



## **Beyond the Boundaries: A Study of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The debate over the position of women, their condition in their family and society at large, has contributed in giving them many rights earlier denied. Nevertheless, the basic rights for women are still not enough to say that their position is equal to their male counterparts. Although women in general, are said to be in better positions than their earlier counterparts, but they are still in the marginalized position, because the multifaceted gender patterns work differently on women of different classes and backgrounds through culture. By looking at the women characters from two different social backgrounds, this paper attempts to have a better understanding of their marginalization through Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*. This paper aims to study the plight of women who are called privileged according to the societal norms yet, they are marginalized. In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, the protagonist Akhila, an independent unmarried woman, goes on a journey alone to Kanyakumari in order to find a place for herself. The text contrasts the challenges of living alone positing it against the women surrounded by human relationships. The objective of this paper is to study how human relationships have become a tool to women's oppression and also what major role travel plays in the development and realization of 'Self'. Human psyche, being largely influenced by culture, has many a time played a crucial role in victimizing human being themselves, especially, the women. So, in a way it includes the deep cultural influences on human psyche that leads to the oppression of a particular group and suggests alternatives to deal with them.

### **KEYWORDS**

Patriarchy, Women, Psyche, Marginalization, Self, Travel, Privileged.

## INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the genesis of Indian literature written by any Indian in English, we talk about the literature which is not even a couple of centuries old (Naik, 2002). Sake Dean Mahomet, in first ever written travel narrative *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, (1794) by any Indian in England, gave a near to similar, if not completely true picture of India. It was the first published work in English by any Indian (Fisher, 1997). European writings about India can never be called an authentic record of the country, its people and culture. It is something which they have written after what they have seen through their biased colonial viewpoint. Whereas when the Indian writers, write something about the people, culture, geographical aspect and other elements of their country, are more authentic and emphatic in their treatment. This reflects a true picture; hence a real image is formed in the minds of the readers especially in the minds of the Non-European readers (Fisher, 1997).

Later other contemporary Indian writers who were residing in India or abroad strengthened the genre more; their works were filled with Indianness and its related themes. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sehgal, in contemporary times Anita Nair and many more fortified Indian writing in English to a great extent (Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmmed, 2020). For the purpose of current study Anita Nair's Bestselling fiction novel *Ladies Coupé* is taken up. Before discussing about the work in detail it is necessary to talk a little about the author first.

Anita Nair was born in Mundakkottukurussi near Shoranur in Kerala on 26 January 1966, educated in Chennai and has many books to her credit. Her writing career started when her first work, a collection of stories, *Satyr of the Subway* published in 1997. Her next works are *The Better Man* (1999) and *Ladies Coupé* (2001). *The Better man* was published by Picador USA, which makes it the first work by any Indian author to be published by this publication agency. Her other notable works are *Mistress* (2003), *Adventures of Nonu, the skating Squirrel* (2006), *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007), and *Magical Indian Myths* (2008), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014), and many other works as well. She has won many accolades for her brilliantly written works.

Anita Nair is one of those eminent female writers who championed the genre of Indian Literature in English. She wrote emphatically in various genres like detective fiction, nonfiction, children's literature, travel writing, plays, screenplays and poetry as well. She also wrote on

varied contemporary subjects be it about male and female sensibilities, gender equality, women's identity, child trafficking etc. Nair has refused to be labeled as a feminist writer as she wrote about other concerns related to society, men and women both equally well (Nair, 2020).

## **OBJECTIVE AND APPROACH**

The objective of this paper is to study the plight of women through the female characters of Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupé*, who are called, privileged according to the societal norms yet they are marginalized. Through these characters it analyzes the effect of deep cultural influences on human psyche that leads to the oppression of a particular group. Human psyche, the self, being largely influenced by culture, has many a time played a crucial role in victimizing women. The paper also aims to explore what major role 'travel' plays in the development and realization of self. For this purpose the concept of 'other' used by Simon de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex (1949)* (Translated by H.M. Parshley, 1953) is studied to draw a contrast with 'Self', which influences the preferences of women and sometimes as a result force them to shift towards the boundaries i.e. the margins.

