

The Notion of Hegemonic Masculinity and Female Audacity in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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Abstract

Imperialism and the notion of Hegemonic masculinity are very closely connected in feminist discourse as it focuses a relationship of inequality and injustice. The idea of fraternity, equality and freedom along with the liberal philosophy of individualism made women to realize of the fact that it is the social process that determine her life. This bestowed to an extreme dislike among women to these so called tradition and custom. The more traditional a postcolonial society is, the more problematic the question of women's emancipation is. Therefore, the more passionate its women novelists like Anita Nair raise what many readers might consider taboo questions about the role of women in contemporary postcolonial India. This paper explores of how Anita Nair has presented an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which a woman is constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize her own strength. It further examines the description of her female characters in the novel Ladies Coupe, struggling side by side because of hegemonic masculinity but at the end has given them a gesture of audacity against patriarchy.

In Indian English Literature among the prominent writers Anita Nair is the most propitious and a writer to reckon with. She has authored some well known novels such as The Better Man, Ladies Coupe, Mistress, Lessons in Forgetting etc. Nair's characters suffer from a system of sex-role stereotyping and oppression of women that exist under patriarchal social organizations. In Ladies Coupe Anita Nair deals with the notion of hegemonic masculinity and signifies a relationship of inequality. The story is an effort to show how, in life oppression and suppression not always come in identifiable forms, but often under the guise of love, protection and the assurance of security. Though patriarchy is a general notion in every woman's life, the author depicts clearly and perfectly the diversity within each woman, as she did not want to put the lives of women to one ideal.

Ladies Coupe is one of the most appreciated novels in the realm of Indian Writing in English. It narrates the story of the protagonist Akhila along with her five fellow travellers travelling in a ladies coupe of a train. The projection of these characters seek struggle to create their identity and existence. These females are those who break the image of traditional and ideological women and speak against the conventions of patriarchy. These are the stories, which together make a single story, of women rediscovering their bodies. The coupe becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from hegemonic masculinity, one that is not characterized by false binaries.

Akhila who takes multiple roles of a daughter, aunt, sister and the bread winner of the family is the woman of twenty first century who demands equality and freedom to lead her life according to her wishes but Akhila is deprived of the same. She is the eldest child in the family so after the death of her father she takes the

burden of the entire family on her shoulders. As Indra Devi says, “Anita Nair probably hints at the family’s easy acceptance of hers as the head of the family on a place traditionally reserved for the patriarch in both colonial and post-colonial periods” (220). Akhila joins a job as an income tax clerk to meet her needs as well as for her family. Though she was the bread winner of the family, she was not considered as the head of the family and her needs and desires were least bothered. Akhila waited for Amma or her brothers Narayan and Narsi to say something about her marriage but they never asked, “What about you? You have been the head of the family ever since Appa died. Don’t you want a husband, children, and a home of your own?” (Ladies Coupe 77). In one instance Akhila’s mother expects her to get permission from her brothers, the men of the family to go on an office tour. Akhila’s encounter with her childhood friend awakened her spirit to think of a life to live her own. But even then there sprouted the patriarchal domination. Even in the modern society women are deprived of the status of equality in relationship. They don’t have asked to present their views about the marital relationship and the decision taken by the male members of the family. Sunita Sinha remarks,

Nair’s India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological background of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality” (149).

When Akhila firmly told her friend Padma about her idea to live alone, she without hesitance says, “Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they will let you live alone?” (Ladies Coupe 204). When Akhila says for her sheer audacity, “For heaven’s sake, I don’t need anyone’s consent” (204), Padma mocked at her telling, “They are men of the family” (204). Everyone including Padma, Narsi and Narayan were strongly rooted in the patriarchal structure and hence were unable to bear the idea of woman living alone. But Akhila’s audacity was stronger than theirs that she boarded the train to Kanyakumari. Akhila meets the five other travellers in the coupe – Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu. All the travellers in the coupe are very anxious to share their plight in their lives. They are aware that it is the first and last time of their meet and will never have a chance to meet again. Even though they differ in age, cultural upbringing and educational backgrounds, but their stories are woven in a common thread: the tragic predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal social order. Akhila listens to the stories of other characters and gives her too, seeking in them a solution to the question that troubled her all her life: “Can a woman live alone and by herself?” requires a new definition of marital relationship and its stability to maintain human culture and civilization. Simone de Beauvoir explains marriage as “The destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (The Second Sex 445). The novelist characterizes the main protagonist as a spinster and single women carrying the responsibilities of her family. It doesn’t mean that she lacks optimism towards life.

