

## Enslavement to Autonomy in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Where ladies get honour, god arrives there

A Hindu mythical slogan is not in practice even among the Hindu community but there is only on the pages of religious books. During the Pre-Aryan age women were gratis and equivalent to men. But from the medieval era, a male dominated society elevated from walls around her excluding her from the rights equal to men.

The writers from the mounting countries that are widely termed third world dominate modern literary scenario. Liberalization of educational rights and the freedom of speech and expression brought about by the end of the imperial rule in the earlier colonies could be the reason for the surge in the women's writing. These writers not only confer women's issues through their works but also use their writings as a tool to challenge and dismantle the authority forces of patriarchy.

The representational writings on Indian history have conventionally used gender to describe weakness or power. Women traditionally had occupied a secondary position, as they were economically dependent on the male earning members. Especially women in rural areas were exploited in many ways. They had a very low social status. They were denied education, as they belonged to the weaker section of the society.

It is gender inequality that has led to affirming femininity as a cultural construct engraving the society's views about women through conventions and inhibits woman's individuality. The term 'feminine' stands for woman herself and everything concerning her womanhood. It is body, passion and nature that define a woman's feminine personality, focusing on her psychological and physical nature of mothering and fostering life.

Women are often treated as inferior and are mingled to put themselves last, thus undermining their self-esteem. For the great majority of women the allocation of social and economical rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families and, in particular, that of the male head.

Colette Guillamin is a French feminist who writes about the discrimination of women under the basis of gender: women are doomed to belonging the "class of women" and they cannot flee this categorization in a male dominated world. Guillamin believes that the specific nature of the oppression of women is caused by the misappropriation of the class of women by the class of men, thus reducing women to the state of material stuff. Therefore, the relation between women and men is based on power. Men dominate women in any sphere of society and the appropriation is not only physical, but also social.

A woman is never anything but a woman, an interchangeable object with no other characteristic than her femininity, whose fundamental characteristic is belonging to the class of women. (Guillamin: 178)

The burden of gender has a strong influence on contemporary Indian fiction and it is reflected in the creation of women writers from different social, cultural and linguistic

backgrounds. Most Indian writers deal with gender in their works. Indian women novelists have forcefully focused light on the psyche of women of different streak in contemporary times of never ending existential struggle in their life. Like other novelists, Anita Nair, an eminent modern novelist, has focused on the marginalization of women in Indian society.

Her second novel *Ladies Coupe* is focused on gender related issues and on the shove of class and gender. The novel stresses the state of subjection of women and inequity of various kinds and the need of strength to fight against the suppression. The novel primarily deals with the struggle of a spinster, who is fascinated under the burden of the family.

Anita Nair introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinctive and apart in style, language, mannerism, beliefs and in particular how they choose a weapon and handle it. In ladies coupe Akhilandeswari, the protagonist meets five other women. Anita Nair uses the familiar narrative technique of a shared train journey intersecting with shared confessions.

The main protagonist and the narrator of the whole story is Akhilandeswari- Akhila for short – a Brahmin woman. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the women's stories: Janaki Prabhakar, the old woman in the coupe whose relationship with her husband is a "friendly love", Prabha Devi, the rich submissive wife who loves swimming because it metaphorically, gives her a sense of achievement, Margaret Paulraj, the chemistry teacher who succeeds in "disciplining" her narcissistic husband, Sheela Vasudevan, the fourteen year old girl whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for own future liberation and Marikolunthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class exploitation is the culmination of all other stories.

Of all the narrative of the six women the most fascinating and most compelling beautiful story is that of Akhila, mainly because she is in the journey of discovering her own identity, also because she finally emerges as a skilled barrier- competing victor of life. Akhila is forty-five, single and she works as an income-tax clerk. She has never been allowed to be a complete woman in all her life because she has to be the daughter, the sister, the aunt and the provider of the family. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, Akhila tries to break of all her conservative Brahmin life and decides to travel to the seaside town of Kanyakumari as a sense of escape. "So this then is Akhila. Forty five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect." (2)

Akhila listens patiently to the ups and downs of their life and she tries to find a solution to the question which torments her all her life: "Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?"