## **LADIES COUPE- A JOURNEY TO CONNECT**

Since the debate over the position of women, their condition in the family and society at large, has contributed in giving them many rights earlier denied. Nevertheless, the basic rights for women are not enough to say that their position is equal to their male counterparts. One of the reasons might be that their psyche is programmed to behave in a set pattern due to the roles they are performing in their daily lives. Eagly (2017), while talking about the stereotypes and reality of female psyche rightly mentions that how the lives of women are still different from men even after several gender equality movements,

Considerable information about the psyche of women derives from observing how they live their lives. Contrary to earlier centuries, most women in industrialized nations, including the United States, are employed outside of their homes throughout most of their adult lives and are also engaged in domestic work of caring for and serving family members. Despite the considerable movement toward gender equality inherent in women's employment, their lives have remained somewhat different from those of men (para. 2)

In this process their self is blurred and gradually lost. Although today, women are said to be in a better position compared to their primitive counterparts yet in general they are still in the

marginalized position. The reason being the multifaceted gender patterns work differently through culture on women of different classes and backgrounds. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social reforms were helpful to remove the tyranny of social evils, but the subordination still remained in the society. So, a few educated women held the banner for emancipation and communicated to the world their own bitter experiences through their writings (Yadav, 2017).

By looking at the women characters coming from two different social backgrounds, this paper attempts to have a better understanding of their marginalization through Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*. By analyzing her work, we categorize the women characters, for the better understanding of this research, the first category includes the educated working women of modern society who hail either from middle or upper middle class, like Akhila & Margaret. The second category is of those women who are never given a chance to step out of their boundaries to work in the outer world, like Prabhadevi, Janaki and Marikolanthu (though she worked in Chettiar household, but due to her financial difficulties not because of her freedom, hence included).

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, the protagonist Akhila, an independent unmarried woman, goes on a journey alone to Kanyakumari in order to find a place for herself. In the *Ladies Coupé* she meets five other women. The coupé becomes a space far away from their patriarchal world, where five women can talk freely, think freely and share the stories of their lives with other women without any inhibition. The text contrasts the challenges of living alone positing it against the women surrounded by human relationships. *Ladies Coupé* follows the storytelling pattern of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where pilgrims tell each other stories, while they halted in an inn during their journey to Canterbury. Similarly, *Ladies Coupé* is a story of six female characters travelling together in a Ladies compartment reserved only for women travelers. Just like in *The Canterbury Tales*, each of the pilgrims has to tell two tales, but those tales were told on the request of the host of Tabard Inn, not because they wished to. Here in *Ladies Coupé* these six ladies are travelling in the same train compartment and choose to share their stories with one another naturally. They do not know each other hence find it comfortable to speak their heart out without any inhibitions or fear of being judged. These women are of different ages and come from different social and educational backgrounds.

The story starts with the description of Akhila's life. She is forty-five years old Tamil Brahmin who could not marry due to her family responsibilities and works in a government office as an Income tax clerk.

Akhila is that sort of a woman. She does what is expected of her; she dreams about the rest. Which is why she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs? To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires. Blue skies, silver linings, a break in the clouds. Akhila knows these to be mere illusions caused by putting on rose-coloured spectacles. She has long ago trodden to shards her rose-glassed spectacles and switched to metal-framed glasses that remain plain indoors and turn photo-chromatic outdoors. Even the sun ceases to shine when Akhila's glasses turn a dusky brown. 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, 2004, pp. 6-7).

She decides to travel to Kanyakumari alone. For her it is a challenging thing to do since she has always followed a trodden path and has never ever travelled alone for such a long distance without a male member of her family. Akhila is haunted by a question forever- "Can a woman cope alone?" (Nair, 2004, p. 22), asked the same from her co travelers, and in reply gets a question further from Janaki, "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her" (Nair, 2004, p. 21). The above questions expose the inner fears of women. Janaki is the oldest among them all. She was married at the age of eighteen and led a comfortable life like a queen of her house as she calls it.

