

ISSN: 2349-2147



Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam

**An International
Journal of
Humanities and Social
Sciences**

An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal

www.modernresearch.in

**Title: Women as Catalysts in Anita Nair's *Ladies
Coupé***

Author/s: Abhilasha Singh

**Volume 1, Issue 2
September 2014**

pp. 171–177.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the articles/contributions published in the journal are solely the author's. They do not represent the views of the Editors.

Email: editor@modernresearch.in
mrsejournal@gmail.com

Managing Editor: **Yumnam Oken Singh**

Women as Catalysts in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

Dr ABHILASHA SINGH

Associate Professor

Dept. of EFL

Indira Gandhi National Tribal University

Amarkantak, MP, India

Abstract: The protagonist of the fiction, Akhila, tries to find out the truth for herself and undertakes a long journey so that she could test her own strength as well as the truth behind the cliché that survival for a single woman is next to impossible in a male dominated social structure. She meets some of the womenfolk from different strata of society while journeying and comes to realize that it needs one's own will and wisdom to face the challenge – to be her own self and not the extension of anybody.

Keywords: journey, identity, expectation, tradition, single woman.

Ladies Coupé by Anita Nair spells out some bitter facts of women's life regardless of their geographical, cultural, religious, social or economic differences. Whatever they are, or whoever they are, they share one thing in common, that is, "affliction"; and the first site of this affliction is the family itself. This paper seeks to reveal how some of the women characters have acted as catalysts in the life of the protagonist of *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila, and have helped her liberate from her cocooned self. For this purpose I have adopted the critical-textual analysis of the fiction.

The novel opens with "a sense of escape" for Akhila, an escape from the inevitability of her life which demands her to do "what is expected of her" (Nair 2001, 1). Akhila has no life of her own except

the one prescribed by her family and/or expected of her by the society. She can dream of her wishes but cannot translate them into reality, as it will subvert her role of an unmarried, independent woman, who is in charge of her family. Though dutiful and the eldest, she is not allowed to think of her own. Her dreams and desires always take a back seat when it comes to her family. But the family consisting of her mother, two brothers, and one younger sister never appreciated her sacrifice, which is why “she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs. To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires... So this then is Akhila. Forty-five years old... Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect” (Nair 2001, 1-2).

A tragedy at an early stage of her life makes her a pre-mature adult forbidding her to dream young. Akhila’s father, the lone breadwinner of a South Indian Brahmin family, meets an accidental death, leaving the family forlorn. Being the eldest, she puts the yoke on her tender shoulders, becomes an income-tax clerk, and looks after the needs of her younger brother’s education, younger sister’s marriage, and even establishing the families of her brothers too. She plays the role of a daughter, sister, aunt, and provider; but she is never allowed to live her own life, never asked what she wants. Being the earning member and also because the job demanded long hours and tedious journey from home to office, Akhila was unable to perform the household chores. She also imagines if she would be able to cope up alone, if needed. The family tries their best to make her believe that a woman cannot survive alone and even if she tries, it will be a kind of hell for her. For long, she accepted this without any question.

Another aspect of the fiction, though related to the same question of woman’s Individuality, is the special ticket counter on an Indian railway station that was in existence before the early 1998. Those special counters were meant for senior citizens, women and handicapped. So, this was a kind of leveling of women along with the two other categories. Not only that, ladies coupés in most overnight trains with second class reservation were also in practice, putting women on the same footage with senior citizens and the handicapped. This practice was also trying to give a woman the same message that a

single woman cannot take care of herself and, like the elderly and handicapped people, she needs to be looked after by someone, in this case, of course, a male. Hence, the journey of a single, very much adult, Akhila in this all-women’s compartment, in search of an answer for her perennial question, “can a woman without a man be happy and contented?” All the time she is being admonished by her family that “A woman can’t live alone. A woman can’t cope alone” (Nair 2001, 16). She further says that at this juncture of life, “marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can’t live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself?” (Nair 2001, 21). She finds herself in an enclosure in which she can move round and round without arriving anywhere, or at any conclusion. But, as we shall see, it is some of the women who help her to come out of this vicious circle and go ahead in her life.

Akhila boards the train for Kanyakumari in search of a viable answer to what worries her. She is trying to convince herself that “a woman can live alone” (Nair 2001, 21). In fact, she joins other women travelers in the ladies coupé: Prabha Devi, Janki Devi, Margaret Shanti, fourteen-year-old Sheela, and Marikolanthu are all of different age group and come from diverse economical, cultural, social environment but somehow all have been denied their natural self to grow.

In the intimate atmosphere of ladies coupé, Akhila listens to their stories and shares her own with them. She is drawn into the most private moments of their lives, seeking in them a solution to the question that has been with her all her life: can a woman stay single and be happy, or does she need a man to make her complete? When she tosses the question to them, the wisest answer comes from Margaret Shanti. She says: “You should trust your instincts...You have to find your own answers. No one can help you do that” (Nair 2001, 21). Margaret is a Chemistry teacher who is well aware of the poetry of elements. But she is married to an insensitive tyrant, who is too self-absorbed to recognize her needs. Prabha Devi, on the other hand, is a perfect daughter and wife, who recognizes her worth after having a glimpse of a swimming pool. After learning to swim, she was able to “triumph over her innate timidity and rise above tradition to float”

(208). Similarly, there is Janki Devi, a pampered wife and confused mother, who leads a very sheltered life. Then, there is the fourteen-year-old Sheela, who is more matured than her parents and knows the people and their inner urge. Marikolanthu is another character, who is not very educated but well taught in the school of life. Her life is destroyed by one night of lust of a man. She becomes an unwed, unwilling mother, who bears her life as a kind of ‘use me but do not abuse me’ attitude. Other women characters whose lives figure in their conversation are Karpagam, Sujata Akka, Chettiar Amma, etc.

