

The Concept of Patriarchy and Female Defiance in

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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“Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to liberate women from female oppression. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman.”

– N.K.Prasad, N.D.R. Chandra

Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it emphasizes a relationship of inequality and injustice. Though it seems that the colonial master has vanished from the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. It is obvious that only men feast on the fruits of independence whereas women are still subjected to oppression by the male as the colonial masters did on the colonized. The colonial domination still continues in the form of male domination towards women, as S.Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose say, “Women continue to be colonized and subjected to the oppressions put into place by colonialism and consolidated by patriarchy” (49). It is obvious that the decolonized man asserted his mastery by his unjust treatment of women.

Among the emerging writers Anita Nair is the most promising and a writer to reckon with. Her maiden novel. “The Better Man” has placed her among the most self-conscious Indian novelists and her second novel, “Ladies Coupe” is in some ways even better than her first, though it is impossible to draw a parallel between the two since they are largely different. In “Ladies Coupe” Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies a relationship of inequality. The story is an attempt to show how, in life, suppression and oppression do not always come in recognizable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Though Patriarchy is a common concept in every woman’s life, Anita Nair depicts carefully the diversity within each woman, as she did not want to put the lives of women to one ideal.

Ladies Coupe is the story of six women who meet in a train journey, just by chance. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist listens to the story of five other women in the compartment and gives her too, seeking in them a solution to the question that has troubled her all her life: Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete? The story switches over from past to present and present to past and hence, even other than the five women in the compartment, we are shown of certain women who are humiliated and debased. Sunita Sinha says, "Nair's India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man's patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality" (149).

Akhila is a forty five years old spinster, who takes various roles of a daughter, sister, aunt and the provider of the family. As her father dies suddenly she takes the burden of the entire family on her young shoulders. As Indra Devi says, "Anita Nair probably hints at the family's easy acceptance of her as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both the colonial and post-colonial periods" (220). When Akhila sees a man in the railway station surrounded by a whole family of uncles, aunts, cousins and grand parents, she finds a parallel between him and her. "Akhila looked at the man who carried on his shoulders the burden of other people's dreams. That she knew all about. That she could understand" (9). As Narsi her brother became the first graduate and found a teaching job and Narayan the other brother joined the tank factory as a machinist, "Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again?" (77). Though she was the bread winner of the family, she was not considered as the head of the family and her needs and desires were least bothered. Since Narsi was a man he did not ask for anybody's permission to get married but "decided" to get married for "Narsi decided he wanted to get married" (77). When he told the family that he was going to marry the principal's daughter, "No one could fault with his choice and there was nothing anyone could say except perhaps – Don't you think you should wait for your elder sister to get married before you think of a wife and a family? But who was to mouth this rebuke?" (77). And both Narayan and Narsi had their weddings in the same hall, on the same day and time. Akhila waited for Amma or her brother's to say something about her marriage but they never asked, "What about you? You've been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a

husband, children, a home of your own?" (77). Though Akhila had done her duties, all that of a head of a family to her brothers and sister, she was not recognized as the real head, just because she was a woman. Amma expected her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour as she says, "Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first"(150). When Akhila argued that she was their elder sister and why she should ask their permission Amma simply says, "You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" (150). Akhila's encounter with her school friend awakened her spirit to think of a life to live her own. But even then there sprouted the patriarchal domination. When Akhila boldly told Padma about her decision to live alone, she without reluctance says, "Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they'll let you live alone?"(204). When Akhila says for her defiance, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent" (204), Padma mocked at her telling, "They are the men of the family"(204). Everyone including Padma, Narsi and Narayan were strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure and hence were unable to bear the thought of a woman living alone. But Akhila's defiance was stronger than theirs that she boarded the train to Kanyakumari.

As we read the story of Margaret Shanthi, it is obvious how women are dominated by man-power. Men like Ebenezer Paulraj are like the colonizers who are unable to see and praise the worth of the women, who are like the colonized. She married Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice and at the immediate willingness of her family. She was a Chemistry teacher not an ordinary teacher but the one who had been a gold medalist. Initially Margaret did not understand the deep rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her extreme love for him had made her blind. Though at times she felt the pain of it she convinced herself saying, "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" (109). As Indra Devi says, "She silences her aspirations in order to what Ebenezer wants her to be"(220). Ebe is simply a male chauvinist when he takes the power to ask Margaret to abort the baby off, the first baby off, when she conveyed him the good news with all happiness. Not only in that, but he continued to thrust upon his supremacy over her in deciding her higher studies, career and even simple things like choice of food and her hair dressing for he says, "What's the point of working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob"(105). She was so patient and gulped in all insults thrown by him on her but later woke up to the fact and planned

