

## **Marginalization of Women in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé***

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### **Abstract**

Anita Nair, a renowned Indian woman writer, constantly focuses on women's liberty through her remarkable literary works. Through her novels, she expresses the difficulties encountered by Indian women in the patriarchal social set-up. Her second novel *Ladies Coupé* published in 2001 depicts how Indian women are marginalized by patriarchal repression in family, social, and religious spheres. In this novel, she explores the pitiable plight of six women who share the same compartment in the Ladies Coupe. Marginalization is one of the manifestations of gender inequality under different conditions and under the influence of historical, cultural, economical, and religious factors. This research paper scrutinizes the pangs undergone by woman protagonists in *Ladies Coupe* owing to their marginalization by the patriarchal social set-up. Three female characters namely Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu are chosen for the scrutiny and their miserable plight due to gender inequality is analyzed. The train journey helps Akhila, the protagonist to realize her inner strength and to resist the male domination. Particularly, she discovers different strategies of survival amidst marginalization in a patriarchal society from the three female characters.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Pangs, Patriarchy, Self-realization

Anita Nair represents the depression of women in the public observance. The novelist articulates her real life experiences through the characters of her novel, *Ladies Coupé*. The novel shows the tragic life of six women belonging to different social strata who travel in the second class reservation compartment for ladies in train. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, during her journey, meets five other ladies who are suppressed in their life in various ways. In spite of the fact that these ladies have various stories, almost all of them are the victims of the patriarchal society and are oppressed in one way or the other. Everyone desires for freedom and struggles to acquire an identity in the society in which women are not treated equally. Every character is stroked by various complications. Their quest for freedom, self-realization, and attempts to seek equal rights are the major issues highlighted in the novel. Clara Nubile in her book entitled "The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class, and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing," claims: "*Ladies Coupé* is a clear example of a gendered spatiality, where woman are sheltered from the outer male world" (60). Due to political, economical, and societal suppressions women undergo psychological trauma. Being victims of the male dominated society, their basic emotions and aspirations are neglected by the male characters. In *Ladies Coupé*, Nair has handled one of the most reasonable tactics. She has taken a diminutive reference from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. During the spiritual journey, a group of pilgrims share stories to one another. Likewise, Anita Nair's characters uniquely share the experiences they had during intricate situations and the different possible ways they employed to handle them.

In Indian society, women are being restricted under patriarchy and face numerous oppressions in the society in the form of race, class, economical dependence, and sexuality. Men fail to understand the reality that women excel in their different roles like being an ideal

wife, a dedicated mother, and an excellent home-maker in the family. This research paper scrutinizes the pangs undergone by woman protagonists in *Ladies Coupe* owing to their marginalization by the patriarchal social set-up. Three characters namely Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu are chosen for the scrutiny and their miserable plight due to gender inequality is analyzed.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* focuses on the phenomenon of self-realization. Even though Anita Nair is not a feminist, her novels often visualize the sufferings of women. She portrays how woman faces her problems and how she governs herself while undergoing the process of transformation. Women in post-colonial India eagerly expect their own reverence, self-dignity, and personal freedom. Both the illiterate and the literate women feel themselves trapped by the male dominated society. In *Ladies Coupe*, Margaret Shanthi is a science teacher married to Ebenezer Paulraj, the Headmaster of a school. She also works in the same school. Her husband shows his interests in her job but does not entertain her desires and feelings. She understands the reality that her better half was not the better one. However, she constantly offers her respect to him: "We have never had to regret any decision that he has taken, even when it was on my behalf" (LC14). The heart breaking moment comes in her life after she conceives her first baby. She feels immensely delighted but to her dismay, Ebenezer asks her to abort the baby for he finds their financial ability not sufficient to fulfil the needs of the child. However, Shanthi is denied the right to live according to her wish, to give birth to her baby, and to assert her individuality for she is emotionally dependent on her husband. Hence she aborts her child and eventually undergoes psychological trauma. Margaret feels very heartbreaking at the moment of her abortion. This instance aptly highlights the pitiable plight of Indian women who are denied the right to create an identity of their own, to lead an independent life, and to take important decisions in their life.

