



Exploring Loneliness and Self-Discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, loneliness works as a catalyst for self-realization as the characters undergo emotional and psychological journeys to discover their true selves. The novel brings into light, about the self-discovering journey of Akhila, a middle-aged woman who has spent almost all her life fulfilling familial duties and societal expectations. Her journey of self-discovery commences when she embarks on a train journey alone. It is through Akhila's narration and the stories of the other women she meets in the ladies' coupe, Nair examines the deep impact of solitude and its consequences on the lives of women. She also surveys how loneliness allows women to introspect into the past and to empower themselves. This paper is an attempt to study how the novel unveils the theme of loneliness as a space for emotional development, reflection of beliefs or challenging pre-existing beliefs. Women are also given opportunities in par with men, to free themselves from being tied down under societal pressures that have been imposed upon them. Through the character of Akhila, one can distinctly observe how isolation results in realizing her desires and needs. Loneliness is responsible for her self-identification and transformation.

Keywords: loneliness, self-realization, solitude and emotional growth

Anita Nair is one of the best sellers in the contemporary Indian English Literature. She is a versatile writer and has penned novels, short stories, poems, essays and travelogues. Though she has explored themes related to feminism in many of her works, she detests being labelled as a 'feminist writer'. She has contributed a variety of themes including feminism, gender inequality, self-identification, family, relationships and social status. Most of her works have Kerala as the backdrop, since it was where she was born and pursued her higher education. Her first collection of short stories *Satyr of the Subway* paved way for her literary career by meriting her with a fellowship from the Virginia Centre for the Creative Arts. Soon

after the publication of *Ladies Coupe* (2001), it was nominated as one of the best five novels in India. Her novels *The Better Man* (1999) and *Ladies Coupe* (2001) have been translated into 21 languages. She is the receiver of many prestigious awards in addition to Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2012).

The theme of loneliness has been exquisitely applied in her novel *Ladies Coupe*. The word 'loneliness' can be defined as feeling isolated even when surrounded by a number of people. It doesn't result from the lack of social contact, rather it emerges when we feel emotionally detached from the people around us. The novel *Ladies Coupe* unfolds the theme of loneliness of the women characters in the



Indian scenario and it sheds light on their struggles as well as their journey towards self-realization.

Akhila is introduced to the readers as a 45-year-old spinster. Gradually, when the pages move on, the readers get a detailed account of Akhila's character. With the death of her father she takes up the role of the family's head. Her sacrifices are immeasurable. She has remained unmarried to provide her siblings with good education and a decent life. In the long run, she has lost her identity. She enquires herself, "...who is Akhiladeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (LC 84). In the eyes of her family, Akhila ceased to be a woman. She feels choked when her brothers decide to marry, instead of shouldering the family's responsibilities. Nair has painted a vivid picture of Akhila suppressing her desire to get married. "Akhila waited for Amma or Narayan to say something. To broach the subject of Akhila's marriage. When they didn't Akhila swallowed the hurt she felt... In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already been metamorphosed into a spinster" (LC 77). In an article titled 'Epitomising Women Through a Vociferous Protest: A Deconstruction Reading of Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe', Vidya and Baskaran have written, "Akhila is not given the opportunity by her family to get married and have a family as traditions dictate; she is rather expected to provide" (202).

Akhila's decision to undergo a journey can be viewed as a kind of awakening in her soul. Before she takes up the journey, she bumps into her school friend Karpagam, a widow. Surprisingly Karpagam is indifferent to the old beliefs and she continues to wear the mark of married women. Akhila feels elevated by Karpagam's ideals and her style of living inspired her. "...it is Karpagam who is able to instil a sense of self-worth in Akhila which makes her decide to live her life on her own terms and not to be dictated by other members of the family who are actually dependent on her" (Indra 130). Akhila learnt the need to live for herself. "...Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (LC 3). She considers Kanyakumari as a place of rescue, a spot where Swami Vivekananda found answers to the questions that surged in his mind. Akhila is pretty sure she will regain herself with this journey and

it will enable her to find an answer to the question "Can a woman live by herself?" (LC 21). She has faced a number of obstacles to travel alone. Yet her determination to look for her lost self, forces her to defy her brother Narsi for the first time. Vidya and Baskaran have commented, "Akhila has to undergo many ordeals as the new liberated woman. She has never been allowed to live her own life" (200).

