

**BARRIERS ARE CONVERTED BY WOMEN AS THEIR CARRIERS IN ANITA
NAIR'S "LADIES COUPE"**

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Women in India, who were considered and treated as marginalized, have now started to march out of the margin laid by the patriarchal society. They have converted their barriers as carriers for their careers. Gone are the days when women imitated and protested against men. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is one such woman who finds an address for her identity in the course of her life's journey.

Anita Nair is one of the finest writers of today with an international reputation. She wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway* in 1997. This book brought her name and fame. She won a fellowship in the Virginia Centre for Creative Arts. Her books have been published in several languages around the world. She lives in Bangalore. Her recent work is *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010).

Her book *Ladies Coupe* (2001) was described as an important work of feminism by well known publications, but she feels that it is lazy journalism to use such generalizations. She says, "I was surprised when *Ladies Coupe* was described as feminist – another lazy generalisation. Also I am not happy with the 'feminism' – firstly it is outdated. Secondly, the word 'feminist' implies a striving to be equal, a desperation almost, to get equal with men, while what is important is to know that you are equal and exercise that equality" (Chandaraju,3). Anita Nair is meticulous and makes sure that she states the truth.

This book acts as a window into the world of pain and ill-treatment that Indian women are subjected to, irrespective of their economical or intellectual superiority. We meet 6 women from different walks of life, all travelling in a *Ladies Coupe* in the train, sharing their stories and stories of other women in their circles. We see the common thread of male chauvinism, gender based segregation, unconscious bias based on gender, and total victimization of the women in society that prevails across all economic backgrounds. We see that while some women lose their ability to withstand this societal cruelty, and finally give-in and lead a subjugated subservient life, some come out of the struggle like diamonds, shining bright like the carbon under pressure.

Margaret Atwood in her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* has posited the four basis positions of victimized individuals.

Position one : Deny the reality that she is a victim

Position Two : To acknowledge that fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance)...

Position Three : No one cannot refuse their duty. That is a inevitable thing.

Position Four : To be a creative non-victim, (36, 37, 38)

Akhila, the central character in Ladies Coupe transforms from a victim to a victor. She is a forty-five year old middle aged single woman. "She dreams many things ,what is expected by her; she dreams about the rest. To her hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires" (1). This is proof that Akhila is in Position Two. The fact that she dreams of her longings reflects her helplessness and her inability to accomplish her wishes. For the first time in her life she leaves her home for a trip to Kanyakumari, without any family commitments.

Akhila had to live a life of a spinster for the sake of the welfare of her family. When Akhila's father died the whole burden of the family fell on Akhila as she was the eldest daughter of the family. She had three siblings, younger in age. Akhila's mother remained a voiceless appendage to her husband. She is in victim position one for she believed a wife is inferior to her husband and her only duty is to be a good wife. She also tried to groom Akhila in her fashion.

Akhila was nineteen when her father died. She come out in flying colours in the university exam with a first class and got job in the income tax department . "Akhila became the bread winner of the family". It is interesting to note that Akhila's mother, who subscribed to the old school of thought that woman was to be home-bound and secondary to men, had no qualms about expecting her daughter to be the 'man' of the family and become the bread winner.

Sarasa mami is one of the women who influenced Akhila. She is a Brahmin, who becomes desolate after her husband's death and made her daughter to compromise with the norms of chastity for day to existence. Though the Brahmin community abandoned her, Akhila had a soft corner for her but was scared to proclaim it in public for her victim position prevented her.

Akhila's good old friend Karpagam threw radiance in her life, when they met in a shop. She encouraged Akhila to send Padma out of her house. To Akhila's question "How can I live? How can any woman live alone?" she replies, "If I can live alone, why can't you?" (201). Akhila draws courage and informs Padma and her brothers about her desire to live alone. Then she starts her journey to Kanyakumari with the belief "My life is going to change forever.

Akhila had to don many hats - that of a daughter, sister, aunt, money-maker. She took care of her family throughout her life. She wanted her siblings to have a good life. She sacrificed her life to make sure they lead theirs peacefully. But later, she realized that no one in her family was ready to reciprocate that care. Disheartened, and deciding to change the course of her life, she decided to buy a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari. During this travel, she meets the 5 women, her fellow passengers. All from different walks of life, these women were going to teach important life lessons to her, and aide her in her quest.

Anita Nair says, "They are strangers to each other's and made them into a confessional box. Their candour, their subversiveness, their subtle strength and courage inspired Ladies Coupe" (www.living.oneindia.in).

