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### **Reclaiming Identity and Liberation in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé***

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#### **Abstract:**

Anita Nair is a notable writer for depicting the lives of women in India. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, explores the lives of six women, such as Akhila, Janaki, Margaret Shanthi, Sheela, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu. *Ladies Coupé* refers to a reserved compartment for women on a train, where the protagonist, Akhila, embarks on a transformative journey with five other women. Janaki, the eldest, shares her experiences of humiliation; Sheela,

a perceptive and self-aware teenager, navigates her coming-of-age struggles; Margaret Shanthi, a teacher, feels trapped in a toxic marriage; Prabha Devi rediscovers her identity after years of conformity; and Marikolanthu, a rape survivor, battles the trauma of her past. As they share their life experiences, they reveal the challenges and resilience of women in a patriarchal society. Inspired by their stories, Akhila gains the courage to break free from her oppressive family and embrace the life she desires. This paper examines the themes of identity reclamation and liberation, analyzing how each character navigates societal constraints and redefines their sense of self in a male-dominated world. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*.

**Keywords:** Identity, oppressive constructions, rape survivor, child abuse,

## liberation **Introduction**

In *Ladies Coupé*, Anita Nair presents six diverse women characters sharing their stories in *Ladies coupé* train. Akhila is the protagonist of the novel. She is forty-five years old and the head of the family. She works as an income tax clerk with a good salary. Eventhough she earns well, and supports her own life, she is forced to live with her family, and she needs approval from the family to make every decision. This makes her feel sick. So, she is seeking independence. Janaki, a traditional homemaker. Sheela, a perceptive young girl. Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher trapped in an unhappy marriage. Prabha Devi, a woman rediscovering herself after years of conformity; and Marikolanthu, a rape survivor struggling with her past. They all sharing their life stories on a transformative train journey.

## **Discussions**

Akhila is raised in a strict Brahmin tradition. Since childhood, she has studied well and lived life plainly. After her father's death, she takes care of the family. Because she was the only earning woman at that time. Her siblings are very young: Narayan is fifteen years old, Narsi is eight years old, and Padma is six years old. Her mother seldom went out; Brahmin tradition

never allowed her to do so. Her family always protects her. Her life is simply a golden cage. So she takes on the role of a guardian angel. She plays a pivotal role. As a daughter, she takes good care of her mother; as a sibling, she pays fees to her two brothers and a sister. Her responsibility made her single all her life. Because of her commitments, she is unable to marry at her marriage age. When her two brothers join in a work and marry without thinking about her unmarried elder sister, Akhila feels she is used. Brothers didn't worry about the sister who gave them a life. Their action is purely an injustice to Akhila. But Akhila tries to make up her life, and she searches for a groom. This time, her mother requests to arrange marriage for her younger sister. She struggles hard to marry her off. She saves money and finishes her marriage decently. She became very old after the marriage. So she plans to stay single. Throughout her life, she is forced to make others' lives easy. Everyone in her family makes use of her and discards her like a trash can. After her mother's death, Akhila planned to live alone. But her siblings didn't allow her, saying it's inappropriate for a single woman to live alone; it may bring shame to the family, and their religious people would neglect it. So, her sister Padma, her husband, and two daughters accompany her to live in Bangalore. Padma and her daughters are pestering and very bothersome. She finds her independence totally gone. So she plans to be alone. But Padma and Narsi are totally against it. Padma argues with her sister that she has a love affair with the man. Akhila feels furious and gives a tight slap to Padma. She thinks about her life and feels crumbled; she lost her life for the family, but her siblings are happy, having a husband, children and being well settled. She wishes to live the life she wants. She thinks how much she wasted her life continuously striving for acceptance and

Acknowledgement from her family and others. Now she feels that family and society's opinion is no more important than personal satisfaction. So, she finally gathers the courage to leave the house and pursue her dream. This is reflected in the below lines. "So this then is

Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-colored spectacles Sans husband, children, home and family Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect” (Nair, 2001, p. 2).

There's a notion that women cannot be single in society. If she feels capable of being alone, why are others around her? so worried about her life? Women should have the freedom to live life the way they want. There are not many men questioned or criticized like women for remaining bachelors their whole lives. These are certain things that are often neglected by most of the writers who focus on feminist discourse and gender studies. In the novel, there are instances where it is seen that the impact of a male-dominating mindset on society, particularly on women, has not changed much during the past decades. Akhila's sister asks her not to travel alone when she says she is going away as part of her job. The idea that ‘you are a woman, it's not safe for you to Travel alone’ is reflected here. Anita Nair even points out the fact that Akhila's sister told her to ask their brother's permission ; both of them are younger than her. Female subjugation in an Indian society could hence be associated with what is taught in families among the generations. Just like men are asked not to cry, women are asked to be obedient daughters and wives who are considered incapable of living a life alone. It is clearly understood that, in most cases, the idea of a woman as a subordinate to men or someone who pleases him and takes care of her family is an expected quality of women in life. Generalizing this principle is not fair.

