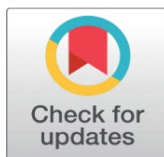
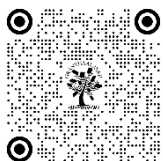


BREAKING THE BARS: BODY AND IDENTITY IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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ABSTRACT

Body has become a subject of serious discussion in the contemporary society where there are stern debates on body shaming, body autonomy, self-objectification, body positivity, fatphobia etc. One's body is closely related to the formation of one's identity. Normally, in literature, female body is always portrayed as 'objects', aiming to please and satisfy the male gaze. Anita Nair in her *Ladies Coupe* describes how the same body which is intended to satisfy the male gaze can be used to satisfy oneself thereby forming an identity, which is free from the identity constructed by the patriarchal society. Nair describes the life of six fellow travellers in a ladies coupe who disclose various personal incidents in their life. The women in the coupe are from various sections of the society, are in different phases of life, but are victims of patriarchy in one way or another. Nair narrates how these women, who were once victims of male domination, uses their body in order to revenge against the male members under whom they suffered.

Keywords: Body, Identity, Bodily Autonomy, Motherhood, Marginalisation, Patriarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

Ladies Coupe, one of the strong feminist novels from Kerala, speaks about the life of six females who meet in the ladies coupe in Kanyakumari express on their way to different destinations. The main character is Akhilandeswari, a spinster, who is travelling to Kanyakumari, and her journey is an escape from the various roles which society attributed to Akhila as a woman. The other characters are Janaki, Prabha Devi, Sheela Vasudevan, Margaret Shanthi and Marikolunthu. These five women from different section of society unveil the secrets in their life which is an inspiration to Akhila, who being a spinster is targeted by her family, and she decided to live her life with maximum enjoyment.

Being an unmarried woman of forty-five years old, Akhila has to answer various questions of the society and her family, and in order to escape from everything, she decides to travel alone to Kanyakumari. Her journey is a journey of self-identification, a journey to find her strength, identity and independence. Her family sees her only as a 'cashcow'. She decides that "she won't let her family use her any more" (p.270). She thinks that she would tell them, "Look at me: I am the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. This is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered" (p. 270). The restrictions Akhila's family imposes on her are continuously haunting her and as a revenge against them, she decides to use her body for sexual satisfaction. Akhila wants to convince herself that she too has human desires and she has an identity of her own. She doesn't want to submit her body to the man whom she

meets at Kanyakumari, but instead uses her body as an object to assert her superiority, dominance, autonomy and power over him. She transforms her body into "being-a-tool-among-tools" (Sartre, 1956). Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism in *The Second Sex* and Butler (1990) says that "The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeting its embodiment together" (p.12). In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila's body is dominant, she doesn't want to be a femsub and she thinks, "If he makes the first move, I'll go further. I don't want a man trying to broaden his horizon with my body" (p. 272).

For Akhila, her body is something above her mind and her body controls her mind. She tells to herself that "where the body goes, the mind will follow" (p. 272). The hierarchy of mind over body is associated with the superiority of masculine over feminine; but here Akhila, by exerting the superiority of her body over her mind is establishing her identity as female. She is aware of bodily autonomy, when, where and how to control her body. The right of a woman or girl to make autonomous decisions about her own body and reproductive functions is at the very core of her fundamental right to equality and privacy, concerning intimate matter of physical and psychological integrity (United Nations General Assembly, 1966, Arts. 3 & 17). It is her body and she has the right to take decisions regarding her body.

Janaki, an aged lady is a 'happy woman' who loves her husband very much and exists a harmonious relationship between the two. She is such a perfect wife as Thomas Hill (1991) says: "She tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals, and when she does, she counts them as less important than her husbands" (p. 5). Her husband didn't force her for body relationship, instead he waited until she approached her willingly, as a wife: 'He held her close and whispered against her hair again and again, you are my wife, you are my wife' (p. 26). Janaki is attributed the identity as a wife only when she surrenders her body to her husband. When she becomes a mother, it is time for her to redefine her identity, as a mother. Her identity is again confusing when she becomes a mother-in-law. While speaking to the daughter-in-law, Janaki's husband uses 'mummy' to mention Janaki, which irritated Janaki and, she wants to scream to her husband:

Don't call me Mummy. I am not your mummy. I am your wife. Remember, you used to call me Janu once. Wife. Darling. Sweetheart. And if you find it hard saying those, call me woman, but don't call me Mummy! (p.34).

