



From Subjugation to Emancipation: A Study of Anita Nair's

*Ladies Coupe*

Nitu

M.A.M.Phil. & NET

Abstract:

Indian women novelists are shining stars in the galaxy of Indian English Literature. They are contributing immensely in enhancing and enriching the Indian English Novels. They try to break the traditional Hindu myth of Sita and Savitri through their creative writings. They raise the problematic question of women's emancipation of Indian patriarchal society. Anita Nair, a versatile woman writer, realistically portrays the dilemma of contemporary women caught in the tangle of modernity and tradition. She penned her views and draws attention towards the need of universal freedom for women. *Ladies Coupe* is a poignant tale of an unmarried Indian woman, Akhila, and her journey of self-discovery in which she encounters various experiences and difficulties. Her co-passengers namely, Janaki, Margret, Sheela, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu narrate their life experiences like Chaucerian tales. Their experiences and her own turmoil help her to become a new woman who successfully challenges the patriarchal system. The focus of the present paper would be on the huge mountainous structure of the patriarchal society which women try to scale and conquer.

Keywords: patriarchal society, women's emancipation, self-discovery, tradition, universal freedom

Indian novel has been enriched by the active contribution of women novelists. In the earlier novels by male writers, woman is presented as docile, timid, mute and a silent sufferer. If she has all these virtues she is a true woman called "Pativrata". With the emergence of women novelists, the meaning of 'Pativrata' has changed. In patriarchal society the question of women's emancipation is more problematic and writers raise their voice through feminist literature. Contemporary women novelists focus on the realistic portrayal of self, the dilemma of



modern woman perplexed by traditional and modernity, sublimation of desires and assertion against patriarchy. 'Feminism' tries to change the assumption of the 'man for the sword' and 'woman for the needle.' There is visible revolution in the writings of women novelists. In their novels, they describe and attack the suffocating conventions and norms that restrict women within the narrow world of morality. In case of married women, female sexuality is used as a trap to keep women pregnant and domesticated. Marriage and maternity are not the chief goals in the life of a woman. A woman's body is essentially her own. They demand freedom not only in outer world but in family also.

Women novelists explore the patriarchal ideology within a traditional society that suppresses woman's voice for emancipation and development. Their novels delineate the social structure and cultural construction that create gender inequality. Their works are praiseworthy for delicately identifying a world where women have been oppressed for centuries. Simon de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* has become a kind of Bible for feminist writers. The main concept of the book is that in traditional societal order women is subordinate to men. Societal norms and customs are under the control of men. Women's secondary position is not a natural occurrence but it has been constructed by man. It is he who controls the system and changes it according to his needs. The dominant sex in hierarchical order imposes various environmental forces to subdue the opposite sex. As a result, women don't come in the mainstream. They remain marginalized and dependent beings. In manmade social system man is the subject and woman is other; the secondary being. "She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less ..... the subject, he is absolute, she is the other. (Beauvoir 16). In India, woman is regarded as an embodiment of self sacrifice. It is expected from them that they seek happiness in their household responsibilities and relationships. Marriage is an escape for the girls from the clutches of parents. But they don't realize at that time, they "had exchanged one pair of pinching torturing shoes for another." (Deshpande 74) Anita Nair is a famous and versatile woman writer, known for her novels. The earlier generation of feminists has talked much about the voices that were never heard and Indian women's narrow and confined world. But Nair gives them voice, breaks the monotony of Indian women's life and makes them capable enough to assert their identity. In Nair's novels, women's sufferings don't



weaken them but empower them. They do not cry for freedom and individuality but make it a weapon to assert their identity and achieve it by fighting against patriarchy. *Ladies Cope* is a poignant tale of a 45 year old unmarried Indian woman. It was regarded as one of the five best novels in India in 2002. The novel presents the picture of male dominated society and how women suffer from society's way of thinking. It describes the experiences and suppression of Indian women belonging to all strata of society. It is not the story of an Indian woman but of all women. Akhila, the central character, in her journey of self discovery encounters many women -- Janaki, Margret, Karpagam Sheela, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu. They draw strength and enlightenment from each other's life experiences. The novel raises a question about women's independent identity and that is the question of every woman's life. Nair tries to answer it through her characters' assertion, their confrontation with old desires and new hopes in life. Their story is set in a train compartment reserved for ladies. It is a kind of pilgrimage for these six women. On their way to self-realization they narrate their stories like Chaucerian characters. All of them know that they would never meet again in life and they share their secrets hidden deep in their hearts. Their confessions make them feel empowered by realizing the self that was until now ignored and suppressed.

