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Social Consciousness in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract:

Social consciousness is a feeling that is experienced by all the persons within a society. It essentially means to be conscious of the rules or beliefs prevailing within a society or community which gives them feeling of equality and safeguarding their personnel interest. It also relates to interdependence of a person and society on each other. All the people have been influenced by the culture, beliefs, traditions, norms prevailing in society. However the extent to which an individual is influenced by the society depends on the circumstances and the level of exposure. An artist possesses a penetrating insight into the reality of things and thus with the help of perceptual philosophical understanding he tries his own way to spread social consciousness and awareness among the people and Anita Nair is one of such devoted Indian writers of the present times. She valiantly expresses her views on women's suffering in contemporary Indian society. This Paper represents how Nair tries to spread social consciousness among the people through her novel *Ladies Coupe*.

Keywords: Consciousness, Society, Coupe, Exploitation, Suffering, discrimination.

Anita Nair is one of the eminent women novelists in contemporary India; she has earned honors for her originality, propensity and for her societal dedication. She presents women characters in her novels with full of enormous courage. As an Indian woman and the experiences of women around her she very perfectly understood the societal-cultural problems of women. "Anita Nair, like the veteran Anita Desai started writing at the age of seven or eight and both of them began doing so in their moments of emotional outbursts" (Mishra100). *Ladies' coupe* provides a poignant and realistic description of continuous efforts of women for the establishment of their identity in their society. Nubile stated that "*Ladies Coupe* is a perfect example of contemporary women's identities and their conflictual relationship with tradition, male dominated society, gender discrimination and class and caste constraints. It is a novel in which fiction merges with reality and where female voices are authentic" (Nubile74). Through the example of six women characters Anita Nair tries to demonstrate that what women should do for their liberation and how our society can become conscious about them. Akhilandeswari is a protagonist and a narrator in the novel. Myles analyses that "Anita Nair refers to the avatar of the Devi Akhilandeswari to insist on the many-headed but unitary subjectivity of women"(Myles128). Akhila is born in a middle class Brahmin family; she is unmarried but at the age of 45 she

becomes aggravated as “Dreaming for escape and space. Hungry for life and experience” (LC 2). So she decides to go on a long trip by train in search of such an unrivaled question which obsessed her throughout her life “Can a woman live by herself” (LC 21). This one question troubled her all life. In an interview Anita Nair says, “To me, Akhila in some sense enjoyed being a martyr. She's not an exceptionally strong woman. She is just somebody who has coped.” (The Hindu, 2 Dec.2001). Akhila receives a seat in ‘Ladies coupe, a compartment in a train specially reserved for the ladies passengers. In that Coupe there are five other passengers. Akhila asks them about the condition of women in Indian society. They all enthusiastically tell their story to each other as they all are the strangers and never going to meet again. Furthermore they all are the victims of Indian male dominated society. Mishra stated that “Their backward journey helps them to understand the major bruises and injuries experienced by them in course of their life” (Mishra102) When Akhila’s father died she was only nineteen years old and in that age, she got a job of clerk in the income tax department. Nineteen is the age group when most of the young girls are romantic about their bright perspective in future life but Akhila had to take the entire burden of her family on her shoulders without any complaint. She is the eldest and only earning member in her family even then she is supposed to take the permission of her younger brother if she wants to go out, just because of the fact that he is a man and she, a woman. Here Anita Nair presents a concept of Patriarchy, in which a woman is required to remain dependent upon man. She tries to affirm that women are only biologically different from men but it doesn’t mean that a woman should be subjugated and demoralized only on the basis of this difference. Anita Nair powerfully believes, “You are the person who holds your destiny in your hands, Even if the whole world conspires against you to push you down and rub your face into dust, at some point that foot will be lifted off and you will stand up.” (Youtube.Oct.2013). This type of terminology reflects her courageous and gutsy attitude. She gives an enormous apparition of women’s life. Akhila’s mother is not worried about her daughter’s desires as she is a traditional woman. She has her own theories and principles as she always teaches Akhila how a good wife should serve her husband:

First of all, no good wife could serve two masters- the masters being her father and her husband. 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. ‘There is no such thing as an equal to marriage,’ Amma said. ‘It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to husband. That way there can be no strife, no disharmony. (LC14).

