



Transgressions and Celebrations: A Reading of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts a feminist reading of Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* by examining how women negotiate identity and agency within a patriarchal social structure. The novel interrogates dominant cultural constructions of female subjectivity, sexuality, and domesticity across various cultures through a feminist lens. Anita Nair's women, who boldly articulate their thoughts and ideas about their identity and freedom, are not passive recipients of patriarchal norms but active agents who develop varied strategies for self-assertion and survival. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explains, factors like ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status interact simultaneously to shape a person's lived experience. The novel shows how the intersections of gender, caste, and class shape the lives of women across different social backgrounds and generations. Invariably, the lived experiences of the women in the novel, who come from different social and cultural milieus, vary. They try to make sense of their own existence by talking about their gendered experiences. Anita Nair skillfully crafts the ways women negotiate and resist the gendered power structures that seek to constrain them in the novel, exploring themes such as female desire, bodily autonomy, mobility, and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: *Ladies Coupe*, identity, agency, intersectionality, gender, subjectivity, autonomy.

Female solidarity and friendship are central to the women's movement, which assumes that "all women have certain areas of experience in common on which a sense of identification can be founded" (Gamble 315). Anita Nair encapsulates this as the central theme of her novel *Ladies Coupe*, calling it "a novel about ordinary women and their indomitable spirit..." (*Ladies* vii). While acknowledging her debt to a few women of her acquaintance, she proclaims that their strength, courage and instinct for joy have inspired her to write this novel. In a conversation with Sneha Subramanian Kanta, she expounds on her views on feminism, though she refuses to label herself a feminist:

To me, feminism in the Indian context is about recognising the importance of the female self and to be able to nurture it. Very often, we Indian women tend to negate ourselves as something that is expected of us. In fact, there may be no pressure at all from extraneous sources for us to do so. Perhaps it is conditioning or perhaps it is lack of self-esteem; we do not consider ourselves important enough and so we tend to put our needs and desires on the back burner. This is what needs to be addressed. And this to me is what feminism ought to tackle.

Ladies Coupé, published in 2001, has received widespread critical acclaim for its portrayal of women's subjectivities and their diverse forms of resistance to patriarchal structures in Indian society. The novel established Anita Nair as a major voice in contemporary Indian women's writing, and critical studies on the text have primarily focused on its subtle yet powerful critique of patriarchy, domesticity, and gendered expectations. "The spark of post-colonial feminism one sees in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair is powerful and significant. Nair is the most self-revealing champion for women's emancipation Her mature artistry of presentation of women's woes in the Tamil social context of the 1990s is celebrated as unique" (Muthusamy 89).

In the novel, a few women, in retrospect, articulate their thoughts and ideas about their lives and individuality. The interlinkages of gender, caste, and class in their society presumably bind women across different classes and generations, and they narrate how they resist and deflect gendered modes of power. They internalise their society's androcentric assumptions; later, when they realise the fatigue of their passive existence, they forge new modes of resistance by learning to "rise above traditions to float" (Nair 208). Women travellers in the ladies' coupe of the train are, in the author's words, like "Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other's lives..." (22). She unveils the energy and inspiration that women can impart to one another through their bonds. Women of different circumstances who meet together in the ladies' coupe of the train to Kanyakumari include Akhilandeshwari, the 45-year-old income tax clerk; the middle-aged housewife Janaki; Margret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher; Prabha Devi, the housewife of an upper-class family; the teenager Sheela; and the thirty-one-year-old Marikolanthu. All women share their experiences with Akhila, the central character, and leave a bolder, more obdurate Akhila, who had been struggling to make a strong decision about her future. Here, each woman empathises with Akhila and willingly talks to her about their private lives. Akhila's friendships with her schoolmate Karpagam, who chides her for wallowing in self-pity, and with her colleague Katherine Webber delight and strengthen her a lot. Throughout the novel, Anita Nair foregrounds the theme of female bonding and solidarity, a central principle upheld by feminist movements.