Various critics have studied the novel from different perspectives. Stella Rose says in "From Periphery to the Centre: Anita Nair's *Ladies Cope*" that women can achieve radical independence through education and economic independence. Rachel Bari's articles on "Narrative of Confinement and Captivity: Anita Nair's *Ladies Cope*" discusses women's confinement and captivity. Doris Thomas's article "*Towards the Emergence of an Autonomous Women: A Reading of Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe*" talks about Akhila's awakening from the hardships of life.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* presents the lives of Indian women of different ages, backgrounds, social status and experiences of life. It deals with the core question of woman's identity that every woman has to face in her life time. In the novel, Nair raises a question — Can a women live alone all by herself or does a woman need a man to survive in this male dominated world? The central character poses the question and others help her to find the answer by



narrating their own life story. Their journey starts from submission to patriarchy. In the course of life they gain strength and finally assert themselves as individual beings and reach their destination. Their experiences enlighten the protagonist, Akhila and she breaks the shackles and goes ahead in search of life and happiness.

Akhilandeswari, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is a spinster and works as a clerk in Income Tax Department. After the sudden death of her father, she becomes the breadwinner of the family. She is so much immersed in fulfilling the familial responsibilities that she forgets her own life. She sacrifices all her life for the betterment of the family. She helps her family in all possible ways. Even after settling in their lives, they do not free her from the burden of responsibilities. She arranges dowry for her younger sister Padma's marriage, works hard to provide better education to her brothers Narsi and Narayan, always fulfils their desires and dreams at the cost of her own comforts. She is "always an extension of someone else's identity: Chandra's daughter, Narayan's Akka; Priya's aunt; Murthy's sister-in-law" (*Ladies Coupe* 201-202).

Akhila's family continually exploits her. Then one day her childhood friend Karpagam reawakens her 'self' and encourages her to assert her individuality. She gets strength from Karpagam's words and decides to live her life alone. But her family doesn't allow her to live her own life because of their selfish interests. Padma fears that she will lose the house that Akhila owns and economic security that Akhila's income provides. Narsi fears that "what will society say" (*Ladies Coupe* 205). Only Narayan has respect and cares for her. He requests her to consult her friends before making up her mind to live alone. She asserts herself and reveals her pain in conversation to Narayan:

For twenty six years, I have all of myself to this family. I asked for nothing in return. And now when I wish to make a life of my own, not anyone of your come forward and says. . . . You deserve to have a life of your own. (*Ladies Coupe* 206)

Akhila has grown up in a Tamil Brahmin family. Her mother gives her training for her future role after marriage. Her father was strict, honest and simple man. At the very young age of nineteen,, the burden of earning falls upon her shoulder after her father's death, s. The girl who



was not allowed to go outside alone even during the day now travels alone every day. On the basis of her school education she gets the job as a clerk in Income Tax Office on compassionate grounds after her father's death. Hoping for better position in office by a higher degree of educational qualification, she enrolled herself in an open university for a bachelor degree. This decision is also a step in empowering her and asserting herself. Her yearning for a man's love and physical involvement gets her closer to Hari whom she meets in a train to office. He is North Indian and younger in age. They meet daily during traveling and one day she goes to Mahabalipuram with him to spend a night with him. But soon, her happiness and romantic enthusiasm come to an end. People are staring at this unusual couple of an elderly lady and a young boy. She does not have courage to fight against her own family and society.

The journey of one night with five women gives Akhila so much potential that she shows courage to call her lost love, Hari. She recollects those memories and regrets why she had forsaken Hari though he had filled her empty life with love and happiness. Hari had promised to live with and love her forever but she rejects him fearing her mother and brothers. Now she decides to live alone, buy a house of her own and reclaim her lost love Hari without any fear of family and society. She recognizes that within her there is a woman with womanly needs. She tries to fulfill those physical needs by initiating a relationship with a younger and stranger person Vinod. It is a kind of physical interaction. She is not emotionally involved with him. They find comfort in each other's arms. This makes her feel free from the clutches of family expectations and societal conventions. She realizes that she has her own life to live and nobody can stop her to do so. She empowered herself with this newly gained identity and calls her lost love Hari after Vinod's departure.