The thought of getting aged is what makes Janaki behaving in such an odd way to her husband. Beauvoir (193) describes the aging woman as, "Intend on struggling against a misfortune that was mysteriously disfiguring and deforming her" (p. 595). She feels that she is losing her beauty and strength and this makes her shout at her husband. When her daughter-in-law speaks of her mother as a strong woman, Janaki starts to think if her daughter-in-law is stating indirectly that Janaki is a weak woman.

Sex-role identity is a key factor which designates gender identity to individuals specific to a particular culture. Anita Nair tries to challenge the traditional sex role identities imposed on females in a patriarchal society through various situations narrated in this fiction. Prabha Devi, at the time of her birth itself, faced gender discrimination:

When Prabha Devi was born, her father sighed. He had hoped it would be a boy. He had planned to open a fifth jewellery store in the city. Madras was big enough to provide an ample business for five stores and if Prabha Devi had been a boy, he could have settled everything so tidily. Five stores, five boys, everyone happy. Now he'd have to shelve the idea of the fifth store (p.169).

Being born as a female, she was hated by her father, who said, "a daughter is a bloody nuisance" (p.169). But for her mother, she was, "someone to leave her recipes to" (p.169). The attitude of her parents constructed the gender identity in Prabha Devi. As Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states, 'One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman' (1953, p.301), Prabha Devi's identity is constructed by her family, especially by her parents. During her childhood, she upheld her gender identity, by playing using dolls, dressing up like school teacher and her mother set up a kitchen play house and she played mother games. She took great care to protect her beauty, she avoided chocolates. Her father imposed several restrictions on her because of her gender and all that he wanted was to find a good alliance for her.

Prabha Devi became a good cook, good embroiderer, whatever stereotypical imageries society attributed to a perfect woman. When she was eighteen, her father found a husband for her. She faced identity crisis in her family and in order to build an identity in her husband's family, she became an assertive wife. She knew well that her body was her right, and when she went to New York, there was a complete transformation in her, she created a new identity, which can be called as a cultural transformation. She took decision regarding pregnancy and asked her husband that she didn't want a baby, not just yet (p.178). As Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) says, "...the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom"

(pp.11-12). Prabha Devi became a 'new woman', a transformation, which 'helps to understand the position of women in the context of power structure' (Sandeep Kumar et al., p.3), enjoying independence, freedom, and power in each and every span of her life. She used her body as an object of power, and in order to utilise the power of her body, she started flirting. Pramod, her husband's friend approached her for sex, but she rejected him. Earlier, Prabha Devi tried to seduce Pramod, but was a failure. Here, there is a 'psychoanalytical approach where we only have desire once we are restricted from the object of crave' (Michael Foucault, 1990, pp.81-82). Pramod's attitude shocked Prabha Devi, and she made a decision: 'She would camouflage this body that had sent such reckless messages to the world' (p.183). She went back to her past identity, a traditional house wife. She wanted her body to be a useful force and for that she demanded her husband that she wanted to become a mother. She wanted to show that she is not sexually available. Joseph says, "As a woman's pregnancy develops, society tends to consider her less sexually attractive, as no longer sexually available. This means that she temporarily escape's man's sexual gaze" (2008). Prabha Devi uses her body as an instrument to escape from the male sexual gaze. Foucault (1990) says that "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (p.25). She became a mother, productive and her body became a 'subject' for her children. Friedan (2010) identifies the works of a housewife as 'the problem that has no name' in which the woman is living a cultural ideal, confined to the world of her home, existing to serve the needs of her husband and children, ultimately having no identity of her own (p. 27). Prabha devi, after becoming a mother and a housewife, feels the same identity crisis as mentioned by Betty Friedan and she overcomes the suffocation within her by studying swimming. That moment is the moment of self-realisation in the life of that lady.

