

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES' COUPE*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is one of the most prolific writers in Indian English fiction. Although she has refused to be called a feminist, her novel Ladies' Coupe is essentially a novel about women sensibility. She delves deep into the inner recesses of the minds of her women characters and brings out their struggle, their suffering and their subjugation in the family and outside. She calls her novels a story of ordinary women with indomitable spirit as they give us the glimpses of their innate strength and their unyielding will. Ladies' Coupe is essentially the story of a single woman's decision to break free from the claustrophobic traditions and multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt, provider, and live life on her own terms. This paper is an attempt to see how Nair's characters go down fighting their victimization and their marginalization in order to live a life in their own ways. They may get bogged down, but their struggle, their quest for their identity is unparalleled and matchless, and, hence, their experiences, their fight against the unjust patriarchal system inspire a whole lot of women who deny succumbing and encumbering.

Key Words: *Victimization, Marginalization, Claustrophobic Traditions, Multiple Identities, Subjugation.*

Ladies' Coupe is essentially a novel of woman sensibility but it does not fit into the category of women writing that depicts women as battered, bartered and abandoned on the shoals of low self-worth. It rides triumphantly against the tide, giving us a glimpse of the innate strength that a woman needs to reconstruct her life. Perhaps that is why Nair has called her novel a story of ordinary women with indomitable spirit. A single forty five year old pen-pusher in the Income Tax Department, Akhila, one day sets to seek certain answers mainly to the question whether a single woman can live alone away from her family. She buys a ticket to Kanyakumari and is placed in a ladies' coupe along with five other women giving her company for the overnight journey. These women share their life experiences with her, and helping her to gain full potential as a woman and grapple with the answers to the questions she has been seeking so long. The novel has also been called 'a novel in parts' perhaps because the lives and experiences of six women have been welded together by the author into a consummate whole, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. The unique bonding among the women in *Ladies' Coupe* makes each life story a learning experience for Akhila who contemplates upon the various aspects of her life after each session of tail-tailing. It helps her to break free from the claustrophobic multiple identities as daughter, sister and aunt and

so on. This paper seeks to analyse the soul searching of Akhila as to how she should live her life and assert her identity. Akhila's tentative overtures to her co-travellers to help her to make up mind whether a woman should or can live alone, give rise to contradictory responses. Janaki, the oldest of the group and married for forty years, says why a woman should live by herself as there is always a man willing to be with her. While Margaret, a young and smart woman says that she would prefer to trust her own instincts as no one can really help her.

Janaki's response is akin to what Akhila has always been led to believe since childhood. Born in a simple, South Indian Brahmin family, Akhila's father is one of those familiar figures who work in the Income Tax Department. Akhila, being the eldest, is a witness to the unique togetherness between her parents. It often makes her wonder about marriage which makes it possible for a man and a woman to mesh their lives, dreams and even their thoughts in such a complete fashion. Married to her uncle, as is the custom in most South Indian families, Akhila's mother has her own theories about what a good wife ought to be, that is she should always be inferior to her husband. But Akhila has her own opinions. She has seen how her father's hasty decision to sell off the small piece of land for only a pittance has deprived her mother of her only inheritance from her wealthy father who had left everything else to his sons. Akhila's mother does not question her husband, believing that her husband knows best. To Akhila this is strange. She is grateful that she does not have an uncle waiting in the wings to marry her.

The devotion of Akhila's mother to her husband is reversed in the case of Janaki. It is Prabhakar, Janaki's husband, who is the devoted husband, so much so, that Janaki finds the situation stifling. Tired of being treated as a fragile creature and resenting Prabhakar's intention to control everybody, she admits that a foe lived in her mind that questioned our marriage. It is much later when they visit their son and daughter-in-law, she realises that she cannot do a single thing without her husband. She reflects on her marriage and tries to fathom what it is really based on: "There was a certain thing he and she shared. A tensile connection that is there between most couples who have been married for a long time. She did not know how to describe it. A companionship? A friendship? Or mere a complicity that springs between people who share a bed, a child and a life"?¹