The protagonist had a love affair with Hari, a North Indian boy. It was a diminutive love affair though they made physical love several times. Hari was younger to her and they enjoy their life without getting married. This type of living culture shows that relationships are not bounded by time and age in the current perspective. In Indian culture, it is the rigidity of the society that male should be elder

than the female. So, Akhila immediately breaks the relationship and decides to stay single by saying: “Hari, this is goodbye. I will never see you again” because he was younger than her and she was bothered about the reaction of the society. She remarks “Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the questions in their minds: what is he doing with an older woman? That bothers me very much, Hari. It bothers me very much that we are not suited” (Ladies Coupe 153).

Akhila’s first companion Janaki is the oldest fellow traveller among the six passengers in the coupe. She is a pampered wife and confused mother who got married at the age of eighteen and had led forty years of comfortable married life. She believes in traditional marriage system and rituals. She is also of the view that in arranged marriage there is no insecurity and one can find the solution of any problems by the help of family members. She remarks:

I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son... women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves. (22-23)

She wasn’t aware of the unfavourable circumstances and her daily life swings between home and society. “Indian women are deeply linked to social, cultural, religious and regional features and their identity is thus multilayered” (Nubile 1). In her old age she was challenged by her son Siddharth’s rude behaviour. He says “You want everything done your way, your selfish way. If someone does not do it the way you want it done...get them do it” (Ladies Coupe 36). Janaki feels that she is losing her identity as a mother in the eyes of Siddharth. She decides not to stay with her son Siddharth and goes back to her husband to maintain her existence. It was too late to amend her life when she realised that even a strong and independent woman can make a good wife and good mother.

Margaret Shanti is another fellow traveller who is dominated by her husband Ebenezer Paulraj. He is like colonizer who is unable to see and praise the worth of his wife. Margaret is well educated woman and colonized by her husband whom she married at her own choice. She is a chemistry teacher and to show the power and importance of women she classifies herself as water among five elements that constitutes life. In the beginning stage Margaret could not understand the deep rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her too much love for him had made her blind. At times though she felt the pain of it she used to convince herself saying, “He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right”(Ladies Coupe 109). As Indra Devi says, “She silences her aspirations in order to what Ebenezer wants her to be” (220). Margaret wants to carry her further study and complete doctorate but Paulraj does not agree with her. He even goes to the extent of asking her to cut her long hair by commenting that it doesn’t suit her. With the passage of time she conceives and wants to give birth to her first child but Ebenezer persuades her to abort. Regarding abortion Beauvoir remarks “Abortion is considered a revolting crime to which it is indecent even to refer” (The Second Sex 502). Her husband doesn’t have any repentance for the idea of abortion but it was very painful to Shanti. Beauvoir remarks “Men tend to take abortion lightly they regard it as one of the humorous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature” (508). Shanti was so patient and gulped in all insults

thrown by him on her but later woke up to the fact and chooses another way to destroy his self respect and ego. She starts feeding him with oily food till he curves into a stout and becomes fatty. Shanti is a modern and educated woman who doesn't know to surrender before male chauvinism. She celebrates and accepts the notion of taking revenge successfully.

