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Quest for Selfhood: A Study of Anita Nair's *The Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

*In her work *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby contextualises the function of patriarchy in society in relation to six structures: the mode of production, paid work, state, male violence, sexuality and cultural institutions. In all these structures, she explains that women are discriminated on false assertions that men are intrinsically more powerful and capable of running sensitive and vital organs of society. Women are considered physically weak and passive their bodies determine their roles as mothers and objects of male desire. The hierarchical binaries of the patriarchal society have relegated women to a subservient position. Various oppressive institutions have commodified women and positioned them as objects of consumption. This multilayered oppression of women is upheld by powerful cultural norms and supported by tradition, education and religion. Contemporary Indian women's writings challenge patriarchal hegemony and expose the grim truths of women's everyday experiences. This paper aims to explore women's subjectivity and agency through an analysis of Anita Nair's novel, *Ladies Coupe*. The novel narrates the diverse experiences of systemic oppressions of six women travelling together in a Ladies Coupe of an Indian railway train. In this text Nair challenges the gender stereotypes embodied in society and unveils the insidious misogynistic system of gendered power inequalities. Nair exposes that repression of women intersects with discrimination based on race, sexuality, class, age, history of confinement, religion, language, and citizenship status. Her novel unearths the pernicious forms of violence enacted against women and delve deep into questions of sexuality and female subjectivity in systems of patriarchy.*

Keywords: patriarchy, gender-based violence, subjectivity, hegemony, autonomy

According to Sylvia Walby patriarchy is defined as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (p.20). Patriarchal structures govern almost all the functional social and political institutions. Simone de. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes:

The category of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the self and the other.... The feminine element was at first no more

involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon and Day-Night that it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil...Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.(p.23)

In India, women are subjected to various forms of patriarchal oppressions. Being a woman in contemporary India also means occupying an ambiguous position. Although women are customarily protected by a range of anti-discrimination laws and constitutional provisions, the everyday access to safety and agency remains contested. Anita Nair is an Indian writer, creative director, and human rights activist whose works portray the social, political, economic inequality of women in contemporary Indian society. Her notable works include *A Better Man*, *Lessons in Forgetting*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress*. In Nair's works one can find the oppression, great insight of solidarity and humour. In her novel, *Ladies Coupe* Nair unveils the histories and contours of systemic gender inequality in India.

Nair narrates the stories of six women who are travelling together in a Ladies Coupe of a train. The novel depicts the various forms of female subjugation and interrogates women's quest for autonomy. One of the characters in the novel is Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila. She is forty-five, single and works as a an income-tax clerk. She has been brought up in a conservative family of Tamil Brahmins. After her father's death, Akhila singlehandedly bears the burden of her family. Akhila was never been allowed to live her own life. She always had to play the role of the daughter, the sister, the aunt and the provider. Her brothers and sisters remain indifferent to Akhila's needs and aspirations. Akhila is a victim of patriarchal oppression. Despite being the breadwinner of her house she is denied an identity of her own. 'She was always an extension of someone's identity; daughter, sister, aunt....Akhila wished for once someone should see her as a whole being '(P.201-202). Akhila is exhausted with her multiple roles as daughter, sister and aunt. She decides to break free from the patriarchal constraints of her family and goes on a train journey to Kanyakumari. Nair describes her: "This then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (2).

On her way to Kanyakumari ,Akhila meets five different women – Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu. All these women narrate their life experiences. Even though they differ in age and cultural background, their stories reflect the subjugation of women in Indian society. Janaki, the oldest of the six women in the Coupe, has grown up in a traditional family. She is conditioned to be the docile, obedient daughter, a loyal wife and a doting mother. She has been looked after all her life by men. She expresses: "First there was my father and brother; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting, to take off from where his father left off. A woman like me ends up being fragile. Our men treat as like princess" (P.22-23). Janaki reflects how women are denied selfhood in the patriarchal world. All her life she has been subjugated by the male members of her family. She recognizes the futility of being an obedient wife and a caring mother.

Sheela's story reflects how young adolescents are victims of sexual abuse or assault at the hands of adults. The fourteen-years-old, Sheela narrates the incident when she felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar. She painfully recollects, "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" (P.66). When once Nazar knotted the bows in her sleeves, "She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother's eyes" (P.66). After that Sheela took the right decision that "She would never go to Hasina's house again" (P.66) The story unravels how adolescent girls are often subjected to sexual abuse or harassment at home, or in their community and the perpetrators of such acts go scot-free. Margaret Shanti represents how women are constantly subjugated, discriminated and commodified by the patriarchal society. She is a successful chemistry teacher, embroiled in an unhappy marriage with Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of the school she works in. Her husband is insufferable, dominating and insensitive towards his wife. He forces her to undergo an abortion. At one point, he degrades Margaret by insulting her in front of friends and says that she was not a great one for discussions, and that she did not have an opinion about anything. Margaret would like to divorce him, but does not do so because she is afraid of social stigma. Her way of taking revenge is to feed him oily food and make him a dull person.

