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Anita Nair's *The Ladies Coupe*: An Enroute To Feminine Consciousness

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Abstract

Anita Nair's *The Ladies Coupe* is itself a literary journey into the world of rediscovery, reimagining and reawakening of feminine consciousness; a cluster of anecdotes weaving a pattern of fabricated motifs exposing the afflictions of 'the other.' Feminine subjectivity has always been put into custody to prove its significance amidst the bounties of phallic nature. Body has received vehement tortures and blows to stand erect against the supreme soul which has already been declared the sine qua non of human existence by the classical philosophers. But as days passed by the soul receded to the back and the body blossomed into prominence. Body is a powerful symbolic form in which metaphysical undertaking of culture is impressed upon. Body is the direct locus of social control which manifests itself through a series of cultural, political activities vis –a–vis the generic power of womanhood. But women are transformed into docile bodies whose energies and forces are habituated to external regulation, subjection and oppression. The body and its gestures often become the canvas over which she and its society struggle for vehement control. Helene Cixous's powerful dictates over writing the body had phenomenal responses from various corners and women propagated proudly "the more body the more writing." The body which speaks clearly exposes the multiple inflictions on it and in other way the mutilations on the body has their own voices. Female sexualisation is thus a counterpart of a valid requirement of the existence of a language which is sublime with respect to the bodies. Thus rediscovering one's own body is parallel to subjectivising female hood, awakening feminine consciousness and establishing own valid identity in a patriarchal societal framework.

Keywords: Female Body, Feminine Consciousness, Identity, Femininity, Subjectivity, Phallic nature

Body and self are the two faces of the same coin which are often put into contestations by several critics of different periods. If body is mutilated does self cease to exist or if self loses



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its potential does body die? These are some of the questions which the feminists have tried to answer from past historical times but have still remained open ended. Self is one's own awareness of his/her individuality channelized through different societal norms. The interaction of society and individual results in the development of self and if it is a patriarchal society then undoubtedly that particular self has to be truncated, holds no question at all. Patriarchies in various ways have debased, repressed and humiliated female subjectivity and have often made them unheard in social, cultural, economic and literary structures. Anita Nair raises such important queries in the minds of her readers when she unfolds the stories of six different women belonging to different social and cultural background but is in unison being victims of patriarchal oppressive systems. They have yet another common thread of unanimity, all of them being in a single ladies coupe of a train travelling to unknown places just to escape their claustrophobic existence. The novel questions such important issues as to whether the role of Indian women, being representative of all other women living under patriarchal repression in relation to culture resistance, is restricted only to being wives and mothers or move beyond them. Can a woman cease to exist if cut off from convenient patriarchal links or find happiness in her own way is the most crucial aspect which Nair's extols in her novel.

Akhila is a forty-five year old Brahmin woman who is sick and tired of feeding each one of her family by being daughter, sister, aunt seeks a get-away from this claustrophobic condition and thus moves forward. An income tax clerk by profession, Akhila has to take care of her dependants after her father's death and cannot live her own life. She has to live the lives of others to whom she is betrothed and she starts hating this secluded life without variegated flavours. "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone." is what her family has taught her from the very childhood and she was struggling hard to prove this a myth. A woman feels comfortable within the threshold of her house and the moment she comes out of her comfortable zone she feels insecure- socially, culturally, economically. Marriage constricts the individuality of women and makes a wife cripple under the blows of marital commitments. Janaki, an elderly woman gets married off at an early age of eighteen and becomes a doll in the hands of her husband Prabhakar. A pampered and protected wife she later relents her own submissiveness. Prabhakar's over-bearing dominance, precision irritates Janaki and she cries out: "You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding."(30) A woman always looked after by her husband and then her son cannot just imagine that a woman can live without a man and at the same time akins herself to a fragile doll. They were more like friends than husband and wife and the camaraderie they shared was one of mutual trust and compassion. She sometimes felt weak because her husband helped her in all possible ways making her incomplete and inadequate. Margaret is another fellow passenger who learns her own means of living to sustain herself in this phallic world. Her husband Ebenezer Paulraj is an epitome of male dominance who controls and manoeuvres