In a male dominated society, women's freedom to take decision related to child birth is neglected by the male supremacy and generally it is men who decide on such matters. Here, Margaret's husband does not even regret for his actions. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states her notions about abortion: "Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature" (548) and "Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer" (502).

Prabha Devi, one of the fellow companions in the compartment, is from a wealthy family and is very conscious to maintain her beauty. After her marriage, Prabha is more focused on maintaining her youth and hence she postpones her pregnancy. Her husband Jagadeesh rejects her wish. In order to maintain his social status, Jagadeesh forces his wife to give birth to a child. Unaware of the pain of child bearing, he asserts: "My parents are getting impatient. They talk of a grandchild all the time. We have been married for almost a year now" (LC179). Governed and shaped by the patriarchal values, Prabha's quest to acquire self-confidence, personality reverence, celebration of life, and beauty undergoes a change after the child birth.

Likewise, Marikolanthu, another co-passenger in the compartment, gives expression to her tale of grief and suffering. As a child, she worked as a child labourer in a Chettiar's home. She never enjoyed the pleasure of childhood days like other children. Her mother's words explain her childhood sufferings: "What have I reduced my child to? I have stolen her childhood from her" (LC 213). When she reaches her adolescent age, she is rudely raped by an unknown man. The culprit claims: "No one will believe you. You might think you are our equal, but you are not. I'm the Chettiar's nephew, his daughter-in-law's brother. And you are only the cook's daughter. No one will dare question me" (LC 240). This instance highlights the arrogant nature of male-chauvinism and caste based inequality prevalent in a

patriarchal society. Though Marikolanthis is the real victim, everyone blames her instead of supporting her. When Marikolanthis becomes the mother of an illegal child, she rejects to love her baby for she considers the baby, a symbol of the crime. After knowing the death of the rapist, she becomes extremely happy and readily accepts her baby whole heartedly. Simone de Beauvoir highlights the significance of the role played by a mother: "Becoming a mother in her turn, the woman in a sense takes the place of her own mother: it means complete emancipation for her" (551).

Almost all the female characters in the novel are sexually subjugated by the male characters. Akhila, who takes the train journey against the wish of her family, understands the importance to establish a unique identity of her own, towards the end of the journey. In this context, Clara Nubile in "The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class, and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing," asserts: "the quest to find her place, to determine her identity, assert her autonomy, and make her own choice in a space free of the repressive traditions of the patriarchal home is carried out during the railway journey, during an intense night of female voices, encounters, and exchanges" (61). Thus, Akhila learns the importance of life through the experience she gets from the train journey. Every single female traveller she meets during her travel has a story to tell.

In her literary compositions, Anita Nair asserts that women are still being abused both physically and psychically by the male dominated world. By describing the memories of female characters in *Ladies Coupe*, Nair moves them from a rustic of separation and disappearance into a state of dynamic closeness, from the kitchen to the public. The train journey helps the women to discover their abilities and establish a unique identity. Throughout the novel, the female characters are subjugated by the male characters directly and indirectly. In this regard, Rita Felski in "Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature

and Social Change,” finds: “Demarcated by a trajectory of inward discovery, these novels trace a movement outward from the domestic sphere into a world outside of the home and family” (129).

To sum up, the novelist drives home the message that every woman should realize her inner strength, assert her individuality, protest against patriarchy, understand her basic rights, and accordingly emerge as a resilient, determined, and emancipated “new woman.” Nair insists that every woman should be aware of her rights and individual capacity. In the novel, the train journey takes them away from their familial duties, obligations and helps them realize the need for their self-confidence and self-respect. Indeed, it is an adventure towards self-discovery. Thus, Anita Nair skilfully depicts the miserable plight of Indian women, who encounter different levels of marginalization, and finally take a journey towards self-realization and eventually attain the real strength of a “new woman.”

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