Margaret Shanthi, the wife of Ebenezer Paulraj is a chemistry teacher and she associates everything in her life with various chemical and chemical reactions. Margaret Shanti is a victim of male domination and her identity is completely denied by her husband. Ebenezer Paulraj is a male chauvinist and 'He listens to no one but himself' (p.99). Margaret Shanthi has no space or voice in her marriage life and her likes and dislikes were not even taken into account by her husband. She wanted to do Ph.D., but he asked to do B.Ed. In their life, Ebenezer Paulraj was dominant. One day she realised that she was pregnant and revealed the happiness to her husband. He replied, "Maragatham, I'm not so sure if we should have a baby now' (p. 104). He forced her for abortion. When she was admitted for abortion, her husband wished her all the best. Beauvoir (1973) states, "Men tend to take abortion lightly: they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature" (p.508).

Margaret Shanthi becomes a victim of her husband's self-love. She has the freedom to take decisions regarding her body, but since she is a wife, the freedom is limited. In a patriarchal society the dichotomy between husband and wife represents a power dynamic, where the husband holds power and the wife powerless. Motherhood is a power, a kind of power which has "the capacity to transform and empower others" (Allen, 1998). The same power is experienced by Janaki and Prabha Devi after becoming mothers. Psychoanalyst Caren Horney came up with the idea of womb envy stating that womb envy arises when men realise that they are not in control and powerful in their lives as they had originally thought they were (Lindsay Hockenberry, 2017). Through the forced abortion, her husband is ignoring the capabilities of Margaret Shanti as a woman.

The womb envy is inferiorizing the male in the power structure and since he wants to be the dominated, he is forcing to do abortion. Her husband is very conscious of his physical fitness and physical beauty. He justifies the decision to abort by saying, "My lovely girl. With no big bouncy breasts and horrible woman's bush. I never want you to change. I want you to remain like this all your life" (p. 111). In order to enjoy the body of his wife, for his pleasure, he is denying a great dream of his wife. After the abortion, Margaret found her life meaningless and she started hating her husband. Ebenezer Paulraj disliked the body of his wife and both of them became strangers in their bedroom. Margaret recalls:

When Ebi came to bed, I pretended to be asleep as usual. I did not remember when we had last sexual intercourse. I don't even remember who turned away first. Was it he, disgusted by my body, folds of flesh, unclear lines, sagging muscles and my woman's bush? Or was it I who wanted an equal in bed and decided that I could no longer keep up the pretence of being a little girl? (p.138).

Accepting the body of one's partner is associated with self-esteem and self-acceptance. The sense of loss of self-esteem tends Margaret to take revenge on her husband by serving him heavy meals in order to make him physically weak and unhealthy which made Ebi 'A quite man. An easy man' (p.134). When he became obese and unhealthy, he lost his energy and, 'no power struggles. All was quiet and calm and watered down in our lives' (p.134). Here it is obvious how tactically she uses food in order to revenge at her assertive husband. For Margaret, food is a power which she uses to control her husband. Alejandra Moreno Alvarez (2006) writes that, "... the only true language left to women is silence

and the language of food" (p.19). Food and body are the two things which Ebenezer Paulraj likes and Margaret shanti uses food as a weapon of revenge in order to make her husband powerless. Margaret was silenced by her husband and later food became her language, through which she spoke about her wishes and dreams. She was denied by her husband because of her changing physical features. As Beauvoir (1953) states, "the body is not a thing, it is a situation...it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects" (p.34), Margaret also realised that her body is an instrument of her grasp upon the world.

Sheela Vasudevan, a fourteen years old girl is a victim of child abuse. Her body was an object of sexual satisfaction for her friend's father. She had a close affection with her Ammumma and it was her Ammumma who warned Sheela to be careful while she was with her father's friends. Ammumma warned, 'she may call them uncle but they are not her uncles.... If you don't take care, you'll regret it one day' (65). Sheela had a strong relation with her grandmother and it was her Ammumma who taught her to understand her identity. It was her Ammumma who taught her, 'You mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy' (pp 66-67). These words of her Ammumma helped her to mould her self-identity and this realisation makes Sheela a strong girl, like her Ammumma. Ammumma loved her body and every night, before going to sleep, she used to apply calamine lotion on face and neck. As Beauvoir (1953) states, 'Woman is haunted by the horror of growing old' (p.587), Ammumma was also afraid of getting old. She thought, "If she were to die in her sleep, she would do so looking her best" (p.68). When her grandmother died, Sheela plucked the hairs from her chin, decorated her face with foundation and applied kohl in her eyes. Sheela also decorated the body of her Ammumma with costume jewellery. For Ammumma, her beautiful body was her identity and she wanted to be like that in her death also and Sheela fulfils her Ammumma's wish.

