

Subversion of Domestic Tyranny in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

The present research examines the subversion of domestic tyranny in Anita Nair's celebrated novel, *Ladies Coupe* (2001). It investigates how the protagonist, Akhila, and her fellow travellers in a women-only railway compartment utilize storytelling as a tool for resistance and identity reconstruction. By sharing their personal narratives of oppression within the domestic sphere, these women challenge patriarchal structures that confine them to roles of service and submission. The study analyses how the protagonist, Akhila, and her fellow travellers dismantle the "institutionalized intimate control" of their domestic lives. The paper highlights Nair's portrayal of female agency, the reclaiming of physical and emotional space, and the transformative power of female solidarity. Through a qualitative analysis of the characters' journeys, the paper argues that the novel reframes the domestic sphere not as a static site of suffering, but as a space that can be subverted through female solidarity, economic independence, and the reclamation of the self.

Keywords: Domestic Tyranny, Female Agency, Identity Reconstruction, Patriarchal Subversion, Storytelling.

Introduction

Literature frequently reflects the intricate dance between societal expectations and individual autonomy, particularly within the context of Indian womanhood. Anita Nair, a prominent voice in contemporary Indian writing in English, recognized for her uncompromising portrayal of complex social issues and the suffering of women within traditional structures. She is renowned for her profound exploration of gender, identity, and resistance. In her novel *Ladies Coupe*, Nair delves into the lives of women who seek to reclaim their selfhood from the stifling grip of domestic tyranny and she offers a more optimistic blueprint for resistance. The "domestic space," often idealized as a sanctuary, frequently serves as a site of both oppression and subtle resistance. In the Indian context, women are often conditioned to embody archetypes of the ideal wife or daughter—obliging, composed, and defined by the needs of their male relatives. *Ladies Coupe* subverts these norms by centering on a middle-aged woman, Akhila, who embarks on a solo train journey to Kanyakumari. This physical journey mirrors an internal quest for identity, as she questions whether a woman can truly live alone and be happy. This paper seeks to analyse *Ladies Coupe* as a narrative of subversion, where the "erasure of the self" is countered by a strategic rebuilding of identity.



Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine how Anita Nair portrays the subversion of domestic tyranny through the lived experiences and narratives of women in *Ladies Coupe*, focusing on their journey from oppression to self-realization and examine the strategies used by the female characters to subvert it. It aims to investigate the various forms of patriarchal dominance within the home, explore how storytelling serves as a mechanism for resistance and self-realization and analyse the role of female solidarity in empowering women to challenge societal constraints.

Literature Review

In recent years, much research has been done on Anita Nair's work that emphasizes the fluid and evolving nature of female identity in the face of patriarchal structures. While studies on *Lessons in Forgetting* highlight "forgetting" as a rejection of oppressive norms, analysis of *Ladies Coupe* often focuses on the "journey" as a transformative process.

Scholars like Yadav and Rohitashwani (2024) note that female characters in Nair's fiction are often conditioned to internalize societal expectations, subordinating their identities within domestic spaces. However, betrayal or disillusionment such as Akhila's realization of her family's parasitic dependence on her triggers a questioning of these roles. Identity reconstruction, as Revathi and Jayashankar (2022) argue, is not immediate but occurs through resilience and self-awareness. By sharing their "shards" of memory, the women in the coupé rebuild a coherent sense of self. Another major area of scholarship focuses on identity formation and self-discovery as acts of resistance against domestic oppression.

Ritu Awasthy and Vijayanand explain that the women in the novel experience social impediments because patriarchal society suppresses female desires and aspirations. However, through introspection and narration, the characters gradually attain self-awareness and autonomy (Awasthy and Vijayanand 1779).

Similarly, P. Ishwariya and B. Ajantha argue that women in patriarchal societies struggle to establish identities independent of familial expectations. Their study highlights Akhila's transformation from a submissive daughter into a self-aware individual who seeks emotional and personal freedom (Ishwariya and Ajantha 14).

Abisha Jasmine Suganthi and V. Karunanithi interpret the train journey itself as symbolic of psychological liberation. Applying Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, they argue that the women's multiple voices create a space for self-confrontation and identity reconstruction (Suganthi and Karunanithi). These scholars suggest that the process of narration allows women to resist silence and redefine themselves beyond patriarchal domestic roles.