For Akhila the quest for an answer to this troublesome question becomes the quest for her identity. Akhila's responsibilities include maintenance of the house and ejecting her duties to the satisfaction of everyone. The quest for identity is carried out during the train journey; Akhila listens to the other women, but also rethinks of her past. Different figures of women emerge from Akhila's past: her mother, her neighbour Sarasa Mami, her Anglo-Indian friend Katherine and her widowed friend Karpagam.

Akhila's mother is a very traditional and conservative Brahmin woman following strictly the prescriptions of her own caste. She embodies the ideal Hindu good wife- the pativarta- and she does not revolt to the role forced on her by the society and tradition. On the contrary, she blindly accepts her role and also inculcates her daughters with these principles.

When her father passed away, her mother becomes a widow and she undergoes the ritual of widowhood. Her mother is deprived of the symbols of marriage, which is defined as symbols of gender discrimination. And being the eldest child of the parents, Akhila shoulders the responsibilities. Getting a job in the income tax department on compassionate grounds, she not only becomes the “man” of the family but also loses her individual choices. Being forced to play the role of the man in the family, Akhila deletes the essence of womanhood from herself to become a “Spinster, government employee, historian and eater of eggs” (90)

She forgets her womanhood and she is drawn into a helix of duties in guiding her brothers in their studies and career and also arranges their marriages. She forfeits everything for the sake of the family, but profound inside she rebels.

Akhila becomes stiff and starchy. The house is in order but the members have forgotten about Akhila’s emotion and her emotional needs. Akhila handles all burdensome tasks delicately and she’s allowed a bigger identity. Not called by her name, she gets the treatment of Akka, elder or older sister, the customary respectful address reserved to women either inside or outside the family group. Even her mother used to call her Ammadi. She feels at a conflict with her emotions. The surge in her inner nook tries to kindle her. She suffers an identity crisis. What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brothers and sister had always called her Akka. Elder sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. All women are Madam and men are Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Ammadi. As though to call Akhila by her name would be an affront to her head-of-the-household status. (84)

This reminds the readers about the Indian female condition where she is expected to spend her time to perform the role of the daughter, sister and breadwinner of the family to satisfy their needs. The readers are handled to the feeling when Akhila gets out of control and ask over her, “So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when she saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? Did the feel of rain on her bare akin send a line of goose bumps down her spine....”(84)

Akhila at thirty four is a single and lonely. Her singular form of revolt until now is seen when she wants to relish a cooked egg brought by an Anglo-Indian colleague Katherine, who teaches her how to eat an egg. She starts eating eggs thus transgressing the norms of Brahmins. Akhila is not a being without desires. She falls in love with Hari, a younger man and had an indulgent physical relationship. Akhila rediscovers the pleasure of being a woman with him. However, she decides to depart Hari because she is scared of the age difference between them and also she fears the social stigma.

The reason why Akhila is attracted towards Katherine was because she lives independently without being bothered about the neighbours and the society. And also she was the only person whom Akhila knew was not concerned within the four corners of the family-husband, baby, home and mother-in-law. The protagonist fights the world of injustices related to gender, class, caste and religion around her. In the novel *Ladies Coupe* caste, class, gender and religion become borders, walls and enclosures which isolate human beings.

Like Katherine another interesting character is Karpagam, one of Akhila’s old friends. Karpagam is a Hindu Brahmin widow, but a very modern and avant-garde one. Karpagam represents a “new woman” who lives independently following her own desires and impulses. She is not afraid of what the others think of her manners. Although she is a widow, she keeps on wearing colour garments and her nuptials jewellery thus go astray the norms of her caste.

Karpagam explains to Akhila that it is normal for a female to be feminine because it is in her personality. Finally she enlightens her to lead her life according to her own wishes.

