

# Conflict between Societal Norms and Self-Empathy on Women Characters in Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe'

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**Abstract**— Anita Nair is popular writer in English. She through this novel 'Ladies Coupe' talks about the various problems faced by the women in the patriarchal society. It depicts the conflict between the societal norms and self-empathy on women characters in various complexities of life. This paper is a study of Anita Nair's second novel where all her major and minor characters undergo physical, psychological and situational constraints set by the society. It centralises around the protagonist, Akilandeswari, a forty five year old spinster who travels in the ladies compartment of a train. There she meets her co-passengers in the Ladies coupe who shares their real stories of their life. Eldest of all is Janaki, Margret Paulraj is a school teacher, Prabhavathi a perfect home maker, Marikolunthu the abused lady of innocence, Karpagam a revolutionary widow and a schoolmate of Akhila, etc.,. Each one is from different from one another in their social status, economical stability, age, community and also in their experiences of life. It also elaborates about how they fight back successfully balancing the norms of the society and revelation of self.

**Keywords**— Anita Nair, Women Writer, patriarchal societal norms, self-empathy, self-revelation.

Anita Nair is a popular South Indian writer in English. She talks about the problems of women folks and their sufferings in the hands of patriarchal society in contemporary India. She unveils the bare truth of how dreams of the women scatter and vanish slowly due to fixed patterns of the societal norms in the name of so called culture and tradition. 'Each of the women is finely drawn' says the Hindustan Times.

Balancing and counter-balancing these strict unwritten rules and boundaries make her struggle between her own

choices and social expectations from her. Going beyond the above boundaries cast her away from the crowd, branding her as unfit for the society in which she lives. In order to cope up, she needs to struggle a lot both physically and psychologically against social, cultural and economical challenges. Breaking those barriers and obstacles withstanding the test of time seems to be a great challenge for her. This may sometimes mar her reputation and cause damage to her livelihood.

This novel 'Ladies Coupe (2001)' is the second novel written by Anita Nair. It brought her great fame and popularity among the audience. It was selected as one of the top five books in the year 2002. It was hence translated into more than twenty five languages around the world. Anita Nair readily brings out all conflicts which women undergo in the name of societal norms, boundaries, marriage, customs and traditions in the male dominated society where men rule over her body and mind.

They were literally been ill-treated in many other ways in all spheres of their life such as verbal, physical and sexual abuse by the spouse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, seduction, reciprocated love, care and affection, lack of financial stability, economic compulsion, curbing of economic freedom, blocking of social independence, oppression and suppression, discouragement, lack of moral support, lack of guidance, use and misuse of her poverty, insecurity, etc., were brought live by the author.

All the characters, major and minor, in the novel 'Ladies Coupe' undergo psychological trauma in their journey of life due to certain situational constraints which they face in their life. All this is brought live in a very simple vivid language by Anita Nair.

The lead protagonist of the novel is a forty five year old spinster Akhilandeswari. She was born in a conservative Hindu Brahmin family of South India which is full of customs and tradition to be followed by women with lot of restrictions even from her childhood. She followed all the norms told by her mother such as obeying elders, following rigid rituals, blending with the environment, accepting the concept that the man is superior to women and doesn't accept any man's role in the house. "A woman is not meant to take on a man's role" (Ladies Coupe 14). She does so till the day when her father dies in a road accident. Very soon she was situationally forced to take up his father's job as a clerk in the income tax department and thereby take the role of a man by becoming the sole breadwinner of a big family. "When Akhila's father died, two things happened: Sundays became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the Family" (Ladies Coupe 75).

As a young lady she sacrificed everything of hers for others livelihood whereas her own kith and kin refuses to understand or empathize with her emotions. They instead had a check over her activities by pointing out her living styles curbing her space and freedom of choice by poking noses into her personal affairs commenting and criticizing her. These are clearly evident from Padma's words: "She is so smart when it comes to office duties, but at home..." she paused ...' why, my seven-year old Madhavi is better housekeeper than she is" (Ladies Coupe 163).

