



# RECLAIMING AGENCY: A SOCIO FEMINISTIC READING OF ANITA NAIR'S *Ladies Coupé*

Sarada.P.S

Research Scholar in English

Bharathiar University

&

Dr.K.Usha

Associate Professor (Retd)

Post Graduate Department of English

NSS College Ottapalam.

## ABSTRACT

Socio-Feminism is a perspective that examines how social structures, cultural norms, and economic systems impact women's lives and their experiences within societies. It focuses on the intersection of gender and societal factors, including but not limited to colonial legacies, in shaping women's identities and opportunities. Edward Said's concept of "the Orient" and its representation within a Western-centric discourse can also be relevant when analyzing how socio-feminism addresses the status of non-Western women. In the context of socio-feminism, Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupé* offers a portrayal of women's lives and struggles in contemporary societies, emphasizing their position in the family and broader social order. Akhila's role as the head of her family after her father's death reflects the challenges women face in navigating patriarchal systems that seek to marginalize and oppress them. By examining the experiences of the female characters in the novel, socio-feminism seeks to give voice to those who have historically been silenced and marginalized.

**Key Words-**Socio Feminism, Oppression, Female Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic feminism is a women's realm that is shaped by language and representation. It has its own historical background with a specific vocabulary and imagery. Socio-economic feminists strive for social, cultural, economic, and religious freedom. This perspective aligns with Audre Lorde's notion, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." Audre Lorde highlights the collective nature of feminism and the shared struggle for freedom. Socio-feminism recognizes the importance of addressing multiple dimensions of oppression to create meaningful and lasting change.

In the context of socio-economic feminism, the Western concept often portrays Third World women as oppressed victims who are universally uneducated, victimized, and sexually exploited, thus seen as in need of salvation. Conversely, Western women are often depicted as universally liberated, enjoying equality, autonomy over their bodies and sexuality, and being perceived as superior, intelligent, and educated. However, this simplistic and generalized view overlooks the diversity and complexities of women's experiences in different regions. Unfortunately, much of the feminist theory and scholarship produced by women from the Third World remains unseen and unheard in the West. Nonetheless, some Third World feminists living in Western countries are increasingly raising their voices and bringing attention to the issues faced by women in their regions. Socio-economic feminists aim to provide a platform for those who were previously marginalized and silenced by the dominant social order. They invest in feminist thought and writing, exploring a women's world that delves into language, identity-nostalgia, and loyalty, social and cultural adaptability, while challenging traditional gender norms and opposing oppressive beliefs. This perspective encourages women to seek personal growth and liberation, empowering them to pursue more fulfilling lives.

### Analysis of *Ladies Coupé*

Indian women writers have also contributed to the constantly evolving feminist literature. In the process of the reconstruction of female identity, a rational and conventional vision is essential. Of all the contemporary Indian English novelists, Anita Nair is one of the most perceptive explorer of women's world-of Indian women, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness. She is a 'woman', a writer of 20th century, who knows the various approaches of feminism and who is experiencing the Eastern life. In her novels, she reconstructed the female identity beyond the male-dominated society of India. Her women characters have a dignity and female desires to realize full individuality. In *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila becomes the head of the family after her father's death, and she occupies the centrist position in the family. She, along with the other women characters, suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. Still, they are searching for strength and independence.

*Ladies Coupé* presents a voice proclaiming the voyage of self-consciousness to the realization of self and ultimately the reaffirmation of female identity against male domination. It is the story of six Indian women who meet during a train journey. They met at a Ladies Coupe, which is a compartment reserved exclusively for women, for their safe journey. Anita Nair brings together women of different ages, backgrounds, experience and social strata. 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? It is a novel in parts in which the lives and experience of six women are welded together by the novelist, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to the story of one woman. All of them are travelling their life's journey under patriarchy. Akhila's encounter with her school friend, Karpakam, 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?" (*Ladies Coupé*, 204). When Akhila says for her defiance, "For heaven's sake, I don't need anyone's consent" (*Ladies Coupé*, 204). Her defiance was strong and she boarded the train to Kanyakumari. Akhila didn't want a husband. She didn't want to be a mere extension again. Akhila's childhood friend, who was a feminist tells her that she can live alone in the world

after the death of her husband and encourages Akhila telling her she would not feel lonely. Thus Akhila walks out of the family as a rebel and her response is rejection - the rejection of social standards, value and the traditional life pattern. Akhila tries to search for her own identity and happiness.