Akhila gains her individuality and identifies her womanly self in enjoying sexual liberation and celebrating her womanhood. She breaks the shackles of conventions of society and family bondage that have conditioned her mentally and psychologically since childhood. This new Akhila does not believe in restrictions. Akhila's decision to live alone, travel alone, spending night with an unknown man, calling her lost love all are part of the revolutionary act of



asserting the “self”. She is all prepared to break the patriarchal wall around her to restore her identity and individuality

In her life changing journey, she meets various women of whom Karpagam, Prabha Devi, Margaret are strong women. They fight against male domination and patriarchal society and win in the game of life. They leave their imprints on reader’s mind through their remarkable personality and active presence. They help Akhila to make up her mind and liberate her captive soul. To quote Vasanthakumari, “She recollects her past, listens to others and moulds her future. She remembers and hopes but expects nothing. Akhila goes through the experiences of all the ladies in the coupe” (117).

On the other hand, there are weak characters who surrender before patriarchal society, accept its norms and follow them silently. Their submission to the patriarchal tradition is so complete that they remain limited within the narrow world of home and children. Their economic and physical independence and psychological weakness strengthen their belief that there is no life for a woman without man. There are characters like Sujata Akka, Padma, Janaki Devi, Chandra Iyer, Jaya and Marikolanthu who feel sheltered as well as suffocated by male domination. In the beginning they remorsefully revolt against their limited space in the larger world, but gradually they realize that they cannot go against the stronger and larger structure. Continuous suppression forces them to give up and accept male as the dominant force of their lives.

Chandra Iyer, Akhila’s mother, is a devoted wife. Her husband is her maternal uncle by birth. He is an honest but pessimistic man. She gets married at the age of fifteen and does not get much education. Her devotion towards her husband is so complete that she believes that they are “two bodies and one soul” (*Ladies Coupe* 10). She always prefers his choices and tries to please him by paying him complete attention. Since childhood she has been taught that her supreme duty is her husband’s service. For her entire life, she believes in the myth of what it is to be an ideal wife. She believes in the theory” “It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony” (*Ladies Coupe* 14). Her gender biased theory projects husband as the supreme authority and exaggerates his masculinity by behaving like a



slave before him to satisfy his male ego. Since, he is the master and provider, he rules over his wife and treats home as his kingdom. What a woman does tirelessly to preserve his kingdom entire day is negligible and honorary. She believes: “It is when one wants to prove one’s equality that there is warring and sparring all the home. . . . A woman is not meant to take a man’s role” (*Ladies Coupe* 14).

Chandra teaches her daughter Akhila what it means to be a good wife. When Akhila’s pre-university course is complete, all she has to do is to improve her abilities and prepare herself for the day she would be married. She advises Akhila to draw Kolam everyday on the walls of the house. Kolam design should be perfect and suit the occasion. She imbibes all these qualities in Akhila that she had inherited from her mother. A girl should be perfect in all the virtues as she is the “guiding light to the family” (*Ladies Coupe* 50). There are many other qualities of a good wife that Chandra wants to impose on Akhila. A girl should be careful about her complexion. She should always make efforts to improve her personality. Fair complexion adds an extra point to a virtuous wife. “All men want fair-skinned wives even if they are black as coal themselves!” (*Ladies Coupe* 51).

Chandra ignores her eldest daughter Akhila’s marriage and prepares for her sons’ marriages. After that her younger daughter Padma gets married but she doesn’t think about Akhila’s marriage. She became a demanding mother who forces Akhila to remain spinster devoid of all happiness and colors of life. Her obedient daughter accepts the status of head of the family and to maintain that status she sacrifices her love, Hari. Her complete surrender to patriarchy makes her believe that sacrifices are woman’s destiny and supremacy is man’s. Her faith in tradition and convention doesn’t make her guilty conscious for ruining Akhila’s life and making her son’s lives comfortable and happy. Patriarchy is in her conscious mind and under its effect she damages Akhila’s life unconsciously.

