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The Plight of a Spinster as Presented in Anita Nair's *Lady's Coupe*

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India is a patriarchal society. There is male domination and woman are subjugated in all walks of life. A woman is expected to always obey a man – obey her father and brother before marriage, obey her husband and even her son after marriage. All the social institutions such as marriage, family, and community, (including all rituals from birth to death) reinforce male domination and woman subjugation. Therefore, becoming the representative voices of such subjugated women becomes the primary objective of any woman writer from India. In fact, most woman writers – Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, etc. – invariably become the representative voices of Indian women and their sufferings. In this regard, Anita Nair also gives a voice of resilience to women in her novels. *Lady's Coupe* is one such novel in which five women from different backgrounds present their testimonials against male domination and woman oppression that prevails in Indian society. This paper aims at understanding how Nair makes a candid presentation of the social injustice that exists against women in Indian society.

The story centres around the question: Can a woman live unmarried, single, and be happy? Or, does she need a man to complete her life? (Nair 22). The main character of the novel is Akhila, short for Akhileshwari. She is a fourth-five-year-old single woman working as a clerk in the income tax office in the city of Bangalore. Akhila is unmarried and she faces discrimination in society, and even in her family because of her being single. One day, she decides to go away from her routine, board a train to a place she had never been before – Kanyakumari, and during her journey in the *Lady's Coupe* of the train, she meets five women, Janaki, Sheela, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Marikolunthu, who come from different backgrounds but find a common ground in their suffering oppression in the hands of men, and other women. Akhila becomes a thread that holds the plot of the novel together as the five stories of the five women unravel, revealing how they are subjected to oppression because of gender inequality and patriarchal domination. All these women,

in spite of their diverse backgrounds, suffer as victims in a society that has gender inequality in all walks of life.

Akhila, as mentioned earlier is a middle-aged spinster working woman. Brabha is a wife who is obedient to her husband as per the Indian social order. Janaki is a daughter to her parents who consider her the apple of their eyes. She is also a wife and a mother. Sheela is a fifteen-year-old girl who represents the teenage girls of India. Margaret is another married woman who suffers subjugation. It is evident in how she is unable to make her career choice – she wishes to complete her Ph.D. degree but is forced by her husband to pursue a bachelor's degree in education. The fifth woman is Marikolunthu who is a victim of physical abuse. The six women in total almost cover the entire gamut of women folk from various backgrounds. The one thing that is common in all these women is the oppression at the hands of men, and how their lives are entirely dictated and directed by the menfolk of their families.

Through the story of Akhila, Anita Nair presents the traumatic existence of an unmarried woman in the Indian society that looks at marriage being the only event that makes a woman's life whole. It is as if the woman gets full marks in the life exam if only she is married and she gives birth to children. Akhila remains unmarried not by her choice, but by the situation that prevails in her family. As her father passes away at the age of forty-six, Akhila is given the responsibility of providing for the family of her mother, her brother, and her sister. As she becomes the sole breadwinner of the family, her mother remains hesitant to get Akhila married off which would take away the income of the family. Therefore, Akhila remains unmarried and becomes the person who earns for the family.

In spite of being the sole earning member of the family, Akhila is not considered as the head of the family because of the social setup that prevails in India. It is her younger brother to whom all the three women in the family defer in taking decisions. Such is the state of women in the Indian society that women are not given their freedom nor their status within the family and in the society in spite of they become educated and professional. Akhila is always treated with reservation by others, including her family members because of her being single. Even her sister is always suspicious of Akhila. Akhila says how she is treated by her own sister in the following words: "Padma wouldn't like it, Akhila knew. These days her sister was suspicious of everything she did or said." (1)

Being unmarried, Akhila is forced to live a nondescript life, almost like a sage. Even in her dressing and in her appearance, she is made to look austere. It was as if she did not allow the sun to shine on her. The following words aptly describe the state of a spinster in India:

