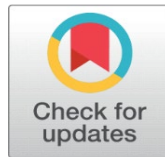
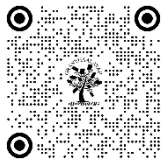


BEYOND THE COUPE: RECONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH DECONSTRUCTION AND SUBVERSION IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001) catechizes the concepts of gender-autonomy, and societal expectations through deconstruction and subversion. It focusses on the life journey of Akhila, a single, middle-aged woman trying to find her identity outside the bounds of patriarchal norms. The novel employs a fragmented narrative structure, with six women in a railway compartment sharing their life stories. These narratives attempt to deconstruct traditional gender roles, exposing the vulnerability of social constructs that impose marriage, motherhood, and female submissiveness. Simultaneously, the act of storytelling becomes an act of subversion, as the women collectively challenge the dominant and authoritarian ideologies to reclaim their identity through their narratives. This article is an earnest effort to explore the manners by which the novelist tries to destabilize the patriarchal binaries—such as male-female and public-private and also critiques the systemic oppressive structures that perpetuate suppression. The novel, dextrously, is placed within a liminal space that allows for the emergence of transformative possibilities, celebrating women's solidarity and resilience. Through the interplay of deconstruction and subversion, *Ladies Coupe* not only reimagines gendered identities but also contributes to the evolving discourse on feminist literature.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Subversion, Feminism, Patriarchy, Oppression, Repression, Postmodernism

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism and its ideology, from the beginning itself, is part of subversion and its ideology. Ecriture feminine at once subvert and deconstruct masculine language which marginalizes female language. Contemporary women writers through their writing try to reject the masculine oppression. They subvert and re-read psychology to explore the issues of female and male identity. Feminist writers in almost all the literature have attempted to free themselves from patriarchal bonds. The present paper makes a study on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and attempts to find out the voices of deconstruction in the text. It tries to analyze how the writer goes deep into the inner conflicts of the women characters. The paper focuses on how the women characters subvert all cultural, religious and social codes and achieve their identity.

With the arrival of Anita Nair in the Indian English literary arena, fiction has assumed a different dimension in relation to its human relationships in the post-modernist positions. In her texts she tries to foreground the moral breakdown of modern society in which the woman longs for fulfilment. She deals with the disappointments of women, their frustrations, obsessions and insecurities. Her feminist ideology covers a wide range of variety. She displays an

understanding of Indian society, the cultural and economic handling faced by a feminist world. Her texts also depict their search for self-fulfilment. Nair comes to the field at a time when the concept of femininity has undergone a great cultural change supported by the Western feminist discourses. Nair takes a strategically agonistic position of feminism and places her fiction on a constant struggle against the post structural ideology. A close-reading of her fiction suggests an exclusives space for women, a space which helps them deconstruct the mythical identity. Nair's fiction incorporates some of those identity aspirations drawn from the ground of Indian culture.

2. RECLAIMING FEMALE IDENTITY: DECONSTRUCTION AND SUBVERSION IN *LADIES COUPE*

One common idea constantly present in Anita Nair's fiction is her concern for women who have been socially oppressed in a patriarchal society. Her woman comes as worthy representations of modern Indian woman. They constitute different and at times radical and even at times acceptable versions of the female individuals. She has presented women as deconstructing the notion of their mythical identity and lays before the readers the psyche of Indian women. Nair has most of her woman as rebellious, whose main motive is to criticise patriarchy. At the same time, they advocate a new sexuality which guarantees freedom for women. They sometimes nullify the social structure called marriage. Her women again rise up against the patriarchal system which is characterised by indifference and humiliation. Much of Nair's fiction propounds the doctrine of freedom, independence and liberty. As Judith Butler states:

Gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed. Instead, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the performativity of discourse. Gender is performative—it produces that which it names. (140)

Ladies Coupe explores the true self of Indian woman who is caught between modernity which guarantees freedom and issues of gender are prominent in her writing and she presents the various issues of contemporary Indian woman. Women in this novel have a different thinking and most of them want to create their own worlds. In their quest for realization, they subvert all religious and cultural codes and achieve their identity. She helps the characters to redefine themselves and discover new meanings in their life. She has portrayed them realistically-both psychologically as well as physically in the novel.