(Pankajakshan and Nagar, 2021, p. 2). So, Akhila decides to stay single and live life. When she sits on the train, she feels like she has done something for her. Here she feels content that she reclaims her identity and liberates herself from the oppressive constructions of identity.

Janaki is the second character who shares her experience. She is a housewife and an elderly lady in the coupe. She is the traditional Indian woman who is obedient and dutiful. She is

married to Prabhakar at the age of eighteen. Prabhakar forces hard sex on her. Even though she hates it, she cooperates. If a woman tolerates everything, she is a good woman. If she doesn't, she is considered bad. Here, Janki is the epitome of a good woman. She always pleases others. When her son's wife was admitted for a cesarean, she went to help her. She is a very old lady. But her son Siddharth and her daughter-in-law Jaya complain and humiliate her, saying that she is not helping properly. Here, Nair clearly describes Janaki's emotion, "an understanding person always suffers... She had tried very hard to be a good wife and mother. It was only now, this certain age, that had made her so, well, Sensitive" (Nair, 2001, p. 31).

Now, She didn't have enough strength to take care of herself so she obviously can't nurse her daughter in law. But she wishes to help. Instead of appreciating her, they compare her with Jaya's mother. They don't understand her age factor. It infuriates her. Throughout her life, Janaki tolerates everyone and stays silent. But for the first time in her life she fights back for herself and leaves her son's home. Here, she liberates herself from the dominating clutches.

The third tale is about the fourteen year old Sheela, who is distressed by the Child Abuse. She talks about how she has been mentally and physically assaulted by her friend's father who tried to touch her inappropriately and tries to tie the knots of her blouse's sleeve in front of her friend Hasina, which made her feel embarrassed. "One Sunday when Sheela went to their house, rushing it from the heat with a line of sweat beading of her upper lip, Nazar has reached and wiped it with his finger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time. Another time, the bows on the sleeves of her blouse had come undone and as Hasina's and her mother watched, Naazar knotted the bows. Slowly, meticulously" (Nair, 2001, p. 66).

Even though it was not her fault, Sheela felt very bad and never went to her friend's house again. She loves her grandmother who always tells her to stay away from men as they all have bad intentions and would take advantage of girl children. But still she couldn't tell this

abuse to her parents or anyone, because they definitely find fault with her actions. But her decision of not going to an unsafe place is correct. This slightest decision brings immense peace and leads to a liberation of life.

Anita Nair elaborates Prabha Devi's story. She is another victim of male dominated society. When Prabha Devi was around fifteen years old, her father sent her to convent school even though she strongly objected to it. By childhood she faces patriarchal oppressions. When she asks permission to her mother to go to cinema house with her friends, she says, "I don't think your father will like it" (Nair, 2001, p. 170). In Patriarchal Society, women are only dependent upon men's approval. When she is a child she has to obey her father and brother. After marriage she has to obey husband and in old age she has to obey her son. This is the exact reality of women in India.

When Prabha Devi turns eighteen years old, her father seeks a husband for her. But her mother was not happy. Because she thinks she is too young for marriage. But her husband says, "What do you want to do? Keep her with you for life? Have you ever heard anything sacrilegious? You were always a strange one" (Nair, 2001, p. 171). Without her consent, she married Jagdeesh. Life went well.

Her husband's friend Pramod often comes to the house. When she was alone, Pramod came with her niece in the afternoon. Prabha Devi slightly fears his arrival. But he courageously goes near her and tries to seduce her. When she opposes him, he said, "Oh come now, he touches her wrists with his fingers, pulling her toward him. Quit playing the good wife will you" (Nair, 2001, p. 182). Here it is evident, women is not safe even inside the home. If she blames Pramod, no-one believes her including her husband. She is considered as an object of sex and pleasure for Pramod. "Fredrickson & Roberts has talked about objectification theory and the effects of it. They postulate that many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to

be valued for its use by others. Sexual Objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire. Objectification theory posits that sexual objectification of females is likely to contribute to mental health problems that disproportionately affect women by eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction via two main paths. The first path is direct and overt and involves sexual objectifying experiences. The second path is indirect and subtle and involves women's internalization of sexual objectifying experiences or self-objectification" (1997, p. 173). Even Prabha Devi's husband Jagdeesh treats her submissively like a sex object and always restricts her. She became devoid of emotion. After this incident she feels that she has to do something to forget this incident. Being inside four walls made her so feeble. So she decides,

When there were no more tears to shed, Prabha Devi made a decision. She would camouflage this body that had sent such reckless messages to the world. She would lock away that gay spirited woman who had caused her such anguish ... She would withdraw herself from life. She would revert to being who she was when she first married Jagdeesh. A woman beyond reproach and above all suspicion (Nair, 2001, p. 194).

