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SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPE

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Abstract:

Anita Nair is a well-known postmodern Indian English novelist. Her novel *Ladies Coupe* explores the experience of different women by journey. The ideas of fraternity, equality and liberty along with the liberal philosophy of individualism made women conscious of the fact that it is the social process that determines her life. The present paper aims to focus on the theme of women subjugation in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. The main purpose of the present research is to bring to the readers, an idea on the Indian society which still demands women to play a subservient role in the male dominant society. This contributed to an intense dislike among women to these so called customs and tradition. *Ladies Coupe* has the voice of women in contemporary post-colonial India. The character of the present novel are women from different classes who share their story to each other how they exploited in male dominated society during their journey in *Ladies Coupe*. It is the journey of self-discovery. Nair portrays her female characters not just as meek sufferers but as strong women who struggle for their individuality, freedom from subjugation.

Key Words: Subjugation, male-dominance, suppression, women's suffering, feminism, self-discovery.

Anita Nair is the eminent writer born in Kerala. She is novelist, journalist, short-story writer and famous poet also majority of the 20th century novels depicts the women's suffering and their suppressed status in Indian Society. In post-Indian English fiction great women writers such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair etc. depict feminist picture of Indian society. These women writers analyse issue of women, complex relationship of man and woman, exploitation of women in their fiction. Anita Nair is known for her style and depiction of Indian reality in her works. Her best novels are *The Better Man*(2000), and *Ladies Coupe* (2001), have been translated into more than 21 languages around the world. She deals with the life experiences of women, who face subjugation and traumatic experience in their family life. Nair's '*Ladies Coupe*' also talks about the middle class women in urban India, educated and conscious of their identity but always moving on a quest for finding their place in family as well as in society. The novel *Ladies Coupe* is a novel particularly about South Indian woman but it takes about universal factors of female subjugation in society and explores themes of alienation, loneliness and lost opportunities in a woman's life.

In post-colonial era, women condition is not much improving and they are not leave clutches of male dominated society. *Ladies Coupe* depicts the story of these women. The story of *Ladies Coupe* portrays six culturally diversified women, "Akhila, Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu". These females are those who break the image of traditional and ideological women and speak against convention of Patriarchy. Nair moves them from a state of passivity to a state of activity and presence, from the kitchen and the bedroom to the street and the world at large. The novel follows the journey of a

spinster named Akhila, a 45 years old single women from a Tamil Brahmin Family, who have been forced to play subordinate role as the daughter, sister, aunt and the provider. Women for centuries have been looked upon to emulate the role of 'Sita' who never had an identity of her own and always live in the shadow of her husband. In the Indian Society women are always considered as weak, vulnerable and dependent on the male counterpart. If she is young it would be her father, if she is married then it is her husband. The protagonist of novel, Akhila is representing such type of a Indian woman, who is unhappy with her life and feels trapped by the expectations of her family and society. She has always been interested in books and learning, but her father insisted her to marry and devote herself to her husband and children.

Ladies Coupe provides a realistic description of continuous efforts of women for the establishment of their identity in society. It is a novel in which fiction merges with reality and where female voices are authentic. The inspiration Anita got to write this novel in her own travel experience in a ladies compartment in a train from Bangalore to Madras. Once the door was closed, she began to experience an unexpected world where the fellow passengers in the coupe began to speak openly about their experiences, desire and ambitions in life. It was a combination of the confined spaces and assurances of anonymity as they were strangers to each other that turned the Coupe into a confessional box. Nair said about this novel that "it is not about feminism, it is a book about human conditions". It is the story of six women who meet in a train journey, just by chance. All these women are trapped in the unsteadiness of custom and the social order. Akhilandeswari is a protagonist and a narrator in the novel. She is an unmarried, 45 years old, clerk, who has been working for her family and has taken the whole responsibility of family members after the death of her father instead of marriage. But at the age of 45 she became thirsty for life experience and wanted to escape away from home and find a space for herself. So she decided to go on a long trip by train to Kanyakumari in search of an answer to the question which obsessed her throughout her life. "Can a woman live by herself?" This one question troubled her all life.

