

Unraveling Traditional Gender Boundaries: A New Paradigm of Identity in *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract:

Anita Nair is a well-known postmodern Indian English novelist. Her novel, *Ladies Coupé*, explores several women's lives through personal journeys. In today's society, the rigid boundaries of conventional gender roles are being increasingly questioned. *Ladies Coupé* is a compelling exploration of these issues, offering a nuanced perspective on gender identity, societal expectations, and blurring of traditional roles. By focusing on female characters' experiences within the confines of a ladies' compartment, the novel provides a microcosmic view of the broader societal constraints and expectations that shape women's lives. This article uses feminist and psychoanalytic literary criticism as its primary methodological framework to examine how *Ladies Coupé* challenges the traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity, highlighting the complexities of gender identity in modern India. This paper analyzes the characters of the novel to show how it subverts conventional gender stereotypes and offers a more nuanced portrayal of gender expression. By examining characters' interactions and relationships, this article explores how social expectations can both limit and empower women. The women's compartment symbolises both the restrictions and possibilities that women face in a patriarchal society. Through their experiences, the characters demonstrate women's resilience and autonomy in challenging the established gender norms. This research suggests that the novel not only critiques patriarchal structures but also envisions a transformative redefinition of gender roles and identities in Indian culture, offering new insights into how women's voices can influence cultural and social change. The research eventually finds that *Ladies Coupé* not only criticises patriarchal standards but also redefines gender roles by depicting female characters who regain their identity, autonomy, and voice, providing a transformational picture of femininity in modern Indian culture.

Keywords: Gender Boundaries, Identity, Patriarchy, Self-Discovery, Feminist Literary Criticism, Indian English Literature, Women's Agency, Postcolonial Feminism

Introduction

Anita Nair, an eminent Indian writer in English was born in Kerala. She is a novelist, journalist, short-story writer, and famous poet. The majority of 20th century novels depict women's issues and their status in Indian society. In Indian English fiction great women writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair depict feminist picture of Indian society. In Indian English Fiction, women writers analyse the issues of women and the complex relationship between men and women who were victims in society. She is a bestselling writer whose two novels, *Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe*, were translated into many languages in the world. Her other recognised works are the *Magical Indian Myth*, *Mistress*, *Adventure of Nonu*, and *Living Next Door to Alive*. *Ladies Coupe* is the best novel to give her the status of a creative writer with a feminist spark. Literature mirrors our society. Anita Nair shows the condition of women in Indian Patriarchal society through her works.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* voices the women in contemporary post-colonial India. This novel describes the different female characters and their life events. All of them were exploited by a male-dominated society. *Ladies Coupe* is a journey toward self-discovery. She depicted the plight of the women she had seen.

Review of Literature

C.V. Abraham (2016) has made an argument in his article entitled 'Deconstructing Gender Roles: A Reading of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*' that Anita Nair has refused to be a feminist but her characters are present-day rebellious modern middle-class Indian women. He emphasised that women are not treated as equal to men, but as older men and handicapped persons. He quoted Gayatri Spivak's words that no text had ever been fully deconstructed. According to Abraham, *Ladies Coupe* opposes rigid notions of gender, allowing for shifting identities.

D Silvia Flavia's article entitled "The Concept of Patriarchy and Female Defiance" in Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' explores the male-controlled society and inequalities. Anita's story explores the impact of male-dominated culture on women's lives. She avoided limiting the women's experiences to a single ideal. She emphasised the need for women to face their problems on their own without external help.

According to Mishra and Kumar (2006), modern Indian English female authors are increasingly concerned with topics such as gender, resistance, and self-assertion. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* upholds this legacy by questioning conventional notions of femininity and pushing for self-determined female identity.

The Analysis shows that a doctoral thesis entitled *Multifarious Dimensions of women in the select novels of Anita Nair in 2023* has submitted by Deepika B to the Periyar University. This thesis has tried to present the female characters in the fiction of Anita Nair and has portrayed the life of women in the background of Indian social and family life, in which her female characters undergo a variety of experiences, often painful, under patriarchal oppression in the family. They face physical violence, career obstruction, and abandonment. The thesis offers a view of how women emotionally suffer in

the patriarchal system and explains how women are oppressed by the age-old patriarchal social practices, indirectly criticizing the society