Chandra is so much captivated by norms of social and moral conduct established for a woman that she doesn’t want to preserve any relation with her friend Sarasa Iyer. Once a friend of her, she is now a destitute woman as the curse of widowhood falls upon her. Even as a widow herself she fails to understand the feelings of another widow. Poverty compels Sarasa to sell her



eldest daughter Jaya. This shameful act of her for livelihood invites social censure and her family is excommunicated. For Chandra, their life is worse than death. She realizes that it could have been the fate of her family also if Akhila had not come to rescue the dignity and honour of the family. Chandra and her Brahmin Community ostracize Sarasa and her family for breaking the moral code of society and adopting degraded means to live.

Margaret Shanti is a co-passenger of Akhila in ladies coupe. She narrates her life story to help Akhila to find answers to her question. She is the most prominent and strongest woman among them all. She is portrayed as a well educated, bright and promising student with a gold medal in Chemistry. All her academic ambitions and dreams to go to America for a Doctorate degree come to an end “Their love culminates in a hasty marriage and it liberally becomes a death bed for Margaret” (Mishra 104). She loves her husband immensely at the cost of her higher studies. She wants to do a doctorate but he forces her to do B.Ed. to become a teacher in his school. He wants her to cut her long hair. She accepts all: “I didn’t know what it was he expected of me now” (*Ladies Coupe* 108). She is a working woman. Instead of helping her in house hold jobs, he is complaining all the time about the food she cooks, spider webs, dirty clothes, his dusty certificates and about school children.

Eighteen months after their marriage she gets pregnant. She is so happy and excited that she wanted to tell everybody that she is going to have a baby. But all her dreams and joy evaporate when her husband tells her that he doesn’t want a baby now. She aborts her baby even though her heart does not allow her to commit the crime. “I was afraid. I was uncertain and I feel guilty” (*Ladies Coupe* 106). He says: “Just think of this as a tumor that has to be removed” (*Ladies Coupe* 106). It shows that “men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature” (Beauvoir 508). Even though she is an educated independent woman, she can’t live alone as her family and society don’t allow her. There is stigma of divorce in our society. Even if both husband and wife are not happy in marriage, they continually live with each other for the sake of society and holy sacrament. Marriage is considered sacred in Indian society, a union sanctioned by God. So woman should try hard to preserve it. Margaret realizes that the idea of divorce would not help her. It would





rather alienate her from parents also. She doesn't want to disturb her parent's peaceful life as no one has ever been divorced in her family. So she gives up the idea of divorce and plans her own strategy to take revenge. Ebe is becoming more and more egoistic, domineering and becoming stronger in her mind to take revenge. A turning point came into her life when she sees the golden fish floating dead. She identifies herself with the golden fish. She determines to take her life in her own hands as she does not want to float like dead fish. Margaret decides to erase his confidence by making him fat. She knows his appearance makes him feel proud; his attractive body gives him strength. By using water metaphor, she dissolves Ebenezer's patriarchal hegemony. She tantalizes his taste buds by her culinary skills. Ebe becomes fatter. He now resembles Margaret in appearance. Margaret's achieves her goal of taking her revenge. Her knowledge of chemicals has an advantage over Ebe's admiration for poetry" (Mishra 104).

Anita Nair through the character of Margaret tries to show that not only illiterate women are dependent on patriarchal system but highly qualified and well educated women also are trapped in patriarchal society. Margaret is a strong woman: "You should trust your instincts ... You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that" (*Ladies Coupe* 21). It shows her confidence that she has gained self-worth, identity and individuality by decimating her husband's male ego.

Janaki Devi is the eldest among the six women in the coupe. She has led forty years of comfortable happy married life as a pampered wife. There is 'friendly love' between the two. She is a woman who has always a man to protect her: "First there was my father and my brothers, then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son" (*Ladies Coupe* 22). Her life is a perfect example of Manu's dictum:

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (*Manu Smiriti*148)

Janaki's son Siddharth doesn't treat her as a caring mother. Prabhakar's attitude towards Janaki irritates him. He dislikes that his father always takes her mother's side, and always patronizes her



even when she is wrong. The attitude of Siddharth bothers Prabhakar that after his death his son will not take care of his loving wife.

