

# Women, Class and Society: Exploring Marginalised Voices in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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### Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to analyse and explore the condition of the marginalised voices, particularly women, with respect to Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe. Marginalisation can be termed as a social exclusion where a group of people are denied equal opportunities, basic rights, and are treated as less important in the society. In a patriarchal society, women are consistently relegated to perform subservient roles; their voices are silenced. Marginalisation can stem from any intersecting factors such as gender, class, or economic status. Anita Nair in her novel Ladies Coupe has discussed the marginalised condition of women. The silent struggles of the women and their awakening are vividly explained by Nair. By bringing together women from diverse social backgrounds and social classes, Nair exposes how class division intensifies the problems of women, irrespective of their educational or professional status. Social hierarchies and gender roles play vital role to mute the voices of the women across Indian society. This study therefore seeks to investigate the condition of the silenced voices of the women, critiques socio-cultural structures that worsen the status of women, how marginalisation acts as a catalyst for self-realization, and reimagines spaces where women can articulate their identities beyond traditional roles.*

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, Subservient, Gender Roles, Social Hierarchy, Self-Realization and Patriarchy

### Introduction

Anita Nair is one of the bestselling novelists in the contemporary Indian English Literature. Her works undoubtedly receive worldwide recognition. In most of her novels, she features the landscape of Kerala as backdrop since it is her place of birth. She graduated in English Language and Literature and began her career as a creative head in an advertising agency. With the publication of her short story collections, she won a fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. This transformed her life and she became a full time writer from then. Her most famous works include *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2003) and *Cut Like Wound* (2012). She has covered a variety of genres in her writings which include short stories, novels, crime fiction, and poetry. To add to her credits, her name was shortlisted for the Orange Prize and she has been bestowed with a number of prestigious awards including Central Sahitya Akademi Award. Her novels being translated into several world languages exemplifies her glory as one of the leading literary voices in India.

## Review of Literature

A reasonable number of research has been carried out by scholars on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. They mainly focus on women's identity, patriarchy, self-discovery, and women empowerment in Indian scenario. Scholars have explored the style adapted by Anita Nair to portray her women characters as well as her projection of their socio-economic status.

In a recent study carried out by Ms. Ishwariya, Dr. B. Ajantha Parthasarathi under the title 'Women's Empowerment and the Quest for Identity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', published in 2022, they have observed how the novel presents female characters are longing for individuality. The study concentrates on how the female in the Indian society struggle for emotional independence. The train journey is analysed as a symbolic space allowing women to express their suppressed emotions with strangers.

In 2024, several other scholars have focused on the novel's feminist and sociological perspectives. In the article 'Female Liberation in Anita Nair's *The Ladies Coupe* and *The Better Man*', the researchers Sharma and Chauhan highlight the author's efforts to correlate gender discrimination and social hierarchy by presenting the stories of women from multiple classes, occupations, and family backgrounds. The article focuses on how the women characters liberate themselves.

Another article published in under the title 'Self-discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', Lalitha sheds light on the sufferings of women and their quest for self-identification. The researcher has opined that the ladies compartment serves as a symbolic face enabling them to honestly let out their feelings, trauma, expectations, and desires.

A recent study shows that how the idea of womanhood is reconstructed by Anita Nair. The article published in 2025 'Women's Search for Identity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', Angelis and Nair analyse Nair's attempts to cast-off the societal expectations imposed on women. It also emphasizes the challenges faced by women to liberate themselves and also their progression towards self-identification.

Although numerous studies focus on feminism and identity in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, the relationship between gender, class, and social omission remains untouched. Most researches

analyse the empowerment of women without uprooting how class, gender, and society indirectly influences women. Consequently, the present study explores the unique avenue 'Women, Class and Society: Exploring Marginalised Voices in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*' and analyses how Anita Nair represents the marginalised women across different social structure.