The ladies coupe is gendered spatiality which allows women travellers to travel securely and comfortably. It is a place where male space is completely wiped away. Akhila has a stream of questions whose answers she attempts to find from her co-passengers who had seen more life and experienced the basic realities of living with four corners- husband, baby, home and mother-in-law.

When Akhila decides to depart her family and to go to live on her own, her sister and her brothers do not endorse her resolution. They cannot realise why she acts so strangely, talking about her personal needs and desires. After her father's death Akhila completely dedicated herself to her family, ignoring her own individuality. Akhila wants to be "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother."(207)

Akhila's situation assists her to think that woman could survive by herself and that marriage was inconsequential. She marvels how her co-passengers, although their settled lives were existing lives on periphery. Akhila is nosy to know about the experiences of being married and if there was any jeopardy in living alone. The stories of her co-passengers engender in Akhila an aspiration for life, a life she required to live on her own. She too, like her fellow citizens, should respect her womanly feelings and start her life afresh. Living unaccompanied in a sea-resort at Kanyakumari gives her ample time to reconsider and re-examine her needs. She decides to end her burden and initiate a new-fangled life.

Women can be strong if they are able to find the strength buried into their depths, one of the ordinary features shared by the female characters of *Ladies Coupe* is that most of them have forgotten to be a woman. The characters in the novel undertake the journey of subjugation and revolt on their lives. Men and women are indivisible and the bond between them is not only a right but also a rite. The ladies coupe gives women travellers a wisdom of audacity and sisterhood and also a clearer idea about their objective in life. These women have spent their lives being restricted into male-dominated and male-related spaces. The only way to survive with their agony is to ascertain their inner strength and to be sturdy, despite of family ties and social chauvinisms.

*Ladies Coupe* is an ideal paradigm of modern women's writing in India as it discovers entirely women's identities and their reliable relationship with the tradition, male-dominated culture and gender bigotry restrictions. Akhila not merely observed everything but has also given a persistent glimpse at her psyche. Finally she calls her lover Hari, back to begin a new life. It is a gendered novel which gives confidence and nerve to all women in the society.

Akhila, having discovered her true self in shared love, experiences a world of pure sensations. The new woman in her is manifested by her body language. She exults in her new found identity and liberty. Akhila learns through all experiences and realizes the futility of clinging to support systems, be it a man, a woman, or institutions, for ultimately everything leads to nothing, but one form of confinement or capture. She realizes the value of freedom.

Akhila decides that she needs companion in the journey of her life and she thinks Hari to be the right person. After listening to the life stories of the five women, she relives her experiences and decides that she has a right, even at the age of forty-five to seek her lover Hari and begin a new life. Her decision is her rebellion against the society and its repressive forces. She has had a spiritually and emotionally liberating journey and Akhila forms herself

and discovers life. She learnt life is attractive, thrilling and full of wonders. She learnt that it is in her hands to create happiness and it is her responsibility alone.

Akhila is undoubtedly a lucid example of the new woman who chooses freedom and sovereignty. Women can be strong if they are able to find the strength hidden into their depths. Akhila learns through all these experiences and realizes the senselessness of clinging it to support organizations, be it a man, be it a woman, or institutions; in the end everything leads to nothing but one form of captivity or capture of some kind.

Anita Nair gives an answer to the question whether a woman can survive alone by presenting an insight into the way of women live in India. There is an aspect of sympathy in all women. The author has touched on many controversial and sensitive subjects, but all with extreme elegance and caliber. She talks about untouchability, casteism, cultural and religious bias, betrayal, abuse and disrespect of women, domination of power and money and even homosexuality. The novel remains an uplifting tale of womanhood, love and endurance. It brings out the preferences women make for themselves and options made for them. Akhila's experience teaches that a female can survive and get her identity and liberty not by keeping herself secluded from the male-dominated society but by co-operating with them.

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