

# Trauma and Subjection in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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### Abstract

*The advancement of women is reflected in the contributions made by women in every sector. The novels of Anita Nair beautifully address the shifting perceptions of women from those of pain to those of self-assurance. Though they have a secondary role in human civilization, women are essential components of it. The patriarchal societal structure has physically and psychologically harmed women since ancient times, yet from a contemporary standpoint, the idea of women's traditional roles is eroding daily. Everybody has been impacted by the culture, values, customs, and social mores that are prevalent in the world. On the other hand, the conditions and exposure level determine how much a person is impacted by society. The portrayal of women's lives and difficulties in modern civilizations in Anita Nair's novel Ladies Coupé emphasizes their place in the household and larger social order. The difficulties women have in navigating patriarchal institutions that aim to marginalize and repress them are reflected in Akhila's role as the head of her household following the death of her father. Socio-feminism looks into the experiences of the female characters in the novel to give voice to women who have traditionally been oppressed and silenced. Thus, a feminist perspective will be used to examine women's challenges in this study. Therefore, the status of women in modern Indian society is presented in this study.*

**Keywords:** Socio Feminism, Oppression, Female Identity.

On the other hand, the conditions and exposure level determine how much a person is impacted by society. The portrayal of women's lives and difficulties in modern civilizations in Anita Nair's novel Ladies Coupé emphasizes their place in the household and larger social order. The difficulties women have in navigating patriarchal institutions that aim to marginalize and repress them are reflected in Akhila's role as the head of her household following the death of her father. Socio-feminism looks into the experiences of the female characters in the novel to give voice to women who have traditionally been oppressed and silenced. Thus, a feminist perspective will be used to examine women's challenges in this study. Therefore, the status of women in modern Indian society is presented in this study. The work of fiction that elevated her to the position of creative writer and feminist trailblazer was Ladies Coupe. The mirror of our society is found in literature. The social reality of women's status in Indian patriarchal society is demonstrated by Anita Nair. Women used

to be aware of their identity in the roles of mother, daughter, and wife, but these days they are more aware of who they are. The Ladies Coupe by Anita Nair represents women in post-colonial India today. Several female characters and their life experiences are featured in this novel. They relate how they are taken advantage of in a society where men predominate. Ladies Coupe is an exploration of the self. It's a womanish discourse. She portrays the mistreatment of women that she has witnessed. She felt it once while driving a Ladies' Coupe. The majority of postmodern Indian women novelists are interested in examining the status of women in modern society as well as the consciousness of the female characters, how they develop into awakened consciences, and how this ultimately enriches their inner selves in a culture where men predominate. Although some authors, including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Bharathi Mukherjee, and others, have denied any kind of feminist bias in their works, a thorough examination reveals a strong feminist intent because women's issues are central to their stories. Anita Nair is one of the most well-known female authors of Indian English literature among these authors. She has resisted being called a feminist author. By incorporating all the feminine sensitivities, she has adopted a balanced approach to life from a woman's point of view, rather than adopting a feminist stance and battling against patriarchal society and male dominance.

The ever-evolving feminist literature has benefited from the contributions of Indian women writers as well. A conventional and logical perspective is crucial in the process of reconstructing the feminine identity. Anita Nair is one of the most insightful writers of current Indian English novels on the world of Indian women who are gripped by a severe sense of powerlessness. She is a writer from the 20th century who identifies as a "woman", is familiar with the many feminisms, and has lived in the East. She rebuilt the Indian female identity in her novels outside of the patriarchal culture. Her feminine characters are endowed with dignity and a strong desire to be fully unique. Following her father's passing, Akhila becomes leadership of the family in Ladies Coupé, where she holds the role of centrist. She and the other female characters are victims of a patriarchal society that has made several attempts to suppress, degrade, and humiliate women. They are still looking for power and autonomy.

Ladies Coupé offers a voice that declares the journey from self-awareness to self-realization and, in the end, the reaffirmation of female identity in opposition to male dominance. This is the tale of six Indian ladies who cross paths with one another on a train. For their secure travel, they gathered at a Ladies' Coupe, a space designated just for ladies. Women from all socioeconomic classes, ages, experiences, and origins come together thanks to Anita Nair. The heroine, Akhilandeswari, seeks an answer to a topic that has plagued her whole life—can a woman be happy alone or does she require a male to be complete?- by listening to the stories of the other five ladies in the compartment and sharing her own. It's a novel divided into sections where the author skillfully weaves together the experiences and lives of six different women, with Akhila serving as the central figure. The narrative of a single lady is the focus of each chapter in the novel. They are all living their lives under a patriarchal system. Akhila was inspired to consider living her own life after meeting her school classmate Karpakam. But even then, there sprouted the patriarchal domination. When Akhila boldly tells Padma about her decision to live alone, she without reluctance says, "Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?" (Ladies Coupé, 204). When Akhila says for her defiance, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent" (Ladies Coupé, 204). Her defiance was strong and she boarded the train to Kanyakumari. Akhila didn't want a husband. She didn't want to be a mere extension again. Akhila's childhood friend, who was a feminist tells her that she can live alone in the world after the death of her husband and encourages Akhila telling her she would not feel lonely. Thus, Akhila walks out of the family as a rebel and her response is rejection - the rejection of social standards, values, and the traditional life pattern. Akhila tries to search for her own identity and happiness.

