



---

## Revealing the Self: Indian Femininity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*



**More Samradni Sanjay**

Research Scholar

Department of English

Dr. B.A.M.U., Aurangabad



**Dr. V.R. Shedge**

I.Y. College of Arts, Science

And Commerce, Mumbai

### ABSTRACT

Anita Nair, a Keralite by birth, is a famous poet, short story writer and journalist. In *Ladies Coupe*, she focuses on man and woman relationship, marriage and divorce, social and cultural, and psychological issues. *Ladies Coupe* (2001), her second novel published after *The Better Man*, is a mixture of various experiences that are drawn from everyday life of five women. These five women, Margaret Shanti, Janaki, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu, are the fellow travelers of Akhila who is on a journey to Kanyakumari in search of the self and the strength and independence of a woman. As they all exchange their stories on their lives, Akhila tries to find a solution to her eternal dilemma - whether a woman needs a man to complete her or whether she can stay single and happy?

**KEYWORDS :** Dilemma, Suppression, Confinement, Insecurity, Goddess

## RESEARCH PAPER

---

“Akhila and her friends are on the threshold of self-discovery. The manner in which Nair relates these transformations is in turn revelatory and redeeming. Her tale is light enough to relieve the tedium of a long journey and yet filled with the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek a new destination”. (Geeta Doctor)

Margaret Shanthi is a Chemistry teacher who got married to Ebenezer Paulraj. He is an example of male dominance. He changed her life because of the power he had in her life. She wanted to do Ph.D. but he asked her to complete B.Ed. Finally, she changed herself in an artistic way to win her freedom from her husband. Janaki, another fellow passenger of Ladies Coupe, is an example for old age tradition. According to her, a woman should be a good daughter, sister, wife, mother and so on. Indian society also believes that woman should always depend on some man in their life. Sheela is a fourteen-year-old girl, who is very sensitive with a deep insight. At the very young age, she understands what is meant by life. Her grandmother also teaches her a negative picture of male domination. Her father used to control her whenever she began to talk. Marikolanthu is another passenger who comes from a poor family. She and her mother work as coolies in Chettiar's house. She was seduced by one of the Chettiar's son Murugesan. Marikolanthu shows her love and affection towards Chettiar's grandson but she hates her own son Muthu, the one who escaped from many attempts of abortion. 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 as the weaker class. They undergo suppression in a male dominated society. These women are unvoiced creatures of the society as portrayed in her *Ladies Coupe* (2001). Any relationship is a beautiful bond that connects people to share pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow and success and failure. A strong and healthy relationship assures a person that he/she is not left alone on this earth. Everyone is surrounded by such relationships as marital, parental, siblings and friends. Trust, commitment, adjustment, sacrifice and love are the prime pillars of a healthy relationship.

Marriage cuts off a woman from the mainstream of life and pulls back her from achieving her goals. Most marriages are successful only when the women show major attention to the

household affairs. For men, it is different. In most families, the man is the boss of the house; wife a counselor or a minister who assists or helps; but not the dictator.

Beyond the threshold of her house, woman finds life less promised and confusing due to her social and cultural insecurities. Whenever women step out of their confinements, they have to fight to wipe out the negative image of women already dwelling in the minds of men and women. In certain aspects, women are treated as angels and goddesses. In some other aspects, women are expected to be slaves, who are ready to work for a man and his benefits and comfort. Marginalization and centralization are common in a woman's life. Veneration and isolation both does not help her to mingle with the realities of life. "An Indian woman has been either venerated as a goddess or rejected as a siren. The modern Indian woman has to compete against these two extreme images; she is striving to lead the life of a normal human being with normal desires" (Manohar 22).

Women writers of Indian Writing in English are good in analyzing complex issues like complexities of human relationships, man-woman relationship, woman's psyche and her potential. The changing pattern of man-woman relationship is presented not only in the novels, but also in films and television serials. Bold themes and diverse issues are now being taken up by the media. The mosaic of stories highlights the fact that man-woman relationship is a very complex and subtle issue. (Mukherjee 25)

The changing pattern of man-woman relationship can be traced in the works of writers such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and Shoba De. It shows how the modern Indian women attempt to free themselves sexually, economically and domestically from the male dominated society. Male and female characters in their novels fight against their interpersonal problems without caring for any success; often they end up having some kind of peace. The novelists, like the readers, know that there is no logical analysis of emotion. Anita Nair's characters in *Ladies Coupe* have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle and have their own life in their society.

Margaret Shanti is one of the fellow travelers in the *Ladies Coupe*. Margaret's story is a story of a woman who learns her own strategies to get her dreams true. Margaret's husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, is an example of male dominance. He maneuvers Margaret into a position of submissive silence, making her out to be an unnoticed and unremarkable girl. A girl, with a brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality, is reduced to an average girl. His subtle

cruelty to the children in his school gets repeated with his wife too. Once he was obsessed with the girlish characteristics of Margaret. It was visible even at their first meet. To retain the girlish charm in her, when she happily announced her pregnancy, he insisted on aborting the baby. Margaret feels confusion, anger, sorrow, pain and self-pity. Tired of her submissiveness at her home, she finally takes her life into her own hands. With supreme will power, she collects her hidden strength and sends the ball to his court. Having learnt the tactics from his constant playing of games to get his things done, she takes her revenge by following the same tactics, which are her husband's tools to rule her.

