

## From Self-denial to Self-discovery : An Exploration into Contemporary Feminine Psyche in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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**Abstract.** The novel *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair examines gender concern, female empowerment and the oppressive design of patriarchal standards. Nair highlights the complexities of feminist agony and emphasises the transformational potential of making free-will decisions through the protagonist, Akhila. By choosing to go alone, Akhila breaks the existing social norms and upends preconceived ideas about what a woman's place in Indian culture is. Regardless of their age or marital situation, Nair emphasizes that women have their own individuality and should be allowed the opportunity to make decisions about their life. In her novel, Nair examines several facets of patriarchal institutions and criticizes how they affect women's life. The author reveals the repressive design and cultural expectations that govern women's behaviour as revealed in the experiences of the women Akhila meets along the way. Nair draws attention to the restrictions placed on women by marriage, the exploitation of women's bodies, and the few options available to them to realize their potential. She is critical of prevailing socio-cultural mindset regarding women folk and pleads for the emergence of society that empowers women rather than stifles them by exposing these difficulties. Nair emphasizes the necessity for gendered spaces where women may freely express themselves without being constrained by society by creating a distinct norm for weaker sex by allowing characters to discuss their experiences and aspirations, the ladies coupé transforms into a microcosm of female lives, generating a sense of sisterhood and empowerment. Nair deftly makes use of this constrained setting to question gender stereotypes and portray the path toward emancipation of women.

**Keywords :** Female agony; gendered spaces; exploitation; journey of Liberation; female empowerment.

### Introduction

Anita Nair, a renowned writer born in Kerala, is celebrated for her contributions as a novelist, journalist, short story writer, and poet. Throughout the 20th century, many novels in India focused on women's issues and their status in society. Notable female Indian English fiction writers such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anita Nair have depicted a feminist portrayal of Indian women.

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In Indian English fiction, these women writers analyze women's issues, the complex dynamics between men and women, and the victimization of women by a patriarchal society. Anita Nair, a bestselling author, has had two of her novels, *Better Man* and *Ladies Coupé*, translated into multiple languages worldwide. She has also received recognition for her other works, including *Magical Indian Myth*, *Mistress*, *Adventure of Nonu*, and *Living Next Door to Alive*. *Ladies Coupé* is considered Nair's most acclaimed novel, elevating her status as a creative writer and feminist voice. As regard idea of writing the novel Nair mentions the inspiration which led her to create this masterpiece, "Some years ago, I was buying a ticket and I found this special ladies line clubbed with the handicapped and senior citizens. I was a little disturbed by the blatant inequality and wanted to write about it" (Vasanthakumari, 116). Further, "The woman's compartment—the so-called Ladies Coupé—is a clear example of a gendered spatiality, where women are sheltered from the outer male world" (Bausman, 59; Nubile, 60). Literature serves as a reflection of our society, and through her writing, Anita Nair reveals the social realism of women's conditions in Indian patriarchal society. Women were previously defined solely by their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives, but now they have become more conscious of their individual identities. In Nair's novel *Ladies Coupé*, the voice of women in contemporary post-colonial India is strongly articulated. The book features diverse female characters and explores their life experiences. These women share their stories, highlighting how they have been exploited in a male-dominated society. *Ladies Coupé* takes readers on a journey of self-discovery and serves as a discourse on femininity. Nair vividly depicts the challenges faced by women, drawing from her own observations and experiences. One such experience occurred when she was traveling in a ladies' coupé, which deeply impacted her perspective.

The novel *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair examines gendered settings, female empowerment, and the debasement of women caused by patriarchal standards. The novel, which was first published in 2001, recounts the journey of Akhila, a middle-aged lady, as she boards a train that transforms into a metaphor for self-discovery and emancipation. Nair's writings question societal taboos, investigate the complexity of women's lives in a male-dominated culture, and challenge established gender norms. The representation of gendered places, the portrayal of female autonomy, and an overall critique of patriarchal institutions are all examined critically in this article.

### **Female Agency and Protest Against Suppressive Mechanism of Patriarchy**

Nair emphasizes the value of female agency and the transformational potential of making free-will decisions through the protagonist, Akhila. By choosing to go alone, Akhila breaks the existing social norms and upends preconceived ideas about what a woman's place in Indian culture is, "Has anyone of you ever asked me what my desires were or what my dreams are? Did anyone of you ever think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do?" (*Ladies Coupe'*, 206). Regardless of their age or marital situation, Nair emphasizes that women have agency and should be allowed the opportunity to make decisions about their life. The author's goal of tearing down patriarchal boundaries that limit women's options and potential is shown through Akhila's journey to examine her ambitions, job goals, and personal identity, "... patriarchal structures and institutions, in which women have very little visibility and influence" (Miles, 256). Characters are self-designed based on divine or demonic thoughts that are encountered under diverse conditions. The choice made to fulfil the need and satisfy a latent longing illuminates womanhood. Life isn't just about letting males dominate women; it's also about letting go of all the many types of people who pose as the guardians of the patriarchal system. The protagonist acts their part passionately to elicit sympathy in the cruel environment. The ladies fight the struggle on their own and with their own reasoning in an effort to survive and prosper and lead happy lives.

