



VOICE OF WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPÉ

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ABSTRACT

*Anita Nair is an Indian novelist who used English as the language of her novels. She was born in 1966 in Kerala. Anita Nair is one of the most prominent women writers in Indian English. She has refused to be labelled as a feminist writer. Far from taking a feminist concern, thereby fighting against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has taken a balanced view of life from a woman's point of view by bringing in all the feminine sensibilities. The concept, ideas and plot of Anita's novel are unique style in writing the ordinary contemporary fiction writers. She tries to describe everything in detail and you cannot find a rush in narrating a certain context. She has shifted the idea from the city lights to the dawn of villages. Her novel *The Better Man* recalls the values that are inherited in the village atmosphere that is almost forgotten in the contemporary Indian English fiction. The protagonists and other five women characters not only endure life's hardships stoically but, in the process, also emerge stronger, providing sustenance and equilibrium to the entire community.*

INTRODUCTION

Ladies Coupé is the story that revolves around women whom she meets them in the train. *Ladies Coupé* follows the journey of a middle-aged Indian woman named Akhila as she travels and on the train's *Ladies Coupé*. Every character in the story gives a broad spectrum of challenges faced by women in their lifetime with varying degrees. Anita Nair *Ladies Coupé* is a novel puts forward a long journey of women, not the journey which is physical but an emotional journey in nature.

The protagonist of the novel is Akhila a forty-five-year-old brought up in an environment in which the society had the supreme power. After her father's death, Akhila bears the burden of

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her family. Her brothers and sisters got married but nobody gives a thought about her needs and aspirations. In her search for independence, liberty and wanting to learn more about the lives of her travel companions, she swaps stories with different women who inspire her to live her own and independent life. *Ladies Coupé* is the story of Akhila and six other women that she meets on the train. The Indian culture women are traditionally known to be married and if that doesn't happen their only other alternative is to live with family. This novel is an exploration in many ways. Each character has been taken from different fields and phases of life.

The woman characters in the novel *Ladies Coupé* seems to be the personifications of new women who have been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions they have carried for ages. They go through the gruelling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of the repressive forces of society but finally they revolted against the oppressions and resolved to discover them and establish them in society.

Akhila has been the breadwinner of her family since the death of her father when she was in her early twenties. She worked and supported the family financially to her mother, younger brothers and sister as they grew up. All the while Akhila was forsaking her life to respect her duties to her family. As the days passed, she decided and interested in leading a life of her own and she means life for her. As a common woman like other she too had a dilemma whether her decision of leading an individual life would be successful. So she invents a work trip to get away to reflect on her future as maybe a woman living alone.

Once she arrives in the train, six different women enter the car. They are different ages and are living completely different lives and social statuses. Each one recounts openly the story of their lives. Meanwhile Akhila is using this time to reflect on her dilemma. *Ladies Coupé* is a succession of stories of women starting life fresh, wide-eyed and energetic but are slowly but surely faced with the harsh realities of being a woman in modern-day India. Each story is personalised, saddening, and sometimes disturbing. They almost all ring with a sense of frightening reality. Akhila, though unwilling in the beginning, listens to others, shares her own opinions and in the process learns to appreciate others with their experiences. She seeks their help in making her decisions.

Feminism is the most important theme for this book. The story follows the main character as she starts to embrace the fact that she does not need to be defined by specific gender roles. The book does not just touch on independence and freedom but change too. The change is in scenery just as much as it is in her internal thoughts. Feminism has been subtly handled in the massive work of English novels of India, Feminism is defined as a cultural, economic and political movement that is focused towards protection legally and striving right of Women. Anita Nair's characters *Ladies Coupe* have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome

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their entire struggle and have their own life in their society. The setting is an overnight train in South India, and the women who share a sleeping compartment designated for women are: Akhila, primary protagonist, forced to become head of household after her father dies; Janaki, mother of a selfish and spoiled son; Sheela, recalling her beloved grandmother's sad death; Margaret, saddled with a big-headed liar for a husband; and Marikolanthu, a village girl mistreated by her wealthy employer. Each story is movingly told, with Akhila's own saga interwoven between those of the others. The novel depicts the groups of women who get together and come to some sort of self-fulfilment or realization of their empowerment. Akhila begins to seek answers to the question that has been haunting her all her life. Through their stories, Nair has sympathetically explained the woman's agonies, endurance, sufferings, anticipations, etc.

The marriage is found to be a social contract in depicting women to adapt new aspects of life. Anita Nair brings out at two aspects the reconstruction of female identity beyond the male-dominated society of India and secondly the assertion of female dignity and female desires to realize full individuality. The novel presents a voice of the women in the voyage of self-consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the restatement of female identity against male domination. The story is tracing out the process of life-changing realizations that suddenly grips a person and she feels like the life that she had been living until now was bound in so many restrictions and fake relationships. The past of social suppression of women is still existing and heart-breaking issue. This is a problem that will take its time to be completely rooted out. Society has to stop enforcing age-old ideas that have no meaning now on the modern women.

Between each story, Akhila adds her own: her brief affair with Hari, a younger man; a Christian friend who introduced her to eggs, a food her devout Hindu family thought unclean; and her thwarted efforts to live alone after her mother's death. The first passenger's tale is told by the elderly Janaki, who recalls how a visit to her son convinced her to live only for her husband, whom she loved deeply, rather than her selfish children. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat us as if we were princesses" (P.22-23).

Sheela, a teenager, remembers her closeness to her imperious grandmother, who has just died; "one Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip. Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time" (P.66) Margaret, a chemistry teacher, describes how she finally got even with her tyrannical, and possibly perverted, husband; wealthy Prabha, a wife and mother, tells of recapturing her independence when she learned to swim; and Mari, who was raped as a teenager, relates how she hated the son she bore as a result, even indenturing him to gain money, until she was ashamed of what

she had done. As the journey ends, Akhila is ready to act. Marriage and the responsibility behind as a wife and mother disturbed her in taking responsibility.

Along with a range of socio-cultural, political and economic concerns, the focus on 'self' has been an inevitable assertion of writers during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Individualistic in tone, the contemporary women novelists are trying to portray realistically the predicament of modern women torn between the forces of tradition and modernity, their sense of frustration and alienation, the emotional and psychological turmoil and complexities of man-women relationships and subtleties of feminine consciousness against the persistent patriarchal social set-up.

In Ladies Coupe Anita Nair has woven five different tales around the protagonist Akhila. And through their tales she presents an Indian traditional woman's life style that is full of difficulties. Akhila is Nair's new woman who attempts to grasp the point that the binary opposition with the traditional woman will certainly tend to work a way of seeing a typical woman.

Confrontation between family responsibilities of individuals and self-actualization is the main thrust of her novels. An awe-inspiring depth is displayed by her in her narration. She writes because she has to and whether it's her agenda behind a feminist fiction or her characters' enigma. The train journey in fact symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make them conscious of their self-esteem and dignity. Her novels may be problematic in terms of her one-eye-sightedness at times. Anita Nair presents the existential struggle of woman who denies to flow along the current and refuses to submit her individual self.

The woman emerging out of such situations is a defeated individual who undergoes much pain and suffering. Such characters exhibit a sense of insecurity due to their traumatic psychic experiences and also due to the collapse of one value system and the absence of enduring values. Thus, in Ladies Coupe, Anita Nair traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice is heard throughout the novel.

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