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From Silence to Voice: Akhila's Path to Empowerment in Ladies Coupe

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Abstract

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe explores the inner lives of Indian women as they navigate patriarchal constraints and reclaim personal support. Set in a women-only train compartment, the novel presents six interwoven narratives that confront issues of gender roles, familial expectations, sexuality, and selfhood. This article analyzes the coupe as a metaphorical feminist space, examining how personal stories function as acts of resistance. Drawing on feminist theories by Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Gayatri Spivak, and others, the paper argues that Nair's novel is a powerful meditation on the transformative power of storytelling and solidarity. The article also emphasizes the relevance of the novel's themes in both Indian and global contexts.

Keywords: Anita Nair, Ladies Coupe, Indian women, feminism, gender roles, patriarchy, personal agency, feminist space, sexuality, identity

1. Introduction

All human beings, both men and women, spend their lives trying to understand what life means. Even after many centuries, they have not found a clear answer. Man often believes he controls all living creatures and believes everything is perfect under his rule. But problems begin when he tries to treat women the same way. A woman is not like other creatures. She will not simply obey. She has the same six senses as a man. She can think and decide for herself. The man keeps trying to show that he is more powerful. At the same time, the woman keeps fighting to prove her worth. This ongoing struggle affects the peace of human life. It is not a small matter. If one is separated or defeated, the other will also suffer. Their creation is linked to each other. Because of this constant conflict, a feeling of emptiness follows human beings from birth to death. India today claims to give full rights to women. Women are said to be equal to men. But this is not completely true. Many feminists have raised their voices for freedom. Yet, they have not fully succeeded. Often, their efforts lead to disappointment. In Ladies Coupe, Anita Nair presents female characters who take brave steps to gain freedom. These women slowly move away from the cultural, traditional, and religious forces that have controlled and hurt them for years. It is important to notice this and find ways to change the system that suppresses women.

This study looks at Nair's novel Ladies Coupe to explore the existential struggles of her female characters. These women fight against traditional, cultural, and religious rules. They search for their identity like outsiders in a world that seems meaningless. Nair, a well-known Indian English writer, shows how her female characters try to balance their freedom

with their roles in society. They live among both men and women and try to find meaning within that space.

1.1.Loss and Resilience

Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* is a compelling exploration of womanhood, freedom, and self-discovery in the context of a conservative Indian society. First published in 2001, the novel follows Akhila, a 45-year-old unmarried woman, as she boards a train to Kanyakumari in search of answers about her identity and independence. Through the intimate stories of five other women traveling in the same compartment, Nair constructs a mobile space of reflection and resistance. This article examines the novel's major themes, including gender roles, patriarchy, female sexuality, and selfhood, arguing that *Ladies Coupe* is a feminist narrative that reclaims the right of Indian women to define their own lives. As Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* declared, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (29). Nair transforms that room into a moving train compartment, an imaginative space where voices buried under layers of social conformity finally surface. In *Ladies Coupe*, the physical journey mirrors an inner awakening, one that unravels patriarchal myths and gives rise to an independent female identity.

The setting of the ladies coupe, a women-only compartment on a long-distance train, is more than just a physical space; it becomes a metaphorical shelter where women can voice their desires and pain without fear of judgment. As Nair in her book *Ladies Coupe* writes, "The ladies coupé was a world unto itself, a place where women could let go of their masks" (7). This temporary refuge allows each character to tell her story, revealing a broad spectrum of experiences shaped by love, loss, violence, and resilience. The coupe serves the same function as the feminist consciousness-raising circles of the 1960s and 70s, safe spaces that allowed women to share their stories and realize that personal pain often stemmed from collective societal issues. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283). Within the coupe, women shed the roles society has scripted for them and begin to redefine who they are on their terms.

1.2.'She' - Gender Roles

Akhila, the protagonist, represents the "everywoman" figure in Indian society, a dutiful daughter, sister, and breadwinner, yet denied the space to make choices for herself. Her journey is both literal and symbolic. Trapped by familial obligations and societal expectations, Akhila yearns to break free. Her internal conflict, "Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?" (12) frames the central inquiry of the novel. As the stories unfold, Akhila finds strength in their voices, each one validating her quest for autonomy. Her development throughout the novel echoes what Betty Friedan termed "the problem that has no name," a sense of dissatisfaction among women who appear to have everything society says they should want, yet feel unfulfilled. Akhila's transformation is a rebellion against that cultural silence.