Akhila's observation of Janaki and her husband leads her to the idea that "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (Ladies Coupé, 39). Janaki, an older woman, has a friendly love relationship with her husband, Prabhakar, whom she married at the age of eighteen. They enjoyed a happy and comfortable married life for forty years, raising a son and daughter-in-law. However, Janaki begins to realize her submissiveness when she notices her husband's controlling behavior, even towards their grown-up son. She confronts him, saying, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding" (Ladies Coupé, 30). Prabhakar's dominating and exacting nature starts to irritate Janaki, and her once smooth life experiences ups and downs. Despite discovering her true happiness lies within herself, she struggles to break free from the long-standing web of submission. Initially, Janaki responds to Akhila's question, "Why should a woman live by herself?" (Ladies Coupé, 21), by expressing her dependency on others for care and protection. She reflects, "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First, there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile" (Ladies Coupé, 22).

Margaret, a chemistry instructor who likens humans to chemicals, is Akhila's second friend. Margaret's persona serves as an example of how a woman may subdue male domination. But when he coerces her into getting an abortion, causing strife in their marriage, their relationship takes a bad turn. This illustrates how males frequently exert control over and mistreat women. Men such as Ebenezer Paulraj represent colonists who regard women as the colonized and do not understand or cherish them.

Margaret gradually subdues her husband by playing tricks on him and making him lose his cool. Her repression gives way to rebellion and ideas of retaliation. Her hopes appear dashed as she considers how her life has been destroyed, including the death of her unborn child. "All that was good and noble about my life that he had destroyed, the baby that died even before it had a soul... there was nothing left for me to dream of, and the words rose to the surface again" (Ladies Coupé, 131). She starts to hate him and the day she realizes her hatred towards him, she feels liberated from some unknown clutches: I mouthed the words:

I Hate Him. I Hate My Husband. I Hate Ebenezer Paulraj. I Hate Him. Hate Him. I waited for a clap of thunder, a hurling meteor, a whirlwind, a dust storm... for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelations. (Ladies Coupé, 98)

Prabha Devi is the third woman in the compartment. She has a tremendous revelation of her beauty, dreams, and independence during her vacation to New York. For Akhila, seeing Prabha Devi's renewed self-assurance and taking charge of her own life had a profound effect. Akhila learns more about life and realizes that genuine freedom is found inside oneself and cannot be controlled by others thanks to Prabha Devi's open confessions.

Sheela, the youngest of the six, is a fourteen-year-old girl who talks about her maternal grandmother and exhibits traits of femininity. Although Sheela is fourteen years old and belongs to a different generation than Janaki, her mental maturity well outweighs her years. In addition to highlighting the need to value the uniqueness of female identity, Anita Nair has deftly highlighted the problem of female child maltreatment through the portrayal of Sheela. Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar, "One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time" (Ladies Coupé, 66). So, Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her, but developed the confidence to protect herself from it in the future for it is an aid, "Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home" (Ladies

Coupé, 66). Thereafter Sheela took the right decision that “She would never go to Hasina’s house again” (Ladies Coupé 66) as a means of her self-protection. Thus, Sheela was strong in her defiance against a man’s abuse of her physique. As Judes Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, “Sheela’s retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men” (122).

Out of all the six main characters, Marikolunthu is presented as the saddest woman. She is raped, and regrettably, society tends to hold her responsible for going it alone. This is a reflection of a deeply rooted victim-blaming mindset. Marikolunthu stands for the hardships of a lowly and downtrodden peasant woman who, in the face of male persecution, encounters little opposition or questioning from others in her immediate vicinity. Marikolunthu shows a tremendous metamorphosis and maturity as she adopts Muthu, her illegitimate son, despite all the trials she faces. She decides to live alone and earns a living as a servant maid since she opposes the thought of dedicating her life to a marriage. This reveals her strong will and will to sustain herself financially, refusing to rely on her brothers or anything else. Due to her horrific experience of physical abuse, Marikolunthu has a dislike for both her son Muthu, and the offender. But as the narrative goes on, she learns to love being a mother and grows to accept her role as Muthu’s mother.

On the other hand, novelist Anita Nair examines the struggle of a female protagonist seeking a meaningful definition of life via the character of Akhila. Following her father’s passing, Akhila assumes the role of family head, which is customarily held by the patriarch. This demonstrates how gender norms are being broken and how family interactions are changing. As Indra Devi says, “Anita Nair probably hints at the family’s easy acceptance of her as the head of the family in a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods” (220). As Narsi, her brother, became the first graduate and found a teaching job and Narayan, the other brother, joined the tank factory as a machinist, “Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?” (Ladies Coupé, 77). Akhila views marriage as an oppressive structure that takes away her self-identity and what she longs for is a self-generative identity. Finally, she succeeds in her defiance against patriarchy. She subverts the repressive forces of patriarchal ideas that have chained her not letting to discover her “self”. Karpakam, her childhood friend, is a courageous woman who breaks the shackles of patriarchy when she says,

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 I choose. Tell me didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that despite his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men” (Ladies Coupé, 202).

