
Female Identity in *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

In the process of growing up to become a woman, the girls and their talent in real sense do not get the opportunity and environment to grow, the reason is that it lies in the deep-rooted notion of masculinity and femininity existing in our society which applies pressures on women to conform to the dominant societal stereotypes. Masculinity in our society implies aggregation and dominance. The women, on the other hand are the example of femininity which implies passivity, sacrifice, timidity and inferiority. Our circumstances always give a second position to the female community. They are supposed to be the sufferers of all male dominated activities. Our literature had no such sufficient space to express the situation of women. But now a day's many woman writers are ready to express their own ideas through their works. They expressing the agonies, struggles, problems faced by the female community. Through this paper I wish to point out how the female identity or female self is expressed in the novel *Ladies Coupe* which is written by Anitha Nair.

Keywords: Self, Identity, Female Existence, Culture, Tradition

Introduction

Literature always performs an important role in the field of arts. It expresses the things which denied by the society and established a world of creativity. The novels are the main parts of literature. Novel had great influence in the mind of common man because it represents the feelings of common man. Indian English writing has obtained an independent status in the realm of Indian literature. Wide range of themes is dealt with in Indian English writings. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture and tradition, social values, and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments.

Fiction by woman writers constitutes major segments of the contemporary writing in Indian English. It provides insights, a wealth of understanding, a wealth of understanding, a reservoir of meaning and a basis of discussion. Through women writer's eyes one can see a different world and with their assistance one can realise the potential of human achievements. Every appraisal of the Indian English literature will certainly result in an appreciation of the writings of woman. Anitha Nair is one of the finest in Indian English writing with an international reputation. She is a fine writer, with a great sense of character, a vivid knowledge of South Indian culture and has an eye for describing details. She can move from tender compassion to sensuality, to raging hatred, and is a compelling story teller. She presented a new world of

literature and a new way of storytelling. As an Indian English writer, she gave a new picture about India especially southern India. Her main works are *The better man*, *Satyr of the subway*, *Ladies coupe* etc. In *Ladies coupe*, Nair's second book, she presented new idea related to the male dominated society.

Female identity, from the early period of time, treated as a second position in the social milieu. Masculine dominated world always gives a neglected mind to the female community. The journey to the main stream is very difficult to woman because they always get a space in corner. The peculiarity of Indian society is it is controlled by patriarchy. The caste and class system is also played their own role to the condition of women. For example, upper caste women are controlled by so many laws which are created by the male society. These things are clearly depicted in this work. Through my paper, I wish to focus on the self and identity of female community in the Indian society.

Ladies Coupe – A Short Picture

Ladies Coupe was the second work by Anita Nair, the leading writer. In this work she considered the stories of contemporary Indian women who always got a second position in their family as well as social life. She also depicts the dos and don'ts of upper and middle caste women in Southern India. Besides, Anita Nair also told us about the mental strength of lower caste women. The contemporary India is always under the patriarchal system in which men got predominant consideration than women. The leading characters in this novel were female characters. If there are male characters, they got less importance when compared with women.

The story begins with a train journey. There is a beautiful description about the railway station. In India, railways and railway stations are commonly used by middle class people. So, the picturization of railway station is a symbol to express author's attitude about the common life. The mental pain, relief, sorrow, enjoyment all are mingled in the railway station. Arrival of the passengers brought enjoyment but departure brought sorrows. All type of smells is mingled in the railway station. That means the smell of sweat, perfumes, talcum powder, toddy etc. People from all sides of the society are mingled in the railway station. They have their own needs. Somebody needs a job for their existence while others need some mental pleasure. This journey is symbolized as the search for self of the characters.

The main character in the novel is Akhilandeswari, Akhila for short. She belongs to the South Indian Brahmin caste. Her father was an income tax office clerk. As an income tax clerk, her 'Appa' was always busy with files and crowded by office matters. In Sunday he always stays at home with weekly dress and planned about the life after his retirement. In his office he was very strict and straight forward. Every file on his table took a longer time to leave. Her mother was a pure Brahmin lady, who always treated her husband firstly. She never allowed her children to eat something before her husband had food. In Sundays, if Appa at the home, Amma prepared special dishes for him. She would sit on a little wooden platform and lay the green plantain leaf before him. She prepared piping hot, fragrant with the alchemy of steam, spices and Amma's devotion to his man is expressed in this way. Amma did the Kolam (a picture drawn by Brahmin ladies in front of their house with rice powder for devoting the goddess Lakshmi).