The title of the story—*Ladies Coupe* — suggests a long journey, and women travellers are a rare theme in Indian novels due to social inhibitions about women's mobility. Journey is used as a powerful narrative device to bring together stories of many women's lives in a single context of intimacy and sharing. In her travelogue, *KooKooKooKooTheevandi*, Anita Nair recounts that she

has hardly read any travelogue by a woman writer (128). This reveals that, though there are many women travel writers, they have hardly been promoted and have not been included in the literary canon of travelogues, so they have not gained much popularity. This denotes the social prejudice against women travellers. A lone woman traveller is often condemned and ridiculed by Indian society. The destinations and motives of women in the novel are different, and for Akhilandeswari, that is a pure journey to freedom and escape from the life she is expected to live (4). The opening itself sets the tone of the novel: "This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape" (1). For the first time in her life, apart from her routine office journeys, Akhila is undertaking a long journey alone to defy the norms of her society that have bound her hitherto. Here, Anita Nair depicts a woman leaving her home for the public domain to free herself, treating her journey as an act of liberation from the claustrophobic existence she has been leading up to this point. Her sudden decision to travel alone to Kanyakumari shocks her family, but she is adamant, with a fierce protest against the multitude of ways society has been curbing her freedom. In Kanyakumari, an alien land of dreams for Akhila, she enjoys her status as a lonely woman traveller, which is a rarity in the Indian context. She braves the comments and stares from strangers that a lonely woman traveller often faces. Through the journey, Akhila tries to seek all that has been denied to her--her freedom, love, desires, sexuality, and friendship. She tries to free herself from her own inhibitions and prejudices about gender stereotypes, and thereby, Akhila's journey has also become a journey inwards that helps her to break gender inhibitions.

In the ladies' coupe of the train to Kanyakumari, camaraderie develops among the inmates, and Akhila shares her perennial doubt with others about whether women can live alone. Instead of burdening Akhila with their advice, each of them chooses to share their experiences with her.

Eventually, their urge to unravel their mind and feelings has become palpably sharper than Akhila's fervour to listen. Against the norms of patriarchal society, which often enforce silence on women through prohibitions and taboos, here women are getting a space to give vent to their feelings. They are "trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen" (136). It also becomes a deliberate effort by those women to break the silences in their lives by discussing undisclosed incidents and unearthing feelings hidden in the recesses of their minds. Many issues related to girls, such as socialisation, customs related to menstruation, sexual encounters, female desires, single or marital life, hetero/homo sexualities, experience of undergoing a medical process of MTP and so on, become part of their narration.

Whether women can live alone has been a topic of discussion in Indian society since ancient times. Manu, the ancient lawmaker, has laid down that the father should protect a woman in her childhood, her husband in her youth, and her son in her old age. Even today, society follows the law, as a single woman is still considered unnatural in Indian society, so a woman living alone or a lone woman traveller is often looked upon suspiciously. Sudhir Kakar, in his study "Feminine Identity in India", observes:

First of all, where and when tradition governs, an Indian woman does not stand alone; her identity is wholly defined by her relationships to others. For although in most societies, a woman (more than a man) defines herself in relation and connection to other people, this is singularly true of Indian women. The dominant psycho-social realities of her life can be condensed into three stages: First, she is the daughter to her parents. Second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter-in-law to his parents). Third, she is a mother to her sons (and daughters). (44- 45)

Akhila becomes a problem for her siblings, as her identity cannot be defined in this way. Single women like her are expected to live under the protection of other family members. However, soon after her father's death, Akhila has carried the image of a saviour of her family. In her mother's opinion, Akhila has saved her family from poverty and ignominy while her relative Sarasa Mami resorted to sex work as a livelihood after the death of their breadwinner. Through her hard work, Akhila provides her young siblings with education and dowries, marries them off, and looks after her mother until her death. Akhila, now in her forties, wishes to lead a life for herself in her own house, enjoying her freedom. However, by then Akhila becomes a liability, and her wish to live alone threatens the respectability of her family. She is repeatedly told by her siblings that a woman cannot live alone, and in their opinion, Akhila, as an unmarried woman, should be protected by them. She is compelled to live with her sister Padma, but Padma undermines her peace of mind by deliberately taunting her and depicting her as a perverted woman in front of the neighbours. V. Geeta observes: "Until recently, in most countries, women who did not marry, or were not fertile, who became widows at a young age or were 'defeminised' in other ways—because they did not conform to conventional reproductive norms—were viewed with horror and suspicion" (7).