She [Akhila] collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs. To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires. Blue skies, silver linings, a break in the clouds. Akhila knows these to be mere illusions caused by putting on rose-coloured spectacles. She has long ago trodden to shards her rose-glassed spectacles and switched to metal-framed glasses that remain plain indoors and turn photo-chromatic outdoors. Even the sun ceases to shine when Akhila's glasses turn a dusky brown. So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect. (2)

People are quick to judge the character of Akhila because she is unmarried. They always suspect of her being promiscuous because she does not fit into the stereotypical Indian woman who grows up, marries a man chosen by her family, and serves him throughout her life by birthing his children and taking care of all his needs until one of them dies. It was not by her choice that Akhila became a spinster but she decides to live her life as a single woman and finds herself a victim of social injustice. Even her sister, Padma suspects Akhila: "what Padma was thinking. Is she travelling alone or is someone going with her? A man, perhaps. Padma's nostrils flared as if she could smell the stench of illicit liaisons." (6) even Akhila's colleagues are quick to pass judgement on Akhila because she is a spinster, even in matters like travel: "can you get me a ticket on tonight's train to Kanyakumari? Why? What's happening there? Niloufer's kohl-rimmed eyes widened." (10)

Akhila looks at other women in her society and begins to wonder if marriage and children are what makes the life of a woman complete. It is evident when she talks about the life of her mother and father. Similarly, when she observes the old couple in the railway station, the old woman's contentment as she stands beside her husband makes Akhila think about how Indian women are indoctrinated to find happiness and contentment in life only through their marriage. They are trained to serve men, and they consider their service to men as their right and privilege. It is evident in how Akhila's mother treats her responsibility towards her

husband, Akhila's father: "But leave your Appas shirts for me. He is satisfied only if I do it, she added. Akhila grimaced because she knew that it wasn't so. Her father didn't care who ironed his shirts as long as they were done. But Amma liked to perpetuate this myth about a tyrant husband who was easily annoyed and could be placated only by her complete devotion." (3)

Akhila finds her life as a spinster to be oppressive. She feels as if she is being forcefully confined in a prison. It is why she decides to take up an unplanned journey to a new place which happens to be Kanyakumari, the last place in India, a place where three great water bodies, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian sea meet. Mythologically that is the place where the goddess to remained unmarried for a long time. "She had read that Kanyakumari had got its name from the goddess who, like her, had put her life on hold, condemned to an eternal waiting. And that the beach there was made up of multi-coloured sand; the fossilized remnants of a wedding feast that was never served or eaten." (4) it is the constant but silent nagging by the people around her that drives Akhila to seek adventure in her life: "She would go. She had to, or she would go mad confined within the walls of the house and the life she was expected to live." (5)

The frustration in Akhila's life is caused by the hypocritical and selfish behaviour of her own family members. Her mother does not wish to marry off Akhila because then the income would stop. Both Akhila's brother and sister are selfish enough to take care of their lives by getting married and settling down. In spite of becoming the sole breadwinner of the family, Akhila is forced to live a life of discrimination, and it frustrates her. "Manning the responsibility of the family begins to eat. In her actually, her needs are taken for granted where her own sibling thrive like parasites on her. They milk every opportunity to bolster their lives at the expense of their eldest sister. Even her own mother does not spare a thought for her wellbeing. (Bartakke 46)

Akhila comes to a decision not to marry even though the usual marriage age is well passed, she being forty-five. "these days, getting married is hardly on my mind. All I am trying to do is convince myself that a woman can live alone." (Nair 21) The problem is not in her decision to remain single, nor in executing it, but it lies in the way she is told that she cannot live unmarried, single, and be happy. She is constantly badgered from all sides and it causes her frustration and her unplanned train journey to Kanyakumari. Akhila remarks about marriage as follows: "As far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that no woman can live alone." (21) When Akhila expresses her wish to remain single, her family calls it foolish: "My family said that, if I talked to other people, they would tell me how stupid it was for me, a single woman, to want to live by myself."

