

---

## ANITA NAIR'S REPRESENTATION OF VARIED SOCIAL ISSUES IN LADIES COUPE

**Dr. Anup V. Gumble**

Associate Professor, Dept. of English  
Arts, Commerce & Science College,  
Arvi, Dist. Wardha -442201  
Email: anupgumble@gmail.com  
Mobile No.- 9423424093

---

### **Abstract :**

*Anita Nair's fiction is considered as a rich tapestry of social commentary, highlighting varied experiences of women in Indian male dominated society. Nair has represented varied social issues through her second novel entitled Ladies Coupe (2001). The key issues like gender discrimination, patriarchy, women's quest for identity and self-discovery, sexual violence, marital disharmony, denial of freedom and education to women, child abuse, marginalization of women, and struggle between tradition and modernity are noticeable in the novel. Her women characters fight against societal norms to claim their space in the male dominated Indian society. The present paper intends to explore how Anita Nair has mirrored varied social issues through her novel Ladies Coupe.*

**Key Words :** Sexual, Women, Gender, Identity, Marginalization, Sufferings

---

### **Introduction :**

Anita Nair's writing is marked by social realism and she portrays varied experiences of Indian women across different socio-economic backgrounds in her novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001). While depicting her women characters as victims in the male chauvinistic society, a gesture of defiance against patriarchy has been provided to them at the end of the novels. Nair focuses on the problems of women in her novels as she expresses their pains, struggles and sufferings in Indian society. Nair has not only portrayed pictures of victimized women in a patriarchal set-up of Indian society, but also furnished the cultural, familial, economic and social aspects of the contemporary Indian society. In her novels she deals with varied issues such as identity crisis, lust, adultery, child abuse, man-woman relationship, evils of patriarchal framework, quest for independence and self-discovery, domestic and sexual violence, impact of modernity, family, marriage, motherhood, female foeticide, women's sufferings, frustrations, disappointments, aspirations, secrets, and social and cultural oppression of women. She doesn't portray heroic characters as her characters are common people drawn from particular situations of the society. The present paper is an attempt to explore some of the above-mentioned themes as portrayed by Anita Nair in her novel *Ladies Coupe*.

### **Anita Nair's Representation of Varied Social Issues in *Ladies Coupe* :**

---

Anita Nair's second novel *Ladies Coupe* is about a train journey taken by the main

---

protagonist, Akhila, in the ladies coupe of the Kanyakumari Express, to find out answers to many questions that have haunted her regarding her identity. After getting a berth in a second-class compartment in the ladies coupe, she encounters five other women - Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanti, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolanthu – and listens to their life stories to find out her answer to her question, “Can a woman live by herself?” Nair has depicted marginalization and exploitation of Akhila by her family members. The novel is a saga of Akhila's search for identity and independence and Anita Nair successfully investigates the psyche of Akhila who carries unfulfilled desires, aspirations and familial responsibilities in her heart. Whereas Akhila's life story appears to be a saga of sufferings, loneliness, exploitation and marginalization, the stories of other five co-passengers also seem narratives of women's dilemmas, sufferings, desires and their search for strength and independence. All the five women share their stories with Akhila to help her in arriving a decision. All these women appear to lead stereo-types roles in patriarchal society. Sunita Sinha observes, “Evoking experiences from everyday life and endowing it with epic dimensions, Ladies Coupe relates the saga of a woman's search for strength and independence” (Sinha, 150).

After getting substantially influenced by Karpagam and her co-travellers, Akhila reaches Kanyakumari where she discovers that she has got enough strength to stop her exploitation by her family. She seems to get rid of her old identity as an elderly spinster, older sister and once the breadwinner of the family as she is certain that she will not let her family to use her any more. She asserts her self-identity as, “Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered” (*Ladies Coupe*, 270).

While narrating the story of Sheela and her grandmother, Anita Nair has depicted the issue of child abuse and maltreatment. Ammumma wanted Sheela to be careful while playing with her father's friends. When Ammumma mentioned sexual exploitation regarding Celine's episode, Sheela recalls all about the Celine incident that had happened when she was five years old. Sheela recalls how Celine was seduced by her friend's father. Sheela knows that it will be easy to be another Celine and recalls her humiliating experience at her friend's house. Naazar was her friend's father and her father's friend. His daughter Hasina was Sheela's classmate. On one Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to Hasina's house, Naazar wiped a line of sweat heading Sheela's upper lip unnecessarily. Sheela hated that touch as the touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time, and thereafter she mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home. Another time, when the bows on the sleeves of her blouse had come undone and as Hasina and her mother watched, Naazar knotted the bows undesirably. Sheela recalls, “Slowly, meticulously. Sheela felt her breath lodge in her throat and when she saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother's eyes, shame wrapped itself around her.” (*Ladies Coupe*, 66). Sheela narrates that she had decided that she would never go to Hasina's house again. Sheela then realizes the meaning of her grandmother's statements regarding her safety against sexual assault in the society.

Nair has depicted the plight of the marginalized community of the society through Marikolanthu's portrayal. Marikolanthu appears to be the victim of lower caste and poor family. Marikolanthu sees herself as a victim and she gets raped by drunk Murugesan and spoils

her life. Afterwards, Marikolanthu establishes homosexual relations with Sujata Akka. Besides, we see that Marikolanthu shares bed with Sujata Akka's husband, Sridhar Anna which she thinks as a help done to Sujata Akka in order to prevent her husband from going to concubines. After some days, Sujata Akka sends her away from her household forever. Thus, Marikolanthu is exploited by the Chettiar.