The novelist problematises female sexuality, and in a society where sex outside conjugality is proscribed, unmarried Akhila is afraid of the desiring self in her. Though Akhila wishes for a partner in her life, she has been too timid to broach the subject with her family, and they, too, pretend to be oblivious. She discontinues her affair with Hari, a co-passenger on her train to her workplace, whom she befriends, as she is scared of social ostracism against her relationship with a man who is many years younger than her. She tries to hide her desires behind the image of an elder sister of the family, or Akka, who sacrifices everything for the family's welfare. She ceases

to wear bright colour dresses “to hide herself in the drab moth tones” (4), and she considers her starched cotton saris a symbol of her stiffness of mind.

Nivedita Menon remarks in her observation on Indian society: “The porous borders evident here between the categories of ‘unmarried woman’, ‘widow’ and ‘prostitute’--each of them a woman unbound by marriage--reflects the intense patriarchal anxiety about controlling female sexuality” (133). Therefore, in the novel, when Akhila initiates sex with Vinod, whom she meets at Kanyakumari, it is for her-- “A need satiated. Her past purged. A point proven to herself” (Nair 275). Swamped in lust, Akhila is imagined as the Shakthi, the powerful Akhilandeshwari, the goddess of the universe and her ten incarnations. Anita Nair celebrates female power, equating it with the ten entities of goddess Sakti, and Akhila becomes powerful when she breaks a social taboo.

Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, comments on a strange, silent, growing sense of dissatisfaction that American women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century, as they felt, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (32). Friedan probes into the various social forces that have foregrounded the image of ‘Happy Housewife’ who is not interested in politics, national issues, art, science, ideas, adventure, education, and “who had no thoughts for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the house” (18); and that tied women to such an image. Thus, family remains at the centre of women’s identity, and at the same time a major site of women’s oppression. Therefore, the first step in feminist consciousness-raising involves recognising and articulating this oppression within the family. The representation of women’s resistance to the family in fiction occurs either through their negotiation of power within it, through their attempts to escape its restrictions, or through both (Rajan 81). Each narrative in *Ladies Coupe* is imbued with hints of such power struggles that exist within the family. The

middle-aged Janaki, a middle-class housewife, has always led a sheltered life. She was first protected by her father, then by her husband, and now she feels tired of being a fragile creature. “Women like me end by being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses” (Nair 22-23). Once she believed women’s sole duty was to get married and be a good mother and wife, and she worked hard to fulfil her duties, adhering to “that tired old cliché that a home was a woman’s Kingdom” (23). Janaki has camouflaged the drab monotony of her life with the myth of a happy, contented homemaker who scarcely sought a space for herself beyond the conventional roles. However, she suddenly feels that her home no longer interests her, and all the values she cherishes become insignificant as restlessness unravels in her mind in her middle age.

The vacuum in her soul and the fragility in her character nauseate Janaki. Her doctor and her husband, Prabhakar, consider her restlessness as natural to women who have reached the stage of menopause. Prabhakar is a partner who has always been gentle and loving, and he promptly shares household duties with Janaki. However, her husband’s incessant role-playing as the family’s provider and protector irritates her. Gender norms of a traditional society assign men the roles of protector and nurturer and women the roles of the protected and the sheltered, and her husband dons these roles very well throughout his life. Her son accuses her of being a spoiled one who is unable to do anything alone. But the realisation does not prompt any action on Janaki’s part, and she seeks recourse and happiness in the familiarity and friendly love she has shared with Prabhakar for the last forty years.

Margaret Shanthi is a chemistry teacher at the school where her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, serves as principal. Though a career woman, she can hardly claim equal status with him, as the school is only an extension of her home. He plays the role of a Daddy, subjecting everything to his hegemonic gaze in the house as well as at school. Margaret, the gold medallist in MSc