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Janaki is the first lady other than Akhila to be presented in the book *Ladies Coupé*. She is presented as a spoilt wife who is content with her life and is constantly taken care of by both her man and her kid, giving the reader the impression that she is a happy lady: she thinks of herself as "Women like me end up being fragile" (*Ladies Coupe'*, 22). She is a compliant, obedient kid who never challenges anything and is entirely

at ease in her own skin. She is a devout, loving wife and mother whose entire existence is subjugated by masculine control. Because she is nine years more youthful than the guy she married, he treats her as a weak creature, but she has come to love him anyhow. She claims that she and her husband have grown to be cordial with each other over the years, but when he attempts to control her kid, she loses her cool and claims that he controls everyone, which is in direct opposition to the notions she expressed to the other accompanied women. She has always believed that a guy is necessary to complete her, although there have been times when she has been uncertain about herself and her way of life. In the second story, Sheela, a fourteen-year-old girl, is saddened by the mistreatment and gender-based violence she witnesses from the men in her environment. She describes how her friend's father tried to handle her improperly and attempted to tie the knots in the sleeve of her blouse before the eyes of her companion Hasina, which left her feeling humiliated. Sheela felt extremely ashamed despite the fact that it had not been her fault and she never returned to her friend's home. She adores her grandma, who always advised her to avoid males since they all have ulterior motives and will exploit of women if given the chance.

Chemistry teacher Margaret Shanti has a unique story because she uses a creative strategy to improve her life. Her life experiences several emotional and physical crises. Before she marries, her mother gives her the following advice: "How a good wife never says 'No', even [if] she is not in [the] mood" (110). Later on, when her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, is appointed college principal, she begins to feel submissive to him. She is highly educated herself, won a gold medal in chemistry, and desired to pursue her doctoral degree. However, her manipulative spouse advises her to pursue her B. ED and a career as a teacher because there will be no sense in doing otherwise. She accumulated some extra fat after marriage, just like every other woman, and when Ebe begs her to get an abortion by persuading her that they are not ready, she is crushed into pieces. Women naturally gain weight when they are pregnant, but some of them may return to their regular routines by eating and maintaining a healthy balance in their lives. What about the rest of them, though, who are responsible for caring for the family by themselves? She works, is a mother, and a homemaker all at once. She doesn't point the finger at anyone or request assistance from anyone.

Then there is Prabha Devi, whose mother loathed having a daughter and feared that the daughter would steal her jewellery and

family recipes. The birth of Prabha Devi in and of itself illustrates the pitiful status of women in India because having a daughter was frowned upon. From the moment she is born, the idea of inequity sticks in her mind. Her father thought that a girl child would ruin his business plans and was supposed to be an extra burden on his shoulder. Prabha Devi's father murmured as he looked down at her with disapproval. A daughter is a horrible hassle, in his opinion. The behaviour that is required of an Indian girl is depicted by Prabha Devi. Even her activities were limited to how the kitchen was set up and how she interacted with children and adults. After getting married to Jagdeesh, she once more had a routine life typical of Indian women: get married, wait for the husband to arrive home from work each day, have children when the family expects them, and continue to wait impatiently for other things: her life and she is "incapable of doing anything beyond the periphery of your home and he will manage your life, from sending postal orders to balancing check books to booking railway tickets to managing household expenses. He will pet you and cosset you at first, for after all, you are appealing to the male in him to protect and safeguard" (199). Because of how deeply ingrained the culture is in society, individual disappointments and waits are hardly acknowledged or taken into account. Parents contribute as well to completing the task placed on their children's shoulders. Prabha Devi, although having strayed at one point, finds comfort in her spouse.

Marikolunthu, a cursed spirit that has only ever witnessed suffering, finally appears. She suffers child abuse herself at an early age. She had a miserable existence because her mother forbade her from going to school because she was afraid to send a girl outdoors, but she also loses her virginity. She was assigned to a Chettiar's home to labour and support her mother and brothers. She is raped by a Chettiar family cousin named Murugesan, and as a result, she gets pregnant. Every girl in the world dreams and aspires for an education and a happy marriage as the two pillars of her existence, yet neither is given to her. She experiences suppression in the guise of being a rape victim, a poor daughter, and an unmarried mother, which causes her to end herself in the presence of a crazy lady. Marikolunthu truly treats her son badly by avoiding his presence. She finds comfort in Chettiar's daughter-in-law's care, and by having a lesbian connection with Sujatha, she actually departs from what is typical of Indian women. With Sujatha's spouse, she continues her unjust acts by making physical contact. When she is pursued from there, the Missies provide her warmth and comfort, but after they leave the city, loneliness pursues her once again. She is able to grant her son permission

to handle the burial arrangements for Murugesan, her son's father, thanks to a tiny flicker of kindness within her. Mari gains self-awareness and discovers strength inside herself while having to modify her battle for justice in a negative way.