She felt alienated within her own family and longed for the personal care and concern. Meanwhile she fell in love with a man named Hari who is younger than her age and did not accept him as she was afraid of the society's comments and criticisms. She at one point realizes that she was just being utilized by all the people around her. This very thought made her feel depressed and unfolds her mind and decided to oblige to her order of choice and freedom. So she wanted to totally get away from the place and like to live alone in her life on by getting away from the clutches of life which the society has framed. "Of sitting with her back to her world, with her eyes looking ahead. Of leaving, Of running away. Of pulling out, Of escaping" (Ladies Coupe 1)

Janaki, the eldest of all from all her experiences of life she learnt to love her husband whom she was married to. She accepts the fact that women is inferior to man and need somebody to look after her. So, she is always dependant on some or the other men throughout her life First her father, then her brother, later her husband and now her son. According to her, the prime duty of women is to

look after and maintain her household chores well to make herself a better mother, wife and a good daughter in law. Thus became the queen of the household chores. With all constraints and difficulties she had in her life during her certain age she was able to tolerate just things which came on her way of life apart from all these adjustments she too dreamt and longed to live her independent life on her own.

"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 upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves...I think I was tired of being this fragile creature" (Ladies Coupe 22-23).

Then after her comes a girl of fourteen years who is studying in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and her ability to think beyond her age seems a distinct quality. She knew the tactics of understanding and perceiving others thoughts. She has experienced the bitterness of sexual harassment by her friend's father and knows how to escape from the clutches of it by her mental maturity. She was able to perceive things beyond her age. This is clearly evident when she understands the wishes of her grandmother and wanted to fulfill it during her last rites. "Sheela knew Ammma did it so that even if she were to die in her sleep, she would do so looking her best. Her children, of course, dismissed it as assign of age and its concurrent eccentricity" (Ladies Coupe 68).

Next, is Margret Paulraj a well-educated Chemistry gold medalist and a school teacher. She fell in love with the principal of the school in which she is working with. Her husband dictated terms both in his school and at home. She was not allowed to pursue her Doctorate degree. Instead she was asked to take up what she needs to be for working in a school. He takes command over her and she obliges to all his orders. She was instructed to cut her long hair into short hair as he felt that it looks appropriate and said that it doesn't suit her. She needs to fulfill his sexual desires but was asked to abort her baby. Thus the stress accumulated brought a drift between the couple which turned love into hatred. She then took revenge by feeding him oily and fatty foods and made him obese and thus broke his confidence to nothing. Finally as a result of that he became very much dependent on her due to his ill health. Her word clears this: "But first, I had to persuade Ebe to let down his defenses. To open his senses and taste buds to me" (Ladies Coupe 132).

The forth story is about Prabhadevi who was born rich and had a perfect childhood. She looked pretty and was well versed in all the works she does such as cooking and

needle work. She was married to a rich diamond merchant's son. She in one of her visits to the West tried to adopt their culture and pride struck her which brought disputes in the family between the couple. Later she realizes her mistakes and she rectified it and thus learnt to balance life and hence then on she lived a satisfied life. "She was a good wife and an excellent mother. What more could a man ask for?" (Ladies Coupe 184).

The last was Marikolunthu who lived beyond her age and life. Being born in a poor family she was forced to assist her mother who is a maid in Chettiar's house. She was sexually abused by Chettiar's distant cousin Murugesan and delivers an illegitimate son Muthu. She withstood and tolerated all these in order to raise her brothers and son. This slowly paved her to give birth to an illegitimate child. She works as a maid like her mother in Chettiar's house to look after their grandson later was misused by Chettiar's son too. She later worked as a maid for the two lesbian lady doctors and later was lived as Lesbian partner too. Her poverty and continuous blows in her life made her bite her teeth and a life without listening to any comments made by society. "For so long now, I had been content to remain sister to the real thing. Surrogate mother, surrogate lover. But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing. All I want to be was Muthu's mother" (Ladies Coupe 268).

Apart from these five characters, Akhila's old schoolmate Karpagam also influences her a lot and convinces her to live a life she wants to live. Karpagam a widow wears Kumkum and colourful sarees even after the death of her husband is also became a big turning point in her life.

"I don't care what my family or anyone thinks, I am. Who I am and I have as much right as anyone else to live as choose. Tell me, didn't we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It isn't privilege that marriage sanctions. The way I look at it, it is nature for a woman to want to be feminine. It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead." (Ladies Coupe 202).

All these incidents clearly indicate that all women characters of Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' undergo great conflict between the societal norms and self-empathy in various dimensions of life. They all lives in dilemma without knowing how to escape or get rid of these unknown humiliations of self. They also tolerate the shameful experiences faced in the name of perseverance and adjustments to the core. These women need to fight back for their rights courageously empowering themselves to reach greater heights to lead a confident and comfortable life.

Moreover they need to strive and work hard for their own upliftment in the society to gain independence and freedom by changing and altering certain norms in the society to live a life of their choice within the boundaries of the consciousness balancing both.

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