The novel presents the tales of six women who meet up in the ladies' compartment of an Indian train. Janaki, Sheela, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Marikolanthu and the chief protagonist Akhila belong to different classes of the Indian society. Akhila is in search of her true self and identity. She is searching for answers to some questions that have been disturbing her throughout life. As a spinster and dutiful head of the family, she is expected to be submissive. She is "Akhilandeswari: Mistress of all the worlds, Master of none" (84). Akhila's needs are never recognized by her family. She is considered as a dutiful spinster who takes the responsibility of the family after the untimely death of her father. Akhila's life is marked with many turning points that lead to her transformation. At the age of thirty-three she decides to get herself education. She always cherishes her relationship with Hari who really wants to marry her. She refuses him as he is younger in age. In the beginning she is afraid to break her stereotyped image as a woman and at the same time she doesn't want to be trapped in the institution called marriage. **Adrienne Rich comments:**

Feminism is the politics of transformation. It begins with the recognition of the oppression of women but extends into an inquiry about power and relationships in all areas of life. It is about making the invisible visible, naming the unnamed, and imagining the world differently. Feminism is not just about gender; it's about challenging power structures everywhere. Its core is revolutionary. (275)

Janaki though satisfied with her family life has got some dissatisfaction. She believes that the women's role is to keep her family intact. But she feels a stirring revolt within her when she comes to know that her husband wants to control everyone including their son Siddhardh. Her crisis is short lived and she turns back to herself. She is a true representative of the traditional Indian woman who carries the idea that the basic purpose of a woman's life is to get married. According to Janaki, woman is a subordinate class and her satisfaction contains in being with her husband. She believes in a male dominated system. Though her ideological apparatus fail to assure Akhila, one can see that she has achieved her own identity.

Fourteen-year-old Sheela is a girl who knows 'everything'. Her special kind of insight helps her to examine her friends and relatives. She closely examines the overt and covert behaviour of others and watches the relationship among them. She notices the contrast between her two grandmothers- one is her father's mother who retreats into a shell

without disturbing others. She is like all the traditional grandma who demands little. But her other grandma who is the mother of Sheela's mother is a person who subverts all traditional norms and constructs her own identity. She is not like other grandmas who pamper their grandchildren with love and affection. Still Sheela admires her grandma who believes the fact that a woman, even when she's old, has to be physically attractive. She is a lady who "hated imperfection of any kind" (67). She says to Sheela, "The only person you need to please is yourself" (67). Sheela also feels an identity crisis. When she was a little girl, her parents, especially her father, encouraged her to speak like an adult. But now her father sees a woman in her and he feels irritated when she questions his authority. Sheela takes an independent decision to dresses up her grand1na when others carry her dead body to her house. Others blame her. But she doesn't bother. "She knew Ammoomma would have been pleased" (74). Sheela is in the process of becoming a woman. Luce Irigaray states:

Woman is neither mother nor virgin nor prostitute, nor is she a combination of these terms. She is a being in her own right, irreducible to male definitions or desires. Feminism demands the articulation of a female subjectivity beyond patriarchal language. To speak as a woman is to disrupt and rewrite the symbolic order. This is the power of feminist thought. (23)

Margaret Shanthi is a bold woman who goes through many crises in her life. She inspires Akhila through her story. Her marriage with Ebenezer Paulraj was a failure. She suffered physically, mentally and spiritually. In the beginning she is a woman who says 'yes' to whatever he said. She always tries to please him. Her attitude is clear when she says, "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" (109). She worships him for his abilities. She becomes pregnant but she has to get the baby aborted. He loves her but stands against her wish to become a mother. Thereafter, she begins to hate him. Though she wants to do PhD, she is forced to do B.Ed. Ebe begins to find fault with her once he is made the Principal of the school he has been working. Margaret is not able to conceive again for a long time. What she wants is a divorce but no one in her family had ever divorced. So, she continues to live with him. Her injured soul longs for revenge. She decides to destroy the beauty of Ebe's healthy body with the help of food. She pampers him and he grows fat and seeks her help more. Now they have a daughter. After suffering silently for many years, she finds a way to take her revenge. She realises her true identity. Ebe considered her as an ordinary woman. She compares herself with water. As she says: "That was a mistake that Ebe made, He dismissed me as someone of no importance. So, I had no other resource but to show him what the true nature of water is and how magnificent its powers are" (96). Nancy Fraser comments:

Feminism today must address the twin dimensions of justice: redistribution and recognition. It must tackle economic inequality while also addressing cultural misrecognition. Gender justice requires a synthesis of these approaches. Without redistributive policies, cultural change is insufficient. Feminism is about transforming both material and symbolic structures. (216)

