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FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

KEY WORDS:

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INTRODUCTION

Ladies Coupe is a very delineating feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this delineating is chiefly expressed through the projection of the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom. Akhilaandeswari, is the chief protagonist of this novel, she is not an exceptional strong woman. She is just somebody coped with all. She wanted to be a good wife and mother. In the *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila meets five additional women, each of whom has a story to tell.

The woman characters in the novel "*Ladies Coupe*" 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 grueling 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. The *Ladies Coupe*'s story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love and protection. The novel opens with "a sense of escape" for Akhila, an escape from the inevitability of her life which demands her to do "what is expected of her" (LC 1).

Anita Nair's "*Ladies Coupe*" traces the lives of six women as they travel in the ladies compartment. It is about a train journey taken by the leading role, Akhila to search within herself for strength independence and answer to many questions that have disturbed her spinsterhood. In the ladies compartment she meets five other women. They are Janaki, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolunthu. As they are travelling, Akhila asks a problematic question to them: "can a woman stay single and be happy?" To answer her question, everybody starts narrating their own story. Through their stories, Nair has sympathetically explained the woman's agonies, endurance, sufferings, anticipations, etc.

The protagonist Akhila in the novel "*Ladies Coupe*" is a forty-five year old spinster, daughter, sister, aunt and the only provider of her family after the death of her father. When Akhila's father dies, all the responsibilities come to her shoulders. Due to her earning makes her younger brothers to pursue their education. Due to her financial support her younger brother Narayanan becomes a mechanic and Narsi becomes a teacher. Narsi decides to marry the college principal's daughter. But nobody in her family has considered about Akhila's marriage.

She can dream of her wishes but cannot translate them into reality, as it will subvert her role of an unmarried, independent woman, who is in charge of her family. Though dutiful and the eldest, she is not allowed to think of her own. Her dreams and desires always take a back seat when it comes to her family. But the family consisting of her mother, two brothers, and one younger sister never appreciated her sacrifice, which is why "she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs. To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires... So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old... Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (LC 1-2).

She finds herself in an enclosure in which she can move round and round without arriving anywhere, or at any conclusion. But, as we shall see, it is some of the women who help her to come out of this vicious circle and go ahead in her life. Akhila boards the train for Kanyakumari in search of a viable answer to what worries her. She is trying to convince herself that "a woman can live alone" (LC 21).

In fact, she joins other women travelers in the ladies coupé: Prabha Devi, Janki Devi, Margaret Shanti, fourteen-year-old Sheela, and Marikolanthu are all of different age group and come from diverse economical, cultural, social environment but somehow all have been denied their natural self to grow. In the intimate atmosphere of ladies coupé, Akhila listens to their stories and shares her own with them. She is drawn into the most private moments of their lives, seeking in them a solution to the question that has been with her all her life. When she tosses the question to them, the wisest answer comes from Margaret Shanti. She says: "You should trust your instincts... You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that" (LC 21).

In *Ladies Coupe*, Margaret Shanti, the successful chemistry teacher, is the victim of an unhappy marriage with an insensitive tyrant and too self-absorbed husband who neglects her. She says, "What else could I do? Hadn't I done everything he wanted me to? I didn't know what it was he expected of me now. And suddenly, I felt much too weary to care" (LC 109). From the beginning itself the prevailing fact in Indian marriage is hinted. It is normal to quarrel with one's husband. Everyday won't be the same when you've been married to a man for years. There will be bad days and there will be good days. The trick is to remember the good days. And like I have said many times before, it is a women's responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have some many preoccupations that they might not have the time or the inclination to keep the wheels of a marriage oiled. (LC 112)

Even with wealth and all kinds of sophistication, Prabha Devi's childhood was not that much happy one. Her marriage with Jagdeesh was also not a successful one. "For the next many years that was all Prabha Devi did. Wait for Jagdeesh to come home. For the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph... waiting for something to happen while her life swished past in a blur of insignificant days" (LC 172). Here from Nair's words, Prabha Devi's waiting for something shows vividly her disappointment in life and her waiting for some happiness to happen.

The next character is that of Marikolunthu, the victim of Man's lust, whose innocence was forcefully destroyed in one night. She is the most pathetic woman among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry woman on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even in her childhood she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, "It's not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself... there is too much risk" (LC 215).

As a child she suffers as a victim of social and economic repression. Her mother works as a cook in Chettiar Kottai. Nair's introduction of Marikolunthu mirrors her life well, "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" (LC 210). This can be considered as an echo of Nair herself.

Nair combines the reality with ideal in her presentation of a downtrodden woman through the words of Marikolunthu. "I grimaced. What happened to me? Ask God. Ask that Brahma who write my destiny. I have been trained in despair. Despair came easily to us, my mother and me. And we accepted it because we told ourselves that what was meted out to us was what we deserved..." (LC 253). This is somewhat a satire to human society

who feel that their sufferings and failures are due to their own karma and destiny.

Next, the character of Sheela Vasudev is analyzed. She is the youngest of the lot with an ability to perceive what others can miss. Through Sheela's story, Nair tries her best to depict a society in which women are not only ill treated but are also abused and exploited. That is the reason why Sheela's Ammma advised her to stay at home after she comes back from school. "She's a grown-up girl. You shouldn't let her wander around. And who are all these men she plays badminton with? She may call them "uncle" but they are not her uncles and how dare that man Naazar put his arm around her? She's not a little girl..." (LC 65).

Then the last character of *Ladies Coupe* is the most wanted, referred and criticized Akhilandeswari, a single forty five year old income tax clerk, through whose eyes the stories unfold. Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, decides to go on a train journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman. The introduction of Akhila, is a great evidence for the readers to feel how she wants to be away from her bonds. "This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape" (LC 1).

Nair emphasizes through Akhila how women should emerge as individuals. Akhila has to undergo many ordeals when she comes out of bondage to evolve as the new, liberated woman. She has never been allowed to live her own life. She is presented as an independent woman who refuses to follow the expectations of the patriarchal life style. The ability to endure under the worst of circumstances is Akhila's key for survival. Akhila tries to search her own identity and happiness. She questions her family members. Why shouldn't I live alone? I'm of able body and mind. I can look after myself. I earn reasonably well. Akhila paused when her voice choked with tears, and began again. 'Has anyone of you ever asked me what my desires were or what my dreams are?' Did anyone of you ever think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do? (LC 206)

She comes out of the family as a rebel, and her response is rejection of social standard values and the traditional life pattern. Her stoic endurance and perseverance supports her in all matters. Living in such a condition, she has nothing to fall back upon, no shoulder to lean on, and out of her total vacuum, she had to re-create herself and meet the challenges of life. Nair emphasizes through Akhila how women should emerge as individuals. Akhila has to undergo many ordeals when she comes out of bondage to evolve as the new, liberated woman. She has never been allowed to live her own life.

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CONCLUSION

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