Methodology Used

Feminist literary analysis and psychoanalytic criticism were the two methodologies applied in this study. Feminist literary analysis examines how literature reflects, sustains, or challenges gender norms and patriarchy. It investigates how literature perpetuates or undermines women's oppression, looks at female characters, and connects gender with other characteristics. Feminist critics seek to discover and analyse the patriarchal roots of works, such as the suppression of female voices and women's representations in the literature. Psychoanalytic criticism, based on Sigmund Freud's theories, examines the psychological components of texts, delving into issues such as repressed emotions and oedipal complexes. It also examines how an author's own experiences and subconscious mind shape characters and themes, treating literature as a psychological document. This paper deals with these two methodologies

Discussion

Nair depicts the effects of societal conditioning on women. Her women were capable of expressing their rights and identities. She refuses to identify herself as a feminist. None of the female authors are feminists. As women, they understand their difficulties and represent modern women's hardships. She clearly investigates the true situation of women, not just in the household but also in society. She focuses on the issues of modern women. Her feminine characteristics come from varied backgrounds, representing many cultures. It is essential to quote Virginia Woolf *In A Room of One's Own*, she says:

It is probable, however, that both in life and art, the values of women are not the values of men. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man and trivial what is to him important. (81)

Anita Nair in her novels focuses only on the marginal position of women in the society. Her character revolts against the social setup of society. They manipulate and negotiate to propagate middle

class values. During this journey, subtle cultural transformations were captured. Binod Mishra is the leading critic of Anita Nair. He analysed the diverse aspects of Nair's novels. According to Mishra, Nair's novels raise concerns about all classes and groups of people. He compares her to Anita Desai's novels. Mishra states:

Desai's novels depict mental conflicts coiling their heroines, whereas Nair makes her characters suffer and enables them to come out of it. Desai's heroines sulk, sob, and submerge themselves in their calamity, but for Nair's characters, their suffering becomes their strength and weapon to fight out their predicaments. This becomes a matter of debate, and, as Anita Nair, herself reacts when Ladies Coupe is being argued as an important work of feminism by well-known publications. (101)

The heroine of this novel is Akhila, or Akhilandeswari. She listens to the story of the five women and seeks solutions to her problems. She questions: 'Can woman stay a single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel compete?' All women were married except for Akhila. She is not married, but has her own story about family and her lover Hari. *Ladies Coupe* is a story of Akhila, Janaki, Margaret Shanty, Sheela, Prabha Devi, and Marikolunthu.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila's tale delves into the battle against traditional gender restrictions, particularly as a single woman in a culture that views women primarily as spouses and mothers. Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (The Second Sex, 2011, p. 283) is directly relevant to Akhila's inner metamorphosis. In *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila's story exemplifies De Beauvoir's belief that womanhood is a condition moulded by society and expectations rather than an essence. Akhila embodies what De Beauvoir would term "transcendence", escaping immanence to assert her subjectivity, by choosing to live freely and redefining her position beyond that of a caretaker or dependant. Akhila's life is defined by her battle to defy these expectations and declare uniqueness. She stays unmarried, which is unusual in her community. Despite this, she pursues a job and lives freely, breaking usual bounds. Akhila struggles with internalised views and challenges her right to live for herself, seek love, and find companionship

without being constrained by conventional duties. Through the experiences of other women in the *Ladies Coupe*, she develops courage to overcome her own constraints and discover what it is to be a woman in her own terms. Dr. Ashok Kumar in his article "Portrayal of New Women: A Study of Manju Kapur's A Married Woman" mentions, "Anita Nair has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic women eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact" (194). This story questions traditional gender limitations and praises the prospect of breaking free from them to live a greater, more self-determined life. Akhila and her fellow passengers on the coupe were on the verge of self-discovery.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Janaki represents conventional gender norms, notably in marriage and family life. She has spent her entire life dependent on her husband, Prabhakar, relying on him for decision-making, financial security, and emotional stability. Janaki's existence is defined by her reliance on her husband, which reflects the traditional assumption that women should visit their spouses for protection and advice. As she grows older, she begins to question the existence and limitations of traditional gender norms. Despite the initial opposition, Janaki eventually accepted her conventional role and found comfort in her familiar duties. Her tale represents the experiences of many women of her generation, who were raised to serve their families, demonstrating the comfort and security that comes with following traditional gender roles. Janaki's conventional attitude stands out among the other women in the car, emphasising the range of female experiences as well as varying degrees of compliance and resistance to societal norms.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Sheela's story delves into the influence of cultural expectations on girls' knowledge of gender roles. As a young girl, Sheela's position as a caretaker for her grandmother exposes her to conventional gender duties, such as nursing and keeping her company. Sheela's increasing awareness of gender inequalities is reflected in her interactions with her grandmother, who reinforced these expectations. However, Sheela defies these expectations by refusing to put nail paint on her

grandmother's corpse after her death, indicating her autonomy and desire to create her own beliefs. This act shows that Sheela may grow up to question-and-challenge the established gender roles. The narrative represents the transition between generations, since Sheela's grandmother's life was based on traditional gender norms, implying a change toward a new concept of identity that challenges these constraints and gives hope for a more inclusive future.

