

## A Study of the New Woman in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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### Abstract

Among those post modern Indian novelists who deny the role of female subalternity to male hegemony, Anita Nair is the most celebrated name. Akhila, the female protagonist in Nair's *Ladies Coupe* attains the status of new woman rising above the subaltern status of womanhood. However, this change comes over her not in a sudden occurrence of momentary realization but by a long evolutionary process of the self which works when she meets five women of different age, class, and experience in a ladies coupe during the course of her journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. The stories of these five women prove eye opener to her. This present paper endeavours to bring into surface the process of transformation taken place in Akhila, the narrator cum protagonist in Nair's *Ladies Coupe* along with her fellow passengers from silent subaltern to strong rebel.

**Keywords:** Hegemony; Modern; New Woman; Patriarchy; Subaltern; Womanhood.

The term 'New Woman' denotes to that class of women who set themselves free from the conventional image of womanhood to the modern new women. So far as Indian literature is concerned, it had long been confined within the patriarchal image of womanhood and only few years ago the new and modern image of womanhood came to pass due to appearance of new generation of women novelists who took everything under the subject of scrutiny through their writings. Now the old and traditional image of womanhood as conceived down the long ages based on the essentialist point of view that it is socio-culturally constructed and attains its fulfillment, not by the anatomy of body but by the complex process of socio-cultural factors and conditioning as brought upon by the practices and norms of patriarchy, is slowly on a way of being faded out in the main stream literature and in its stead, a wholly transfigured image of modern new woman is on its way bit by bit to be emerged. Endorsing the cause

of womanhood through their writings, these new generations of women novelists have ventured to guide and lead their female characters to a position of distinctiveness through their bit by bit transition and transformation. Among these women novelists of present generation, Anita Nair is the most celebrated name. Instead of being dominated by male value structure, Nair's women characters are completely free and live on their own. They hardly sacrifice anything that comes on their way of freedom. Out of tradition they emerge completely as new and modern women who know how to challenge the male hegemony. In this perspective, Nair's masterpiece *Ladies Coupe* is an interesting study as regards female emancipation from age old stereotypical image to modern new woman.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is about an abrupt meeting that has taken place by chance among six women of varied age, class, and experiences - Akhilandeshwari, Margaret Paulraj, Janaki Prabhakar, Praba Devi, Sheela Vasudevan, and Marikolanthu in the Ladies Coupe, a reserve second compartment for women which is generally found at the tail's end of Indian Railways. They tell their stories with an intention to help Akhila, the narrator cum protagonist, in finding an answer for her constant arising question in the upper layer of her mind, always fresh and painful : "Can a woman live by herself" (Nair 21). When the novel starts we get Akhila, the protagonist caught between personal and family interests sacrificing the former for the later. However, she transforms into a changed personality when the novel comes to its closing. Doubts and confusions revolving round her initial question reaches to its solution only at the end. Akhila's train journey appears more than a common journey by a train. It finally turns from common to the evolutionary journey of the self, the end of which offers a certain self-confidence over her confused and doubtful situation and she transforms into a complete changed woman.

Protest for emancipation from their marginalization is very common in almost all the female characters in Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. Akhila, a torn image of typical Indian womanhood, undecided at the initial becomes resolute at the end. The self same tone of Akhila's protest against marginalization is also found among those five characters whom Akhila meets in the ladies coupe and who play a very deciding role in her life. Their stories are eye-opener to her. Though Akhila is the main narrator of the novel, the role of other five characters in the ladies coupe is equally important to the thematic design of the novel. They not only contribute to the development of the novel but also help in transforming the protagonist from passivity to action. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of these characters' story. The novel tells us how these women come out from traditional false

belief to hard core reality. "The manner in which Nair relates these transformations," as Geeta Doctor observes in her article "Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe: A brilliant evocation of sisterhood on the move" published in the newspaper "India Today, "is in turn revelatory and redeeming" (Doctor).

