

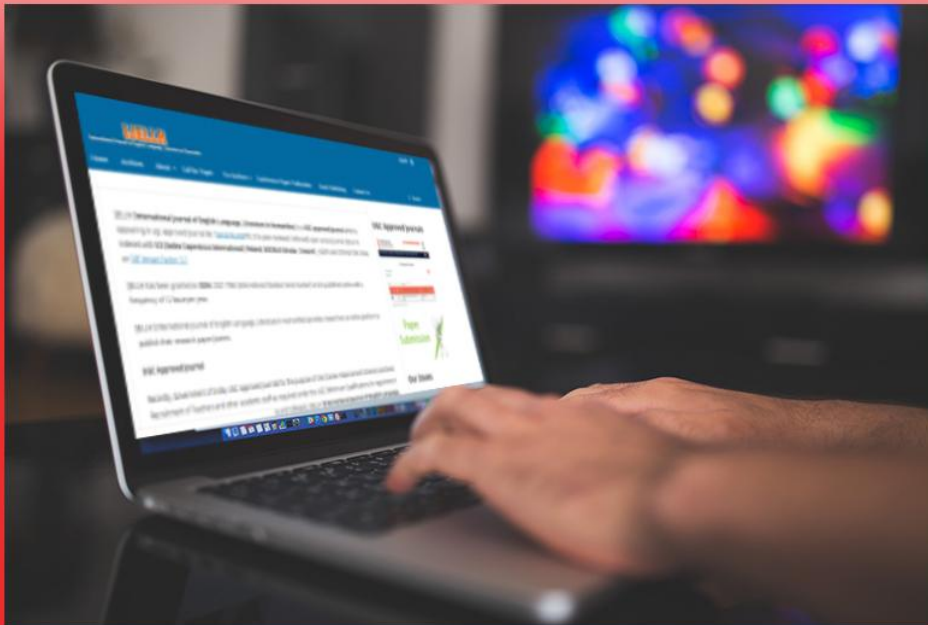
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The Transformation of the Indian Women as in  
Ladies Coupe' by Anita Nair

Anita Nair's second novel, *Ladies Coupe'*, elected as one among the best five novels in India centers around women's longing for self-assertion in a male dominated society. Focussing on the dilemmas that woman face in their strained relationships with parents, children, husbands and siblings and exhibiting a remarkable understanding of the psyche of Indian women, she attempts an exploration of all the overwhelming problems and challenges faced by them. On one hand she is fully aware of her needs and selfhood while on the other, tradition demands that she be reduced to the role of a minion for the peaceful running of her family. By keeping herself submissive and by accepting the role patriarchy has assigned her she struggles in the chains of a deeply patriarchal organization.

Akhila, the income tax clerk around whom the novel is woven is a victim of the oppression of women that exists under conservative Brahmin society. She lived in an environment in which society had the supreme power and the traditional people never dared to alter its baseless norms. Akhila had lost her father at a very young age and since then she has been shouldering the responsibility of the entire family. The narrator elucidates: "When Akhila's father died, two things happened: Sunday become just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the family" (*Ladies Coupe'* 75).

Manning the responsibility of the family, she begins to repress her needs. Even her

mother does not care about her desires. They have never asked, “What about you? You’ve been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don’t you want a husband, children or a home of your own?” (Ladies Coupe' 77). Akhila wanted to lead her life with Hari who is younger than herself. But her fear of social norms prevented her from doing so. “What Akhila most desired in the world was to be her own person; in a place that was her own. To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure” (Ladies Coupe' 201).

Akhila’s youthful days were spent bringing up her sister Padma and two brothers Narayan and Narsi. Anita Nair says:

“Padma was twenty-two by the time Akhila put together a dowry for her. Gold jewellery; a diamond nose stud; a steel almirah, a cot and a mattress; stainless steel and a bronze cookware; silver lamps; a gold ring and an expensive wrist watch for her groom; and twenty thousand rupees in cash. And even then, it wasn’t easy. Prospective grooms worried that once they married her, there was little more they could expect from her family. Finally, they found someone who was willing to believe Akhila when she said she wouldn’t forsake her Padma. Akhila was thirty-four. What does a single woman do next in life?” (Ladies Coupe’ 78)

She also had desires and dreams, though not any of them found an outlet. None had time to set apart to plan the life of this spinster, who devoted all her youthful years for the service of her family.

She is often reminded of a Tamil film whose heroine faces similar situation as that of Akhila - a work horse and a woman who relinquishes her desires for the smooth running of her family. “...When Akhila thought of the film, she felt darkness lick her. Would her life end like the life of the woman in the film?” (Ladies Coupe' 77)

Always the daughter, the sister, the aunt or the provider, she had no time to actualize

herself, until the day she bought for herself a one-day ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari. She was gloriously alone for the first time in her life in a Ladies Coupe', which she shared with five other women. They discussed their desires, fears and hidden secrets and understood that they were foils to each other. Akhila had always "dreamt" of this "...eyes looking ahead. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of escaping" (Ladies Coupe' 1). She had never done anything that she desired to, but only what she was expected to do. But the conversation with her fellow passengers instilled in her a strong desire to be free from all bondages.

In Ladies Coupe', Anita Nair delineates various women characters and provides a macro picture of women's society. Janaki, the elderly woman Akhila meets in the Coupe' got married at the age of eighteen. As a girl of eighteen, she is not matured enough to know the meaning of marriage and what to expect of marriage. However, Janaki accommodates her body and mind to marriage and what it had to offer her in life. As a wife in the patriarchal society, Janaki finds her husband a loving and protecting one in the initial days of her life.

