

Unveiling Patriarchal Stereotypes: A literary Exploration of *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair

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Abstract: The paper approaches Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* from a feminist point of view to foregrounding women's stereotyping in a male-dominated society regardless of age, religion, and place. It analyses various facets of oppression in the novel due to patriarchy. *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair narrates the story of six women's oppression through the protagonist Akhila, a forty-five-year old spinster, who serves as a string to weave the stories of the other five women, who encounter her in the ladies compartment of the train to Kanyakumari. The paper deals with various aspects of stereotyping in the novel *Ladies Coupe*. Patriarchal stereotypes reinforce and justify patriarchy, the unequal social system that favors men over women due to their gender. The article shows how the six women suffer at the hands of men in society due to their gender. Every woman has a unique story to share with the rest of the women in the compartment.

Keywords: Patriarchy, male-dominated society, oppression, stereotyping

Introduction

Anita Nair is one of the most important literary figures in the history of Indian English literature. Her novels mainly revolve around her female characters bringing out the plight of women in Indian society due to their gender. Her female characters are victims of gender discrimination.

Many critics and theorists have tried to show the difference between men and women.

"One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes, a woman." (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949)

"Once made equal to man, woman becomes his superior" (Socrates)

"The male is by nature superior and female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject." (Aristotle in *Politics*, 1254b)

Patriarchal stereotypes reinforce and justify patriarchy, the societal system that gives authority and rights to men over women leading to gender inequality and oppression. Peter Barry calls 'patriarchy' a cultural mindset that causes inequality.

According to Sylvia Walby (1990), patriarchy is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". (*Theorizing Patriarchy*, 20)

Patriarchy is the root cause of the oppression of women in a male-dominated society as it gives all power, rights, and opportunities to men. It is shown as the source of women's oppression in the novel *Ladies Coupe*. It suppresses women by robbing them off their voices and identity and impacting their psyche to a great extent by exerting its power on them. It supports the ideology that men are superior to women, who hold secondary position in society. The deep-rooted patriarchy is imposed in an excruciating way on women. This is a deep analytic study of the female characters, who carry the burden of patriarchy on their back losing their identity by behaving like puppets with the strings in the hands of their men. The prevalent patriarchal ideology empowers men giving them rights to suppress in the name of patriarchy.

Theoretical framework

The novel *Ladies Coupe* can be read from feminist perspective as the main focus is on female characters and their sufferings in patriarchal society. Feminism is a political movement that seeks to end patriarchy and misogyny. For women, life has been always challenging since time immemorial as they have been subjected to face challenges thrown upon them by society controlled by its men.

Patriarchal Stereotypes in *Ladies Coupe*

The novel *Ladies Coupe* is Nair's masterpiece that

offers a narrative of six women of different ages, experiences and social strata. Anita Nair brings them together in the ladies compartment to share their unique stories demonstrating the link in terms of Indian women's journey in life under patriarchy.

The novel *Ladies Coupe* depicts the plight of Akhilandeshwari aka Akhila, the only bread winner of her family after her father's sudden death in an accident. Despite being the eldest daughter and sister, she has never been allowed to live her life on her own terms. The novel kicks off with Akhila's decision of taking a train to Kanyakumari in her pursuit of freedom and self-discovery. She gets a berth in a second class compartment in the ladies coupe, where she has an encounter with the five other women – Sheela, Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu. During the course of journey, Akhila comes to know her fellow travellers.

All the female characters lead stereo-typed roles, into which they are moulded by patriarchal society. Akhila starts off her journey to Kanyakumari with a perplexing question in her mind, "Can a woman cope up alone?". When all the women share their experiences, she finds the answer to her most perplexing question. But before that, Nair introduces all the major characters and their stories one after the other.

Janaki is a pampered wife. Margaret Shanti is a Chemistry teacher, who is married to a self-absorbed tyrant Ebenezer Paulraj. Prabha Devi is an ideal wife and daughter. The youngest of all Sheela is gifted with an exceptional ability to understand the matters beyond the capacity of normal people despite being thirteen years old. Marikolanthu falls prey to a lustful man, who deflowers her at a very young age. The stories of these five women provide Akhila with the answer to her quest for freedom and self-discovery.