There were other women traveling with her in the compartment, Prabhadevi, wife of a rich diamond merchant. Her visit to New York after her marriage, changes her for a while but when she realizes that she has become someone else, an imitation of western women, she comes back to her old life. She finds solace in swimming; in fact, she floats in her life swiftly just like she does in water.

Sheela Vasudevan is a fourteen years old student of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, who is travelling with her father. She is a sensitive & sensible girl who understands her dying grandmother's wish and tries to respect her wish after her death. She is the youngest among them all. Margaret Paulraj, a chemistry teacher, is married to Ebenezer Paulraj. Ebe is the principal of the same school where Margaret teaches Chemistry. She is a brilliant woman, good in academics but has to sacrifice her wishes and follow the wishes of her narcissistic husband unwillingly. Marikolanthu, a 31 years old woman, suffers a lot in her life. She works for Chettiar household where she was raped by a member of the Chettiar family. She becomes an unmarried mother at the age of nineteen and

refuses to take care of her son due to her hatred towards him, since he is born out of wedlock. This train journey proves cathartic to all these women and helped them understand themselves and their lives in a better way.

## **ROLE OF SELF AND CULTURE IN WOMEN'S LIFE**

What is this 'Self' here? The concept of self is something when an individual has some perceptions about him/herself, their abilities or uniqueness, which makes the person who they are. "The self is the distinct characteristic individuality of a person. The human self is a self-organizing, interactive system of thoughts, feelings and motives that characterizes an individual" (Chandra, 2009). In the case of Anita Nair's protagonist Akhila, she has this question always lingering in her mind that whether a woman can live alone? She, being an unmarried woman in her mid-fifties always questions about the happiness and freedom she achieves and could have achieved further but could not enjoy due to her mental training of being a woman. She has this deep-rooted psychology that women need a man to live her life, which came from her upbringing in a society of similar minded people. It is the individuality of any person which is felt all in her/his personality through their actions throughout their lives. But in case of a woman's life this Self is subdued by the thinking and instructions of the male members of the society (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019).

In the introduction of her book *The Second Sex* (1953) Simon De Beauvoir writes, that women are brought up by women and their normal destiny is marriage, and marriage is a kind of subordination to man itself. So, she urges to study women's traditional destiny carefully. She also tries to find out that how woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences that and what kind of an escape mechanism she has with her (Beauvoir & Parshley, 1956). The same apprehensions, we find, uttered by the women travelling in the Ladies coupe in Nair's work. The cultural backgrounds from where the women characters come from, irrespective of their classes based on their economic status or education, restricts them to take any drastic step which deviates from their normal order of their patriarchal lives.

M.A.R. Habib, an academic scholar and poet in his book, *Literary Criticism: from Plato to the Present*, mentions that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) writes that if we see history we shall find that women have always occupied secondary role in relation to man and thus relegated to the position of "Other," also that man has always controlled his environment. She writes how

the so-called “essence” of woman is created at many levels which ultimately represent the interests of men. (Habib, 2017)

In this regard we find that Akhila is someone who never felt that she can take her own decisions by herself. She always felt that she is just a provider for everyone in her family. First her father took care of all of them, after his death she takes the place of her father but only her place as a provider not as a decision maker, who can take decisions on behalf of the family as well. After her father the decision makers were her brothers who were far younger than her in age. But since they are men, they got this position automatically. This is how the women psyche works, since their childhood they are taught to behave in a certain way and have certain expectations from life. So, even if they become independent financially, then they never stand equal to men, because their trained psyche does not let them see themselves at that position. If this is the condition of educated, independent women, the position of uneducated and dependant women can very well be assumed.

Cultural influence is also a major factor in the making and development of their ‘Self’. According to Oxford Dictionary, ‘Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society.’ The women travelling in the Ladies Coupé assimilate their personalities into their husband’s in such a way that at one point their identity is blurred and lost. Janaki, Prabhadevi, Akhila, her mother is some of the best example of this. As they lose their individual ‘Self’ in order to become what the patriarchal society wants from them. Their culture expects them to do so and they do not defy it.