According to Anita Nair, the major stage of repression is marriage. After marriage, a girl becomes a woman and she has a multitude of roles to perform. She has to play the roles of a daughter – in – law, wife, mother and mother – in – law. Of all the roles mentioned here, the most difficult ones are a woman as daughter-in-law and wife. They could never come out of tradition. The expected feminine traits of the traditional daughter-in-law never allow them to depart from the age old customs and duties.. They are not expected to oppose or question their men folk. As a result, their suppressed emotions and desires find no outlet. Janaki says:

"I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take from where his father let off. Women like me end up

being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves. I believe in that old cliché that a home was a woman's kingdom. I worked hard to preserve mine... and then suddenly one day it didn't matter anymore. My home ceased to interest me, none of the beliefs I had built my life around had any meaning. I thought if I were to lose it all, I would cope. If I ever became alone I would manage perfectly. I was confident about that. I think I was tired of being this fragile creature... Now I know that even if I can cope it wouldn't be the same if he wasn't there with me." (Ladies Coupe' 22-23)

During the initial stages of their marriage, Janaki was uneasy as she was quite young to know what it meant to be a wife. Later, she accepted him into his body and heart. Though Prabhakar was a devoted husband, she was not satisfied. After a long battle with her frustrations, she reached a point when she realized that Prabhakar's presence was not needed to make her life complete. That recognition was the initial stage of her transformation.

According to Evelyn Cunningham, women are the only oppressed group in our society that lives in intimate association with their oppressors. They even feel glorified in their sufferings, and if any woman had rebellious attitude, the people around them made it double sure that it was curbed in the beginning itself.. Women are brainwashed right from their birth to be polite, submissive and obedient. She is expected to be chaste and faithful even when her husband is unfaithful.

Margaret Shanti, the Chemistry teacher goes through many physical, mental and spiritual crises. Their marriage had a fairy tale like charm initially which slowly disintegrates when Margaret begins to see the true nature of Ebe. He loved her but he never allowed her to have an identity of her own. Margaret initially was the little girl who said yes to whatever he said as Ebe wanted her to be a docile wife. "This is the life of the women to look after her

home, her husband and her children and give them food she has cooked with her own hands” (Ladies Coupe' 40). She leads a life of obscurity in some corner of the house all the time pretending to be satisfied and happy.

As a result, Margaret spent her years in a frozen state. In that form, she was powerless to make things happen. She let herself float on the surface of time, impervious and oblivious to what her life had become. It took some time for her to ponder over her situation to find an answer to her problem. As a result she decided to change her state of existence and effect an overall transformation in her being. She says:

"There is a technical name for the water that I turned into. Supercritical water. Capable of dissolving just about anything which, as mere water, it wouldn't dare aspire to. Raging with a vehemence that could burn and destroy poisons that if allowed to remain, would kill all that was natural and good." (Ladies Coupe' 97)

Margaret as a part of her revenge finds immense pleasure in overfeeding him till he loses his athletic figure and becomes a fat slob. She says: "I, Margaret Shanthi did it with the sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundations of his being. To rid this world of a creature who if allowed to remain the way he was, slim, lithe and arrogant, would continue to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy". (Ladies Coupe' 96)

PrabhaDevi was a good wife and an excellent daughter who fell in love with life at the sight of a swimming pool. With tradition compelling her to play the role of a traditional daughter in law, she gradually recognized a different angle in her personality, i.e. to live life to its fullest and to experience the warmth of its minute joys and sorrows. Her first foreign trip enables her to shatter her concepts about traditional attire and switch to western clothes. In the process of breaking free her tradition and keeping her identity intact, she finds

immense fulfillment. It is perhaps because of this that Akhila finds her the most self-confident in the group, one who could “triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float” (Ladies Coupe’208).

Sheela, the youngest of the five passengers in the Coupe' said that she could not restrain her idea of sending the body of Ammumma to fire without any jewels as Ammumma during the whole of her life she stayed with Sheela had confined in her about maintaining individuality no matter whoever criticized it. Applying makeup even when she was about to go to sleep made her more and more satisfied with herself. It was as though makeup was an integral part of her identity. As they started leaving for the graveyard, Sheela hurried the makeup and wearing of jewels to Ammumma for she did not want the identity of her grandmother to be damaged in her journey to the outer world.

Marikolanthu, the fifth to narrate her story, on whom the violence of casteism and innumerable social justices were inflicted, was a pathetic victim of social repression. It is this gender disparity, the suppression and oppression of women, and their resultant transformation that emerge as a powerful theme of the novel. Murugesan rapes her and defiles her. It is ultimately love that brings her on the right track in which she finds happiness and satisfaction. Her struggle had been one of hate for herself and accommodating with humiliating relationships thereafter. Her resolution to bring up her child shows her transformation into a new character. The motif of the novel is well expressed through the words of Marikkolanthu: " Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek the vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally". (Ladies Coupe’ 210).

Akhila listens to all these stories and ponders over the story of her life. These are the stories which together make a single story, of women rediscovering their bodies. Thus Coupe' becomes a symbol for a Utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not

characterized by false binaries. At the end of the journey, Akhila faces a wide ocean and the soothing sea breeze of Kanyakumari. Away from the enclosed space of her home and the claustrophobic nature of her conscience, she faces a brand new world devoid of all commitments. Previously, Akhila had lived only for her family, giving least importance to her dreams. As a result of the journey, she understood the need of asserting her identity. She learned that it was her life and it was only Akhila who was the sole person responsible for its joys and sorrows. No more a daughter or a sister, she transformed herself into the fullness of Akhilandeswari, representing the powerful image of a changed woman.

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