Contemporary critics increasingly examine domestic tyranny as emotional and psychological violence. Pujarinee Mitra's influential study "Malignant Care: Affects and Labor in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*" argues that women are burdened with unpaid emotional labor within heteronormative patriarchal families. Mitra explains that the female characters resist oppressive systems through subtle emotional defiance and alternative forms of care (Mitra).

The study further highlights how domestic oppression intersects with caste, age, and gender hierarchies, making the women's experiences multidimensional. Mitra's analysis expands earlier feminist readings by showing that domestic tyranny operates through emotional expectations and caregiving responsibilities as much as through overt authority.

This perspective is particularly relevant because it interprets resistance not as open rebellion alone but also as quiet emotional subversion within oppressive domestic structure



Methodology

This paper “Subversion of Domestic Tyranny in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*” adopts a qualitative research approach, employing a descriptive methodology to analyse the primary text. Textual analysis of *Ladies Coupe* is used to examine key themes, character interactions, and the representation of subversion. Close reading and thematic coding identify domestic tyranny and subversion. Particular attention is given to how the protagonist and her companions negotiate emotional trauma and patriarchal constraints during their journey. Secondary sources, including existing research on Indian women's writing and feminist theory, provide a broader socio-cultural context. Liberal and radical feminist theories frame character-wise analysis of narratives, contrasting household oppression with the *Ladies Coupe* as liberating space.

Analysis of *Ladies Coupe*

Breaking the Chains of Domesticity

Akhila from Provider to Person

Ladies Coupe celebrates the lawlessness against women in the society. All the six women characters of the novel have witnessed and discrimination. The feminist novelists like Anita Nair have exposed the women psyche. She also shows how to revolt against the gender discrimination.

Akhila’s life has been defined by the roles of the dutiful daughter and the breadwinner for an ungrateful family. Following her father's death, she sacrificed her own desires to sustain her mother and siblings. In many ways, her experience mirrors that of Meera in *Lessons in Forgetting*, who was "perfectly trained" to care only for her husband’s wishes. The novelist remarks "Akhila, forty-five years old. Sans rose coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming off escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (Nair 2). She is the best child in the family so after the death of her father all the responsibilities come her shoulder. She takes up a job as an income tax clerk to fulfil the requirements of the family. Akhila criticises how even in the well-equipped and civilized society women are still deprived of equality in relationships. Once she talks about the equality in marriage, her mother remarks:

There is no such thing as an equal marriage. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one's equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one's station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man's role. Or the gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage (Nair 14).

Akhila’s domestic tyranny is not marked by physical violence but by emotional exploitation and the total erasure of her personal identity for the sake of the family collective. Her decision to buy a one-way ticket is her first overt act of resistance a reclaiming of her right to exist outside of her domestic functions.

Through the stories of Janaki, Margaret Paulraj, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolanthu, Nair illustrates that domestic tyranny takes many forms from the subtle belittling of a wife's intelligence to the brutal violation of a woman's body. Janaki represents the traditional wife who eventually realizes that her "composed" life was a surrender of self. Margaret Paulraj subverts her husband's dominance by using his own obsession with chemistry to subtly control him, demonstrating resistance through intellectual manipulation. Prabha Devi reclaims her identity through the simple act of learning to swim, symbolizing a physical and psychological immersion into her own desires rather than her husband's.



The Power of the Coupe as Shared Narratives

The setting of the "ladies coupe" is central to the novel's subversive power. It functions as a "liminal space" a threshold between the oppressive domestic sphere and the unknown public world. While patriarchal society often uses gender-segregated spaces to ensure the "safekeeping" of women, Nair subverts this by transforming the compartment into a "homosocial and homoemotive safe space". Within this enclave, the hierarchies of class and age are secondary to the shared experience of being female in a restrictive society. The ladies' coupe functions as a liminal space where societal rules are temporarily suspended.