Prabha Devi is an accomplished woman whose embroidery was done with stitches so fine that one could barely see them. Her 'Ideas were light and soft', and she 'walked with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant; womanly" (p.24) After her marriage, continues to live an insignificant life. Prabha Devi finds herself caged in her marriage and is looking for succor: "For the next many years that was all Prabha Devi did. Wait. For Jagdeesh to come home. For the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph...Waiting for something to happen while her life swished past in a blur of insignificant days." (p.172) She desires to escape the monotonous life of a homely wife and mother. She achieves her agency by learning swimming and overcomes her innate timidity. She tells the women in the coupe that if she had a daughter she would tell her:

Daughter, 'I'll have to say, 'show [your husband] you are incapable of doing anything beyond the periphery of your home and he will manage your life, from sending postal orders to balancing cheque books to booking railway tickets to managing household expenses. He will pet you and cosset you at first, for after all, you are appealing to the male in him to protect and safe-guard. But it will be only a matter of days before he turns into a tyrant who will want to control your every thought. There is an alternative. You could choose to demonstrate how independent you are and show him how well you manage by yourself. Except that when you need a pair of arms around you, someone to hold you and cherish you, he might not be there because you have always let him know that you don't need him. Where is the middle path, the golden mean? Daughter, I wish I knew. I wish

my mother had told me what was the right thing to do. Or perhaps the truth is, she didn't know either" (p.99)

Marikolunthu's story unveils how impoverished Dalit women are positioned at the bottom of India's caste, class, and gender hierarchies. They are dehumanized in a patriarchal world and treated as objects of lust. Marikolunthu is thirty-one years old and an unwed mother. She is a victim of double oppression. Belonging to an impoverished family Marikolunthu experiences poverty, rape and physical torture. "I was a restless spirit warped and bitter. Sometimes I would think of the past and I would feel a quickening in the vacuum that existed within me now" (P.266). Marikolunthu's narrates that her mother worked as a cook at Chettiar's house, which was one of the richest families in their village. Even as a child she was oppressed by the elites. She was denied education and she had to look after her house when her mother went for work. When her mother was seriously ill, she was employed at the Chettiar's house. There, she is assigned the task of taking care of a child of SujataAkka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar.

Marikolunthu is raped by Murugesan. Marikolunthu's situation reflects how Dalit women are exploited by those in power who carry out their attacks with impunity. Even, while raping her Murugesan asserts his power on Marikolunthu and tells her: "No one will believe you. You might think that you are our equal, but you are not. I am the Chettiar's nephew, his daughter-in-law's brother and you are only the cook's daughter. No one will dare question me." (p.240)

The text unveils how Dalit women are perceived as belonging outside the normative structure of caste purity and hence sexual purity. The caste system sanctions the upper-caste man's access to Dalit woman's sexuality, body and labour. Caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women is condoned and considered normal. Marikolunthu hates her son Muthu who is the result of the rape at the hands of Murugesan. She leaves her son at her mother's care and goes to work for the Chettiar family.

SujataAkka, deprived from her husband, develops a lesbian relationship with Marikolunthu. Later Sujata's husband also uses Marikolunthu to fulfill his lust. When SujataAkka comes to know this, instead of charging her husband, she pushes Marikolunthu out of her household. Marikolunthu's attitude towards her son changes after the death of Murugasen. Marikolunthu, reflects the multiple oppressions on Dalit women. She is a voiceless victim who is forced to motherhood and lesbianism. Such characters exhibit a sense of insecurity due to their traumatic psychic experiences and also due to the collapse of the value system. Thus, in *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair traces a woman's journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization, self-denial to self-assertion and self-negation to self-affirmation. The feminist voice is heard throughout the novel.

One night in the Ladies Coupe and her interaction with the five women, helped Akhila to realize that she had given the society an unnecessary power of ruling her life. These women and their stories helped Akhila find the answer to her biggest question- 'Can a woman stay

single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?" (p.125) In her pathbreaking book, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner argues:

The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial of women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, on from another, by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (p.28)

Lerner recognises the strictures of patriarchal society that enforces control on women and denies them a space. She states:

It should be noted that when we speak of relative improvements in the status of women in a given society, this frequently means only that we are seeing improvements in the degree in which their situation affords them opportunities to exert some leverage within the system of patriarchy. Where women have relatively more economic power, they are able to have somewhat more control over their lives than in societies where they have no economic power. Similarly, the existence of women's groups, associations, or economic networks serves to increase the ability of women to counteract the dictates of their particular patriarchal system. Some anthropologists and historians have called this relative improvement women's "freedom." Such a designation is illusory and unwarranted. Reforms and legal changes, while ameliorating the condition of women and an essential part of the process of emancipating them, will not basically change patriarchy. Such reforms need to be integrated within a vast cultural revolution in order to transform patriarchy and thus abolish it. (p.30)

The stories of Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan and Marikolunthu reveal how women are constant victims of gender-based violence, and gender inequalities. Though, these women meet for the first time they share their life's experiences with each other. Their stories show how the invisible structures of patriarchy dominate women. Even though these women differ in age, educational background and cultural upbringing, their stories have a common thread, the tragic predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal social order. The coupe symbolically represents the space which enables these women to critique the gendered inequities of society. It allows them the figurative journey to selfhood. Within the space of the train, these women challenge the ideological constructions of private/ public domain. The journey enables them to reject cultural prescriptions and reconstruct their identity. The narratives of these six women unmask the deeply misogynistic patriarchal culture. Their life experiences present the social paradigm and reiterates the inescapable nature of exploitation and sexual violence women face in India.

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