## Theoretical Framework

Anita Nair has crafted several women characters in the novel *Ladies Coupe*, who differ widely in their educational qualification, social background, and economic status. These differences are highlighted to show how the patriarchal society is indifferent to women irrespective of their socio-economic status. Their voices are silenced and are left unheard by the society. Akhila, Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu suffer endlessly until there is an urge to identify their lost selves.

## Discussion

Akhila, who is portrayed as the prominent character in the novel *Ladies Coupe* comes from a Brahmin family. Right after her pre-university exams, Akhila has been trained to be an Ideal wife. An orthodox Hindu family expects nothing but good wifehood from women. Being a skilled wife requires the art of running a household but not university education. But the irony is, Akhila remains a spinster despite excelling in the household chores. She is introduced to the audience as a forty-five-year-old spinster, who has toiled for the welfare of her siblings. Akhila, who steps into her father's shoes after his demise is not valued by her family and they make her remain single all through her life. "...She has become a useful instrument, a faceless provider. Even her own mother fails to gauge, or rather, carefully avoids wondering about her longings" (Khot61). In addition to these things, Akhila is never allowed to make decisions on her own.

Akhila's life is ruined by the societal expectations too. She falls in love with Hari, who is much younger than her. Wherever they move around the city, the passers-by throw a look of disgust on them. Unable to bear this strange look any longer, she decides to put an end to her relationship. Fearing society,

she suppresses her desires. Commenting on this Jain writes, “Though Akhila wants to live life on her own terms, she is too scared of disapproval of her family and society...” (123). Savita Singh has also expressed, “She desires him but thinking of what society would say, afraid to break through the stereotypical frame in which she has been enclosed, she lets the relationship die away” (34).

### Findings

Ladies Coupe is brimming with women characters who suffer silently in the patriarchal society. Anita Nair has elucidated that education is not a weapon to put an end to the societal prejudices against women. Margaret Shanthi is a Chemistry teacher who falls as a prey to male chauvinism. She is married to Ebenezer, a tyrant who puppets her every actions. She lets him rule her and finally, when he asks her to undergo an abortion, she could not tolerate.

What’s the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed... Long hair doesn’t suit you. Cut it off... I don’t think it is wise to eat bhelpuri from the roadside stalls...Let’s wait till we’re both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other (LC 105).

Margaret has to agree with him. He cajoles her with his words. “As always, I let his voice smoothen away my fears” (LC 109). The moment she is about to be taken to the operation theatre for the abortion process, he wishes her ‘All the Best’. Instantly, her hatred towards him erupts. Commenting on this Agarwal and Kaushal have opined, “Against her own wish she aborts her baby. ‘Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer’ (Beauvoir 502)”. This act of submission is further examined by Afzal and Dhepewho have commented, “She begins to hate him... Margaret, initially consents with everything he says. Later on, she realized how he systematically imposed his ideas on her” (675).

Margaret does everything to save her marriage. When she tries to share her problems with her family members, they do not understand her. Instead, they convince her saying, “...it is a woman’s responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have so many preoccupations that they might not have the time or the inclination to keep the marriage happy”

(LC 112). The society always expects women to act as the saviours of marriage. Nevertheless, woman have to tolerate her husband even if he mishandles her.

Janaki, an elderly woman reflects the pathetic status of women in Indian society. She is portrayed as a conventional woman who believes that women need men all through their lives. She is an example of how women surrender themselves to the societal expectations without any sense of self-esteem. In her opinion, women are dependent on men. “I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son” (LC 22). Moreover, she accepts that the duty of a woman is to get married, and beget children. “...I believe that a woman’s duty was to get married and. To be a good wife and mother...” (LC 23). She represents how women play multiple roles in the society without thinking about their own dreams and desires. She is stereotypical and feels comfy in her traditional beliefs.