Marikolanthu is a co-passenger of Akhila among the others in the coupe. She is different from the women passengers as she is dressed poorly and is not much educated. While other women speak English, she can't. Expression on her face shows that she has seen all human fickleness and fallibility. When she was nine years old, her father died and her mother started working as a cook in Chettiar's House for livelihood. Chettiar is the richest person in the village who runs silk worms business. In her childhood, she takes responsibility to run the house. Her mother realizes that she has stolen her childhood from her. She spent her childhood as a housewife looking after her mother's house and her younger brothers. Now her brothers have staked claim to the house and she has "no house to call my own" (*Ladies Coupe*, 218).

In Chettiar's fort, widows serve as cooks. Marikolanthu's mother and Rukmini Akka do this job. According to Rukmini they are assigned this job because widows are not allowed to taste spices as with the death of their husband, their taste bud also die. It shows the attitude of the society towards widows. Chettiar's eldest daughter-in-law Rani is a timid woman and her acceptance of the fact that she is mother of a daughter and not of a son increases her timidity. There is no importance of hers in the family as she is unable to give birth to a son who could lead the family as his father's successor. At the time of his second son Sridhar's marriage Chettiar is conscious of the fact that the bride should be "beautiful and educated and from a family that had a predilection for bearing sons" (*Ladies Coupe*, 218).

Marikolanthu is appointed to help Sujata and for taking care her infant. Marikolanthu is raped by a relative of Sujata and she feels helpless as she can't help her. As a daughter-in-law of the family she can't raise her voice against her in-laws. Her submission to male domination prove that although she believes in women emancipation but she kills her desires and remains in the comfort zone to enjoy the position provided by patriarchy. Sujata becomes the mistress of the family after the death of her mother-in-law and she employs Marikolanthu as her personal assistant. She feels alienated and finds comfort in Marikolanthu's company. She knows that if she doesn't take interest in the physical acts of her husband he would abandon her. She never



says' no to her husband because of the fear that "he'll find a mistress like his father did and flaunt her beneath my nose." (*Ladies Coupe* 242)

Marikolanthu is the object of lustful glances for the men of the house. To save her chastity she goes to Vellore where she finds lesbian relation between two lady doctors. She adjusts herself in new world, learns writing and reading and dreams to become nurse. Her brief visit to Chettiar's Kottai for a short time changes her destiny. She is brutally raped by Murugan, a relative of Chettiar. The terrible humiliation affects her deeply, she becomes pregnant. After two months, her mother becomes suspicious about her deteriorating health and finds her pregnant. And it is too late to ask Murugesan to marry her. Sujata tries to seek help from her husband but he cautions her not to drag the matter to the village elders and spoil family reputation for a maid. He rejects it as a false story "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape." (*Ladies Coupe*, 245) Murugesan's statement that no one would believe her proves true. For her the lesbian relationship of missy's is less faulty than the inhuman, cruel act of rape. It is a horrible dream for her that haunts her for years. Her mother is worried that if Murugesan would not marry her, she "will end up in the gutter like a street dog." (*Ladies Coupe*, 245) But she firmly refused to marry "that filthy animal". She would like to "die than marry him" (*Ladies Coupe*, 245). Sujata Akka suggests that "if she has a job, that will replace a husband's protection" (*Ladies Coupe*, 246). Even though she has not committed the sin but she is forced to live a life of social ignorance. It is very ironical that the man who is the actual culprit lives freely. Society expects shame from her but she feels "anger, humiliation but not shame" (*Ladies Coupe*247).

Mari feels indebted towards Sujata. She serves her during the day and her husband Sridhar at night. Sujata's physical revulsion for her husband drags her towards Marikolanthu. She offers her body to Sridhar only to save her mistress's marriage. She serves him as her proxy. If she doesn't do this he would have found another woman to fulfill his needs. She is misunderstood and thrown out of the house; a destitute woman, dejected by everyone she decides that "It was time Murugesan paid for what he did to me." She mortgages her son to Murugesan's looms to arrange money for an operation as she is pregnant from Sridhar. To take



revenge she sells her own son to fulfill her selfish purpose and feels happy. At the death of Murugesan, she goes to cremation ground where she finds her son Muthu trying to light his father's dead body again. Murugesan's relatives order her son to keep an eye on the pyre. The very sight of her son Muthu as "a keeper of graves, the overseer of the dead" (*Ladies Coupe*, 268) fills her with remorse and guilt. She curses herself for depriving him of all human dignity and reducing him to Chandala.