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* narrates the story of Akhila's self-discovery. The more the narrative progresses, the more Akhila, the central character reaches to self-realization. Akhila, aged 45, still unmarried, presently working as an income tax clerk is a fragmented character between her personal desire and her duty towards her family. She has been bearing the load of her family since her father's death, as if it has become her final goal in her life beyond which she has no life of her. She is the breadwinner of the family ever since her father's death but still her position in the family is overlooked. She cares for everyone but no one takes a notice to her. Her presence is left unnoticed. Even her identity has become questionable. She is always addressed with "someone else's identity: Chandra's daughter, Narayana's Akka, Priya's aunt, Murthy's sister-in-law" (Nair 201) and her wish to be addressed with her true and real name always remains unfulfilled. Akhila after her brothers have got jobs hopes, "the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?" (Ibid 77) But no change comes over her situation. Both brothers get married but "No one could fault with his choice and there was nothing anyone could say except perhaps – Don't you think you should wait for your elder sister to get married before you think of a wife and a family? But who was to mouth this rebuke?" (Ibid) In spite of her seniority among children of the family and her role as a sole breadwinner of the family, she is neglected and she has no decision of her in the family. She has to wait for permissions from her younger ones for her every decision and when Akhila argues against it, Amma says, "You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" (Ibid 150). Akhila is against all of these and wishes to live on her own but helpless in her present situation which demands opposite to her wishes.

However, Anita Nair never intends to show her protagonist a subaltern who dares to go against tradition and male hegemony. "Anita Nair refers to the avatar of the Devi Akhilandeswari to insist on the many headed but unitary subjectivity of women" (Myles 128). When Akhila manages a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari, she determines, for the first time in her whole life, to run away from all and everything that her conservative traditional family has shackled her to, she begins coming to her own being. "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" (Nair 2). This is the exact mark of beginning for a journey towards self-realization which reaches to its culmination when she finishes her journey listening to all the stories told by five women in the ladies coupe from different perspectives. When Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari after finishing her journey from Bangalore, she is completely a changed woman. Shadowy clouds of doubt and confusion have removed from her life and she welcomes the sunny and cheerful day waiting for her. She discovers her lost self and her desire for her own life is strengthened. She restores her lost love Hari and emerges out as a new woman defying patriarchy and subverting all those age old ideals based on it. She becomes completely free to fly in the wide open sky.

Margaret, one of the fellow passengers in the ladies coupe is a representative figure of those women who are forced to lose their self-identity and subordinated to the subaltern status by male hegemony. Margaret, a girl of brilliant academic career wants to do Ph. D. but her husband Ebenezer Plauraj compels her to do B.Ed. Her husband is the final decider of her every action. At the initial stage she bears everything, though she feels a little hurt on her husband's behaviour. But the situation goes beyond her expectation when her husband forces her to abort the baby: "I have spoken to the Doctor at length about this and she said there was nothing to fear. At seven weeks, that thing in your uterus is little more than a zygote" (Ibid 105). Listening to the substitute word zygote used for the baby Margaret looks up in surprise how Paulraj can use scientific terms for their baby. After more debate Margaret agrees for abortion with broken heart. "Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature" (Beauvoir 508). She always thinks about her baby day and night during her pregnancy. After abortion, she finds herself unable to forget her baby. The image of her husband starts to appear before her as a criminal. She loses all her faith and love for her husband. "Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer" (Ibid 502). Now Margaret no longer remains a woman to be made dance on her husband tunes. Previously her love for him screened her eyes from all his faults. Although hurt very often, she would say, "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" (Nair 109). But now she is completely a changed woman. She hates her husband who has killed her innocent baby cruelly and forces her to share the crime equally. "I hate him. I hate him" (Ibid 131). The crucial point in her life turns up when she observes flotsam golden fish dead. She becomes resolute to live on her own instead of leading a life like a flotsam dead fish. She becomes a vengeful against her husband, the murderer of her baby instead of remaining silent and irresolute. She starts to work