However, it is only Karpagam, Akhila’s school friend, who asserts herself as a woman without any guilt. It is she, who plays a catalyst in Akhila’s life and prepares her to look for a new dimension. She says to Akhila that she wears colorful clothes and jewelry though she is a widow. “Would you rather that I dressed in white and went about looking like a corpse ready for the funeral pyre?” (Nair 2001, 202). When Akhila asks how her family reacts, Karpagam says emphatically, “I don’t care what my family or anyone thinks. I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose...It has nothing to do with whether...her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn’t bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive...” (Nair 2001, 202). Akhila “realized with shame that while she had in the manner of a docile water-buffalo wallowed in a pond of self-pity allowing parasites to feast on her, Karpagam had gone ahead and learnt to survive” (Nair 2001,202). This meeting with her friend works as a catalyst in the life of Akhila as it brings her “out of...the dark and dismal hues of the world she had lived in for so long now.”

Now she is sure enough to do “what she intended to do with her life.” What Akhila hates most is not having an identity of her own. “She was always an extension of someone else’s identity...Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being...What Akhila most desired in the world was to be her own person...To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure...she didn’t want a husband. Akhila didn’t want to be a mere extension again” (Nair 2001, 200).

Now, Akhila defines happiness for Karpagam. She says: “Happiness is being allowed to choose one’s own life; to live it the way one wants. Happiness is knowing one is loved and having someone to love. Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow” (Nair 2001, 200).

For long, Akhila, has played the role of Chandra’s daughter; Narayan’s sister; Priya’s aunt; but now she wants to be herself. But the problem is that nobody is ready to listen to her or try to even understand her pain that she may want to live for herself as well.

Here, I am reminded of Anna’s (the central character in *Anna Karenina*) pangs when she utters if she would happen to be someone else apart from being mistress of Vronsky. She also suffers death-in-life because she was not able to establish her own independent ‘self’ and all the time either she was Karenin’s wife or Vronsky’s mistress that gnaws at her heart (Tolstoy 1877). But Akhila is now ready to face the truth.

When asked by her brother Narayan, “How will you cope? ... How can any woman cope alone?” (Nair 2001, 206). Akhila has her answer ready. She replies: “I know I can. I did once before when you were children. Now I can for me, for Akhilandeswari. Nobody’s daughter. Nobody’s sister. Nobody’s wife. Nobody’s mother” (Nair 2001, 206-7). Akhila wants to be herself; wants to live for her ‘own self’.

Then comes the turn of Marikolanthu, who thinks about the previous women passengers who “have all led such a sheltered lives.” She asks, “What do they know of life and the toll it takes? What do they know of how cruel the world can be to a woman?” (Nair 2001, 209). Marikolanthu is a working class woman, a domestic, who works at a doctor’s. Towards the end of the novel, as also the end of the journey, she tells her story of grit and determination of a woman to Akhila.

Once again, it is this illiterate, poor woman, who instills in Akhila not only the desire but also the will to survive at her own cost, bringing into her a kind of internal metamorphosis. From a very poor background, Marikolanthu helps her family by working for the same family where her mother works, from an early age. She is good-looking

and this goes against her. She is raped by one of the relatives of the Chettiar family but is unable to raise her voice because she is poor and belongs to a working class. As biology always goes against women in such cases, she has to give birth to a boy whom she never accepts. Only towards the end when the perpetrator of that injustice i.e. the man who had fathered the boy dies that she realizes the condition of her own son. For the first time she feels that whatever happened, it was not the crime committed by the boy and when this truth dawns upon her she accepts him wholeheartedly and says: “What was left in this world for me to hate... Murugesan was a smouldering heap of ashes. There was Muthu. But what could I hate him for? The bitterness unraveled...I felt shame...now all I wanted to be was Muthu’s mother....” (Nair 2001, 268).

This is the story of a woman who was “used by a long line of people” and then “discarded when their need was over”; yet she never loses the warmth of humanity in her and ultimately emerges as a strong human being by “wresting control of my destiny”; by accepting her responsibility towards her son who was born of an illegitimate father (Nair 2001, 268). Yes, a son cannot be that, only a father can be illegitimate if he is not ready to take the responsibility of the child.

While working for the Chettiar family, Marikolanthu comes to know the plight of these well-to-do women. They are well-fed, well-attired but compelled to lead a life of pseudo-respectability by their men which sometimes lead to insanity, as is the case with Chettiar Amma. These women are mere showcases and trophies. Their roles in the family are to attract their husbands and produce a male progeny, failing which their life is bound to turn poisonous. They are forced to accept the presence of their husbands’ concubines. Whether it is Chettiar Amma or Sujata Akka, all face the same fate. It is Marikolanthu who tries to alleviate their pain by acting as a balm in their lives. She takes care of Chettiar Amma and Sujata Akka both; but she is uncared for all her life. It shows different levels of women-bonding and how they stand for each other when needed.

These two women compel Akhila to think for herself without any sense of fear. If Karpagam acts as a catalyst in the life of Akhila,

Marikolanthu provides her strength enough to take hold of her destiny. Finally Akhila “throws her head back and voices her triumph” and is now ready to take control of her destiny (Nair 2001, 275).

References:

Nair, Anita. 2001. *Ladies Coupé*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Tolstoy, Leo. 1877. *Anna Karenina*. Translated by Constance Garnett (1901). Revised by Leonard J. Kent and Nina Berberova. New York: Random House, 1965.