

Loneliness as a Catalyst for Self-Discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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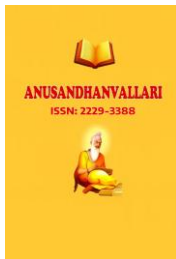
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Abstract: In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, loneliness works as a catalyst for self-realization as the characters undergo emotional and psychological journeys to discover their true selves. The novel brings into light, the self-discovering journey of Akhila, a middle-aged woman who has spent almost all her life fulfilling familial duties and societal expectations. Her journey of self-discovery commences when she embarks on a train journey alone. It is through Akhila's narration and the stories of the other women she meets in the ladies' coupe, Nair examines the deep impact of solitude and its consequences on the lives of women. She also surveys how loneliness allows women to introspect into the past and to empower themselves. This paper is an attempt to study how the novel unveils the theme of loneliness as a space for emotional development, reflection of beliefs or challenging pre-existing beliefs. Women are also given opportunities in par with men, to free themselves from being tied down under societal pressures that have been imposed upon them. Through the character of Akhila, one can distinctly observe how isolation results in realizing her desires and needs. Loneliness is responsible for her self-identification and transformation.

Keywords: Loneliness, Self-realization, Self-discovery, Solitude and Emotional Growth.

Anita Nair can be termed as one of the best selling novelists in the contemporary Indian English Literature. She is a versatile writer who has penned novels, short stories, poems, essays and travelogues. Though she has explored themes related to feminism in many of her works, she doesn't like to be labelled as a 'feminist writer'. Apart from feminism, she has contributed a variety of themes like gender inequality, self-identification, family, relationships and social status. Most of her works retain the scenic landscape of Kerala as the backdrop because it was her birthplace and that was where she pursued her higher education too. Her first collection of short stories *Satyr of the Subway* paved way for her literary career by meriting her with a fellowship from the Virginia Centre for the Creative Arts. Soon after the publication of *Ladies Coupe* (2001), it was nominated as one of the best five novels in India. Her novels *The Better Man* (1999) and *Ladies Coupe* (2001) have been translated into 21 languages. She is the receiver of many prestigious awards in addition to Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2012). Anita Nair has treated 'loneliness' as the predominant theme in her novel *Ladies Coupe*. The word 'loneliness' can be defined as feeling isolated even when surrounded by a number of people. It isn't a product of lack of social contact, rather it emerges when a person feels emotionally detached from the people around them. The struggles encountered by Indian women due to loneliness, their efforts to overcome loneliness, and journey towards self-realization are vividly illustrated by Nair. Akhilandeswari, referred to as Akhila in the novel is introduced to the readers as a 45-year-old spinster. Gradually, when the pages move on, the readers get a detailed account of Akhila's character. She is a typical Indian woman who sacrifices everything for the sake of her family. She emerges to be the head of the family soon after the sudden demise of her father. Her sacrifices are immeasurable and she has remained single from then on, in order to provide a good education and a decent life to her siblings. In the long run, she loses her identity. She grows doubtful about her identity and enquires herself, "...who is Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (LC 84). In the eyes of her family, Akhila ceased to be a woman at all. She feels disillusioned and disheartened when her brothers decide to marry, instead of shouldering the family's responsibilities. The biggest irony is they don't even consider about Akhila's marriage. Nair has captured the emotions of Akhila, suppressing her desire to get married. "Akhila waited for Amma or Narayan to say something. To broach the subject of Akhila's



marriage. When they didn't Akhila swallowed the hurt she felt... In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already been metamorphosed into a spinster" (LC 77). In an article titled 'Epitomising Women Through a Vociferous Protest: A Deconstruction Reading of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', Vidya and Baskaran have written, "Akhila is not given the opportunity by her family to get married and have a family as traditions dictate; she is rather expected to provide" (202). In the article entitled, 'Quest for Identity and Self-Discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', Venibha and Dr.D.L. Jaisy commented, "For twenty-six years, with her job in the Income Tax Department, Akhila was able to give everything, time, money and care to her mother and siblings. Her behaviour was ideal according to the deepest promptings of culture which appealed to the role she had to play and not to her identity" (6).

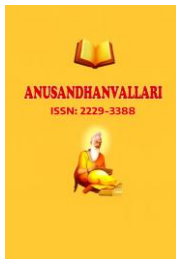
Akhila's decision to take a break and undergo a journey of self-discovery can be regarded as an awakening in her soul. Just a few days ahead she undertakes the journey, she bumps into her school friend Karpagam, a widow. To her surprise, Karpagam is indifferent to the deep-rooted beliefs of widowhood and she continues to wear the marks of married women. Akhila feels emotionally elevated by Karpagam's ideals and her style of living inspires Akhila. "...it is Karpagam who is able to instil a sense of self-worth in Akhila which makes her decide to live her life on her own terms and not to be dictated by other members of the family who are actually dependent on her" (Indra 130).