The six major women characters come from different social and financial backgrounds. These women belong to the upper middle and middle class. Also, can be divided into two categories; First, women who are doing jobs and second of those who are homemakers. Akhila, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu are working women, out of them Marikolanthu is an uneducated working woman who is also a victim in the hands of culture. The culture makes them what they are, as from the very childhood they are taught to be good daughters, wives and mothers. Their psyche gets deeply embedded in what they are taught throughout their lives, ‘To become a good woman.’ That psyche leads to their oppression by their own self. Nair writes in *Ladies Coupe*, “Janaki didn’t know what to expect of marriage. All through her girlhood, marriage was a destination she was groomed for. Her mother and aunts had taught her the arts of cooking and cleaning, sewing and pickling.” (p. 24)

Similarly, all the women in the novel has to follow the set pattern of patriarchy including Prabha Devi, Margaret, Sheela, Marikolanthu, Akhila and as well as her own mother succumb to the cultural and socio-patriarchal norms of the society.

## **ROLE OF TRAVEL IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND REALIZATION OF SELF**

“The self is the distinct characteristic individuality of a person. The human self is a self-organizing, interactive system of thoughts, feelings and motives that characterizes an individual” (Chandra, 2009).

By analyzing the lives of the entire female characters, one shall find that it is the journeys of their lives that change them as a person. Travel plays a very strong role here. Since travel signifies movement and this movement further changes the human being as a person. Here our attempt is also to find the role of travel in the development and realization of ‘Self’ in Akhila’s life. Her train journey to Kanyakumari alone provides her an opportunity to open herself in front of five other women, who are completely unfamiliar with one another. This journey signifies an emotional, psychological journey as well along with a physical movement. The journey helps not only to Akhila but her co travelers as well in transforming or at least realizing their true selves.

When Akhila decides to travel alone without anyone with her, she is apprehensive first but then she acts upon her wishes just to find the answers she has been trying to find all her life. She remembered the strapped Bata sandals her father had bought just before he died. “Quo Vadis. Appa read aloud from the side of the box. Do you know what that means? It’s Latin for “Whither goest thou?” I like the conceit of a pair of sandals that dares ask this question. Something I haven’t asked myself for a long time” (Nair, 2004, p.36).

The motif of travel is also seen in the life of Prabha Devi, when she is transformed after her visit to New York. It changes her physically and psychologically as well for some time until she realizes that her new ways are not working for her. She tries to become a western woman physically and mentally both. Her dilemma to become someone else shows how trapped she is in her desires to live freely. She keeps taking pride in her life by thinking, “How lucky I am to be me!” (Nair, 2004, p. 139).

“Sometimes people stare at her. They are not used to the sight of a single woman by herself. A foreigner they can understand, but an Indian Woman...She walks past them slowly...It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t care anymore” (Nair, 2004, pp. 213-214).

The journey alone gives her time and space to go away from her normally mundane life, away from worries and to think about herself and her wishes only. It might seem very normal and easy but is difficult in its core, as women in Indian traditional society have never been in the position to decide anything on their own especially taking the decision of travelling alone. That is why this decision of Akhila is a drastic step which liberates her spirits and boosts her confidence.

## CONCLUSION

We can say that by the above discussion and in the given circumstances, we find that irrespective of their culture, age, class and financial backgrounds women need to step out of their cocoon and move beyond their mental boundaries, hence the title – *Beyond the Boundaries: A Study of Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé*. The boundaries could be pushed by the one for whom it is creating obstruction, here in this case- Women. Human psyche makes a person do what s/he has not imagined. In the case of women, travel helps them explore a new world full of possibilities. It leaves a cathartic effect on their psyche. As it provides answers to Akhila's questions which she found within her own questions. A sense of freedom is achieved in true sense. Simon de Beauvoir has suggested in *The Second Sex* (1953) that the situation of women can be changed with the change in her economic condition but not until it also generate moral, social, cultural and psychological transformations. Their condition could not be better until they both remain self for themselves and becomes 'Other' for other (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 859).

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