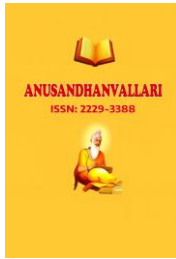
Female Solidarity as a Path to Autonomy

Nair emphasizes that "female solidarity" is essential for resisting domestic erasure. The bond formed between the women in the coupe mirrors the "combined empathy and shared resilience" necessary for social empowerment. This solidarity provides a "pragmatic" form of feminism, suggesting that individual rebellion is strengthened when it is part of a collective understanding. The issues of marriage system come in the centre of the discussion. Each one has contrary view regarding the marriage as an institution and the importance of men in women's life. Akhila remarks "As far as I am concerned, 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. Can woman live by herself?" (Nair 21). The question "can a woman live alone and by herself?" Is a question which requires a new definition of marital relationship and its stability to maintain man culture and civilization in the modern context Simone de Beauvoir, a renowned French feminist defines marriage as "The destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beavoir 445).

Subversion as a Transformative Process

Nair depicts resistance as a "multifaceted process". For Akhila, listening to these stories is a lesson in "reclaiming the self". Like the characters in *Lessons in Forgetting* who use memory as a tool for reconstruction, Akhila uses the collective memory of the coupe to dismantle the patriarchal narratives that have defined her. She moves from a state of "total dependency" to an "economically and emotionally independent" individual. A key aspect of subverting tyranny in the novel is the reclamation of the female body. Whether it is Akhila's decision to travel alone or Prabha Devi's immersion in the water, these acts challenge the domestic confinement that seeks to keep the female body "docile". The novel portrays "freedom as simply the ability to choose oneself," which includes choosing how one's body moves through the world.

Janaki is the oldest fellow traveller among the six passengers in the coupe. She believes in traditional marriage system so she favours the arranged marriage as her marriage took place. She is of the view that in arranged marriage there is no insecurity one can find solutions of all problems by the help of family members where as in forms of marriage people lose the support and affection of the society. She expresses the benefits of arranged marriage and her status in the family "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 princes" (Nair 22-23). Since the ancient time women are taught that male is superior to female and a husband is equal to god. The patriarchal society imposed the ethics that the duty of a woman is to serve her husband and follow what he wishes. Janaki is also instructed to the male chauvinism after the marriage "He is your husband and you must accept whatever he does" (Nair 25). One day her sense of identity and self-esteem is crushed in son's house and she realizes that a woman needs to be stronger and independent.



Discussion

Ladies Coupe can be viewed through the lens of Postcolonial Feminism, which highlights the layered oppression faced by women in culturally conditioned societies. The novel reveals how identity is shaped by internalized gender norms, such as the idea that "a woman always learns to adjust". By the end of the journey, Akhila realizes that she does not need to be a "Zeus" or have one to be complete. The subversion of domestic tyranny in the novel is not necessarily about the destruction of the home, but the reconstruction of the woman's place within it or outside of it. It celebrates "individual strength and resilience" against "patriarchal conventions". The novel provides an intricate portrayal of a woman's struggle to reclaim her selfhood. Through the protagonist Akhila, Nair demonstrates that reclaiming the self is a dynamic and transformative process involving both internal and external acts of resistance. By the journey's end, Akhila decides that "how she decides the trajectory of her life is for her, and her alone, to deal with". The novel ultimately suggests that identity is not fixed but is continuously negotiated through the resistance of imposed roles.

Scope for Further Research

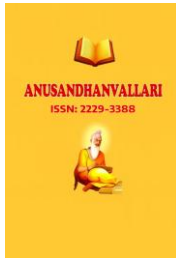
This study focuses on textual analysis of *Ladies Coupe*, further research can adopt a comparative approach with other Indian women writers to examine varied portrayals of domestic tyranny and to trace evolving patterns of domestic resistance. Present study focuses mainly on middle-class women. An intersectional study examining caste and class dimensions, or a reader-response analysis of contemporary women's reception, would enrich understanding of domestic tyranny beyond the middle-class setting. Empirical research can be done on how contemporary Indian women readers receive and interpret the novel's message of subversion.

Conclusion

Ladies Coupe Nair presents a class conscious society, through the character of the protagonist's mother. It is a focus on the fact how such class distinctions fail to help and see the inner feelings of people like Sarasa mami, though she belongs to the same Brahmin community, but blames her when she chooses the means of selling her daughter's flesh to make her living. Also it highlights the fact how justice is denied for the poor, as that in the case of Marikolanthu that had been the root cause of all her agonies. Nair's *Ladies Coupe* depicts domestic tyranny as normalized patriarchal control, subverted through female solidarity and storytelling. The coupé becomes a transformative space where women reclaim agency, proving that micro-resistances within households can dismantle systemic oppression and redefine Indian womanhood.

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