chemistry, was once blindly in love with him. Her parents, impressed by his well-built body and aristocratic family, fully supported her choice. During the first months of marriage, her only wish is to appease him, which results in continual self-negation. At his insistence, she abandons her academic interests and higher studies for a career, joining the school where he is principal. Though highly educated, she has hidden her personality behind the gloss of wifely subservience. She yields to his decision to abort her first pregnancy, though her mind rebels against it, and undergoes the trauma of MTP. He wishes to see her always as a lovely girl, and she realises that Margaret Shanthi, the woman, has no place in his mind. Later, this total acquiescence to his ego and forced self-effacement render her restless and unhappy, and she loathes his vanity, hypocrisy and hegemony. In public as well as in private spaces, he continues to humiliate her to satisfy his ego. Though she wishes, she cannot break free from the marriage due to her parents' strong disapproval of divorce. Stealthily, she expresses her protest. She destroys her slim, delicate body, the symbol of her femininity in his concept, by overeating. "I hated to look myself in the mirror. But at least I was no longer daddy's little girl" (123). Ebenezer is proud of his muscular body, which, for him, is a symbol of his masculinity, and he maintains it by guarding his keen appetite and through hours of exercise. She sabotages his muscular body, the seat of his vanity, through rich, big, salacious meals, thereby reducing him to a fat man who waddles. Evidently, she cannot fully transgress the conventional domestic space or gender roles, as she continues to bear the responsibility of preparing food alone. In addition, she has to retain a relationship in which neither has sincerity for the other. However, she presumes that life has become much easier to live since there is no power struggle between them, as she has freed herself from his egotism and domineering attitudes. Margaret, who appears self-sufficient to Akhila, believes that her virtue is her "immunity to what people think of me" (136).

Being a spirited woman, Prabha Devi cannot hide her true self behind the façade of docility. Though her partner Jagdeesh likes her gay spirited self, it always embarrasses him, due to his fear that her behaviour may annoy his parents. However, her encounter with a male friend, Pramod, who attempts to violate her body, is enough to quench all her spirits. Prabha Devi is extremely shocked and more dismayed by the fear that someone might have witnessed the incident and might consider her a brazen woman. Thereafter, she decides to lock away the gay spirited woman in her who has caused her mental trauma by attracting another's attention. She withdraws from every activity outside the home, gives up her confident, fearless strides, and becomes a different woman, beyond reproach and above all suspicion: "With eyes forever downcast and busy hands" (183). Her fear of her body leads her to a total self-denial and a total withdrawal of all her desires, appetites and her former high-spirited nature. She knows Jagdeesh has never been a domineering man, but she lets him rule her. Now he starts questioning her about the money she utilises and the time she spends away from home. Prabha Devi seeks the golden path of marriage, where one can freely enjoy both companionship and equality with one's partner. After many years, when she can no longer bear the ennui of her passive existence, she again ponders doing something for herself to save her from it. Her lessons in swimming, which she secretly manages to learn while accompanying her son to the tennis court of the club, help her to regain her lost confidence and gay spirit. Here, swimming becomes a symbolic act through which she conquers the fear of her body. While lying afloat, she feels her body is no longer an object that may be violated or disgraced by society at any time and that she is the sole owner or the subject of her body. Prabha Devi reflects on how to subvert gender restrictions and to be free from inhibitions or over-concern regarding her body. She learns to make bolder movements and claim her mind and body, and discovers how

to do more with her time instead of always remaining tied up in the routine duties of an upper-class housewife.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent American civil rights advocate who coined the term ‘intersectionality’, contends that the experiences of Black women are shaped by a combination of race- and gender-based prejudices, and such experiences could not be adequately addressed by considering racial and sexual discrimination separately. Intersectionality “emphasizes that different dimensions of identity are not isolated from one another; instead, they intertwine and overlap in intricate ways, resulting in distinct advantages or disadvantages, benefits or harms” (Samie). Therefore, feminist criticism should be sensitive to differences in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and the same yardsticks cannot be used to measure the condition of women of different classes, castes, or racial situations. The nexus between caste, class and gender has defeated the last narrator, Marikolanthu. Her words unfurl a story of stark insecurity and grim poverty since she belongs to the lower strata of society. She is initiated into her unsheltered life as the servant of the richest Chettiar family of the village, who thrive through silk manufacturing and exploitation of the poor class. Marikolanthu’s widowed mother, from morning to night, endures the endless toil of preparing food for the Chettiar family, which demands the total service of mother and daughter. The Chettiar family exploits their poverty and dominates them mentally and physically. Her mother sows the seeds of subservience and masochism in Marikolanthu’s mind: “We shouldn’t expect anything from anyone. That way there will be no disappointment” (221), and teaches her to be satisfied with the meagre wage they get. Therefore, Marikolanthu renders her heartless service to Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of the Chettiar family, and looks after her son without expecting any reward other than Sujata’s leniency. Clara Nubile, in her study on gender, class and caste in the Indian context, comments that “violence is first gender- related,