Margaret has gone through physical, mental and spiritual crisis throughout her life. She keeps on growing till she finds a state where she is happy and peaceful. Margaret's marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj is like a fairy tale for her. Ebenezer Paulraj loves Margaret Shanti from the bottom of his heart but is not ready to accept her individual likes and dislikes, whims and fancies and dreams and aims. Margaret's state, hands tied freedom, is excellently portrayed by Anita Nair. He loves her but he did not allow her individuality. Margaret is initially a little girl who says 'yes' to whatever her husband says and ready to do anything for him. She is jolted out of this role when she has to go for an abortion. He controls her completely. She is forced to do B.Ed., though she wants to do Ph.D. She is made to work only for her husband and he nags her all the time.

Ebenezer's love for food and sex becomes a tool for Margaret. She starts pampering Ebenezer with sex and food he likes the most in his life. The result he becomes fat, loses his vanity and needs her more and more. She, once controlled by him earlier, now holds him completely in her hands. A unique way adapted by Margaret helps her go back into the society, change her parents' outlook and attitude of her husband. Anita Nair artistically handles the strategy, finding and attacking the weakness of the opponent to win him. The heavy depression of Margaret, her silenced voice, her physical and mental sufferings, and the effort she takes to make her strong are the places where Anita Nair proves to be a notable writer of Indian Writing in English.

Janaki, another fellow passenger of *Ladies Coupe* is an example of age-old belief of Indian society that a woman should always depend on some man in her life. The comparison of woman with Sita or Savitri, epic characters of Indian Literature also insists this motive.

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons, if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband, in

default, upon those of her father, if she had no paternal kinsmen, upon the Sovereign, a woman must never govern herself as she likes.

According to Indian tradition, a woman is always synonymous with good wife. A good wife should be faithful, obedient and virtuous. Janaki is expected to take up this traditional role of women. She plays various roles such as a daughter, a wife and a mother but not an individual who claims her life to be her own. The secondary position becomes permanent for her. This is mainly due to the patriarchal pattern of her society, which is accepted as a natural phenomenon.

The problems of adjustment with the husband and his relatives have been the most widely treated problems in the novels written by Indian women novelists. This has been treated, for instance, by Nayantara Sehgal, Antia Desai, and Shashi Deshpande. These writers suggest that wives must be given more rights and not to be treated as inferior to their husbands; they should have a more positive outlook than the one they already have: the negative should be nullified.

Janaki gets married to Prabhakar, when she is eighteen year old and leads a happy, comfortable, long married life for forty years. Janaki's husband is a caring partner and she has a son and daughter-in-law. Janaki leads a happy life until she realizes her submissiveness. She feels some string of revolt when she finds her husband controlling everybody even their grown up son. She says to her husband, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding." (*Ladies Coupe* 30).

Prabhakar's overbearing dominance, exactness, and precision irritates Janaki. The life, which has gone smoothly, starts to find its ups and downs. She discovers herself and her true happiness that lies in her, but she is not able to take off the web under which she is covered for a long period. Her initial response to Akhila's query- "Why should a woman live by herself? - there is always a man willing to be with her" (*Ladies Coupe* 21), explains it. I am a woman who has always been looked after. First, there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Woman like me end up being fragile (22).

Sheela, the next narrator of *Ladies Coupe*, is a sensitive girl of fourteen year old, blessed with a deep insight. She looks at the family around her and relationship between her grandmother, mother and father and she understands the dynamics of life. Her grandmother teaches her practical life. She becomes attached to her grandmother until she dies and the attachment brings in maturity to Sheela. Her conversation with other fellow travelers seems to be matured one. The

knowledge of three generation women can be found in Sheela; her mother's and her grandmother's and also her own.

Anita Nair, with a psychological insight, skillfully utilizes the story of Marikolanthu to comment upon the sexual exploitation of village women. Marikolanthu's story recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. They never hesitate to blame the woman at the end. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that a woman's responsibility towards the family is total whereas any sort of other authority is conveniently denied to her. This society shuns thinking that the woman is strong-willed to create disastrous consequences if she is completely ignored.

In this way, the five different women tell us different stories and represent the social strata of Indian society. Margaret, a Chemistry teacher represents the women who are forced to lose their self-identity by their husbands. A fourteen year old girl Sheela's portrayal depicts the modern young women who are aware of their need of individuality. Marikolanthu, pictures the rural women who lose their life because of illiteracy and ignorance and Janaki stands for a pampered housewife's posture common to be found in India.

“Like a rag picker with an eagle eye, she [Nair] observes the ordinary lives of maidservants, 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 visualize them clearly - their faces, their bones, their desires...” (The Telegraph)

## REFERENCES

1. Nair, Anita. 2001, *Ladies Coupe*, Penguin Books, New Delhi.
2. Manohar, D.Murali 1994, “Indian Fiction women's Fiction: A Study of Marriage, Career and Divorce”, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt. Ltd., Delhi.
3. Mukherjee, Meenakshi, 1994. “Between Spaces of Silence: Women Creative Writers”, New Delhi.
4. Doctor Geeta, “She's Got A Ticket To Write”, published in *India Today*  
<anitanair.net>