Akhila's observation of Janaki and her husband leads her to the idea that "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (*Ladies Coupé*, 39). Janaki, an older woman, has a friendly love relationship with her husband, Prabhakar, whom she married at the age of eighteen. They enjoyed a happy and comfortable married life for forty years, raising a son and daughter-in-law. However, Janaki begins to realize her own submissiveness when she notices her husband's controlling behavior, even towards their grown-up son. She confronts him, saying, "You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding" (*Ladies Coupé*, 30). Prabhakar's dominating and exacting nature starts to irritate Janaki, and her once smooth life experiences ups and downs. Despite discovering her true happiness lies within herself, she struggles to break free from the long-standing web of submission.

Initially, Janaki responds to Akhila's question, "Why should a woman live by herself?" (*Ladies Coupé*, 21), by expressing her dependency on others for care and protection. She reflects, "I am a woman who has always been looked after. First, there was my father and brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son, waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile" (*Ladies Coupé*, 22).

Akhila's second companion is Margaret, a chemistry teacher who compares people to chemicals. Margaret's character exemplifies how a woman can overcome the dominance of men. However, her relationship with her husband takes a sour turn when he pressures her into having an abortion, causing friction in their marriage. This reflects how women often face control and oppression from men. Men like Ebenezer Paulraj symbolize colonizers who fail to recognize and appreciate the value of women, who are treated as the colonized.

Margaret eventually gains control over her husband by manipulating him and causing him to lose composure. Her suppression turns into rebellion, leading to thoughts of revenge. She reflects on the destruction of her life, including the loss of her unborn child, and her dreams seem shattered. "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" (*Ladies Coupé*, 131). She starts to hate him and the day she realizes her hatred towards him, she feels liberated from some unknown clutches:

I mouthed the words: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZAR PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. HATE HIM. I waited for a clap of thunder, a hurling meteor, a whirlwind, a dust storm... for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelations. (*Ladies Coupé*, 98)

In the compartment, the third woman is Prabha Devi. Her trip to New York brings about a profound realization of her own beauty, dreams, and freedom. Witnessing Prabha Devi's newfound confidence and determination to shape her own life leaves a lasting impression on Akhila. Through Prabha Devi's candid revelations, Akhila gains a deeper understanding of life and comes to the realization that true freedom lies within oneself and is not subject to the control of others.

The youngest of the six is Sheela, a fourteen year old girl, who talks of her maternal grandmother, and in whom one could see the manifestations of femininity. Sheela is a fourteen year old girl who is of a different generation to Janaki's, but she possesses a mental maturity that quite surpasses her age. 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. 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" (*Ladies Coupé*, 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" (*Ladies Coupé*, 66). Thereafter Sheela took the right decision that "She would never go to Hasina's house again" (*Ladies Coupé* 66) as a means of her self-protection. Thus Sheela was strong in her

defiance against a man's abuse on her physique. As Judes Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, "Sheela's retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men" (122).

Marikolunthu is portrayed as the most tragic woman among the six main characters. She becomes a victim of rape, and unfortunately, society tends to blame her for walking alone, reflecting a deeply ingrained victim-blaming mentality. Marikolunthu represents the struggles of a humble and oppressed peasant woman who faces male oppression without any question or resistance from those around her. Despite the hardships she endures, Marikolunthu displays a remarkable transformation and maturity when she accepts her illegitimate son, Muthu. She resists the idea of tying her life to a husband and chooses to live independently, making her own living as a servant maid. This demonstrates her strong will and determination to be self-reliant, refusing to depend on her brothers or anyone else for financial support. Marikolunthu's traumatic experience of physical brutality leaves her with an aversion not just to the perpetrator but also to her own son, Muthu. However, as the story progresses, she comes to embrace motherhood and finds happiness in being Muthu's mother.