Margaret Shanti's story, *Ladies Coupe* delves with the power dynamics of traditional gender roles, notably marriage and societal expectations. Margaret, a chemistry teacher, is married to Ebenezer Paulraj, a dominating and emotionally distant husband who rules every aspect of their lives. Margaret, despite her apparent obedience, is deeply dissatisfied and longs for independence. She feels an underlying resistance to her husband's authority and finds modest measures to establish individuality. A key act of rebellion is surreptitiously giving Ebenezer junk food, which causes him to gain weight. Shashi Deshpande, who considers herself a hard-core feminist, defines the liberation in context of Indian Feminism in the following way:

Liberation does not mean casting humanity. Liberation never means doing without a family. Liberation does not mean leaving one's own marriage. We are human beings. Human beings are social animals, and we need all of these ties. My only thing about liberation is that you do not give into oppression and cruelty. Liberation means refusal to be oppressed, refusal to give up individuality, and refusal to do things which go against conscience. You realise the potential you have within you; you do not let other people tell you what to do. You know what is worth. You know what your value is. You take this into account, which is liberation. This does not mean doing away with all the ties. (24)

Margaret's relationship with her husband also demonstrates the emotional toil that conventional gender norms may impose on women. She feels stuck in a loveless marriage in which her own wants and aspirations are overlooked. She is blinded to her love for him. Anita Nair, describes Margaret's reaction to love. She stated that love is a colourless, volatile liquid. Love ignites and burns. Love leaves no residue-smoke or ash. Love is a passion masquerading as a spirit of wine (LC 104). Margaret's inner resistance gets stronger, and she

want to live freely, free of repressive gender norms. This narrative focuses on the internal battle that women confront when deciding whether to comply with cultural standards or pursue their own wishes and happiness.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Prabha Devi's story is a poignant critique of conventional gender limitations, particularly in terms of social expectations of women in marriage and parenting. Raised in a rich atmosphere, she is nurtured to be the ideal wife and mother, ensuring that she plays the role of perfect lady. However, over time, she becomes dissatisfied with her life and challenges the constraints that have formed it. Her voyage for self-discovery begins with her learning to swim, which represents her longing for freedom and autonomy. Swimming becomes a metaphor for overcoming societal restraints, allowing her to explore her individuality beyond the responsibilities of wife and mother. Her change is more than simply personal emancipation; it is also a subtle opposition to cultural standards that limit women. Her story demonstrates the possibility of having a life unconstrained by traditional gender norms, implying that women may find joy by embracing their uniqueness and forging their own pathways.

Marikonthalu's narrative in *Ladies Coupe* depicts the reality that women are confronted with traditional gender roles. She is married at an early age, reflecting the traditional view that a woman's worth is determined by her capacity to serve a husband and have children. Marikonthalu's existence has become one of the chores and obligations, with little personal fulfilment or autonomy. Despite these terrible conditions, Marikonthalu's narrative contains moments of calm perseverance. Her life exemplifies the long-standing injustices that women confront as well as the persistent nature of gender norms that limit them. Her story emphasises the significance of questioning and pushing these restrictions, which frequently leads to a life of despair and unfulfilled potential for women who are denied the right to choose their own paths.

From a postcolonial standpoint, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is essential in the context of narrative. Spivak questioned the premise that experts or the elite

can objectively represent suppressed perspectives. She claims that the subaltern woman is frequently silenced doubly—first by patriarchy and second by colonial or academic frameworks (Spivak, 1988, p. 271). Marikolanthu's story as a domestic servant and rape survivor in *Ladies Coupé* exemplifies how lower-class, non-urban women's voices are silenced by both familial and society systems. Her quiet following trauma and subsequent expression inside the coupé are consistent with Spivak's framework, which allows her to "speak back" on her own terms rather than as a victim in someone else's account.

The different stories of Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margaret, and Marikolanthu convincingly demonstrate Sangari and Vaid's claim that "the category of 'woman' is never homogeneous" (Sangari & Vaid, 1989, p. 1). Each lady in the *Ladies Coupé* reflects a unique combination of caste, class, and personal history. While Janaki complies with household standards, Prabha Devi reclaims her agency through physical autonomy, while Margaret opposes her emotionally abusive husband through intellectual rebellion. Most vividly, Marikolanthu's experience as a Dalit woman demonstrates how caste and gender intersect to generate additional oppression. These parallel stories reflect the diversity of Indian female identity, which Sangari and Vaid highlight.