Sheela suffers from her father's awful behavior as she says, "Nothing Sheela did was right. He picked on her and found fault incessantly" (*Ladies Coupe*, 69). In those days he used to scold Sheela for being rude. Sheela is unable to find the reasons behind her father's irritating nature towards her. Now and then her father would scold and blame her. Sheela knows that she was the only one Daddy could exercise his power over and that there was no escaping the beast's wrath until Ammumma left or died. Sheela seems to be a victim of verbal and emotional abuse through her father's constant disapproval of her conduct

Anita Nair has narrated women's predicament through the characters of Akhila's neighbours, Sarasa Iyer and her eldest daughter, Jaya. Sarasa Iyer was a Brahmin and living happily with her husband, Subramani Iyer and their three daughters and a blind son. After the death of her husband, Sarasa Iyer had to thrust her oldest daughter, Jaya into prostitution due to her poverty-stricken situation. The story of Sarasa and her daughter Jaya may be treated as domestic violence in a way that Jaya had been compelled by her mother to accept the profession of prostitute and she mutely accepted her fate. As Anju Jagpal remarks, "The dearth of any shelter and support would have ultimately made Jaya an easy prey of male lust anytime, so she could have decided to sell herself on her own terms and conditions" (Jagpal, 95).

At another occasion we see that Akhila would ask Amma's permission for going to the house of their neighbour, Sarasa Iyer, Amma used to show her fear regarding men's attitude to women. Amma was conscious of sexual violence against women as she used to tell Akhila, "the streets were fraught with all kinds of dangers that would rob her hymen before it was legally perforated by the man who would be her husband. Thereby bringing disgrace to her father, their family, and the whole brahmin community"

Nair has narrated an aspect of sexual violence in the form of rape as Marikolanthu gets raped by drunk Murugesan and spoils her life. Nair has vividly portrayed Marikolanthu's and her mother's sufferings after that incident. Nair has also depicted the aspect of domestic sexual assault when Sujata Akka narrates her repulsion regarding unwanted sexual contact with her husband.

Prabha Devi tells Akhila how she is able to cope with her identity crisis and becomes aware of her potential. After Prabha Devi's trip to New York with Jagdeesh, she transforms herself into a charming and sensuous woman and considers herself as a young, beautiful and desirable woman. She begins to go to the club every weekend with Jagdeesh. When Pramod, an acquaintance of Jagdeesh, at the club remains untouched by her presence, she dislikes it and thinks about her self-identity: "Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality?" (*Ladies Coupe*, 180). Jagdeesh's Mrs and no more". Prabha Devi succeeds in enticing Pramod with her secret smiles and coy looks. Nevertheless, when Pramod reaches her home and tries to seduce her, she is shocked and reverts to her former

state of a devoted wife. Nair has used internal monologue through Prabha Devi's inner voice regarding two extremes of dependent and independent woman as she thinks to tell her daughter that after her marriage, her daughter should not allow her husband to dominate her life. Rather she should show that she is independent and how well she manages by herself. Prabha Devi is unable to think about the golden mean or the middle path between these two extremes as her mother also didn't know about it. By learning swimming independently without the help of a swimming coach and without the knowledge of Jagdeesh, Prabha Devi is able to overcome her innate timidity and emerges as a bold, assertive and independent new woman. Her venture of swimming gives her sense of freedom and she asserts her individuality.

Prabha Devi encounters her school friend, Sharmila, who was also going to New York with her baby and mother-in-law. Prabha Devi knows that Sharmila was the most brilliant student in her school and everyone would say that she will be either a doctor or an IAS officer or someone noteworthy. But Prabha Devi learns from Sharmila that her family tricks her and compels her for marriage against her dreams. Prabha Devi's school friend Sharmila cannot pursue her study after marriage because of the responsibilities of her baby and mother-in-law who is unable to speak English in US.

Marikolanthu was the last woman in the coupe who tells her pathetic tale of grief and suffering. She is thirty-one years old. She is an unwed mother. She expresses her anger when she says how life can take its toll and how the world can be cruel to women. She comes from a poor background. After her father's death her mother works as a cook in the Chettiar household where Marikolanthu also works in her childhood with her mother. She cannot complete her school education as her mother needed her help in the Chettiar household.

### Conclusion :

To conclude, Nair has explored the themes of gender discrimination, sexual violence against women, women's sufferings and exploitation, child abuse and concept of patriarchy through her novel *Ladies Coupe*. The majority of female characters in the novel follow unique ways in their individual lives to assert their own independent identities. Victimization and marginalization of these women lead them to struggle for asserting their identity and seeking their liberation. As they no longer want to be the sufferers in the patriarchal framework, they struggle and succeed in discovering their veiled inner strength and vitality during the course of their respective lives.

### References :

- Jagpal Anju. *Female Identity: A Study of Seven Indian Women Novelists*. New Delhi. Prestige Books, 2012. Print
- Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupe*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001. Print
- Sinha Sunita. 'Journey of Self Discovery' in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. *Post-Colonial Women Writers New Perspectives*. Ed. Sunita Sinha. New Delhi. Atlantic Publishers, 2012. Print
- Vinai, Maya. *Interrogating Caste and Gender in Anita Nair's Fiction*. New Delhi. Prestige Books International, 2014. Print