Janaki's realisation of her dependence on her husband is driven into her mind by her son and daughter-in-law, Siddharth compares her unfavourably to his own mother-in-law, who widowed young, had to fend for herself and calls Janaki 'spoilt' and the former 'generous'. It is Prabhakar who takes up cudgels for her against their son and they decide to leave as early as possible. Janaki is at last aware of the importance of 'friendly love' and she cuddles together under the blanket letting his warmth slip into her. Janaki has already admitted earlier that though she could cope perfectly well, and if she were alone, "it would not be the same".² Janaki's words reverberate in Akhila's mind and it occurs to her suddenly that she could not find answers in her

own life by “treating other people’s lives as they were books”.³ She muses: “If I were to make up my mind on what Janaki had to say of her life, then I should continue to live with my family. I might not love them but at least they are there”.⁴ But, Prabha Devi, another co- passenger, and around Akhila’s age, tells her not to be disappointed. After all, Akhila has heard only one story and already there is a marked change in her. For the first time as Janaki points out to her there is life in her eyes.

When the night descends and Akhila’s co passengers retire for the night on their respective births, Akhila again delves into her past. She remembers her father who was essentially a misfit for the clerical job in the Income Tax Department and also his silent accepting of humiliation at the hands of his colleagues because of his ‘foolish’ integrity of not accepting bribes. She remembers those “Sundays, which were a full-fledged weekly dress rehearsals for that day when he would retire and could live life on his own terms again”.⁵ Akhila remembers her mother’s pampering of her father with her exclusive cooking and the rhythmic movement of the swing on which her father spent the afternoons with his head cushioned in his wife’s lap. Akhila’s father is a born loser and could never get promotions mainly because of the manipulations of the superiors who black marked his confidential files. Akhila’s father has a perennial air of suffering about him and Akhila compares him unfavourably with Subramanyam Iyer, a counterfoil to the character of Akhila’s father, and also a neighbour and family friend. He is the husband of Sarasa mami for whom Akhila has a soft corner. Iyer is just a peon and has a growing daughter and a dependent blind son. But he is full of *joy de vivre* of life and has none of the aura of suffering around him which Akhila’s father has. The negation of life seems to be the lot of Akhila’s father. His death too has an element of mystery.

When Sheela, a fifteen year old girl, enters the coupe around midnight, “something about the way she sits reminds Akhila of her brother Narayan on the day their father died”.⁶ Sheela is grappling with the shock of the death of her Grandmother who was a strong woman living life on her own opulent terms. Dying of cancer, amamma as Sheela calls her makes her home with her daughter (Sheela’s mother) because of an altercation with her sons. Sheela is a witness to her grandmother’s great dislike for imperfections and also her fondness for manifestation of femininity and jewellery. The act of defiance of tradition, good conduct and convention on the part of young Sheela reminds Akhila of her own father’s death – of how Sundays became just another day of the week of how Akhila became the man of the family at the tender age of just nineteen. She is then caught in the quagmire of family responsibilities, ceases to be a woman and has already metamorphosed into a spinster. Akhila has jeopardized her life at the call of duty by allowing her to become the sacrificial goat at the altar of family responsibilities. Akhila feels her identity being lost in the role she is expected to play. Young as she is, she hopes that one day she will have a home and a family of her own.