Akhila, Janaki, and Sheela struggle with suppressed impulses and societal conditioning, displaying recurrent patterns of conflict between imposed rules and genuine needs, as revealed from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. However, since not all women experience patriarchy in the same way, an intersectional lens—which considers factors such as class, religion, and geographic background—adds a dimension. For example, Margaret Shanti's minority status and Prabha Devi's upper-class background influence their reactions to injustice. The novel extends beyond individual experiences to represent the structural and psychological forces influencing women's lives by making a closer connection between these narratives and feminist and psychoanalytic theories. According to Flavia D. Silvia, *Ladies Coupé* portrays the female journey as an act of rebellion in which women recover their voice, space, and identity (Silvia, n.d., p. 5). This defiance is fundamental to Akhila's transformation and that of other women.

The New Paradigm of Identity

Ladies Coupé ultimately advocates a new paradigm of identity that transcends traditional gender boundaries. The journey of the characters showcases the fluidity of their identity, asserting that women can choose who they want to be free from societal constraints. By unravelling these traditional boundaries, Nair offers a vision of female empowerment grounded in self-awareness, collaboration, and resilience. The novel critiques rigid definitions of femininity that have historically marginalised women. Instead of adhering to predefined roles, the women in the coupé redefine what it means to be women in contemporary society. Their experiences reflect a broader societal shift towards recognising and celebrating diversity in women's identities. Virginia Woolf's notion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 2002) resonates with Akhila's journey in *Ladies Coupé*, where her physical and emotional space within the train becomes symbolic of her search for autonomy and voice. Through their interactions and relationships, these characters demonstrate the power of collective agency. By supporting and encouraging one another, they create a space in which women can challenge traditional norms and pursue their own aspirations. The novel suggests that, by working together, women can create a more equitable and inclusive society. *Coupé* offers a compelling exploration of gender identity and societal expectations in contemporary India. Through its nuanced portrayal of female characters' experiences, the novel challenges traditional gender stereotypes and advocates for a new paradigm of identity. In doing so, Nair's work expands on the discourse established by earlier feminist authors like as Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur, adding a new narrative that stresses both individual resistance and collective strength. Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women* (2000) and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) look at how patriarchal standards mute and constrain women. Deshpande's metaphor of lifeless, self-sacrificing women represents Akhila's own fight to break free and express her identity. Similarly, Kapur's *Astha* defies the constraints of marriage and motherhood in her quest for emotional and personal independence:

Both works, like *Ladies Coupé*, highlight the process of self-discovery and resistance, defining a new paradigm of gender in Indian literature. According to Kumar (2006, 194), Anita Nair represents a stern, yet tough woman who defies traditional bounds, emphasising *Ladies Coupé*'s significance in establishing the concept of female autonomy in Indian literature. Her representation contributes to the continuing scholarly discourse on gender fluidity and female empowerment in post-colonial Indian literature. By empowering women to reclaim their agency and redefine their destinies, the novel contributes to a broader societal shift towards gender equality and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is a powerful exploration of gender identity and autonomy within the context of traditional Indian society. By unravelling the restrictionstive of societal expectations, the novel presents a compelling narrative that encourages women to assert their individuality and embrace their journeys towards self-discovery. As these characters navigate their lives, they challenge patriarchal gender boundaries and inspire a new identity paradigm.. This novel invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of femininity and personal agency, highlighting the importance of self-expression, resilience, and solidarity. Through its nuanced portrayal of the female characters' experiences, *Ladies Coupe* offers a valuable contribution to feminist literary discourse by offering a transformative vision of womanhood in contemporary Indian society. According to Ruth Vanita (2022), disadvantaged voices may be empowered by Indian ethical and philosophical traditions when interpreted inclusively with a focus on justice. This viewpoint is echoed by Nair's characters who express their unique autonomy while navigating societal norms. The novel's exploration of the complexities of women's lives in a patriarchal society is thought-provoking and empowering.

However, the scope of this study is limited, as it focuses exclusively on the literary analysis of a

single novel, which may not completely capture the diversity of women's experiences across India's regions, castes, and socioeconomic classes. Future studies could broaden this approach by including comparative studies of other Indian women writers and employing intersectional and sociological feminist frameworks. These findings suggest that literature may play an important role in transforming gender discourse and that more interdisciplinary research could provide light on the dynamic link between gender identity, literature, and social transformation in postcolonial contexts.

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