Akhila receives a seat in Ladies Coupe, a compartment. The word 'Coupe' is originated from French, signals the meeting of a restricted area, has association with the English word 'Coop'. A woman especially in her married life is placed in a coop, in a narrow confine limiting her freedom in every way. It also suggests how Akhila's life is severely restricted by her family's demands on her. The other ladies, who travel with her in the Coupe of the train, are also severely constricted in their life one way or the other. These all women do not know each other hence find it comfortable to speak their heart without any fear of being judged. They all are of different ages and come from different social and educational backgrounds but they have one common thing, that is a suffering, still they have different opinions about this suffering and male dominance in women's life.

Akhila as she is haunted by a question forever "Can a woman cope alone"? (Nair, 2004, P.22), asked the same to her co-travellers and in reply gets a question from Janaki "Why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her". (Nair 2004, P.22) These questions expose the inner fear of women. Janaki is the oldest among them all. She was married at the age of eighteen and led a comfortable life like a queen of her house as she herself calls it. She is the traditional woman. She is an example of good type of woman who tolerates anything and as a wife, daughter-in-law does everything for others. Janaki became subordinate to male in society and believes in good counterpart of male in woman's life. She is submissive wife. In Fact she suffered a lot in family due to her husband Prabhakaran's behaviour, but she thinks, if he controls and takes care of family, he has right to dominate.

Sheela the another traveller is the fourteen year old who is so sensitive. She enters the train at midnight. She was in the shock of her grandmother's death. She becomes a victim of male dominant society. Hasina is Sheela's best friend but when Hasina's father touched to Sheela, then she feels hurt and understood how the life of woman is. Sheela explained her humiliation without hesitation, what one day Hasina's father Nazir has done: "One Sunday when Sheela went to their house, rushing it from the heat with a line of a sweat beading of her upper lip, Nazir has reached and wiped it with his fingers". She didn't like unwanted touching. Nazir touched to her for a long time but Sheela didn't open her mouth or tolerate it because he was her friend's father. She feels embarrassed and humiliated. This way woman sexually abused by Indian Society. After that Sheela decided to never go to Hasina's home. In Indian society girls are considered as the burden but people need to change their physical instincts and bad desires. Nair explained the reality of woman's life and shows the unjust treatment of women by men.

Margaret Shanti is another traveller companion of Akhila. Her life goes through physical and mental crisis. She was married to Ebenezer Paulraj whom she loved a lot. They have done love-marriage. Paulraj is the principal of that school, in which Margaret teaches. She is the student of M.Sc. Chemistry and also a gold medallist. After the completion of M.Sc Margaret want to do Ph.D. but Paulraj said to her to complete B.Ed.

Being educated, clever gold medallist also she is not able to take decision of her education. She wrapped her desire of doing Ph.D. as her mother advised her before one day of her marriage: "How a good wife never says No, even she is not in mood" (102).

Prabha Devi, one of the travellers who is very pretty and conscious about her beauty. she doesn't want to conceive as she tells her husband

"There are many ways in which pregnancy can be avoided. Jagdesh stiffened in shame and embarrassment what kind of woman was she? My parents are getting impatient. They talk of a grandchild all the time. We have been married for almost a year now: - Prabha Devi is trapped under dilemma as Shanti.