Life of Prabha Devi has been always comfortable as a young daughter of a rich family. She had all sorts of comforts in her life. She marries Jagdish, the son of a rich and successful diamond merchant. Her husband loves her and allows her full freedom to lead her life as she wants. But still, she wants to be treated not as somebody's wife but as an individual. She makes a trip with Jagdish to New York and a complete change comes over her. She wants to be like those women whom she has seen in New York. "Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Such poise, such confidence such celebration of life and beauty" (177). She wants that confidence for herself. She practices the lifestyle of those ladies. She has transformed into a new being and starts admiring herself. This confidence helps her to lure Pramod. But when he tries to take liberties with her, she slaps him. This shows how women can preserve their sanctity. She realises her mistakes and turns back to her duties. Prabha Devi suppresses all her desires and emotions but later realizes its dangers. She regains all those repressed emotions and sensations when she joins a swimming class. Repression often results in suffering but she escapes from it with her willpower. At last, she conquers her fears and she understands: "that life would never be the same again". (195) As Sylvia Walby comments:

Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. It operates in both private and public spheres, from the household to the state. Feminism seeks to uncover and dismantle these systems. This involves not only equality but the transformation of social relations. True change requires structural and ideological shifts. (20)

Marikolanthu's life is a mixture of many ups and downs. Her life is different from the life of other women in the compartment. From her childhood on words, she suffers social oppression. She continues her parent's tradition of working in Chettiar Kottai and becomes intimate with the daughter- in-law of the house, Sujata. Her stay with the two lady doctors is really beneficial to her. They taught her good manners and offered a job. But the rape by Murugesan has a destructing effect on her and she hates her son, Muthu who is the result of the rape. Her mother's words have made a

deep impression in her mind. She advises her, "We shouldn't expect anything from anyone. That way there will be no disappointment" (221). Though she pleases both Sujata and her husband physically, she realises that neither of them loved her. She is drawn out of the Chettiar Kottai and after the death of her mother the responsibility of the child falls on Marikolanthu. One can feel her revenge when she sells him to one of the looms of Murugesan. But when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre and her son Muthu tending to the pyre, she is shocked and realises her fault. She transforms into a mother and decides to take him back. After enduring all kinds of oppression and suppression, it is love that brings her back to a new life.

Akhila's revelation of her secrets and fears to the other women helps her to deconstruct her identity. All the women characters lay their heart to Akhila and through their narration one can understand that all have suffered at the hands of the society. The experiences of the co-passengers move Akhila and help her to re-evaluate herself. Akhila listens to the stories of the women and realises how they have achieved their identity. Akhila is happy to discover the fact that she is not alone in her problems. She achieves courage and strength from the exchanges between the co-passengers. The stories of these women stand together and make a single story of women who discover their true selves. Sara Ahmed states:

Feminism is a building project: it is about creating new habits, new ways of being. It is also about dismantling habits of oppression. Feminist work can feel like housework because it requires attending to the details of everyday life. Feminism is not about an abstract future but about the concrete present. It is about living a life that makes feminism possible. (22)

The stories told by these women create in her a desire to live and lead a new life. She has taken a new resolution which would lead her to ultimate happiness. She realises, as Marikolanthu says, "Women are strong. Women can do anything as well as men. Women can do much more, but a woman has to seek that vein of strength of disagreement. Her fiction is a protest in herself, it does not show itself natural" (210). She subverts the whole system and achieves her own identity. The company of these women helps her to become a new human being. During her lonely stay at Kanvakumari, she re-evaluates her desires. She decides to break all traditional bonds. She doesn't discourage a boy in twenties when he tries to approach her. Akhila doesn't hesitate to invite him to her room. She realises that she has the right to get Hari back. Her decision to back to Hari is a kind of rebellion against the patriarchal society.

3. CONCLUSION

All these women in Ladies Coupe undertake the journey of oppression in lives. Most of them preserve their true self. They are not weak enough to be submissive to their men folk. They represent the image of the new Indian women. Their voice echoes the voice of the new women. All the women characters of her novels lack a sense of fulfilment. These women are silent in their male dominated society but they get a chance to think aloud in the female space. Nair's works are the works of protest and her women are radical, subversive and taboo breaking. She employs conventional devices such as wit, irony, exaggeration and sarcasm. The voice of protest in her novel is the voice against the patriarchal system of oppression and exploitation. Through vivid narration the writer takes these women out of their passive lives into an active space. *Ladies Coupe* focuses on the inner strength of women. Nair truly represents the present condition of Indian woman as it is. She presents them as they are. While comparing these women we find that they are made of the same stuff. They are not inferior but all of them are powerful. They are able to deconstruct and subvert their images and reconstruct a new self.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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