Suddenly a twist happened in Akhila's life. Her father died in an accident. Akhila was the

eldest and she took the charge of her entire family. Her brother Narayan was fifteen at that time. She got the job of her Appa in her nineteen. She paid all her salary for the well-being of her brothers and sister. Her one brother, after passing his post-graduation, took a decision to marry the daughter of a college principal. At that time Akhila also wanted to be a bride but there was nobody to take a decision about her marriage. Similarly, Padma, her sister also got married and Akhila remain alone. After the performance of a master role, Akihla's life limited to the small living style. In home, Amma and Akhila cooked food ate it and they slept. After a long period of time, she realised her life is a monotonous one and her brothers and sister got their own secure life. Then she decided to live her own life and need some mental pleasure. For that, she decided to travel a trip to Kanayakumari, where a male ocean ganged by two female oceans.

On her journey to Kanyakumari, she met some fellow passengers in her compartment. They are Prabhadevi, Janaki, Margaret Shanthi and Marikolunthu. Each passenger has their own story to explain. Janaki married to Prabhakar when she was eighteen theirs was an arranged marriage, the horoscope matched, the families liked each other and they were considered perfectly suited for each other. Another girl, Sheela, is facing so many restrictions from her grandmother. Grandmother always restrict her by saying don't do this, don't do that, don't go there, don't make company with boys etc. Another one, her name is Margaret Shanthi and she is a chemistry teacher. She married Ebenezer Paulraj, principal of the college in which she worked. Prabhadevi, one of the passengers, told her story to Akhila. Prabha's father hesitated her when he came to know that his wife gives him a baby girl. Lastly, Akhila found a girl sitting on a seat. Her name is Marikolunthu and she is going to Nagarcoil where she worked as a servant for a doctor. Marikolunthu said that the other women have their own silly problems.

Then the Tamil girl began to start her story. She was born in Kanchipuram. When she was at nine, her father died with serious disease. After the death of her father, they moved to Chettiar Kottai because there was nobody to protect them. One day she was brutally raped by Murugan, a relative of Chettiyar (land lord). After some days she came to know that she was pregnant. All stories of her fellow travellers and their own farewell words gave a new path of living to Akhila. When she reached Kanyakumari, she met a young boy and had a physical relation with him. She finds the telephone number of Hari, her old boyfriend. When Hari attended the telephone, she told him that I am Akhila, Akhilandeswari. She decided to stay as Akhilandeswari. There is no surname to accompany her name. This way the story ends. Through her story the author wishes to points out the women's situation in contemporary India.

Female Identity in *Ladies Coupe*

The self is the distinct characteristic individuality of a person. The human self is a self-organising interactive system of thoughts, feelings and motives that characterizes an individual. Self, the result of human's awareness of the individual as a separate entity in the social environment enables humans to regard their emotionally experiences and their own integrity and identity in relation to their past, present and future. Enquiry of self is an important thing in the human life which is denied by everyone. Some people find their own identity and people regarded them as heroes and incarnations.

The novel *Ladies Coupe* deeply considered about the enquiry of self-identity of women. Women and men are equal in the world. Women can perform all duties similar as man. But

women are always considered as a dirty creature and always treated as a second one their life. This is only because of the lack of self-identity. *Ladies Coupe* discusses the problems like women's second position, their identical problems, middle class female life and caste problems which badly affect the women. Identity is the main problem to everyone. Identity does not mean even a name, address and of the marks. It means the questions related to our kind and existence. All human being's life is an enquiry about self. "Who am I?" is the main question which raised every one's mind.

The story begins with a train journey. Akhila, the protagonist wants to travel to Kanyakumari. Through her journey she had a chance to mingle with her fellow travellers and this helps her to study the problems related with women in different areas. The train journey here presented as a journey for the search of 'self'. All her fellow travellers have their own problems. They were good daughters, wife, and aunts and so on. But the society, patriarchal society, doesn't admit them and they became frustrated. The plot of the novel is southern India, which seriously banged by superstitious, old customs, class and caste systems. Men had all authorities and power than women. They can decide the life of women too. They can have many affairs with women, travel everywhere, engaged in public meeting and so on. But women have all the restrictions. They all perfectly stated in the old Vedas and Upanishads. When Appa died, Akhila's mother also lived like this. Her ornaments were taken by the relatives and head shaved.