Anita Nair has portrayed Prabha Devi as one of the voiceless victims of the male chauvinism. As soon as Prabha Devi was born, her father turned away from her disappointedly, as he wanted a fifth son to take over his fifth jewellery shop. His contempt was shown in his words, “Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (LC 169). In an article titled ‘Yearning for Self Identity and Freedom in Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe’, Agarwal has expressed, “Prabha Devi... is a victim of gender discrimination. She was unwanted by her father. When she was born her father expressed his anger...” (45).

Prabha Devi’s mother, on the other hand, was ecstatic to forward her jewels, culinary skills, and other treasured possessions to her daughter. She was taught all the essential skills formulated by the society to be an educated as well as a modern wife. In the patriarchal culture, it has become an unwritten law, a girl is always expected to excel the household chores. Prabha Devi was married to a diamond merchant. From then on, all she did was to wait. Through the character of Prabha Devi, Anita Nair shadows the status of women in the Indian

society. "Then she waited. For the next many years that was all Prabha Devi did. Wait. For Jagdeesh to come home. For the babies to be born... Waiting for something to happen..." (LC 172).

Prabha Devi experienced a cultural shift after her visit to New York. She decided to build anew identity for herself. She altered the way she dressed, walked, and behaved with others. Nevertheless, her Western adaptation was misinterpreted by a man, who tried to take advantage of her. This incident made her revert to her former self. "She would camouflage this body that had sent reckless messages to the world... She would withdraw herself from life. she would revert to being who she was when she married Jagdeesh" (LC 183). Her identity was limited by the patriarchal norms and the societal expectations. According to men, "What more could a woman need apart from a happy marriage and healthy children?" (LC 184).

Apart from these women, there is another character from the lower economic stratum. Marikolanthu, a thirty-five-year-old woman can be identified as the one who has endured the greatest sufferings. Poor economic conditions forced her to work in a distant land, leaving her family behind. However, her return to her native village landed her in only trouble, as she was brutally seduced by Murugesan, a man from the of the wealthy Chettiar bloodline. He humiliated her poor economic status, "You might think you are our equal, but you are not. I'm the Chettiar's nephew... and you are only the cook's daughter" (LC 240). The society exploits the downtrodden people through class conflict and inequality.

Marikolanthu choked down the injustice that was inflicted upon her and continued to live. However, destiny did not let her rest. Much to her distress, she bore a boy whom she disliked the most. Marikolanthu could not voice what had happened to her. Nityanandam has observed, "The female body becomes the site of violence in the case of the rape of Marikolanthu. Like the violence unleashed by the colonizer on the powerless colonized, she has to face physical brutality as well as mental torture..." (130). When Marikolanthu's pregnancy came to light, Sujata, the Chettiar's daughter-in-law blamed Marikolanthu but not Murugesan. She insisted that Marikolanthu abort the baby. "Sujata Akka, daughter in law of Chettiyar, asks her

not to disclose this issue, even though her rapist is known" (Rajalakshmi&Shanmugam 4). Unable to accept the boy born out of wedlock, Marikolanthu took up the role of a caretaker in Chettiar's house. There she fell prey to the manipulative woman. Here Marikolanthu's love for Sujata was misunderstood and once again she was exploited and cast out by the very same upper class.

## Conclusion

In the novel Ladies Coupe, Anita Nair has brought out how society and class act as catalysts to mute the voices of the women in a patriarchal setup. Despite all the prejudices, these women managed to overcome suppression and liberate themselves from societal norms, gender discrimination, and class conflict. Self-identity and self-realization are the key factors that persuade them to strive and achieve autonomy.

Akhila manages to travel alone to Kanyakumari for the first time symbolizing her quest for self-identity. Vidya and Baskaran have noted that, "Akhila herself is the magnet for their stories. She has suddenly decided to take her life in her hands... She decides to bolt, to take a long train journey to Kanyakumari" (198). Margaret avenges her tyrannical husband and holds things under control. Prabha Devi who had lost her self-identity, regains her lost self by learning to swim. Marikolanthu endures all sufferings yet continues to live with her head held high. The patriarchal structure has muted the marginalised voices, yet they manage to travel towards their aspirations.

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