In contrast, through the character of Akhila, the author Anita Nair explores the struggle of a woman protagonist in search of a meaningful definition of life. Akhila becomes the head of her family after her father's death, a position traditionally reserved for the patriarch. This highlights the evolving dynamics within families and the breaking of traditional gender roles. 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). 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?" (*Ladies Coupé*, 77). Akhila views marriage as an oppressive structure which takes away her self-identity and what she longs for is self-generative identity. 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".

Karpagam, her childhood friend, 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" (*Ladies Coupé*, 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" (*Ladies Coupé*, 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..." (*Ladies Coupé* 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's portrayal of women characters in her novels reflects her Indian sensibility and attitude. Despite belonging to different social strata, these women exhibit inner independence and a willingness to experiment with their lives. Throughout their journeys, they gain self-knowledge, which empowers them to recognize that a woman's desire for individual success does not diminish her longing for love or the simple pleasures of domestic life. Each of her characters exemplifies this theme in their unique ways: Janaki finds her true happiness within herself; Margaret, the chemistry teacher, successfully takes charge of her life and relationship with her husband; Prabha Devi, a wealthy and submissive wife, finds a sense of achievement through swimming; Sheela, the fourteen-year-old, learns valuable lessons from her dying grandmother that pave the way for her future liberation; and Marikolunthu's experiences of rape, poverty, and class exploitation culminate in a powerful story of struggle. Akhila, Karpagam, and her daughter's journey moves from the periphery to the center, as they strive for identity independent of external factors. The characters in Anita Nair's novels are relatable and ordinary, making their stories resonate with readers. These women come to life

with real tears, genuine exasperation, and understandable dilemmas, making it easy for readers to see themselves in these characters.

In her own words, Anita Nair expresses her preference for writing about ordinary people rather than larger-than-life characters. Her women characters display strong emotions while maintaining constant self-evaluation and critical analysis of their relationships. By delving into the private truths of what women truly want, Anita Nair portrays the complexities and authenticity of their emotional experiences. . 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).

Through the narratives of the six women, Anita Nair transforms them from passive and absent characters into active and present individuals. To achieve this, Nair crafts a space where diverse identities intersect, clash, and grapple with each other in relationships of dominance and subordination. As the characters undergo their individual journeys, they confront situations that challenge traditional roles and societal expectations.

Akhila's journey to Kanyakumari symbolizes her empowerment and quest for self-discovery. She seeks to break free from the life she lived for others and yearns for a life of her own. The journey becomes an escape, a chance to explore the excitement of independence, making decisions without seeking permission. Each woman's story contributes to a larger narrative of self-discovery and liberation. The metaphor of the coupe in the novel represents a utopian world free from patriarchal constraints and false dichotomies. The women in the story find a space where they can redefine their identities and challenge the norms that restrict their freedom and agency. By bringing together these diverse stories, Anita Nair crafts a compelling tale of women breaking free from societal constraints and discovering their true selves. The novel celebrates the strength and resilience of these women as they navigate their way towards liberation and empowerment.

## Conclusion

Despite Anita Nair's claim that she is not a feminist, her stories delve deeply into the experiences and expectations of married Indian women and the choices they make within their relationships. The women in her narratives grapple with suffering and rebellion born out of societal constraints, and their stories carry a message of hope, highlighting the possibility of change through courage and initiative. These women find themselves entangled in the patriarchal norms of society, yet they exhibit a strong will to survive and make the best of their lives. Despite facing difficulties and obstacles, they channelize their emotions in various ways to break free from cultural ideologies that restrict their freedom and individuality. They position themselves as outsiders to fight against and criticize the oppressive norms that hinder their liberation. Anita Nair's narratives offer an affirmative vision, showcasing the inherent goodness and beauty in life. Akhila's journey towards self-discovery grants her a sense of power and makes her a voice for all the dislocated, isolated, and marginalized women in India. By realizing her inner strength as a woman, she had made a success of her arduous journey from being a victim to a victor “ ... 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. It does not show itself naturally.”(LC 209-10)

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