Akhila has learnt the need to live for herself. "...Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (LC 3). She considers Kanyakumari as a place of rescue, a spot where Swami Vivekananda found answers to the questions that surged in his mind. Akhila is pretty sure she will regain herself with this journey and it will enable her to find an answer to the question "Can a woman live by herself?" (LC 21). Akhila really has a tough time to convince her family members to let her travel alone. Her determination and quest to find out her lost self, forces her to defy her brother Narsi for the first time. Vidya and Baskaran have commented, "Akhila has to undergo many ordeals as the new liberated woman. She has never been allowed to live her own life" (200). Akhila liberates herself from the familial bond that clutches her and embarks on a journey towards self-discovery.

Margaret Shanthi's life reveals that even educated women fall a victim to the patriarchal dogmas. Her love for her husband Ebenezer blinds her and she forgoes her ambition of pursuing research in Chemistry. Like a puppet, she dances to his tunes but gradually loses her self-identity. She is utterly engrossed and charmed by his words. She even goes to the extent of abortion, to please her loving husband. Eventually, she realizes the ruination of her soul and feels alienated.

Ebenezer always considered himself to be more intelligent than Margaret. During a coterie, he butts in and says, "She's not a great one for discussions. She doesn't have an opinion about anything..." (LC 127). Commenting on this Vidya and Baskaran have expressed, "Due to perceived threat there is a passive submission in Margaret. She is helpless, depressed, have a poor self-image and suffer from self-devaluation" (203). When his domineering attitude reaches its pinnacle, Margaret is forced to act. The tool that she takes up to retaliate is too modest. She overfeeds her bossy husband, transforming him into a fatso, killing his ego and domineering his nature. Unless Margaret has done such a thing, she would not have regained her lost self. Payal Jain has written, "... despite being an independent working woman she is unable to free herself from the structures of security that the institution of marriage offers" (119). In an article entitled 'A Post-Colonial Reading of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*', Indira Nityanandam has expressed, "...Margaret Shanthi develops the ability to work for her own independent identity" (130).

The narration of Prabha Devi, flaunts the life of every housewife who loses herself and lives a borrowed life. Unlike other women, Prabha Devi is very well aware of her self-worth. She consciously submerges herself into patriarchy and when she awakens from the trance, she is over forty. Payal Jain writes, "Resistance and



submission mark the life of Prabha Devi equally as she goes through different phases of life... she emerges as a woman who is conscious of her identity as a woman, but, at the same time, is at ease with herself" (119). The quest for emancipation fosters a strong determination in her soul and she succeeds in coming out of the web she has spun around herself. "...she had discovered that desire spawns desire; fulfilment begets fulfilment" (LC 195). Agrawal has shared his opinion, "Prabha Devi overcame her innate timidity and emerged as a bold, assertive new woman" (46).

Among all the characters in the novel *Ladies Coupe*, the one who suffers the most is Marikolanthu. She suffers exploitation and physical abuse yet she manages to liberate herself. Her journey towards self-discovery is entirely different from the rest of the women in the novel. Marikolanthu, the poor girl who works in a wealthy clan is sexually assaulted by Murugesan. This incident transforms her life drastically. She runs away from reality. Alienating herself from the world, she is left alone to deal with the unwanted child. She experiences the harshest form of abandonment from the society and also from the circumstances.

Despite all her sufferings, Marikolanthu emerges as a stoic woman, strong enough to defy life. Instead of yielding to the societal beliefs, she makes painful decisions to overcome isolation and she succeeds in that. "...she gives a bold challenge to all the problems which confront her... Rather than accepting her destiny passively, with stoic resilience she does everything which would give her some respite..." (Jain 120). Marikolanthu's words shows her self-assurance attitude and indifference to others, "I'm not ashamed. I'm sorry. I am not ridden with guilt. I did what I thought I had to do" (LC 257).

Ladies Coupe is an excellent commentary on the theme of loneliness which acts as a catalyst for self-realization and self-discovery. Anita Nair does not merely present loneliness as a theme but as a transformative force to liberate the characters from self-suffering. It also enables the readers to realize alienation not as a sign and symbol of weakness but as an indispensable phase leading towards emancipation and self-empowerment. The story of these women resonate with innumerable struggles faced by them trying to balance the societal expectations and personal aspirations. Akhila's decision to redefine her life is an excellent example that states true liberation lies in identifying one's own desires and chasing it rather than conforming to the societal expectations. It is undoubtedly one of the best contributions to feminist literature.

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