Prabha Devi is another fellow traveller is an accomplished woman who emphasises the issue of patriarchy. The narrator weaves the story fantastically to delineate the male chauvinism and the attitude of man towards the girl child in the modern society. As Suresh Kumar and Leema Rose say, "Patriarchy shows its ugly face from cradle to grave." When Prabha Devi is born his father sighs, as it would be a hindrance for his business progress as he says, "Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance"(Ladies coupe 169). On the contrary her mother is happy for the girl child. Though Prabha Devi's childhood had been this way, in future she grooms herself as a woman who can measure up her life with difference. She visits New York and gets impressed by the Western Culture and the rights of equality and freedom given to women. She learns how to swim and does not suppress her desire. She has her opinions and plans for her life. She is a conscious lady and freely talks to her husband about the first child plan and talks how it can be avoided until they want. The narrator portrays her as the changing and confident woman who is capable of running the livelihood and carrying the responsibility of the family as well the society. The novelist remarks:

She felt the years slip away from her. This body that had been the cause of much unhappiness, first with its excessive demands for gratification and then with an abrupt deadening of nerve ends, now melted. She was the blue of the pool and the water was she (Ladies Coupe 195).

The youngest fellow traveller among the six travelling in the coupe is Sheela. She is too young and hardly recognizes the meaning of masculinity and femininity. The narrator finely brought out the issue of female child abuse through the character portrayal of Sheela. She is afraid of man's behaviour as her friend Hasina's father tries to seduce her. As Judes Jalaja and Shunmuga Sundari observe, "Sheela's retrospection also touches on sexual abuse of girl children by older men" (122). Sexual exploitation of a girl displays the dark side of masculinity. Sheela felt ashamed and hurt at the unwanted touching of Hasina's father Nazar as, "One Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his forefinger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time" (Ladies Coupe 66). In the traditional society most of the girls don't share the shameful experience with anyone. Even today they are afraid of the society that it will in turn raise questions on her character that would not be bearable to them. So Sheela was unable to open her mouth against the physical abuse attempted on her. But she developed the confidence to protect herself from it in future for it is said, "Thereafter Sheela mopped her face with a hanky each time she entered Hasina's home" (66). Sheela loves her grandmother very much who is self confident and courageous even at the age of 69. She represents the strong femininity and every night she adorns herself before going to bed. Beauvoir remarks: "Woman is haunted by the horror of growing old" (The Second Sex 587). Sheela is represented as a rebel character who doesn't follow the

traditional customs and rituals. Sheela even goes to an extent of restricting herself in going to her friend's house as a means of her self-protection. Thus Sheela was strong in her audacity against a man's abuse on her physique.

Marikolanthu is one of the most pathetic women among the six travellers in the coupe. She is the victim of rape and is facing the identity crisis and survival in the society. Her mother warns about the male attitude towards women in the society. To ensure her mother's fear, her childhood innocence is destroyed when Murugesan attempts physical brutality on her. Her mother is least bothered about her feelings but worries that no one will marry her. Even when the matter is taken to the village head son Sridhar, he with little reluctance says, "The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she's making up a story about rape" (The Ladies Coupe 245). For her mother and Sujatha, a woman's life and protection lies in her husband. Marikolanthu on the other hand never wants to tie up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty- one she lives alone and wrestles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to rely upon her brothers nor wants a penny from Sujatha or her husband but decides to make her living of her own, working as a servant mid in a house. She always wants to define herself as an independent woman. Her strong defiance for the physical brutality attempted on her, evoke a strong aversion for her son Muthu.

Listening to the stories of various women in the coupe the protagonist Akhila gets down at Kanyakumari as an empowered woman to rediscover her 'self'. The more she wants to get rid of her life she had lived for others, she desires more of her life, that is more of Hari and excuses her decision to get reunited connected him over phone. Finally she succeeds in her audacity against hegemonic masculinity. The novel renegotiates and textualizes the problems of women which revolve around the socio-economic conditions and more significantly, situations that embellish the oddities of human relationships. Anita Nair has presented an increasingly common concept of patriarchy in which a woman is constrained by tradition to be dependent on men, crippled to realize her own strength. She has presented her characters struggling side by side because of hegemonic masculinity but at the end has given them a gesture of audacity against patriarchy. Her characters have been portrayed as knowledgeable, reasoning women who are not contended with the injustice and rebellion against them. So, Anita Nair's characters raise the question of their way of life consolidated by hegemonic masculinity, and looks it not only as the site of their suppression at home and in society but also make it a battle field to destroy their oppressors. Their stands an evolving awareness of the self as a victimized woman followed by a gradual development that breaks the barriers of discrimination only to emerge as a stronger woman to fight the world alone.

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