She is the victim of class and caste atrocities. Her emancipation lies in her son's emancipation from the patriarchal looms. Only then she is able to assert her space in this patriarchal world. She recognizes her strength: "Women are strong; women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself" (*Ladies Coupe* 209-210).

Prabha Devi is a fellow passenger in the coupe. She is married to Jagdeesh, son of a wealthy diamond merchant. On her fortieth birthday she realizes that "she had forgotten the sound of her own voice" (*Ladies Coupe* 168). Gradually she wakes up and she becomes the "cause and effect" (*Ladies Coupe*, 167) of her transformation. Patriarchy affects a woman's life from birth to death. When Prabha was born, her father was not happy. He saw baby girl as a hindrance for his business plans. He thinks that a daughter would not be able to run his businesses. But Prabha's mother is happy to have a daughter who would be her companion and inheritor. At the age of eighteen her father arranges her marriage in a rich family. Only her mother is sad because her marriage would create a vacuum in her mother's life.

After marriage her life comes to an end. She has nothing to do, but only wait: "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" (*Ladies Coupe* 172). A woman dedicates all her life to her family. She remains in the narrow world of house to complete the role of ideal daughter, wife and mother. Patriarchal society stifles a woman's self and soul.



She is very happy and excited when her husband plans to go to New York with her on a business trip. When they reach and settle in New York, she transforms herself into a western woman. She practices regularly to change her personality to look like a western woman. Her life is totally different from that of her friend Sharmila who also lives in New York. She meets her at the airport. Sharmila lives with her mother-in-law who is always suspicious about everything. Sharmila was a brilliant student and everyone had thought that she would be a doctor. Now, her husband and mother-in-law rule over her destiny. All her intelligence is wasted on household job. She is never allowed to wear western dresses like Prabha Devi. Before marriage her father took decision on her behalf; after marriage it was her husband who did so. Patriarchy always dominates a woman's life.

Prabha Devi is the centre of attraction wherever she goes. When Parmod willingly neglects her in the presence of her husband she considers it as her insult. She wants people to know her and behave with her as Prabha Devi, not as someone's wife: "Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality? Jagdeesh's Mrs. and no more. (*Ladies Coupe*, 180) She wants to assert her own identity, before Parmod as an individual and not as Jagdeesh's wife. She starts making overtures to Parmod. One day he comes to her home with an intention to make sexual advances. Humiliated by his actions, she slaps him and throws him out of the house. It makes her realize that she herself is responsible for violation of her body: "She would camouflage this body that had sent such reckless messages to the world" (*Ladies Coupe*, 183).

Her learning of moral and traditional ethics, her conditioning reverts her back in the role of an ideal and passive wife. Her short term involvement with western life is a kind of shocker for her. Now, she accepts the Indian traditional way. She seems impatient for a baby. She wants to experience motherhood. For almost twenty years she had forgotten her 'self.' She becomes ideal wife and a caring mother. She abandons her dreams, her identity and her individual life. And she tries to find 'self' in her relationship with her husband, children and in-laws. She becomes a non-existent entity, a soundless entity: "What do I sound like? Is my voice shrill or harsh?" (*Ladies Coupe* 168). Prabha's silence and self-imposed restrictions transform her docile



husband into a domineering man. She allows him to rule over her. She chooses “the middle path, the golden mean” to set the tone of marriage (*Ladies Coupe*, 188). In the process of empowering her husband she herself becomes strong. She allows him to hold the strings of her life to make him happy.

One day she decides to learn swimming, to regain her lost ‘self’ without her husband’s permission. She learns swimming without any help of instructor. She conquers her fear of her lost identity by conquering the fear of water. Her enthusiasm and energy to learn swimming help her to regain confidence and lost passion in herself. She discovers her independent and individual self without any compromise with material bliss and material security. Her body was the cause of her lament, now she makes her body the reason of her happiness.