The first and oldest of her fellow passengers is Janaki. Her's was a story that most Indian women could relate with. She was brought up in a strict family, and learned to love the man she got married to. She always lived under the shadow of a man – first her father, then her brother, now her husband, and she realizes that later it is going to be the same with her son. She has never tasted the freedom and independence because simply put, the society didn't think she needed them as long as she had a male to take care of her. She used to believe that a being a good wife and mother were the most important duties of a woman, and this could be achieved only by being a step below the husband. It was very late in life that she realized that a strong willed, independent woman could also make a good wife and mother.

The second passenger we meet is Sheela, a young girl in her teens. She is on her way back home after her maternal grandmother's death. She narrates about the elegance of her grandmother, her confidence, self esteem and assurance. The strong bond between grandmother and grand daughter is brought out. Sheela's narration about her grandmother is a kind of relief for Akhila who was disappointed about her decision with Janaki's counsel. Sheela's disclosure about her grandmother radiates hope that women can assert themselves. Though Sheela is very young in age, she demonstrates a mental maturity beyond her years. She seems to accept her grandmother's death with an air of someone who has seen much in their life.

The next woman we meet is Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher. She compares people to chemicals. She is married to the principal of the school she teachers in. Hers was a love marriage. Margaret's husband insisted and pressured her into aborting the child when she got pregnant. Thus began the friction in their relationship. Even though her love for her husband has turned into bitter hatred because of his self-obsessed, insensitive nature, she had to continue to be in a relationship because of her family's expectations. So she finds an ingenious way to take her revenge - she attacks her husband's vanity. She was in victim

position two when she aborted her child but emerges as victor by taking responsibility for all that she and her husband are. She says, "Akhila, if there is one virtue I have, it is immunity to what people think of me... Just remember that you have to look out for yourself. No one else will" (136) Akhila gets a clear vision from Margaret's life.

Prabha Devi is the next passenger we meet. She is a woman who doesn't go by the norms set by men. She has her own opinions and plans for her life. Born in a well to do family, she had a perfect childhood. She was brought up with all the traditional values and was married to a diamond merchant's son. Married life went by in a blur - she dedicated herself to being a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter-in-law. Then one day, soon after her fortieth birthday, she realized that in the process of being a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law, she had forgotten about her 'self'. Initially she was a victor but she retards to victim position two when her husband's friend tried to misbehave with her. She confines herself to traditional outfit. As days goes by she realizes her victimization and shifts to victim position three by desiring to change. She decides to learn swimming at her middle age and finally becomes successful by remaining afloat. "Time ceased, A weightlessness.

Marikolunthu, the last narrator is subject to the pinnacle of victimization. She is raped and becomes the mother of an illegal son. She represents the lower class of the Indian society and is thwarted by series of disappointments. Her life is very pathetic and incomparable. She transforms into a mature lady by accepting the boy. She says "I had been content to remain a sister to the real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother, Surrogate housewife. Surrogate lover. But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing" (268). The fact that she is living, gives one the notion that he/she is better off than Marikolunthu.

The ladies coupe is a cross-section of women in Indian society. Each passenger's life is unique and different. Each woman has chosen her own destiny irrespective of her victimization. After hearing the tales of her companion, Akhila gets solution to the question whither goest thou? The co passengers did not give the direct answer but they facilitate her to understand that no life is similar and she has to decide her fate. In fact, Margaret says to Akhila at end, "You should trust your instincts. You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that". Through the narration of these six women's stories, Anita Nair brings to attention the life of women from the kitchen and bedrooms to the world in the open.

Throughout the novel we see how each of these women struggle physically and emotionally to fit into the images that are projected on them by their families and society at large. The society has taught and turned them into thinking that a woman cannot survive without the help of a man. This deeply sowed ideology of dependence is like a shackle around a woman's legs, preventing her from stepping out in her individual journey. Fearing

ostracisation from family and society, many women give up their quest for identity and continue to live in the shadows of their men.

But nowadays we see more women beginning to realize their self worth and stand up for their wishes and lead a life that they wish. Slowly but surely women are educating the society that a strong willed, independent woman can also make a good wife and mother - they shouldn't have to be subservient and second-class to their husbands. Atwood has proposed that no victim position is constant and people keep changing their position. This is evident from the characters portrayed in Ladies Coupe.

At the start of the journey, Akhila was trying to find an answer to her question whether a woman can live without a man. Her transformation happened gradually, hearing her fellow passengers stories. The focus is neither on whether her transformation is for the betterment of the society nor on she being morally upright but she being true to her conscience.

References

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