her own strategy to prove her strength. As Ebe was becoming more and more egoistic, domineering and hypocritic, Margaret was unconsciously compelled to teach him a lesson. She was taken to the height of anger as Ebe started throwing insults on her in front of his favourite Coterie. When he said to the Coterie “When I think of Chemistry, what comes to mind is the odour of rotten eggs” (130), the anger in her bubbled for she thought how he had turned the evening into another moment of triumph for himself. She thought, “all that was good and noble about my life that he had destroyed, the baby that died even before it had a soul,there was nothing left for me to dream of and the words rose to the surface again: I HATE HIM. I HATE HIM. What am I going to do? (131). She chose flattery as the weapon to bring down Ebe’s self esteem. She flattered and flattered and fed him with fatty food since dawn till night, till fat found its home on him, and turned him into a fat man, a quiet man and an easy man who sought her for food and sex and every way she knew. As Dr.T.Vara Lakshmi says, “By making him fat she erodes his self-esteem and feels he is an easy man to live with now, in and out of health institute. Margaret gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe’s self-esteem. She succeeds in achieving her emotional fulfillment keeping the family ties intact, though some justifications contain a modicum of sense” (69). The character of Margaret shows that the woman could vanquish the domineering man.

The youngest of the six is Sheela, fourteen years old who talks of her maternal grandmother, in whom one could see the manifestations of femininity. Anita Nair has not only brought out the need to assert the individuality of the female selfhood but also finely brought out the issue of female child abuse through the character portrayal of Sheela. As Jude Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, “Sheela’s retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men” (122). Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina’s father Nazar as, “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” (66). So Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her, but developed confidence to protect herself from it in future for it is said, “Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina’s home” (66). Even Sheela’s friend Hasina and her mother were able to understand the man’s attempt to touch her unnecessarily but they were helpless. When once Naazar knotted the bows in her sleeves, “She saw the hurt in Hasina and her mother’s eyes”

(66). Thereafter Sheela took the right decision that “She would never go to Hasina’s house again” (66) as a means of her self-protection. Thus Sheela was strong in her defiance against a man’s abuse on her physique. Within Sheela’s story Anita Nair has brought in an incident, where a girl named Celine became a victim to a man’s instinct. Celine became pregnant because of her friend’s father and her family moved to a place where no one would know about her abortion. But it is said, “the friend’s father went to a far away town where he would find plenty of young girls to ruin everyone said” (65). Through this incident, Nair has brought out the unjust treatment of women by men.

As Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose say, “Patriarchy shows its ugly face from cradle to grave.” Even parents are more concerned about the boys than the girls. And Anita Nair has chosen the character of Prabha Devi to emphasise this issue. When Prabha Devi is born his father sighs, as it would be a hindrance for his business progress as he says, “Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (169). Even Prabha Devi’s mother is pleased when a daughter is born as her thoughts are confined that a daughter is some one who will take her recipes to the other house and treasure her jewellery and some one who will say that she did this and that in her mother’s house. Even while playing games as a child, a girl is destined to choose to play cooking or baby – sitting games as it is said, “A kitchen was set up for her to play house and mother games. Sometimes Prabha Devi’s mother joined in her daughter’s games, pretending to be an adult – child while her daughter tried hard to be a child adult” (170). Basically a woman is never liked to come out with opinions. Prabha Devi’s mother finds great pleasure in the company of her daughter than in her four sons put together. But she conceals it within her for “she had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell, to be shunned,” (170). She swallows this thought as she has done all her life. Though Prabha Devi’s childhood had been this way, in future she grooms herself as a woman who can measure up her life with difference. She doesn’t want to define herself within a more mechanical and monotonous life of a homely wife and a mother. She is not satisfied with this life and craves for something more. Moreover she feels guilty for her viles upon her husband’s friend Pramod and tries to come out of it. Prabha Devi’s weakness does not escape Anita Nair, yet she displays a very real respect for her as she has done with every other woman. And Prabha Devi achieves the self - actualization by learning swimming on her own out of great desire. As T.Varalakshmi says, “She triumphs

over her innate timidity and gains 'peak experience' of supreme content bringing tremendous happiness to her husband as well" (69).