Sheela is fourteen years of age. She is the youngest in the ladies compartment. At this tender age, a girl hardly has feminine consciousness in her psyche and experiences of male dominance in her mind. But, as a witty and intelligent girl and from the experiences of her maternal grandmother she has learnt what it means to be a woman. She has a child’s innocence and a woman’s perspective. Feminine awareness comes to her consciousness when Sheela becomes the object of sexual desire. She is a victim of child sexual abuse. She never wants to go to her friend Hasina’s house where her friend’s father tries to seduce her. He mops sweat on her upper lip with his fingers and leaves a disgusting imprint on her psyche for a long time. At another time, he knots the bows of her sleeves. Hasina and her mother spotted him, but they feel helpless. Though all of them are humiliated by the incident but they do not say a word because they have completely surrendered before patriarchy. She sees shame in Hasina and her mother’s eyes. She decides that “she would never go to Hasina’s house again” (*Ladies Coupe*, 66). Hasina’s father Naazar does the same at Sheela’s home in front of her parents and grandmother. Her parents do not find fault in his abusing actions. For them he is like father to her. But her grandmother does not like him. She warns her parents of their daughter’s safety.

Sheela’s grandmother, Ammumma, is a woman of “manifestations of femininity” (*Ladies Coupe*, 67). Because of patriarchal forces, a girl develops a tendency to draw attention to herself, and a desire to be loved. Narcissism also affects her thought process. Social customs and



parenting condition her desires to identify herself by appearances and beauty. But Ammumma wants to change this. She does not approve of girl's dependence for love and praises on patriarchy. She is not the object to please others. All her life she sustains the philosophy of narcissism. Every night, before going to sleep she decorates herself with jewellery and make-up. Even in death, she wants to look beautiful. Sheela gives Ammumma the grace that she always wanted in her eternal sleep. She provides dignity to her corpse by decorating it with jewels and powder. Her family criticizes her for converting corpse into a dying harlot but she does not care. She is happy to think that her grandmother would be happy

Sheela's father finds fault in her all the time. He rebukes her all the time for talking to boys, using 'shit' in every sentence, watching TV, being rude and so witty. When she was a child her father had encouraged her to be witty. He feels proud on her sense of humor and now when he sees a woman and not a child in her, but now her wit becomes rudeness for him. He himself has developed wit in her and now when she uses it, he scolds her. She is required to mould her words to make others feel happy

Karpagam is an old friend and neighbor of Akhila who becomes her savior for in her emancipation from her selfish family. She is a strong and independent woman like her mother and a model of femininity. She does not accept that a widow should not wear colourful clothes, jewels and apply kumkum. These things are not to show to the world whether a woman is married or single. These things make a woman feminine and beautiful. For her, these are not the "privileges that marriage sanctions" (*Ladies Coupe*, 202) She denies male hegemony that does not provide a widow human dignity, and makes her a living corpse. The spark in her eyes give confidence to Akhila who has "little life or sprit" (*Ladies Coupe*, 198) in her. She always praises and respects Akhila for what she has done for her family in contrast to Jaya and Sarasa who adopt prostitution for earning livelihood. She makes Akhila realize that she has already fulfilled all her responsibilities towards family and it is time to have her own life.

Sarasa Iyer was once a friend of Akhila's mother. She is forced to adopt questionable means to earn her livelihood after her husband's death. She has three daughters and a blind son. After her husband's death she sold most of valuable things of the house to raise her children.



When she has nothing left to sell off, she sells her elder daughter. Poverty and cries of hungry children force her to break all the social norms of the patriarchy. She tells a lie that her elder daughter works in bachelor quarters. Her disguised respectability could not save her when the news becomes public. Her Brahmin community declared her family a blot on their high caste and community and on society as a whole: “On Subermani Iyer’s good name. On the Brahmin community. On womanhood. Wasn’t there a more honorable way to stay alive?” (*Ladies Coupe* 81). They were excommunicated from the community. Sarasa also searches for job, goes from door to door, requests people to keep her as a maid. But unsympathetic people never come to help her. Now, when she finds other ways, they came to criticize her. She lives in a society where there is “rigidity of thought and a narrowness of acceptance” (*Ladies Coupe*, 82). Sarasa does not care for a society that never came to provide solace in her grief and need. She forcefully rebels against the cruel society.