All societies both patriarchal or otherwise expect a woman to get married as it signifies settling down in life, a logical step taken by a sensible adult, especially a woman, in course of her life. "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society." (Beauvoir) and in a patriarchal society like India, it is often thrust upon a woman. As a result, it becomes suffocation for a woman like Akhila. Within patriarchal society, a woman's cultural and traditional role is to be confined within the confines of the home and to do domestic duties. She is primarily responsible for looking after the children, preparing meals, and attending to the needs of the other members of the family. When a woman decides to remain single, or unmarried, it is an anomaly and she is often made a pariah of society, making everyone glance at her uneasily and with suspicion. "Women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of children" (Chakraborty 21)

Akhila's life is juxtaposed with the life of women in her family and in her society. She is made to witness her parents and their married life. At first, she is fascinated by the love and affection that her mother and father had for each other, and later when she grows up she is even embarrassed by it. Akhila is made to suffer because of her knowledge about marriage and the companionship that it would offer between a man and a woman. The knowledge comes to her through the life of her parents. And when she finds out that the chances of her getting married are virtually non-existent, she is made to suffer because of the memories. It makes her feel excluded.

As a child, her parents' togetherness did not vex her. She was part of that enchanted circle as well. But as she grew up, their playfulness, their affection, and the obvious pleasure they found in each other's presence made her feel excluded. Later, it embarrassed her. But they remained completely oblivious to her mortification. And even if they sensed it, nothing would deter or diminish what was practically a lifelong love affair. (Nair 12)

Similar to that of her parents' married life, Akhila notices an old couple standing on the railway platform with companionable contentment. This makes her wonder about her old age and the state she would be, and if there would be an old man beside her, like the old man who is standing beside the old lady, a man, like her father, who is understanding, affectionate, and considerate. "The woman wore a pale pink sari with a narrow gold border, a slim gold chain around her neck, and metal-rimmed spectacles. ... In a few years' time I will look like her, Akhila told herself Except that I won't have a man like him beside me. He seemed nice enough. ... The couple looked like they belonged together." (13) Watching her parents and then the elderly couple makes Akhila wonder about marriage and the reason why people get married. "What is it about marriage that makes it possible for a man and a woman to mesh their lives, dreams and even their thoughts in such a complete fashion?" (14)

On the other hand, during the train journey, Akhila is exposed to the exploitation of women in the patriarchal society as she listens to the life story of the five women. It is evident that men dominate women in all walks of life and the very social institutions are designed to perpetuate male domination and woman oppression. As a result, women become victims and they suffer at the hands of their husbands either hysterically, or stoically. (Sinha 33)

The plight of single women in any society is traumatic because of the social injustice handed over to them. In a patriarchal society like India, the traumatic experience will debilitate an individual at all levels. It begins with the very appearance of the woman: no attractive dressing, no make-up, no fancy accessories, etc. the woman will also be subjected to psychological stress because of the way she is treated by the members of her society including her family members. Akhila is a single woman and remains unmarried, largely not because of her choice in the beginning. However, when she decides to live as a spinster, she finds that it is becoming turmoil in her life. The constant nagging by her family members frustrates her, and she escapes to Kanyakumari by an unplanned train journey.

During her journey to Kanyakumari, Akhila meets the five women, who narrate their life stories and how they look upon marriage and the responsibility of a woman to a man. At the novel comes to a close, through the story of Marikolunthu, Nair brings clarity to Akhila's question: can a woman live happily without a man? Nair, through the words of Marikolunthu, a victim of rape, shows that women need strength to live life alone and that the strength is well within the woman herself. The following words of Marikolunthu reflect on this thought: "I'm not telling you that women are weak. 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." (209)

Anita Nair presents the life and plight of a woman who decides to live unmarried in a patriarchal society, in India. Her family is highly sceptical and they urge her to marry a man. According to them, remaining a spinster is a foolish decision and they ask her to talk to people in order to realise the real truth. In doing so, Akhila comes across the lives of the five women who travel with her, and in the end, through Marikolunthu, she realises what it takes to live as a single woman in a patriarchal society.

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