Her defiance is outstanding when she says, “I live alone. I have for many years now. We are strong, Akhi. Whatever you think you want to. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first” (Ladies Coupé, 202). More than any other woman, Karpagam and her words instill a strong desire to live a life of her choice as Akhila feels, “Karpagam are you real or are you some goddess who had come here to lead me out of this...” (Ladies Coupé 202).

As a result, Anita Nair presents Karpagam as a person who bravely defies the greater patriarchal structure that denies women their independence. Anita Nair’s Indian sensibility and attitude are reflected in the way she portrays female characters in her works. These ladies demonstrate inner independence and a desire to try new things in their lives, even though they come from diverse socioeconomic classes. They learn about themselves via their travels, and this enables them to see that a woman’s aspirations for personal achievement do not take away from her yearning for love or the basic joys of home life.

Her characters all provide as distinct examples of this theme: A powerful story of struggle is told by Margaret, the chemistry teacher, about how she successfully manages her life and her marriage

to her husband; by Sheela, the fourteen-year-old who learns important lessons from her dying grandmother that will lead to her future liberation; and by Marikolunthu, whose experiences with poverty, rape, and class exploitation culminate in a powerful story of struggle. Janaki discovers her true happiness within herself. The journey of Akhila, Karpagam, and her daughter goes from the perimeter to the center as they work to forge an identity that is unaffected by outside forces.

Readers may relate to Anita Nair's works because of their every day and sympathetic characters. Readers will find it simple to identify with these ladies because they bring to life real tears, sincere frustration, and relatable problems. Anita Nair states in her own words that she prefers to write about regular people over fantastical creatures. Her female characters exhibit intense feelings but also critically analyze their relationships and constantly assess themselves. By delving into the private truths of what women truly want, Anita Nair portrays the complexities and authenticity of their emotional experiences. Sunita Sinha says, that Nair's India suffers from a patriarchal system that has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate, and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also implies the existence of an alternative reality (149).

Anita Nair changes the six women from passive, absent figures into active, present people via their stories. To accomplish this, Nair creates a setting where a variety of identities collide, struggle, and engage in relationships of dominance and subordination. The protagonists encounter circumstances that go against social norms and conventional roles as they travel through their adventures.

Akhila's voyage to Kanyakumari represents her desire for self-awareness and empowerment. She longs for her own life and wants to escape the life she lived for other people. The trip turns into an escape, an opportunity to experience the thrill of freedom and making choices without getting approval. Every woman's tale adds to a greater narrative of emancipation and self-discovery. In the book, the coupe metaphor alludes to an idealized society devoid of false dichotomies and patriarchal restrictions. The story's female characters discover a place where they may rethink who they are and defy social conventions that limit their autonomy. Anita Nair creates a gripping narrative of women overcoming social restraints and realizing their true selves by fusing these disparate experiences. The book honors these women's fortitude and tenacity as they forge on toward empowerment and liberty.

Despite Anita Nair's claim that she is not a feminist, her stories delve deeply into the experiences and expectations of married Indian women and the choices they make within their relationships. The women in her narratives grapple with suffering and rebellion born out of societal constraints, and their stories carry a message of hope, highlighting the possibility of change through courage and initiative. These women find themselves entangled in the patriarchal norms of society, yet they exhibit a strong will to survive and make the best of their lives. Despite facing difficulties and obstacles, they channel their emotions in various ways to break free from cultural ideologies that restrict their freedom and individuality. To combat and critique the repressive standards preventing their emancipation, they present themselves as outsiders. The stories of Anita Nair present an optimistic outlook, emphasizing the innate goodness and beauty in life. Akhila gains a sense of empowerment from her self-discovery quest and becomes a voice for all the neglected, displaced, and solitary women in India. Her difficult transition from victim to winner had been made successful by her realization of her inherent strength as a woman.

The life and experiences of women who endure trauma and subjection in their families are the main focus of Anita Nair's novels. She has addressed topics including rape, lesbianism, prostitution, female infanticide, and the oppression of women. The major focus of the novel is the ethos of Indian urban middle-class women. The women in her work are educated, self-aware, and striving

to discover their position in the family and society in post-independent India. They seem to defy the tyranny of patriarchy and demonstrate that these women are capable of pursuing independent lives. Nair does, however, demonstrate how societal conditioning may make life challenging for even highly educated women at times. Nair's portrayal of her female characters is incredibly realistic.

They fight for their independence and uniqueness; they are not passive victims. They demonstrate their individualism while also demonstrating a sense of accountability. It discusses the significance of education in bringing about social change and how women's lives have changed significantly in India as a result of the spread of education. The status of women in modern Indian society, as well as their lives inside the family, are the main topics of this essay. In addition to highlighting six female personalities, this book also discusses Indian women in general and their status in modern society.

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