Her mother is an ideal Hindu wife therefore she imagines that her daughter should follow her philosophy and thoughts. Her mother leaves every single decision on her father as she thinks that her husband knows best. “We have never had to regret any decision that he has taken, even when it was on my behalf” (LC 14). Women experience such distress and they are failing to make out the accurate path leading to their own character growth. Beauvoir stated that “Woman is bound in a general way to contest foot by foot the rule of man, through recognizing his over- all supremacy and worshipping his idols” (Beauvoir 622).

Akhila had a love affair with Hari, a north Indian young man. It was a diminutive love affair though they made physical love several times. Akhila suddenly broke this relationship. She says, “Hari this is goodbye I will never see you again” (153). Because he was younger than her and she was also anxious what people and society would think if this love affair would be disclosed? She is so agonized that she mentions “Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the

question in their minds: what is he doing with an older woman? That bothers me very much, Hari. It bothers me very much that we are not suited so she decides to remain single.”(159). In the concluding part of the novel Akhila is a changed and revolutionary woman with full of strength and she also enjoys sexual pleasure with a stranger. “Akhila is lust” (LC 274). As an acclaimed writer, Anita Nair makes it explicable that her intention of writing novels is to give emphasis on the depressed situation of women in Indian society. She is very much anxious about the exploitation of women by the male members which encourages her to write for the exploited. “Anita Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they cannot avoid. She portrays women as not totally cut off from familial social ties but women who remains with those orbits and protest against injustice and humiliation” (Kalamani143)

Margret Shanthi is portrayed as a well educated and gold medalist in Chemistry but still dominated by her husband, Ebenzer Paulraj who is a school principal, gives first importance to her career rather than her desires. He never tries to respond to her feelings. Margret wants to do doctorate but he always compels her to become a teacher. He tells her to cut her long hair because it doesn't suit her. As a good wife she always obeys her husband but a deep burst of storm comes in her life when she conceives and her husband tells her to abort their first baby as revealed by her, “He dismissed me as someone of no significance” (LC 96). Against her own wish she aborts her baby. “Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer” (Beauvoir 502). When she was going to abort her baby, her husband wished her All the Best. “For the first time, I felt angry. All the best! What did he mean by that? Was I going to write an exam or recite a poem? Was I going to run a race or perform an experiment? All the best for what? I had nothing to do but lie there while they scraped my baby off the inside of my womb” (LC 109). These words strikes in her heart like an arrow as these words are spoken to somebody when one is going to do some good work. Her husband does not find any fault in suggesting her to abort her first baby as if she would be doing a good work. “Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature” (Beauvoir 508). After the abortion a type of disintegration comes in their marriage, as Margret wants to take revenge for her insult. For the sake of her family and the male dominating society in which she lives, she doesn't allow herself to leave him, so she chooses another method to destroy his self respect and ego. She starts feeding him with oily food, till he curves into a stout and becomes fatty. Her revolting spirit has been shown by the novelist, “God didn't make Ebenzer Paulraj a fat man. I did. I, Margret Shanthi, did it with the sole desire for revenge” (LC 96). She changed Ebenzer into a fat man and now he was almost fit for nothing and slowly he became fatter as unable to shift and systematize anything. His school was not even his under now. As the time passed Margret again conceives and gives birth to a baby girl. Marriage is not a union between two bodies but a union between two souls. Since childhood every girl dreams about her marriage as it's an important part of her life and when she gets married she only yearns for extra love and care from her husband but if her husband to whom she devotes her entire life makes fun of her emotions then where this women will go? Anita Nair through the example of Margret's character reflects that not even an illiterate woman but also a well educated woman feels herself trapped in such a society. Their low social position can be seen in their homes where they are still treated like as an object to fulfill men's sexual desire. Women's position in India is a kind of a contradiction because on one side she is regarded as Devi while on the other side she is distressed by her own family members, thus they have to traverse through a long way as their path is filled with a number of obstacles.

