

VOICES OF WORKING WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR'S LADIES COUPÉ

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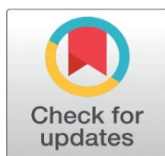
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2

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ABSTRACT

Liberation in economy is a sweet candy factor in a woman's life. It is a common belief that unmarried employed women lead a happy, independent life. This claim is queried in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé. The paper discusses the crises faced by a woman who is forced to be the bread winner of her family. It exposes her lack of individual space, rights and freedom. Financial exploitation becomes an inevitable feature in the lives of these women. The paper urges the need for a comfortable family atmosphere which is supportive and comprehending to make an employed woman liberated.

Keywords: Women, Employment, Liberation, Financial Independence



1. INTRODUCTION

A wise person should have money in their head, but not in their heart.

- Jonathan Swift

Employment provides a secured feeling in an individual's life. It is the key for financial independence. According to Yasmeen Altellawi, the policy analyst, employment and financial independence play crucial roles in personal empowerment, decision-making autonomy, and overall quality of life. She writes, "Career growth and financial independence are deeply intertwined. Remember, every step forward in your career isn't just about climbing the corporate ladder—it's about creating the financial freedom to live life on your terms". Women's empowerment largely depends on her income. Women, who are considered as weak and fragile are always protected inside the house. The financial need of the modern world breaks this old custom and brings the women out. Women who work hard for a long duration is always paid less when comparing to men.

Employment opportunities for women have increased in the past decades. Both educated and illiterate women seek for an income through the job they are capable of. Her dominance over earnings gains her security, freedom, sense of fulfillment and achievement. When women enter certain sector reserved only for men, they are expected to perform the role of men. But in turn they are denied the same amount of respect that is given to men.

Contemporary society believes money as the prime source of happiness and strength in a woman's life. On the other hand, it also serves as the cause of suffering in her life. "Today, women's roles are emerging differently with new commitment and career oriented as well as commitment to families. So, this in turn leads to a number of stress and strain among working women" (Sinha). When money becomes more than a necessity, it fails to appreciate love, kindness, sacrifice and humanity. Eventually it leads to an unhappy and empty life. This is evident through the life of Anita Nair's protagonist Akhilandeswari in *Ladies Coupé*. She is an unmarried working woman who caters to the family's economic needs. But the family is ungrateful to her sacrifice which makes her to lead an unsatisfactory life for years.

In the era of Indian literature, very few writers tell the story of employed women in their works. Most often these characters undergo sufferings in the hands of the society. Anita Nair is a renowned Indian writer of fiction whose works deals with the themes of patriarchy, gender inequality, sisterhood and women's psyche. Her maiden novel *The Better Man* is a transformation novel which gives the true pulse of Indian life. Her masterpiece *Mistress* is a searing novel on man-woman relationship. *Living Next Door to Alice* is a children's novel based on friendship and bravery. *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is a historical novel packed with adventure and passion. Her works are translated into more than thirty languages and have remained best sellers.

Ladies Coupé is a poignant novel about modern Indian womanhood. In this novel, Nair cautiously portrays the diversity within a woman who lives a contented life in the eyes of society but a discontented one in her self. The protagonist Akhila is a forty-five years old income-tax clerk who has never been allowed to live outside her roles as a daughter, sister, aunt and provider. After her father's death, she is forced to replace his role. Thus, she becomes the breadwinner of the family. Her world only revolves around her mother, brothers and sister and their requirements. Her own desires are not taken into consideration. The assorted incidents of Akhila's life are focused vividly with the knowledge of South Indian culture by Nair.

The desires of women are shattered in the patriarchal society as the prominence is given to man's needs. In *Ladies Coupé* Akhila is denied further education while her brother studies with the help of her money. She is unable to develop a hobby for herself. Being a man, her brother, Narsi did not ask anybody's permission to get married but, "Narsi decided he wanted to get married" (77). Thus, her brothers get married first but she remains a spinster. No one suggests that she gets married first. She expects her family to say, "What about you? You've been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a husband, children, a home of your own?" (77). Marriage, the promised end in a traditional society is denied to Akhila as she has to continue to serve for her family. Thus, Nair rightly asserts, "Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster" (77).