Marikolunthu, a Dalit woman is one among the travellers in the ladies coupe and she is portrayed as the 'other' by her fellow travellers. She is a victim of caste discrimination. The other characters, who are from the mainstream of the society, involved in conversations throughout the journey, and completely abandon Marikolunthu's presence:

The woman at the farthest end sat curled towards the door of the coupe. She seemed completely oblivious to the rest of them in the enclosed space. They stared at her. She didn't look like one among them. It wasn't that she was dressed poorly or that there was about her the stink of poverty. It was simply the expression on her face.... Besides, they were sure that she didn't speak English as they all did. That was enough to put a distance between them and her (pp 17-18).

Akhila talks to Marikolunthu only after everyone leaves the compartment. She noticed that and when Akhila starts talking to her, she says, '...But last night, all of you shut me out from your conversation simply because you thought I didn't belong. You looked at my clothes, my face and decided that I was not your kind' (p. 209). As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018) in *The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene* says, "Dalit bodies have been the objects of upper-caste disgust when they have not been simply overlooked" (p.1), Marikolunthu is the object of upper-caste disgust not only in the compartment, but also in her life. The ladies coupe is a microcosm of what she has suffered in her real life.

Marikolunthu's menarche is described in this work in order to show Baby Marikolunthu's transformation into a woman, which is a formation of new identity. Womanhood came to her all of a sudden with a pain on her lower back. When she stood up, something trickled down her leg (p.224). Her mistress Sujata Akka said, 'You're a woman now. No more running around like a girl' (p.225). Several restrictions were imposed on Marikolunthu. Nair gives an elaborate description of the ceremonies taking place on the day of menarche celebration. Manjal Neerattu Vizha is a part of this celebration in Tamil Nadu. After becoming a woman, Marikolunthu became a sex object in the eyes of the male members in the family where she was working as a servant. Joseph (2008) says, "As the girl's body matures, society reacts in an increasingly hostile and threatening manner" (para. 5). A girl, in the patriarchal society, is seen only as 'flesh', as Beauvoir (1953) says: "The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her...on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible', it frightens her to to become flesh and to show flesh" (p. 333). She is brutally raped by one of the family members and became pregnant; but she was blamed for her pregnancy, saying that 'The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant, she's making up a story about rape' (p. 245).

Marikolunthu feels her identity being lost in a patriarchal society and she involves in lesbian relationship with Sujata Akka which is a new sort of happiness to both Marikolunthu and Sujata Akka. For Sujata Akka also, this relationship is an escape from patriarchy and both of them love together with their body. Marikolunthu shares to Sujata Akka about the lesbian relationship between two doctors and later both of them also involve in the same. Marikolunthu is a bisexual, and she uses her body to satisfy both Sujata Akka and Akka's Husband. Through her relationship with Sujata Akka, she is

constituting a gender identity through 'Renewing her body based on the synchrony of individual desires according to the output of social constructions such as identity, gender and sexuality' (Ramadhani & Mustofa, 2021, p. 175). As de Beauvoir proposes, the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom (p. 26), Marikolunthu through her lesbian relationship is enjoying a vast arena of freedom and self-identity. Heterosexuality is a form of exercising a control over the bodies and (Butler, 1990, p. 154), and in order to free her body from the power structure constituted by the patriarchal world, Marikolunthu involves in lesbian relationship.

2. CONCLUSION

In the novel *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila's journey is not a mere physical journey, but a journey of self-discovery. She discovers her identity after having sexual relationship with a man whom she meets at Kanyakumari. Each woman in this novel has to navigate an experience where she utilises her body as a means of forming her identity, which also serves as a form of resistance against the patriarchal power structure that seeks to control and define her. Body is used by the female characters as an object of revenge against the dominated males whom each character comes across. For Akhila, it is through her sexual relationship with an unknown man and for Marikolunthu, it is through lesbian relationship. Margaret Shanthi revenges her husband by making him obese by feeding unhealthy food. Nair, by making her women characters speak, is actually denying the notion of phallogocentric, asseverating the active presence of females and marginalising the males.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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