Akhila's friendship with Catherine, a colleague and Anglo-Indian introduces her to the pleasures of eating an egg, a strictly prohibited item in her Brahmin household. She brings the egg into her kitchen. This is perhaps her only act of rebellion and self-indulgence as the head of the family. Akhila's mother "has to accept her taste for eggs like she has endured Akhila's father's fondness for snuff".⁷The guilt of self-indulgence runs deep into the psyche of Akhila. In one of her erotic dreams, she confronts her sexual desires. But even as she allows herself to be swallowed by its pleasures, she sees the ashamed and accusing faces of the members of her family. But even then, Akhila is carried by her desires, gives into it fully until her dream is cut short by the banging of the coupe door. It is Margaret who tells her that "the truth as I know it and as I live it is that a woman needs a man but not to make her feel whole".⁸Being a chemistry teacher, Margaret identifies each individual with a chemical. She classifies herself as water – the universal solvent and also a solvent that has the power to dissolve and destroy. Her husband's mistake was that he dismisses her "as someone of no significance"⁹ because for years the water i.e. Margaret has remained in a frozen state. But something snaps and a chemical change occurs. Margaret realises that she hates her husband Elbenzer Paulraj more than she has ever hated anyone. When her first pregnancy is terminated at her husband's behest, Margaret wrecked by guilt and a feeling of emptiness, visualizes him as he really is - an egoist, a bully, a sex pervert, and a drawer of genitalia in library books. Margaret bides her time and eventually takes her revenge in a unique manner i.e. through his taste buds. She learns to cook to perfection and knowing her husband's weakness for good food, she stuffs him with her gourmet dishes until his body is sheathed in layers of fat. When he becomes a fat man he becomes an easy man to live with. She becomes pregnant for the second time. Ebe has to go off to a health club in Bangalore to shed off his extra kilos. But as Margaret says "It is imperative that I should keep Ebe away from reverting to his earlier self. For if he did, I could not even think of the evils that would be visited upon us. I had my little girl to think of".¹⁰ Margaret departs with a parting shot at Akhila by telling her to live her life without worrying about what others will think of her. Akhila realises that all these women Janaki, Sheela and even Margaret are trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen.

Akhila examines her own feelings about love after hearing Margaret's story. She is compelled to think of Hari whom she had met on the daily train to work and wonders at how this transient togetherness could blossom into love and also one night of physical intimacy. It is Hari's age which restrains her from furthering the relationship. She finally breaks away the relationship with him in spite of the pangs of regret and loss. She thinks that her relationship with Hari who is so much younger than her would leave her when her youth will be on decline. Nevertheless she dwells hopefully on a 'second chance'. She does get a second chance which is to break free of the family when she is transferred to Bangalore and has to live alone. But sister Padma insists on staying with her, along with her own family, in the name of duty. So, once again Akhila feels

swamped by her. The invasion of space and privacy in the small government flat which Akhila has been allotted takes many forms. Akhila agonizingly thinks of Hari and her inability to revolt. Prabha Devi tells her that she used to be very much like her, quiet and timid and afraid to try anything new. She further tells Akhila that one day she discovered that she did not like the person she had become, and so she changed. Prabha Devi has been through none of the hardships that Akhila has gone through. Ensnared in comfort, Prabha Devi realises one fine day, soon after her fortieth birthday, that enough was enough and she should now do what she has always wanted to do. She remembers her protected childhood, and pampering of her mother. An early marriage to the son of a wealthy diamond merchant compels her to play the role of the traditional daughter-in-law. But Prabha Devi soon discovers an amusing angle to her personality, i.e. to live to the hilt, to experience the joy of sensuousness and test the ultimate power of her beauty. Her first foreign trip enables her to break free from wearing the traditional attire and wear western clothes. She gains expertise in applying cosmetics and enhance her good looks to capture the attention of every male in the vicinity. When Pramod refuses to succumb to her good looks, she entices him with her body language. Finding her incapability of handling his ardour and not having a fling at the cost of her family as well she recedes into her old shell of docile domesticity of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law until she is forty years of age. The old yearnings resurface again as Prabha Devi learns swimming with a steely determination in the face of many odds. Her desire to stay afloat perhaps not only inspires her to learn the art of swimming but also motivates her to break free of tradition and keep her identity intact. She finds immense fulfilment. It is perhaps because of this Akhila finds her most self-confident in the group and one who could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float. Akhila learns from Prabha Devi “to move on the tide of life rather than be cast on the banks”.¹¹

