs to have a balanced and practical approach towards life and keep working at the wheels of life to keep it going.

(Urvashi Butalia, The Hindustan Times)

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