Akhila fulfills all the duties of the head of the family but she is never recognized as one. She is the breadwinner but never a decision maker. The empowerment of women and their ability to hold authority are center in employment and decision-making power. When she wants to leave the house for office tour, her mother insists to ask her brothers' permission. But when Akhila claims that she is elder, her mother replies, "You might be older but you are a woman and they are the men of the family" (150). This evidently proves that Akhila has only taken the man's role but never his supremacy.

In reality, there is unjust distribution of income and allocation of freedom to different members in a family. According to *European Sociological Review*, women who become primary earners experience reduced well-being because

of social stigma and pressure. It supports the idea that society often fails to recognize women's labor equally. Women in Indian society are expected to give their earnings to their spouse. They were never given the freedom to spend their income on their own. In a marital relationship, the husband directly or indirectly exploits his wife's monetary savings. But the case is different in the life of the protagonist Akhila. She becomes the victim of financial exploitation by her maternal family. She is used only for her money, and never shown any love or concern. She is the cash cow, who has to work selflessly. Even after her mother's death, the family solely depends on the earnings of Akhila. Her sister Padma is married, yet she lives with Akhila along with her husband and children. She likes to be left alone in her house but Padma bosses around Akhila that she is unable to live independently. The author says, "Akhila tolerated the invasion of space and privacy that took many forms" (164).

Indian families are considered classically as large, patriarchal, collectivistic and joint families. Such families' functions as a dominant influence in the life of its individual members. Subjugation of women is a common dissatisfaction of Indian family. "Female Indian professionals are expected to seamlessly fulfil their domestic duties no matter how demanding their job is" (Kundra et al. 40). "The middle- and lower-class working women, it's a daily, non-stop 5 am-11pm routine for most part of their lives...with no domestic help either in the form of maids or in-laws at home." (Iyengar). The absence of harmonious family atmosphere often manifests a psychiatric disorder. The daily troubles faced by Akhila pushes her to a state of depression. She experiences emotional chaos and suffers mentally. The demands are so much on her that she is unable to take the burden. Whenever her family members intrude in her life, Akhila, at heart wants to express her anger towards them. But she is resilient, because as a Brahmin woman she has to adjust to her family. She is never allowed to voice out her opinion and not given the space to express herself.

Women's joining the workforce has not been accompanied by a change in their household responsibilities resulting in additional roles for working women. The stress hypothesis theory of multiple roles suggests an individual's well-being reduces when an additional role is added to the societal role that already includes many demands and hassles. Working women experience the same while meeting the demands of high performance at work as well as managing children and the household. (Chawla and Sharma)

Akhila mostly yearns for love but her family fails to give the very love which she expects from them. Akhila is also not recognized for her labours and sacrifices.

The hardship Akhila encounters, makes her intolerable against her family. She decides to come out of her enclosed life. So, she takes the train to Kanyakumari all alone to explore a new world. Her decision to enter another realm gives her a new life. She embraces it as her solution. Akhila's decision is an outcome of her family's apathetic attitude that fails to give her the necessary support. But the same choice is not applicable to everyone, as it is only a temporary remedy. Unless the family structure provides the essential support and love for everyone in the family, there is no true liberation for women like Akhila.

Families form a valuable support system, which could be helpful in management of various stressful situations. A traditional family is a better source for psychological support and is more resilient to stress. Circumstances must be created for the women to freely exercise their choices at home and in the workplace without restrictions or fear. Economist Barbara S. Low advises high-achieving women to strategically balance work and family for utility maximization, viewing employment as essential despite biological and social constraints. Family should love, comfort and help working women. Initially, change must begin in a family which paves way for the society. The contemporary Indian writer Chetan Bhagat also highlights the same outlook in his *Revolution 2020: Love. Corruptuion. Ambition* that, "the revolution begins at home. Society changes only when individual family norms are challenged" (149). Thus, the independence of an employed woman depends on a comfortable family environment.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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