Jaya is the eldest daughter of Subermani Iyer and Sarasa Iyer. She represents a girl who surrenders herself to male domination that leads her to ruination. After their father’s death both Akhila and Jaya take the responsibility of their families. Like Akhila’s father, her father did not have a government job. Her lack of education, absence of any support, lack of professional qualifications, responsibility of a poor and extended family, hostility of rigid society leave her with only one option and that is to go is for world’s oldest profession. Padma is Akhila’s sister and Chandra Iyer’s daughter. She is a traditional woman who believes that a woman’s life attains fulfillment only in marriage. She grows up as an ungrateful sister with resentment and hatred for her elder sister Akhila. She feels pride in confining herself within the boundaries of the house and denigrates Akhila as a working woman. She is one of those women who know no other way to lead life than getting married and giving birth to children. Eating an egg for health issues by her daughter is not a sacrilege in the eyes of Padma. She quarrels with Akhila for eating eggs only for taste: “Aren’t you ashamed of your-self” (*Ladies Coupe*, 161).

Even the society thinks that Akhila is an arrogant and selfish woman who has not found a husband. Padma’s husband, Murthy, does not have self-respect. Even after many years of his marriage he still depends on Akhila for livelihood. Padma and her family are like parasites





sucking Akhila's life emotionally and economically. In her conservative and traditional world there is no space for a spinster. She "needed to make Akhila look inadequate to feel complete herself" (*Ladies Coupe*, 163). As a housewife, she keeps herself bound within the four walls of the house and remains "wedded to the kitchen counters" (*Ladies Coupe*, 163). She portrays Akhila in bad light before others: "What a misfit Akhila was as a woman" (*Ladies Coupe*, 168).

Akhila tolerates Padma's rude behaviour and attacks on her privacy and humiliation before neighboring women. But Padma crosses her limits when she accuses Akhila of having a love affair. It is unbearable to Akhila and she slaps her hard. She breaks all the ties with her family members who do not respect her and she decides to go away: "Akhilandeswari. Nobody's daughter Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother" (*Ladies Coupe*, 206-207).

Most of the women characters in *Ladies Coupe* have vacuum, tragic experiences, pain, sufferings and cries in their lives. After listening to the experiences of life of five women, Akhila realizes that there is so much more in life to experience and enjoy rather than to bind herself to threshold of the house. Vasanthakumari hits the point when she observes that the lives of these women act like "a mirror in which Akhila sees her reflection made whole" (19-20). Now, she takes her life in her own hands and she is now firmly determined that she will not sacrifice her life for the sake of her family, "Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her anymore .... for within me is a woman I have discovered" (*Ladies Coupe*, 270).

Akhila's love and long journey is a journey from submission to affirmation. Though this life is hostile to women, but still it is worthwhile. It is a worth living experience. Akhila realizes it through the experiences narrated by her co-passengers who lead their lives despite all the obstacles and sufferings. Anita Nair exhorts women to launch their own lives without seeking help from the patriarchal society which prides itself on relegating women on the margins of the society. She is strongly in favor of women's education, emancipation and freedom. Akhila's success lies in her rejection of submissive self and declaration of an assertive self.

**Works Cited :**



- Bari, Rachel. “Narrative of Confinement and Captivity: Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*.” *Poetcrit* 17.1(Jan.2004):42-47.Print.
- Beauvoir,Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1983. Print.
- Manusmriti. *Manav Dharma Shastra*. Trans. and Ed. Graves Chamnen Haughton Vol.3. New Delhi: Cosmo, 1985.Print.
- Mishra, Binod. “Resurrection of Self: A Study of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*.” *Indian Writings In English*. Eds. Binod Mishra and Sanjay Kumar. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006. 102-104. Print.
- Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupe*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001.Print.
- Rose, M. Stella. “From Periphery to the Centre: Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*.” *The Quest*.18.2 (December 2004):44-48. Print.
- Thomas Doris. “Towards the Emergence of an Autonomous Woman. A Reading of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*.” *The Quest*. 20(2006):46-51. Print.
- Vasanthakumari, T. “Quest for Female Space in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* .” *The Fusing Horizons: Critical Essays in Indian Writing in English*. Ed. N. Kalamani. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2008. 114-122. Print.