The other Lady passenger in the coupe Prabha Devi is one who is very pretty and conscious about her beauty. She doesn't want to conceive as she tells her husband. "There are many ways in which pregnancy can be avoided. Jagdeesh stiffened in shame and embarrassment. What kind of a woman was she? My parents are getting impatient. They talk of a grandchild all the time. We have been married for almost a year now, he said, caressing the side of her neck." (LC 179). Here Nair's main center of attention is the attitude of an Indian husband towards his wife. She explores how Indian women become marionettes in the hands of their husband and every time or at every point in their life women are still forced to make sacrifice for the sake of the desires and happiness of others. Margret and Prabha Devi both are facing the same problem; both are trapped under same dilemma as Margret is one who wants to conceive a child while Prabha doesn't want to be a mother. One who is going against her own desire to abort her child and the other has to conceive just to fulfill the desire of her husband. Here the husbands have been shown indifferent towards the feelings and desires of their wives.

When Prabha Devi was born her father was not happy as he wanted a male child. "Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance" (LC169). Here Anita Nair presents gender bigotry in Indian society where a girl is still considered inferior to a boy. Nair has expressed the pleasure of Prabha's mother when she gave birth to her, "This one daughter of hers gave her more pleasure than all her four sons put together" (LC170). Discrimination towards women in India is going on for a long time. It wholly affects a woman's life. Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupe* attempts to show that how people in India still treat women as inferior and how they get a substandard position in the society just because of their physical distinctiveness. Nair enforces women to have their own identity in the society where they live. Through these women characters she encourages women to raise their voice and express their feelings so that they would be able to make other people understand the value of their existence.

Marikolanthu is a low -caste woman. When she was young she was raped by Murugesan, an upper- class man and one of the relatives of her employers. A ferocious result of the rape came when she became pregnant. She is forced to marry a rapist "a filthy animal" (LC 245). She refused to marry him. She is a victim but everyone blames her. "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape" (LC245). The word rape is the most awful word in women's life. When a girl is raped she feels ashamed as she is helpless and unable to protect her own self. When Marikolanthu is raped, instead of showing sympathy, everyone blames her. Here Anita Nair tries to delineate the psychology of all the members male or female in society find fault with the woman who has been exploited as she herself is regarded responsible for her tragedy. This incident reminds me Delhi rape case. Recent death of Delhi rape sufferer presents a malicious depiction of men's aggressive nature towards women. When this debacle event took place, some conservative people in India put their opinion that a girl herself is responsible for her tragedy because she usually wears inappropriate attire and fascinates men. This type of outlook forces everyone to think that parents should take extra care of their sons and to show them the right path in life. After that disastrous incident, Marikolanthu spends her days in a phase of complete loss of identity. After some time she gave birth to a male child, Muthu. She is unable to love her baby Muthu, an outcome of that hateful incident and of her helplessness and nothingness. One day she sold him to Murugesan. "It was time Murugesan

paid for what he did to me” (LC265). He didn’t know that this boy was his own son. At this moment, Marikolanthu was flared with happiness and she has a proper sagacity of satisfaction in her mind. When Murugesan died, his body was not fully burnt so Muthu has been given the task to take care of his father’s dead body. In these circumstances she accepts her son and starts enjoying the most important part of her life ‘The Motherhood’. “Becoming a mother in her turn, the woman in a sense takes the place of her own mother: it means complete emancipation for her” (Beauvoir 511). Nair sets down her imagination and breezy thoughts in simple words. She is one, among those novelists who made a valiant approach to elevate her tone against the aggression, violence, oppression and exploitation of women.