but also caste and class-related, as Dalit and tribal women are often the target of male violence and they are systematically beaten up or raped by the police or by upper-caste men” (27). Being born as a lower-class woman, a daughter of the working class, everybody around her tries only to exploit and later discard her. She is raped by Murugesan, brother-in-law of the Chettiar family, and as a result, is disowned and discarded by her brothers. Sujata eventually throws her out of the Chettiar house, even without giving her wages. While Marikolanthu suffers physical, psychological and social implications of rape, including her pregnancy, no one dares to tell Murugesan about the aftermath of his crime. Conversely, Marikolanthu has to confront her mother's helpless ranting and her brothers' rage, who dispossess and expel her from the family for destroying its respectability. In her mother's opinion, her life is over, and she will “end up in the gutter like a street dog with its litter” (245).

Nivedita Menon delves into the social implications of rape that often punish not the perpetrators but the victims:

In the patriarchal perspective, rape is a fate worse than death; there is no normal life possible for the raped woman; the way to avoid rape is to lock women up at home, within the family, under patriarchal control. In this understanding, the raped woman is responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed the *lakshman rekha* of time (by going out after dark) or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (by dressing in unconventional ways or by leaving the four walls of her home at all. (113)

While recognising rape as a fatal crime, feminists try to demystify rape and reject the idea of rape as a fate worse than death. In the feminist view, ‘the rape survivor’, a word feminism prefers over rape victim, does not lose her honour, and it is the rapist who should be disgraced (115-116,140).

Murugesan's brutal rape of Marikolanthu is an act of revenge and class antagonism as well as sexual violence. Murugesan, a member of the upper-class family, turns intolerant seeing the well-groomed Marikolanthu in Chettiyar's house. His repugnance heightens when he sees her in modern dresses and watches on her wrists. For him, the rape is also an act of reminding her who she really is, and in his opinion, he has the right to use her body since "I knew all about the women like you. If the Chettiar sons can feast on the body of yours... remember I am a relative" (249). This articulates much about prejudices cherished by the high caste and high class against the low-class women and about their morality. Being the brother-in-law of the richest family in the village, Murugesan is least bothered about justice. While the perpetrators of rape are considered irreproachable in society, the offended are further violated through character assassination and attacks on their moral behaviour. For Marikolanthu's brothers, she is an outsider who has trespassed into a land of shame and, therefore, has no room or rights in her home. Mother's compulsion of Marikolanthu to marry Murugesan reinforces the same sexist notion that is rampant in society about rape survivors. "The morals of Indian society do not permit consensual sex outside marriage, but if you rape a woman, you can marry her!" (N. Menon 114). In the patriarchal view, a woman is property, that needs to be passed on untarnished from one owner to another. The adolescent Marikolanthu, due to her ignorance and fear, is forced to hide the incident of rape from others. Her mother seeks the help of her aunt Periamma, whose attempts to abort her pregnancy crudely fail, and Marikolanthu gives birth to a male child. Her mother's reluctance to seek medical help for an abortion for fear of social ignominy thwarts Marikolanthu's right to abortion and the right to determine her pregnancy. In the feminist perspective, "safe and legal abortion is an essential right of self-determination"(N. Menon 203) . Marikolanthu thereafter lives by negating her own self, in total servitude and subservience in the Chettiar household, performing various

roles such as a caretaker for mad Chettiar Amma, an assistant to Sujata, and so on. It is often found that traditional Indian society values and respects motherhood. But here the same motherhood becomes a cause of shame for Marikolanthu, and she is expelled from her own family by her brothers. Owing to the patriarchal society's reluctance to accept the children born out of wedlock, her son is brought up as a consequence of the rape, and his human rights are largely violated. The child is totally neglected by Marikolanthu, and after her mother's death, she sells the child on mortgage to Murugesan's factory in revenge.