Marikolanthu is the most pathetic woman among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry women on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, "Its not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself . . . there is too much at risk" (215). To ensure her mother's fear, her childhood innocence is destroyed when Murugesan attempts physical brutality on her. When she is found, pregnant her mother and Sujata, regret it as they just feel it is too late to insist Murugesan to marry her. Her mother is least bothered about her feelings but worries that no one will marry her. Even when the matter is taken to the Chettiar's son Sridhar, he with little reluctance says, "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape" (245). For her mother and Sujatha, a woman's life and protection lies in her husband, as Sujata says, "But if she has a job, that will replace a husband's protection" (246). But Marikolanthu is able to raise the question within her about the so called "Husband's protection'. She is sure that neither her mother nor Sujata had their husbands look out for them, but for them, "a fulfilled woman was one who was married" (246). For Marikolanthu nothing is more cruel than a man's raping of a woman and so she finds little fault in the missy's love for each other and experiences a kind of content and happiness to give her love for Sujata, more than her husband did. Marikolanthu never wants to tie up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty – one she lives alone and wrestles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to rely upon her brothers nor wants a penny from Sujata or her husband but decides to make her living of her own, working as a servant maid in a house. She defines her as an independent woman. Her strong aversion for the physical brutality attempted on her, evokes a strong aversion for her son Muthu. But at the end she feels ashamed for having rejected him and even using him. As Indra Devi observes, "In the end she decided to "measure happiness" as Muthu's mother.

Anita Nair has used the character of Karpagam to bring an awareness to the society of women's demands and their need for self – expression. Karpagam is portrayed as a strong woman striving for self – definition in a patriarchal social organization. She is a widow but unlike other widows she wears the kumkum and colourful clothes. She is a courageous woman

who breaks the shackles of patriarchy when she says, “I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose. Tell me didn’t we as young girls wear colourful clothes and jewellery and a bottu? It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men” (202). Her defiance is outstanding when she says, “I live alone. I have for many years now. We are strong, Akhi. Whatever you think you want to. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first” (202). More than any other woman, Karpagam and her words instill a strong desire to live a life of her choice as Akhila feels, “Karpagam are you real or are you some goddess who had come here to lead me out of this..” (202). Thus Anita Nair portrays the character of Karpagam as one who courageously breaks the larger framework of patriarchy that denies personal freedom to women.

Anita Nair uses certain characters like Akhila’s mother, to express how women are strong conservatives of the patriarchal structure that has framed strict social, political and economic limitations on women. Akhila’s mother is a conservative and orthodox mother, a devoted wife with her own theory that a wife is always inferior to her husband. She is a the sort of woman who never takes decision on her own but left all decisions to her husband for she believes, “He knows best” (14). According to her, “A good wife learnt to put her husband’s interests before anyone else’s, even her father’s. A good wife listened to her husband and did as she said. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly” (14). When Akhila wants her mother to take music lesson as Karpagam’s mother teaches dance, She disapproves of it telling, “I don’t approve of what Karpagam’s mother is doing” (13). She reminds Akhila what her father has told her when they were first married, “I want my wife to take care of my children and me. I don’t want her so caught up with her job that she has no time for the house or for taking care of my needs” (14). Even after the death of Akhila’s father, her mother lets her eldest daughter Akhila shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family, taking advantage over her sense of duty to keep them safe, secure and comfortable. Anita Nair brings in Sarasa mami’s family that faces a similar situation. As Subramani Iyer, Sarasa mami’s husband dies, Sarasa mami goes to every doorstep demanding to be taken as a servant – maid. But every neighbourhood just gives her a handful of rice as if she is a beggar and this makes her

sell her daughter Jaya for the sake of their living. Anita Nair chooses this family as a complete contrast of Akhila's family to interpret how the moral dilemmas of women are trapped in social and emotional circumstances, struggling against oppression and destiny.

Listening to the lives of various women in the coupe Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari as an empowered woman to rediscover her "self". The more she wants to get rid of her life she had lived for others, she desires more of her life, that is more of Hari and executes her decision to get reunited connected him over phone. Finally she succeeds in her defiance against patriarchy. She subverts the repressive forces of patriarchal ideas that have chained her not letting to discover her "self".

Thus, in the novel, Ladies Coupe Anita Nair has presented an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which a woman is constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize her own strength. She has presented her women struggling side by side because of patriarchy but at the end has given them a gesture of defiance against patriarchy. Her women have been portrayed as intelligent, questioning women who are not contented with the injustice and rebellion against them. So Anita Nair's women raise the question of their way of life consolidated by patriarchy, and see it not only as the site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors.

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