

Ladies Coupe: Psychological Confinement of Middle Class Educated Women (Internally and Externally)

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“...Awareness that we suffer from stress. Awareness that this stress is caused by the fact that we become the situations that take place around us. Awareness that this habit can be changed... we in actuality, are not the situation or the feeling or the thought, but are only witnessing them.” (Mishra and Kumar, 112)

Ladies Coupe by Anita Nair is one of the brilliant inductions of strength and endurance. Through this novel, Nair reveals restlessness and dilemmas that a woman faces throughout her life and her immediate urge for love and independence. In a way, writer through her various female characters operates on a broader canvas taking into account the lives of certain women belonging to middle class families. The pristine stance of the author particularly makes her story more than just the predictable feminist platitude that it might appear. The author has captured the experiences and the proficiencies of everyday life (that a mother, a wife, a daughter and an unmarried woman undergoes) in a very realistic manner. Nair is very committed in highlighting the afflictions and contradictions of women's lives; the sacrifices they make in their marriage and family, their forced choices and (required) self-imposed relationships. The novel emphasizes on an inner strength that is possessed by every human being as seen in the major character- Akhila. Intimate setting of the novel keeps the novel

intact. Anita Nair is a powerful writer. In all her stories, the cultural details are very intense and replete. She is quite precise in her domestic details such as the sights, sounds and smell of the surrounding the locale setting is easily juxtaposed with theme prescribed to the characters. Nair exposes social strata of everyday life, especially for women, in simplistic form with the pinch of humor, eroticism and didactics. The deeper and tensed relations (social, cultural and personal) are uncovered with six female characters of the novel those who come from varied backgrounds bagged with distinct challenges of life. The book reveals the lucidity of real life terrors and joys that are full of sensual and surprising details. English author Giles Foden marks Anita Nair as a writer to watch whose depiction of the intimate setting gives a new spin on the tradition of women's confessions.

Nair comprehends women's confessional outlook in unique custom. Six women characters namely Akhila, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu swap stories of their lives. The novel follows the journey of 45 years old Indian woman named Akhila as she travels to Kanyakumari. She wants a break from her role of being a provider of a family both emotionally and economically. Akhila is born in a very conservative family and a kind of environment and society she was brought up in, has no voluntary exit. On one hand, Akhila's

mother always taught her to become a perfect woman (who is mixed with the present society and its environment) and on the other hand, she compels her to be the man of the family (after her father's death).

"...here is no such thing as equal marriage it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way there can be no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on the man's role. Or the Gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage", is what her mother tried to instill in her mind." (Nair, 14)

On her way to Kanyakumari, Akhila shares a compartment with these five different women, each with her own story to tell but with a common goal. Janaki, Margaret and Prabha are a kind of happily married women but somewhere there is a void in each of these characters lives of being a confused mother, a self-absorbed insensitive tyrant and a prolonged wife and a perfect daughter respectively. Whereas, Sheela and Marikolanthu are representative of young girls; one is too intense and the other is marred by crude way of life.

Janaki is a regular Indian woman who learns to love her husband, whose world revolves round her husband and children. Her only duty as a woman is to take care of them.

The second story is about fourteen years old Sheela who is although younger than the other women are but is parallel to these women in her maturity. She dauntlessly accepts the death of her grandmother. As Akhila says,

"...what makes Sheela different from others is her ability to look beyond things and her knack

of perceiving what others can not". ("Journey of Self- Discovery in Anita Nair's Ladies coupe", 68)

The third story is about Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher married to a school principal Ebenezer Paulraj. Soon Margret realized that her husband Ebenezer's every action transforms Margaret's love into hatred and she uses ingenious methods to avenge him.

"...She formulates a scheme which would not only save her marriage but also eat into his amour proper and shake the very brass tacks of his being." ("Journey of Self- Discovery in Anita Nair's Ladies coupe", 133)

Born to rich parents she had the perfect childhood, Prabha Devi is the fourth woman who tells her tale. Her mother beamed with pride when Prabha Devi turned eighteen. She was beautiful, docile, a good cook, a good singer herself, everything that a girl ought to be. After forty years of her marriage, somewhere she realized that she forgot how it is to be here and that is when she learns to strike a balance between being what she wants to be and being what she is expected to be and a shufti of a swimming pool helps her realize the need for the balancing act. These women shares a common sentiment with the women characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work (short story collection) *Arranged Marriage* which states that the inferiority complex is somehow instilled by none other than another woman who herself is trapped within this vicious circle of society.

The most heart-rending fifth tale is that of Marikolanthu. As a kid, she worked at the Chettiar's house where she realized that circumstances never let her to be kidding. When she grew up, a man destroyed her innocence. This one unpleasant incident changes Markolanthu's entire life and destroys her verve.

From being a child who toiled to help her mother raise her brothers to being a house cleaner to two woman doctors who were foreigners, Marikolanthu was now a mother of an illegitimate child. But still Marikolanthu, all through her life she stood up for what she believed in, not caring for the society.

The consciousness of these six characters is disguised form of repression and politics what Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders* states,

“...the politics of difference and solidarity, decolonizing and democratizing feminist practice, the crossing of borders, and the relation of feminist knowledge and scholarship to organizing and social movements.” (Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* back cover)

The women together involve the reader with their sense of dearth and obligation that every woman comes across in her life, some way or the other. There is a strong message of hope through change. Each of Nair's characters is dynamic and is fleshed out until the minute detail. Nair's strength lies in the portrayal of these women characters in a way she brings to life the everyday working and thought process, the desires and the doubts of these six women. These women and their stories helped Akhila find an answer to her biggest question –

“Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?” (Nair, book back cover)

Language is simple and gets little poetic in a few places. The style is involved and each life account is poignant. This descriptive writing style provides a reader with better accessibility towards a sympathetic understanding of the characters. Characters motivate us to look honestly at ourselves, our actions and our habits

within the family and society. Various other characters such as much conservative Amma, Jaya (a prostitute) struggles against oppression of Hindu Brahmin society. Akhila's friend Katherine turns out to be the strength of Akhila, who circuitously guides her in taking the first step of breaking the shackles of the responsibilities and restraints imposed on her. The novelist has very well captured Akhila's sense of incompleteness and her preoccupation with body.

The structure of the novel is progressive and discursive. They are a continuous string of emotions and this acute reality leads to the succession of thoughts, feelings and incidents, forming a chain of reminiscence. Nair depicts how the central character of the novel understands her much better by interacting with other characters.

“So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-colored spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to content.” (Nair, 2)

Nair is a fine writer with a great sense of character and an eye for the choice of words. Old desires and new hopes are described in such a way that Nair provides a reader with an easy access to her plot of the novel. It is more a feminist work of contemporary literature creating an intense patchwork filled with tenderness and warmth of memories. Going beyond the geography of what is; Nair focuses on phenomenon of what if. Author traces the real position of women in the families as well as in the society. Touch of realistic imagery provides a reader with a close understanding of the family lives of women. Nair's work is a definite visual description of women's psyche and her vision of interpreting the similar situations.

This novel of Nair is wonderfully vibrated, takes the reader into the heart of these women. Nair is a powerful writer who with her simplistic behavior reveals traditional orthodoxy of Indian society and offering a powerful feminist message with all its subtlety.

"A deeply serious, enjoyably lucid book about real terrors and joys, full of sensual and surprising details." (*Scotland on Sunday*, Praise for Ladies Coupe)

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