In the present age women are capable to take their own decisions but after marriage men have rights to take decision of women's life especially in Indian society. Indian girls are treated as a curse and so inspite of study the priority is given to the household works. Many girls are deprived of the educational right due to patriarchal society. Mr. Paulraj doesn't want Margaret to do her Ph. D. because he wants to keep her subordinate to him. It shows that women are always considered inferior though they are intellectual gold medallist and educated. Marikolanthus is another coupe mate of Akhila. Marikolanthus is neglected by the upper middle class women. The noticeable indication of her class and social grade uplift her fellow travellers to ignore her in the space of compartment. After the departure of other co0passenger, she narrates her life to Akhila. Marikolanthus works in Chettiar Kottai, after attaining her puberty. She looks very pretty and in order to save her from the clutches of men Sujata asks her to depart to Vellore to work as a maid servant to the two lady doctors, Miss V. and Miss K. They encouraged her to pass SSLexamination and instructed her that they will help her to undergo training to become a professional nurse. Nair here stresses the importance of women education. Marikolanthu is shocked with the lesbian relationship between the two doctors, they both love each other and never care about their homosexuality. Being shocked she returns from Vellore to her native place and replaces her mother's place as a maid in the Chettiar Kottai. She was loaded with heavy work and without any complaints she does it perfectly. A luxurious place is reserved for high class people with having the right of domination, oppression and exploitation. Her innocent life is messed up and ruined by Murugesan, relative of Chettiar. She is seduced in Mango Orchard. her life is left unquestioned due to Murugesan's brutality and lust. The raped Marikolanthu became pregnant but no one cared for her including her brother. Her mother is least bothered about her feelings but fears that no one will marry her. The issue is taken to the Chettiar's son, but instead of justice, he with slight refusal says, "The girl must have led him on and now she is pregnant, she is making up a story about rape." (245) The rape of low caste women is a part of ongoing anti-caste struggle. The patriarchal structure of our society has given the man an unrestricted power to use the body of a woman in any of the ways whether it may be love making or it may be overriding her body against her permission. So a woman is doubly marginalized first because she is a woman and secondly she is inferior to man. For Marikolanthu's mother and Sujata, a woman's life and security lies in her husband. Nair deals with rape, aggression, alienation and troubled relationship. For Marikolanthu nothing is worse than a man's raping of a woman so she finds little fault in the missy's love for each other and experiences a kind of comfort and happiness to give her love for Sujata, more than her husband does. Marikolanthu has to provide sexual pleasure to both Sujata and Sridhar. It is true that women whether educated or illiterate, either from rural or urban, engaged in household or office, suffers varying degrees of physical and psychological violence at the hands of their masters or co-workers. In the second sex (1953) Simon De Beauvoir writes that women are brought up by women and their normal destiny is marriage and marriage is a kind of subordination to man itself. She also writes that if we see history we shall find that women have always occupied secondary role in relation to man and thus relegated to the position of "other".

Nair portrayed Indian women in realistic manner. The six major characters come from different social and financial backgrounds. These women can be divided into two categories: first, women who are doing jobs and second of those who are homemakers. Akhila, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu are working women. Out of them Marikolanthu is an uneducated woman who is also a victim in the hands of culture. The culture makes them what they are as from the very childhood, they are taught to be goof daughters, wives and mothers. Culture is the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society. Women's psyche gets deeply embedded in what they are taught throughout their lives "To become a good woman". That psyche leads to their oppression. Self subjugation among woman is also portrayed by Nair through the character of Janaki. Akhila is also an example. She keeps others life an happiness above her own which leads to them taking her for granted. The story of Marikolanthu is very sad, who is sexually abused, physically harassed and tormented all her life. the usual trend of women being blamed for rape is clearly visible in her case. Her story is really

very heart-touching and tragic. At last she had to sell her child to Murugesan for five thousand rupees because she needed money for her uterus surgery. Her uterus had to be removed as it was damaged because of frequently getting pregnant. She was exploited not only physically but economically and socially too.

Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is the example of women subjugation in Indian Society. It is seen that the journey of six women who share their stories on a train and their conversations they share helps the protagonist. Akhila discover what she actually needs in her life. It is noticed her how each woman is suffering from male dominance in one way or the other. As they began to tell their stories, Akhila feels a kind of connection to each of them and it helps her to resolve the unanswered questions in her heart. *The Ladies Coupe* is a story about an outer journey as well as the inner journey of these all women. The past of social repression of women is very huge and dynamic and unfortunately still persisting. this is a problem that will take its time to be completely rooted out. Society has to stop enforcing age old ideas that have no meaning. A search for self identity of women who want to break free from patriarchal norms is portrayed her in touching and realistic manner.

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