Janaki is the eldest lady in all of six ladies in Coupe. She was married at the age of eighteen and her husband was of twenty –seven. It was an arranged marriage. Simone De Beauvoir defines marriage as “The destiny traditionally offered to women by Society” (445) When Janki got married she didn’t know the real meaning of marriage and her responsibilities as a wife in a family where she is supposed to play the role of an ideal Indians housewife. “All through her girlhood marriage was a destination she was being groomed for” (LC25). From her childhood she had been taught that a husband is an equal to God and it is her duty to serve him “He is your husband and you must accept whatever he does” (LC25). She realizes that her life is not her own life as it’s wholly dedicated to her husband and to her son. She is always snagged between home and society “Indian women are deeply linked to social, cultural, religious and regional features and their identity is thus multi-layered” (Nubile1). Throughout her life Janki’s husband has been an outline for her and never leaves her alone. “I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son. Waiting to take off from where his father left” (LC 22-23). The entire life of an Indian woman is fully dedicated to her husband and to her family. One can find an up gradation in the status of women as there are certain laws for their betterment and a wave of women empowerment is there but in reality their condition is still same even in contemporary society. They are not self dependent or able to live their own life, they are always under the control of their parents and of their husbands after marriage. They are not supposed to think about their own freedom they still feel themselves trapped under the chains which emotionally, physically and intellectually affect them. Nair explores that every women should try to be cautious about their rights and for the expression of their individual capability.

Sheela is the youngest girl in the compartment. She is only fourteen years old and hardly recognizes the meaning of masculinity and femininity. But Sheela has to face the sourness of the femininity as her friend Hasina’s father tries to seduce her. He swabs her upper lips with his forefinger. “Thereafter, Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina’s home” (LC66). Sexual exploitation of a girl child displays the dark side of masculinity. These incidents are humiliating and insulting for women. Most of the time girls feel themselves unable to share these shameful experiences with their family members or others. Sheela decides never to go to Hasina’s house. Nair very intensely tries to pay her attention on the subject of women in contemporary society and tries her level best to accumulate the data regarding women’s problems and their suffering.

Sheela loves her Grandmother Achamma so intensely that she always thinks about her Grandmother’s death. Her grandmother was one who at the age of sixty nine was self confident and courageous. She was considered as a model for Indian women, a manifestation of femininity. Every night before going to sleep, she speckled her face and neck with calamine lotion. “Woman

is haunted by the horror of growing old” (Beauvoir 587). She thinks, “If she were to die in her sleep, she would do so looking her best. Her children, of course, dismissed it as a sign of age and its concurrent eccentricity.” (LC68). Sheela called her as Ammamma. When she dies, Sheela speedily eradicates the thin stands from her chin and brushed almost all weak hair on her head. She rubbed one of her aunt’s foundation into her face and decorated her with heavy jewellery. Karpagam is a widow and a childhood friend of Akhila. She has courage to wear the kumkum and colorful clothes. Akhila was surprised when she knew this and asked her about her family reaction on this. “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. Tell me, didn’t we as young girls wear colorful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It isn’t a privilege that marriage sanctions. The way I look at it, it is natural for a woman to be feminine. It has nothing to do whether she is married or not or whether her husband is alive or dead” (LC202). Akhila is fascinated and says “Karpagam, are you real or are you some goddess who has come here to lead me out of this” (LC 202). Through her work she conveys that women want to make themselves free from the restraints of tradition. She wants to live a free life in male dominating society. This novel induces women to imagine in relation to their strength and about their self- identity. She tries to integrate the chronic female occurrence in her writing.

To sum it can be said that Anita Nair is a one of those Indian English novelists who with her impressive technique of novel-writing give a real description of women’s wretched condition in Indian society. On one side Nair explores women’s agony and on the other side she suggests a number of ways to fight back against these agonies to make their life a fruitful and peaceful one. Her women characters are not weak; they are courageous and possess an impressive audacity and will power to fight back against social evils. Anita Nair’s novels can be considered a microcosm of female world.

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