Ashish Gupta, a critic in his book titled *Novels of Anita Nair: A Critical Perspective*, shows similarity between Anita Nair and Shashi Deshpande in terms of character portrayal. In the novels of both novelists, female characters occupy a central place. The portrayal of female characters becomes more interesting when analysed by the female writers. Anita Nair confidently presents her views on women's sufferings in

contemporary Indian society. Her novels revolve around the middle-class female characters, who are trapped in the predominantly patriarchal structures. Patriarchy has such a strong hold on them that they are not able to disentangle themselves from the cobwebs of the social customs and traditional way of life.

Akhila, a stereotypical woman, who has multiple roles to perform – that of a daughter, sister, aunt and provider in order to cope with the demands of Indian society. Her image reflects a realistic picture of a contemporary middle-class woman, exposing the societal flaws prevalent in orthodox families in India. Nair throws light on her psyche as well. She is depicted as a resistant force determined to break free from the shackles of age-old customs in society. At the age of forty five, Akhila feels marriage is unimportant. She wishes to lead her life on her own terms but is constantly reminded of her limits as a woman in society. She discontinues her relationship with Hari as society does not normalize relationships between younger men and older women.

Akhila's mother is one of the best examples of women belonging to the category of submissive women, who yields to her husband and his orthodox set of ideas by reinforcing her faith in the role of a pativrata. This is evident in her statement:

I don't approve of what Karpagam's mother is doing. All kinds of people come into their house. Brahmins and non-brahmins. Do you think your father would allow such comings and goings on here? Don't you know how strict he is? Anyway, do you think your father would let me...? (LC 13)

Janaki is married to Prabhakar at an early age of eighteen. She is another example of stereotypical woman, who conforms to patriarchal society. Since her childhood, she was being groomed for marriage as her ultimate goal. She symbolises the plight of Indian women, who are always looked after by the male members of their family. This is clear in her statement: "Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses." (LC 23)

She further says:

"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 waiting to take off from where his father left off.

Women like me end up being fragile; our men treat us like princesses.” (LC 22,23)

Her statement shows her belief in the role of keeping the family intact, as an ideal woman. She is satisfied by being with her male counterpart.

Sheela, a fourteen-year old girl, becomes the victim of male gaze when her friend Hasina's father tries to molest her. She does the innocent act of wiping the line of sweat from her upper lip and trying to knot the bows on the sleeves of her blouse when it had come undone. Then, she decides not to go to Hasina's house ever again.

Another character Margaret Shanti classifies herself as water among the five elements that constitute life. She is aware of her power. She is controlled by her tyrant husband, who convinces her to pursue a PhD instead of B.Ed. He also convinces her to abort her child because he wants to settle down first before having a baby.

Another character Prabha Devi is also a victim of patriarchy. She is governed by the patriarchal value structures. Her birth made her father sigh, who desperately wanted a son to run his business. At the age of 15, she was sent to a convent school to be groomed well so as to get a suitable life partner. She becomes the woman her parents always wanted her to be. To Prabha Devi, outward appearance is of great importance. Her transformation leads to her objectification as Pramod makes advances towards her as “she had ignited something she had no idea how to extinguish.” (LC 182).

Her longing for her husband Jagdish, a prosperous diamond merchant, causes her transformation from the calm and composed woman to the bubbling beautiful woman.

Anita Nair's last character Marikolanthu is a victim of man's lust. She is uneducated and poor girl, who assists her mother at the Chettiar house. She is brutally raped by Murugesan, a relative of the Chettiars at the age of nineteen. She has to suffer alone as nobody questions her rapist Murugesan because he is a man. At the end, Akhila reaches her destination. During her journey, she listens to the story of all the five women, who are moulded by the patriarchal society.

Conclusion

The novel *Ladies Coupe* shows how the Indian women are assigned roles by the patriarchal society. They are stuck between tradition and modernity. Their quest for freedom and self-discovery runs throughout the novel. The themes of gender, subordination of women, loss of identity and exploitation of women due to patriarchal structures dominate the novel. Anita Nair dares to tell the truth prevalent in society. Marriage is described as an institution that gives authority and rights to men. The novel deals with contemporary Indian society, where women carry the burdens of their social obligations, responsibilities and expectations imposed on them in a patriarchal society. However, her women characters are not meek sufferers. They strive hard to change their situation in order to have their identity in a male dominated society.

References

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