silently over her vengeful design. She avenges cleverly against her husband. She uses her husband's weaknesses for sex and tasty foods as her weapons and makes her husband fatty feeding him rich and tasty stuffs which tell upon his health and make him completely dependent on her wife. A reversal of situation takes place in her life regarding their relationship. Now she shifts from her role of objectivity to subjectivity. Now she no longer seeks her husband's consent about her personal matters. For the second time she becomes pregnant and gives birth a baby girl. Now she is happy as her long cherished desire finally comes true. As Dr.T. Vara Lakshmi observes, "By making him fat...Margaret gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe's self-esteem" (Varalakshmi 69).

The youngest of six women is Sheela Vasudevan, a girl of fourteen years who gathers a hard experience of life before coming to the age of maturity. She is made the object of sexual abuse when one of her friends' fathers seeks opportunity to seduce her. Through the story of Sheela, Anita Nair presents how insecure a girl child in our present society is. What to say an adult woman, even a teenage girl is not beyond the reach of a man's lustful and amorous design. The story of Sheela reveals the darker side of male dominated society which considers a woman, be it child or completely adult nothing but an object to be used only to gratify sexual hunger of men. With a superb art of story-telling Nair sheds light on the sexual abuse commonly faced by girl children by perverse adult men. The hand of male hegemony is so long that it hardly releases a girl just coming into her being from becoming sexually subaltern. However, Sheela is not like an average girl child who would bear injustice silently. After this unforgettable nightmarish incident Sheela ponders over how to save her next time from Nazar's advances. Since then she becomes completely alert about her safety before going to her friend's house. "Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home" (Ibid 66). But when she feels that Nazar is still trying to touch her and her friend Hasina and Hasina's mother, in spite of understanding the whole matter appear as helpless, she stops going to her friend's house. Nair has employed the technique of telling a story within a story to show the destructive result of child abuse through inventing the story of Celine within the story of Sheela. Celine lost her virginity before becoming a complete virgin in the true sense of the term. One of Celine's father's friends made her pregnant before she could have crossed the threshold of girlish stage. To save family from stigma, Celine's father and her family chose a secured place to abort the unwanted pregnancy lest the matter should become a public issue. Nair has brought women of all ages from child to adult, from maiden to married together in a single reserved coupe of a train only to acquaint us that a woman is not free ever since her birth. What Simone De Beauvoir

has said about woman is true to life of both Sheela and Celine: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," (Beauvoir 87), meaning that a woman suffers from identity crisis and her identity as a woman is defined by the society in which she is and is guided by the norms and system completely regulated by the forces of patriarchy. Sheela's story along with giving a message of positivity in the air of negativity that a girl must protest herself from becoming sexual subaltern at the hand of male hegemony, also throws dark light on those men who are beast in the image of man, insensitive to feminine sensibility caring little to spoil a girl child only to gratify their sexual instincts.

The brutal shape of male hegemony over female subalternity is delineated through the story of Marikolanthu. Marikolanthu, a thirty-one years aged old woman and an unwed mother from rural background is the most pathetic figure in the novel. Anita Nair, with a sharp psychological insight, marvelously employs Marikolanthu's narrative to throw commentary on sexual abuse, torture and exploitation of Indian women from rural background. Marikolanthu's story reminds her all chance meetings with men and reaches to the conclusion that almost all men try to seek advantage when they find women undergoing situations like loneliness, ignorance, illiteracy, dependence and frustration. Marikolanthu passes through humiliation and debasement, which brings adverse result in ignoring her son Muthu, one who has got out of many attempts of abortion. He is the product of her forced seduction by Murugesan, one of the Chettiar's sons, a member of the richest families where her mother toils as a cook. She takes the charge of looking after her house when her mother runs errands; later when her mother undergoes serious illness, she is taken to the Chettiar's house to fill the vacant position of her mother. There, she is employed with the task of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka who is the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. There grows a deep and intimate lesbian relationship sooner than later between Marikolanthu, one who is deprived of the society in which she lives and Sujata Akka, other who is deprived of her husband whom she has married. There she becomes the victim of Sujata Akka's husband's sexual exploitation. When Sujata Akka smells the air of this relationship, she pushes Marikolanthu out of her household instead of punishing her husband for his wrong doing to her. Marikolanthu's strong dislike and aversion for the physical torture and brutality forcibly attempted on her gives birth in her an attitude of indifference and hatefulness to her son Muthu. The culminating point in her life turns up only when she notices her son Muthu tending the burning pyre of Murugesan's dead body. She is deeply shocked on realizing that she is responsible for pushing her son to a very low position for hardly any fault of his and she feels deeply ashamed of her aversion for her