Thirty-one-year-old Marikolanthu, whom Akhila meets in the ladies' coupe, wants to regain her real self in order to live for herself. Later, when she happens to hear about Murugesan's death, her hatred towards her child burns down with the pyre of Murugesan. With much remorse, she regains the child from the factory where she has mortgaged him. What she has to tell Akhila is about what she has learned from the vicissitudes of her life: "I'm not telling you that women are weak. Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" (209-210). All the women narrators in the novel seek the same strength by subverting the repressive forces of patriarchy.

Chris Weedon defines "Masochistic femininity is also acquired through the family, which encourages women to seek satisfaction in constantly deferring to men and to men's definition of what they should be" (40). It prepares women psychologically to accept the material structures of their oppression. Akhila's mother in the novel exhibits masochistic femininity as her mind is firmly rooted in the ethos of Tamil Brahmin culture, and she is highly warped by the sexist gender and caste norms of the Tamil Brahmin community. For her, all Brahmins are above reproach. In accordance with the prevailing customs of Tamil Brahmins, Akhila's mother is married to her

uncle, who carried her in his arms as a child, and she finds nothing wrong with it. Though Appa is not a tyrant, she wishes to perpetuate the myth of a tyrant husband who is easily annoyed, can be placated only through unfailing devotion, and, unlike the uxorious husbands of the neighbourhoods, never lets his wife rule him (11). She always serves Appa first, and never does the family dine together. In her opinion, no good wife can serve two masters, and a woman's allegiance should only be to her husband after marriage. On the other hand, in Akhila, there is a rebel who prompts her to think against the patriarchal Brahmin community, though she conspicuously lacks the courage to realise the happiness of her life.

Susan Bordo, while analysing the relationship between food, sexuality and desire as represented in advertisements and literature, comments that from the Victorian era onwards, the depiction of women eating or their craving for rich food is considered taboo.

Such an image would violate deeply sedimented expectations, would be experienced by many as disgusting and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for sexual appetite.... Women are permitted to lust for food only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they are near starvation. (110)

In the Indian context, women are also generally associated more with cooking and serving food than with relishing food, though these norms are changing now. So, depictions of women indulging in scrumptious food are rare in literature. In the novel, Akhila's mother prepares rich food and serves it with utmost devotion to her master. Food for her is a means of expressing her devotion and service to her husband. On the other hand, Akhila relishes food--its taste, smell and feel on her tongue. She relishes the taste of eggs and becomes an egg-eater, defying the Brahmin ethics.

However, she has to do that in the secrecy of her kitchen. Akhila's narration abounds in detailed, spicy descriptions of food, revealing her appetite and taste. In Kanyakumari, at the hotel where she stays, she alone tastes every item on the menu card. For Margaret, eating becomes the only comfort, and it gives her a secret thrill. However, as sweets are prohibited for her, she has to hide the largest bar of chocolate and relish it in secret. Here, eating becomes a metaphor for personal freedom and the breaking up of all hindrances. "Mythological, artistic, polemical and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from blood-craving Kali... to Malleus Maleficarum" (Bordo 116).

All the female characters whose stories unfold throughout the novel belong to the South Indian social milieu. Often, they are seen bearing the brunt of the notion of their religion or patriarchal society in a sharper way than their male counterparts, as the honour of the family or society is often attached to the conduct of women. While analysing the notion of honour in Indian society, Uma Chakravarti writes:

Women are the repositories of family honour--of their own family as daughter, and of their husband's family as wife and mother. 'The prestige of the family is in the hands of its daughter' is a common saying and oft repeated to girls by the parents and to married women by their in-laws. The implication is that if their conduct is dishonourable, women can ruin their families forever. The concept of honour serves as a link between the behaviour of an individual woman and the idealised norms of the community. By constantly evoking the twin notions of honour and dishonour, families either condition or shame women into appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. (151)