Caste system had a leading role in this novel. Anita Nair beautifully depicted the limitations of upper caste women. The protagonist and her family belong to the upper caste Brahmin family which include so many restrictions to the female society. When the husbands died, the widows of Brahmin community live their rest life in a miserable way. They haven't any right to attend the social functions and they were restricted to the main stream society. By the influence of patriarchal system, the female community hadn't a chance to express their identity. The male dominated powers also impose so many laws and these laws are the by-product of Vedas and Puranas. Women had no permission to go to school, college and even a job. This means they always need assistance from the men and this system has been existed from the early period. When Akhila got her appointment in the income tax department, the others used to abuse her by talking that women's duty is to be a good wife, good daughter and mother.

But the situation of the lower caste is entirely opposite. There, women get much better status and freedom compared with the upper caste women. The characters like Karpagam and Marikolunthu belongs to the lower caste. They have their own freedom and they can support their family with their own income. There is nobody to restrict them and impose the dos and don'ts. Marikolunthu had met a serious rape from her relative and gave birth to a baby boy. But she decided to fight against her destiny and try to reveal her own identity. She found a small income and protects her son. Marikolunthu told Akhila that women are stronger than men they can perform any duties that the men can perform. Actually, these words are the key words of Akhila's life. She became motivated and decided to live her own life. Class system also played an important role in this work. Class system imposes some laws to the life of common people. Because most of the main characters are belong to the middle-class family. The middle-class women have no such power to express themselves in public sphere. Thus, the Margaret try to increase the fat of her husband, Prabha Devi try to learn swimming to conquer her fear and so

on. Because they haven't any other options to react against their husband's torturing. But, on the other hand, Marikolunthu has no such tensions and fear for reacting against the social milieu. She has no fear to give birth to a fatherless child and she finds a job and ready to feed up him. She always wanted a single life and a mother of his child. The author is very sensibly picturized the characters in this work because some characters belong to the upper class and others to the lower class. The attitude of modern girl is portrayed through Sheela, a teenage girl. She has her own perspectives and opinion about the contemporary situation.

Anita Nair, who has a strong base in South India, wrote the novel *Ladies Coupe* with all dimensions of life. The characters in this novel belong to all level, all class, and all caste etc. So, the characters can express the various stages of South India. The novel started with an utter confusion about life of the protagonist herself. Akhila has faced much confusion related with her life. She is conscious about the custom, culture and tradition. She always feared the society controlled by the male supremacist. But at last, she finds her own way and selected a single life. She doesn't need a surname for her name and decided to stay as Akhilandeswari. Through her work the author never made a rude criticism to the male society but she tries to say that women and men are equal. There is no need of any discrimination on the basis of masculinity and femininity. She pointed out that men and women can equally perform the duties. So, they must be equally treated.

Conclusion

Anita Nair, a well-known Indian English writer, who wrote many books based on Indian plurality, feminist ideology and Indian culture. *Ladies Coupe*, one of her famous works, point out the life of women in Indian context, especially under the patriarchal system. Her view point had influenced her writings also. Women, in all ages, are treated as a second one and marginalized class. This work is an attempt to draw how the women considering themselves to this male dominated world. The characters in this novel are trying to prove their own identity through various medium and they protest the dominance from the masculinity. For protesting, they selected their own ways. The author tries to throw the light into the physical as well as psychological problems of women. For example, when Marikolunthu became brutally raped, she was in a pathetic situation and she couldn't manage herself. That is the real picture about the women who always facing the same situations. Masculinity in our society implies aggregation and dominance. The women on the other hand have to be the epitome of femininity, which supposedly implies passivity, sacrifice, timidity and inferiority. Society always consider the female community as a second one. Thus, their mental agony, loneliness, frustrations, etc. are very deeply interconnected. That is why Akhila can understand the feelings and emotions of other characters. Through this paper I would like to point out the present situation of women in contemporary India and their struggle for proving their self-esteem.

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