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her actions and makes her dull and prosaic. He manipulated her vibrant spirits and made a brilliant girl into an average woman. He was so fascinated with her bubbly girlish mien that he curbed her possibility of becoming a matured mother by ordering to abort her child. A woman who finds fulfilment in her motherhood could not take this patriarchal repression and fights back in her own way to teach him a lesson. She applies his own tools to avenge on his deeds and passes the ball in his court transforming him from a tyrannical teacher- husband to a pathetic being. Margaret's hatred towards her husband is reflected through her outbursts: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZER PAULRAJ. HATE HIM. HATE HIM. (98) In order to make her husband distant from her she made herself loathsome by putting on loads of weight but the day her gold fish died she realised that it is not she who should sacrifice but the other way round. She started comparing her state to water that moistens, that heals, that flows tirelessly and that destroys. Ebenezer's love for food and sex becomes a tool for her and she starts pampering him with both and as a result he becomes fat, unhealthy, heavy and unattractive. He loses his haughtiness and started becoming more and more dependent on Margaret and thus the whip changes hand and Margaret starts controlling his life once who restrained hers. Margaret's depression, silence, physical torments and mental traumas got an outlet through her own power and confidence. A woman capable of nurturing thousand hands can also make them crippled if circumstances thrust her to do so. Sheela another co-passenger is a teenage girl who tries to visualise the depth of relationships between persons who mean the most to her. A fourteen year old sensitive girl with a keen and deep insight looks within the relationships and attaches herself so closely with her grandmother that her death completely shatters her and brings her to the ground reality. Her grandmother makes her aware of certain practical things which she as a child could never realise till her demise. Sheela's father is another role model of patriarchy who tries to control her daughter's life and the way she talks and behaves. She is often rebuked for speaking to boys and for her curt replies. When Sheela's grandmother dies of cancer she dresses her gaudily with saree and jewellery because she remembered her words: "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror your reflection should make you feel happy."(67). She thus made her soul feel that bliss in heaven by ornamenting her body beautifully. A fourteen year old girl thus rediscovers her own happiness through her grandmother and reawakens into a matured selfhood. Prabhadevi another elderly co-occupant of the coupe suddenly became reminiscent of her own life at the fag end and truly realised "what was I doing all this while?" Her very birth was a burden to her father who longed for a son to further extent his jewellery store and considered a daughter to be a bloody nuisance. A girl from high end family got married to an equally well to do diamond merchant and remained lifelong a very precious thing not to be used much. Her marriage created a vacuum in her mother's life which nothing but a daughter can only fill up with. Like her mother Prabha's own life also ended up in being a rich man's wife, begetting his child, looking after



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in-laws and similar other mundane things. Prabha becomes oblivious to all things once water creeps between her toes and completely drenches her from top to toe and gives her ecstatic pleasure. Prabha who once coloured herself into western ambience, felt comfortable in silk caftans than sarees led a wanton life changed into a submissive docile wife her mother always wanted her to be. The story of Marikolundhu, a woman from rural setting, stricken with abject poverty, a prey into the hands of lascivious men is in itself the culmination of all other stories. She is raped, mutilated, exploited and at the last she is the person to be blamed: “Why does a young woman walk alone?” She is a bold woman who defies those traditions which link a woman with a man and embraces woman empowerment and enlightenment through education. The struggle for a poor downtrodden woman for emancipation is more difficult than a woman from urban class but Marikolundhu shows enough power and resoluteness to stand against the injustice perpetrated on her and fights back in her way to create a healthy atmosphere around her. She in spite of all her exploitations by different persons stands erect and tries to carve a space for herself to live her life in her own way. The physical inflictions on her body could not bow down her mental strength and despite all that happened to her she wanted to openly defy patriarchal dominion and male hegemony. The child from her exploitation became a thorn of her life that often bled her and she hated her son more and more but the day the sinner died she realised that she has condemned her son for no fault of his and later calls him back to her and finds a new lease of life with her son.

The ladies coupe ultimately becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that all the women try to create for them shaking all the ties with their male counterparts who always constrict their living socially, culturally, economically. It is a literary tour de force where each of the female protagonists seek their own way of living and finally discover a common thread of binding themselves by abandoning their mundane monotaneity through self-discovery. Each one of them rediscovers one’s own body and feels awakened from deep slumber for millions of ages. A get-away from all the trivialities of material world is what they sought after and the main protagonist Akhila finds a suitable solace from this claustrophobic condition which is estrangement and alienation. Can a woman live alone still remains the crux of all questions and each one of them withdraws from their familial world to get an answer to this particular question in respective ways.

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