Consequently, women are forced to bear the marks of their culture or religion in a more prominent way, which often curtails their mobility. In the novel *Karpagam*, Akhila's friend comments on how the Tamil Brahmin community is so obdurate that a widow should dress in white and go about "looking like a corpse ready for the funeral pyre" (202). Karpagam defies such norms and asks, "Who made these laws anyway?" (202). Sexist social stance has often religious or mythical underpinnings. Her parents consider Akhila's education complete after her pre-university course, and she is expected to perfect her housekeeping abilities in preparation for marriage (48). In this family of two boys and two girls, the girls are prepared for marriage and the boys for a job, which reveals the gender biased notions of society. When Padma has her period for the first time, Amma dresses her as a bride and says, "My little one is a woman now" (77), and she is married off with a huge dowry. Marikolanthu's education was cut short at an early age because her mother believed that sending a girl far from home posed too great a risk. When she menstruates, she is suddenly put in the middle of a lot of prohibitions, taboos, and superstitions. Her mind is rattled by a lot of questions, but she gets only baffling statements as answers, such as "Because you are a woman and a good woman is one who safeguards her virtue" (225). She is left in ignorance that imperils her life later. Mothers of Marikolanthu and Sheela prefer to keep their girls ignorant of the ways of society and dissuade them from asking questions.

Sheela's narrative reveals the insecurity children face in our society. Sheela realises the sexual undertones in her father's friend's behaviour towards her, but there is hardly any atmosphere in her family where she can openly discuss such matters with her parents. In the case of an adolescent girl, parents often try to "Kill her spirit and tame her tongue" (70). Hilary M Lips comments on the numerous socialisation practices that instil a sense of powerlessness in girls: "parents and teachers, often unwittingly, are teaching girls not to try things (because their efforts either do not

make any difference or may result in failure or danger) and not to speak (because no one will pay serious attention to them)” (90). Sheela, a teenage girl, narrates her intimacy with her grandmother and the support she receives from her when her parents fail to understand her.

The novelist breaks the inhibitions on female sexuality, and each woman talks openly of it. In Akhila’s mother’s world under a strict Brahmanical ethos, women never knew what it was to desire. Akhila is afraid of the desiring woman in her, as she is living in a society which is eager to control female sexuality. The sexual status of a woman is linked to the respectability of the family’s name as well as the decency of other members of the family. Therefore, her siblings believe that allowing Akhila to live alone may adversely affect their status in the family. Moreover, “One of the most common assumptions that we encounter is the assumption that men have a greater ‘need’ for sex than do women. This negates women’s right to pleasure and somehow serves to excuse the sexually coercive behaviour that some men engage in” (Chandiramani 231-232). In the Indian society where strict segregation of sexes generally exists, Akhila’s friendship and affair with Hari are transgressive as they defy the caste, class, and age norms set by the patriarchal society. Akhila is too scared to continue the relationship. But the novel ends with a bold Akhila’s decision to revive her broken bond with Hari. Margaret Shanthi is disgusted with the sexual relationship with Ebe because of his domineering ways: “Or was it I who wanted an equal in bed and decided that I could no longer keep up the pretence of being a little girl?” (Nair 133). Ebe, who is highly fascinated by the coloniser’s culture, likes to play the role of a coloniser in bed as well as at home and school. Society’s eagerness to put women under strict surveillance accrues from patriarchy’s overt double standards and ambivalent attitude to female sexuality, and its attempt to curb female sexuality with prohibitions and taboos. Pramod, though he fails in his assault on Prabha Devi, can easily practise a mental coercion on her with his words, “There is a name for women like you” (183).

Marikolanthu maintains a physical relationship with Sujata as well as with her husband. When Sujata comes to know of it, she expels Marikolanthu from her house, calling her unnatural and fiendish, and reprimands her for making her do things that no woman would (264). Despite her homosexual inclination, Sujata is prejudiced against same sex love and considers it an aberration.

Ladies Coupe is invariably a novel about women's conditions in a male-dominated society, and it is narrated with great insight, solidarity and humour. The patriarchal ethos of the society is derided by the novelist with her sarcastic and humorous descriptions. A streak of humour runs through Akhila's description of her mother's theories of housewifely duties, her mother's devotion to her husband, and the descriptions of Thiruvalluvar haunting Akhila. Chemical terminology is skilfully incorporated to describe the relationships in the life of a chemistry teacher who analyses the character of every person she meets by reducing them into chemicals. Thus Ebenezer Paulraj, her husband, who has authority in every fibre and priggish righteousness in every breath, is concentrated sulphuric acid, "Biting. Scathing. Colourless. Oily. Dense. Sour. Explosive" (Nair 120). Hider Eid, in his review of *Ladies Coupe*, comments: "By narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves from a state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. These are the stories, which together make a single story, of women rediscovering their bodies".

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