### **Gendered Spaces and the Journey of Liberation: The Power of Female Relationships**

"Space, far from natural or neutral, is deeply ideological, and the division of space into public and private realms is a gendered phenomenon" (Bausman, 57). The Ladies Coupé, which acts as both a literal and figurative gathering place for women, serves as the book's core theme. Nair emphasizes the necessity for gendered spaces where women may freely express themselves without being constrained by society by creating a distinct section just for women. By allowing characters to discuss their experiences, anxieties, and wants, The Ladies Coupé transforms into a microcosm of female lives, generating a sense of sisterhood and empowerment. Nair deftly makes use of this constrained setting to question gender stereotypes and portray the path toward emancipation that takes place under these restrictions. The importance of female solidarity and support is shown through Nair's examination of female relationships in the book. The Ladies Coupé develops into a secure setting where women may express their experiences, frailties, and aspirations. Through these conversations, Nair highlights the possibility of female collaboration and empowerment while contesting the idea that women are competitors. The ladies in the Coupé have a link that cuts beyond social barriers and cultivates a sense of unity that upends patriarchal systems.

Indeed, while the women of the coupé each narrate a transformative moment or decision, the fact remains that their tales are largely examples of adjustment rather than liberation (Karmarkar, 212). Janaki understands that even if she doesn't love her spouse, she still needs him for company; The attempt by Prabha Devi to achieve sexual liberty backfires, leading to a close call with rape and a return to her usual role of mother and wife, which she can only abandon in the sport of swimming pool; Since no one wants to hear or believe Margaret's desperate discontent or the truth about her husband, and since leaving him would entail giving up her child, losing the assistance of her family, and having to deal with the stigma of divorce, the only change she is able to make in her life is to take control of her finances. Margaret is perhaps the most tragic heroine of all. She is a well-educated and financially

independent woman who remains bound to and crippled by her malfunctioning relationship. This journey of liberation thus portrays a woman who is caught up in a system and negotiating her way out of it, none is rebelling, forging forward, or establishing an identity distinct from conventional culture. All are searching for “a middle path”; as Prabha Devi suggests, “Where is the middle path, the golden mean?” (*Ladies Coupe'*, 199). It appears to point to an extra possibility, even if it is one that has yet to be realized, the concept of a “middle path” is particularly important in this context, which magnifies the gender space in this novel, and that, indeed, seems highly interested in bridging the boundaries between the public and private. Akhila's lesson may be found in an area that is equally ambiguous, in continual negotiation, and discovering worth in more than just a journey's starting and finishing locations. Ladies Coupé may ultimately be pledging that women keep going to look for a “middle path,” one that gives them some autonomy while still maintaining the advantages of a safeguarding patriarchal structure, where they may find ease in simultaneously establishing a life for themselves while sharing it with a partner. *Ladies Coupe'* describes a transformative experience in a transitional, “middle” space.

### Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe'* gives a realistic representation of women's lives in a male-dominated culture as well as a potent indictment of patriarchal conventions. Nair asks readers to consider the limitations experienced by women and imagine a world with greater equality through the investigation of gendered settings, the portrayal of female autonomy, and the oppressive design of patriarchal standards. Symbolically Nair used “train”, to overturn the social structure of not only patriarchy but also the class and caste: “train” in the novel is “a socially diverse and fluid space capable of blurring the lines of class and caste” (Richter, 5). According to Evelyne Hanquart-Turner, the way that the coupé space unites women from all social backgrounds and gives them the chance to converse, learn from, and share while facing daily life in a secure environment is another significant part of the sisterhood that is formed there:

Not only does the ploy of the train as the setting of the narration allow for the social and age diversity of the characters (three married women of different conditions—a grand-mother, a rich housewife, and an educated working wife who are mothers—a single mother, a

teenager, and the working spinster protagonist), not only does it provide the neutral mutual ground that makes their telling of their tales possible, but also by the sheer fact of transporting them through the breadth and width of the Indian countryside and the cities dotting it, it expresses the universality of their experiences throughout India. (Hanquart-Turner, 320)

The novel's focus on female emancipation and solidarity acts as a call to action for women to assert their agency and resist social norms. The readers who want to know the real issues faced by 'certain women' can certainly find many things in the novel described in a metaphorical way or even directly. Nair's writing inspires readers to push and knock down the boundaries that hold back their potential while serving as a tribute to the tenacity and power of women.

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