More than a wife and mother she wishes to do something to make her feel confident and brave. After thinking, she discovers she wishes to learn swimming in her life. So she learns to swim and she feels empowered, emancipated and calm. Because this is the first time she has done something for herself in life. This new identity as a swimmer gives Prabha Devi immense Liberation.

Margaret Shanti is fifth narrator of the *Ladies Coupé*. Her life goes through physical and mental identity crises. She marries Ebenezer Paulraj with lots of love. Ebenezer Paulraj is the Principal of the school in which Margaret teaches. She is a gold medalist in M.sc chemistry. After that she wishes to study for a PhD but her husband asks her to complete B.ed. Self Interest

is very important in Education and Career. But she is unable to choose her own career. She calmly accepts his husband's decision by remembering her mother's words “How a good wife never says ‘No’, even she is not in mood” (Nair, 2001, p. 102).

In the modern age, it is pictured that women can make their own decisions but in reality she didn't have any rights to choose what she wants. It is oppressively constructed that she has to be a subordinate for men in all stages of life. In Indian society, girls ought to learn household chores. Likewise Margaret Shanthi also became tired of cooking continuously for many people . Being a working woman and cooking for husband is a big task but her husband asks her to prepare lunch for all of his friends whom he meets every weekend. Even though it is irritating, she cooks for her husband's happiness. Days passes, After eighteen months she gets pregnant and she is in blue moon to tell her parents, But Paulraj withdraws it and tells her, “Margaret, I am not so sure if we should have a baby now” (Nair, 2001, 104). He insisted on her abortion. After many arguments she agrees for abortion. She has no option other than her husband's decision. After abortion she feels alone and sad. She is unable to accept his cruelty. She says to herself, “I Mouthed the Words: I Hate Him.I Hate My Husband.I Hate Ebenezer Paulraj.I Hate Him.I Hate Him” (Nair, 2001, p. 98).

Even after that, Her husband didn't let her live in peace. He asks her to exercise and always be fit. Because he himself is so obsessed with a fit body and toned muscles. Slowly she starts hating him and plans to avenge him. She teaches a lesson in an ingenious way. She gives high - calorie food to him. Slowly, he became very fat. Finally he stops body shaming her. Later she gets pregnant again and a baby girl is born. Even though she encounters many struggles, she liberates from strict life and seeks her own ways. Marikolandhu story is so compared to above all the five stories. She is a rape victim.

When she was nine years old her father died. Her widowed mother works as a maid in



Chettiyar's house. Marikolandhu goes to that house with her mother for help. There she takes care of the Chettiar's grandchildren. One night, chettiar's eldest brother's brother-in-law rapes her. She gets pregnant. Her mother says, "Who will marry you? Your life is over and you'll end up in the gutter like a street dog with its litter. You have nothing left in your life" (Nair, 2001, p. 245). Marikolandhu becomes a mother of as a result of sexual violence. She resents the child and leaves him. Because she couldn't come out of that terror. But her mother takes care of the child Muthu. After her mother's death, her younger brother asks her to leave the house with her child Muthu. She became helpless but not hopeless. She decides to earn and live life with her son. She goes to a mission hospital and joins as a helper. She empowers her identity and liberates from suffering. Here, Nair points out that rape survivor should come out of it and tries to live the life like Marikolandhu, because it's not their fault. And society should help them to cope up with it. In India women are sexually abused by men continuously. According to the newspaper article from The Hindu (2022), women lodged average 86 rapes daily, 49 offences against women per hour in 2021. Rape is the fourth most common crime against women in India". So, women should be self defensive and careful in society.

## **Conclusion**

In India Women's identity is oppressively constructed in the way that she has to be obedient, good, compassionate, caring, humble, and consoling and so on. These are considered as good identities of women. They are confined to four walls, they should not talk to men, and they are expected to follow strict religious standards whereas men enjoy their freedom substandardly. So, there should be an equal education for men also. Like how they should treat women, how they should respect, and how they should behave. Here in this novel, women's feelings are less acknowledged. All this made these characters vulnerable but at the end, they rose vibrantly and vivaciously. Major characters motive is to reclaim identity and liberate

themselves. Their independence and self identity is highlighted in this novel. To understand themselves better they may take their own time to cheer them up and bounce back. Even though these six characters undergo different kinds of struggles, different life styles, different background and status, their motive is same. That is to liberate from the pain they have undergone. Ultimately, these six characters reclaim their identities and achieve liberation.

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