The story of Margaret Shanthi illustrates how even educated women fall a prey to the patriarchal dogmas. Her love for Ebenezer makes her to forgo her ambition of pursuing research in Chemistry. She dances to his tunes like a puppet and gradually loses her self-identity. She is utterly engrossed and charmed by his words. She goes to the extent of abortion, to please her loving husband. Eventually, she realizes the ruination of her soul and feels alienated.

Ebenezer always believed, he is more intelligent than Margaret. During a coterie, Ebe butts in and says, "She's not a great one for discussions. She doesn't have an opinion about anything..." (LC 127). Commenting on this Vidya and Baskaran have expressed, "Due to perceived threat there is a passive submission in Margaret. She is helpless, depressed, have a poor self-image and suffer from self-devaluation" (203). When his domineering attitude reaches its pinnacle, Margaret is forced to plunge into action. The tool that she takes up to retaliate is too modest. She overfeeds her bossy husband, transforming him into a fatso, killing his ego and domineering his nature. Unless Margaret has done such a thing, she would not have regained her lost self. Payal Jain has written, "...despite being an independent working woman she is unable to free herself from the structures of security that the institution of marriage offers" (119). In an article entitled 'A Post-Colonial Reading of Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe', Indira Nityanandam has expressed, "...Margaret Shanthi develops the ability to work for her own independent identity" (130).

The narration of Prabhadevi, flaunts the life of every housewife who loses herself and lives a borrowed life. Unlike other women, Prabhadevi is very well aware of her self-worth. She deliberately submits herself and when she awakens from the trance, she is over forty. Payal Jain writes, "Resistance and submission mark the life of Prabha Devi equally



as she goes through different phases of life... she emerges as a woman who is conscious of her identity as a woman, but, at the same time, is at ease with herself" (119). The quest for emancipation generates a strong determination in her soul and she succeeds in coming out of the web she has spun around herself. "...she had discovered that desire spawns desire; fulfilment begets fulfilment" (LC 195). Agrawal has shared his opinion, "Prabha Devi overcame her innate timidity and emerged as a bold, assertive new woman" (46).

The theme of loneliness is deeply rooted in exploitation and physical abuse in Marikolanthu's story. Her journey towards self-discovery is entirely different from the rest of the women in the novel. Marikolanthu, the poor girl who works in a wealthy clan is sexually assaulted by Murugesan. This incident brings a drastic change in the course of her life. She runs away from reality. Alienating herself from the world, she bears the product of the physical assault. She is left alone to deal with the unwanted child. She experiences the harshest form of abandonment from the society and also from the circumstances.

Despite all her sufferings, Marikolanthu emerges as a woman who is stoic and strong enough to defy life. Instead of yielding to the societal beliefs, she makes painful decisions to overcome isolation and she succeeds in that. "...she gives a bold challenge to all the problems which confront her... Rather than accepting her destiny passively, with stoic resilience she does everything which would give her some respite..." (Jain 120). Marikolanthu's words shows her self-assurance attitude and indifference to others, "I'm not ashamed. I'm sorry. I am not ridden with guilt. I did what I thought I had to do" (LC 257).

Ladies Coupe is an excellent commentary on the theme of loneliness which acts as a catalyst for self-realization and discovery. Anita Nair's novel encourages readers not to read alienation as a sign and symbol of weakness but as an indispensable phase leading towards emancipation and self-empowerment. The story of these women resonate with innumerable struggles faced by women trying to balance the societal expectations and personal aspirations. It is undoubtedly one of the best contributions to feminist literature.

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