The last woman in the compartment/coupe to keep Akhila a company is the thirty one year old Mariakondu which in Tamil means a fragrant grass akin to lavender. Mariakondu, as she herself says, doesn't belong to the group of women in the coupe because unlike them she has not led a sheltered life with a family. She has seen how life can take its toll and how cruel the world can be to women. Mariakondu is an unwed mother. She becomes a victim of rape at the hands of one of the relatives of the Chettiar family who have made their money through silk trade. It is her widowed mother who works as a cook finds a place for her as the caretaker of the grandson of Chettiar. Young as she is, Mariakondu is infatuated by the patronising attitude of Sujata Akka, the child's mother. Sujata Akka becomes the epicentre of her life. When she gains puberty and the changing shape of her body attracts the hungry looks of the Chettiar males, she is sent away by Sujata Akka to another town to work for two ladies who are foreigners. But Mariakondu cannot escape her destiny. She comes home to attend to her mother who has cracked a bone. Dressed in the finery that Sujata Akka has given her on the occasion of Pongal, and amidst all celebrations, she is dragged to a lonely corner and brutally raped by Murugesan, the brother in law of Chettiar's

elder son. She turns for solace to Sujata Akka who is unable to help her and Mariakonthu gives birth to a male child whom she detests with all her heart. She returns to her work with the foreigners but now there is a huge vacuum in her heart. She returns again but finds that things have changed at the Chettiar Kotai with the death of Chettiar. In spite of the warnings of her mother Mariakonthu takes up the job of caring for the old mad woman, Chettiar's wife and mother-in-law of Sujata Akka. She has no feelings and lives life through a haze all the time avoiding meeting her son growing up in her home. She does not realize when and how she becomes a reflection of Sujata Akka. As the time slips, she is embroiled in a lesbian relationship with Sujata Akka when she senses the latter's need, and her pleasure in satisfying the sensually starved Sujata Akka. She also sleeps with Sujata Akka's husband so that he may not go to the other women. But when Sujata Akka discovers this, she turns her out and accuses her of black magic. Aghast, she goes home and is compelled by her brothers to take custody of her son as their mother is no more. Her troubles do not end. She soon discovers that she has got a tumour in her uterus which has to be operated upon and it will cost her five thousand rupees. As she has no money, she sells her son to the loom factory. The irony of the whole episode is that the loom merchant is none other than Murugesan, the father of her son. It is only after the death of Murugesan and that love for her son blossoms and she decides to collect money in order to buy him back. It is for this purpose she is going to Nagercoil to approach the two foreigners for money, her erstwhile employers.

Mariakonthu's story is of a woman who is tossed about by the vagaries of fate and it makes Akhila aware of how cruel life can really be. Life after all is to be taken by the horns and in spite of shirking away from it; one should go through the gamut of experiences it offers. It is perhaps because of this that Akhila, staying alone in a hotel in Kanyakumari, invites an unknown willing young man into her room and samples the forbidden pleasure of physical intimacy. She does not bother even asking his name and neither does she divulge hers. How could Akhila, the very doyen of middle class morality, take such a drastic step? Akhila has at last learnt to live life on the surface and has learnt to control her emotions. That is why she feels the primal strength inherent in every individual, in every woman. Not goaded by any type of guilt she even ventures to ring up Hari and that too after nearly a decade, suppressing the thoughts that he may now be married and not easily available as he was. The metamorphosis of Akhila into Akhilendswari is a slow but sure process. She discovers power within herself and is no longer swamped by the thoughts of what life is going to be when she is alone. She discovers that she likes being alone. "She has no more doubts about what her life will be if she lives alone. It may not be what she dreamt it to be, but at least she would have made the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now. That she be allowed to experience it".¹²Anita Nair has emphasised the fact that it is not the answer to the question which has been seeking attention of Akhila so long, but it is the quest for finding it which is more satisfying for the protagonist. Akhila's burden has been considerably lightened. She has found the strength to emerge afresh from the prison-house of her old self as symbolised by the

stiffness of the cotton saris she always wore to work. She can at least go back to her old life where perhaps nothing may have changed on the surface, but on the mental plane a process of evolution is definitely visible in her persona.

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