son Muthu and decides to care the child with motherly love and affection. Her personality undergoes a radical change. She decides never to marry and fixes her eye only at her son Muthu. She attains the higher status of motherhood and turns her face away from the subaltern status of womanhood opposing the matrimonial tie. Her motherly state truly confirms to Simone De Beauvoir: "Becoming a mother in her turn, the woman in a sense takes the place of her own mother: it means complete emancipation for her" (Ibid 511).

Janaki who is the oldest of all six women coming in contact to each other in the ladiescoupe, is a disciplined daughter, a faithful wife and a doting mother all at a time. She remains subaltern throughout her life from her father's house as a depending daughter to husband's house as a depending wife and then to her son's house as a depending mother. Everywhere her status is considered below men. "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. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat us like princess" (Nair 22-23). Her suppressed sparks of discontents transform into violent rage only when she notices the domineering attitude of her husband to her grown up son. She opposes her husband Prabhakar, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding" (Ibid 30). She changes herself from an unvoiced subaltern image of womanhood to a voiced lady of protest.

Prabha Devi is a typical example of a woman generally seen in Indian household. Through the character portrayal of Prabha, Anita Nair shows how deep the impact of subaltern status of womanhood is. It curses a woman's life giving a life that is not hers. It makes her completely timid and unidentified. Prabha's self has become questionable in her conjugal life and her very self becomes free from timidity and gets recognition and independency only after It is one day, while watching the swimming pool that Prabha settles her mind on regaining self and identity. Learning swimming, "she triumphs over her innate timidity and gains peak experience of supreme content" (Varalakshmi 69). While sliding into the swimming pool, she comes in contact with water that touches her body and for this she feels an exciting experience of liberation. For a long time she has been ignored the bliss of being herself. Prabha Devi is the representative of those women who are confined into the four walls eagerly waiting for the day when their hopes to get liberated come to be realized. Prabha Devi arrives at the self - actualization by acquiring knowledge of swimming on her own out of great longing.

No other character in Nair's *Ladies Coupe* influences Akhila's life as strong-

ly as Akhila's childhood friend Karpagam does to her. The role of Karpagam is necessarily needed to the accomplishment of the thematic design of the novel. She appears, as though she is the mouthpiece of Nair herself. Karpagam, although a widow, puts on kumkum and colourful cloths against age old tradition. She gives stress over her personal choices coming against the code of patriarchy when she asserts, "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 colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men" (Ibid 202). Her defiance appears to be almost unequalled to many when she suggests Akhila how a woman should lead her life: "I live alone. I have for many years now. We are strong, Akhi. Whatever you think you want to. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first" (Ibid 202).

All these women are opposite to what Spivak asserts in her most celebrated book "Can the subaltern Speak?", "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 271-313). Anita Nair's female protagonist Akhila along with all other five characters in *Ladies Coupe* come out from the shadowy life of subalternity challenging male hegemony. Through reversal role of these female characters in terms of subalternity, Anita Nair forces us to think and reconsider the long run institution of patriarchy and its value structure from rationalistic viewpoint instead of in what form they are actually existing.

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