In many cases, women who are not well-educated or financially independent blindly obey their husbands. They do not question their decisions. When Akhila was young, she used to think that if her mother had money, she could have bought what she liked. Her mother was good at singing. But she never thought of teaching. Her husband had told her, "I want my wife to take care of my children and me" (13). Akhila's mother wanted to be a good wife. She believed that a good wife should always be beneath her husband. She said, "It is best to accept

that the wife is inferior to the husband. A woman is not meant to take on a man's role. He knows best" (14).

2. Quest for Self-Identity and Self-Esteem

Akhila, who had bold thoughts, could not accept this. She asked her mother not to look like a widow by shaving her head and wearing a saffron sari. She wanted her mother to keep wearing her colorful madisars. When Akhila saw her mother dressed like a bride, and others removing the symbols of marriage, she cried. She thought, "So this is what it means to be a woman." Many times, she felt sad for her mother. She also got angry when her brothers and sister tried to control her mother. Even though Akhila was strong both financially and mentally, she still faced struggles. After her father died, she became the one who earned a living for the family. But she also began to search for herself and her identity. At times, Akhila felt deeply frustrated. What troubled her most was not having her own identity. She was always known about others, "Chandra's daughter, Narayan's Akka; Priya's aunt; Murthy's sister-in-law... Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being" (200–201). She tried hard to find her own self. But on her journey, she faced many inner conflicts. These are the signs of her existential struggle.

2.1. Societal Norms

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, education and employment are often seen as privileges reserved for men. However, Akhila breaks this norm. She is both educated and employed, and after her father's death, she becomes the primary breadwinner of her family. Her mother recognizes her contribution, remarking, "When the head of the family dies, the family dies with him... unless there is a daughter like Akhila" (199). Despite shouldering the family's responsibilities, Akhila is denied the autonomy and respect usually given to men in similar roles. She is expected to serve but not to lead, and her desires are consistently overlooked.

Although her mother expresses concern over the marriage of her younger daughter, she ignores Akhila's unmarried status, despite Akhila being 34. In the eyes of the family, Akhila has become more of a "man" of the house, valued for her service, but stripped of her femininity and denied emotional fulfilment. She sacrifices her dreams to support her brothers' education and careers. Yet, her aspirations are ignored and she is viewed as a spinster. Her silent longing is expressed in her internal cry: "Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again?" (77). Even when she suggests having her wedding alongside her brothers', no one responds. To her family, Akhila is no longer a woman with needs and desires.

2.2. Workplace Civilization

At work, Akhila is isolated as the only unmarried woman. Most of her colleagues are married and share experiences she cannot relate to. Her only companion is Katherine, a bold and independent single woman who lives life on her terms. Katherine encourages Akhila to break free from traditional norms, even convincing her to try eating eggs, an act that defies the customs of her orthodox Brahmin upbringing. Akhila secretly admires Katherine and wishes to live with the same freedom. After Katherine's transfer to Australia, Akhila feels a deep sense of loneliness once again.

3. Emotional longings

Though she has fulfilled every duty expected of her, Akhila is still denied a life of her own. Everyone in the family finds stability and success, except her. She yearns for emotional intimacy and companionship. One day, she is unexpectedly stirred by the familiar masculine scents of hair cream, soap, and tobacco that she associates with her father. These awaken a physical longing that she has long suppressed. In a moment of vulnerability, she allows a stranger's hand to touch her, feeling momentarily alive. The narrator notes, "willing enough, and let the hand send a thousand messages to her almost dead nerve ends; wake up, wake up" (139). Although the act brings her a sense of feminine pleasure, societal judgment quickly follows. The bus conductor's disapproval makes her feel ashamed. She begins to question herself: "What am I doing? How could I let my wanton senses rule me? How can I forget who I am?" (141). This moment reflects how society teaches women to suppress their natural desires and punishes them for asserting bodily autonomy.

The older generation in the novel lives in what Jean-Paul Sartre calls "bad faith," a state of self-deception in which people accept oppressive roles without question. Women like Akhila's mother and Sarasa Mami exemplify this mindset. Akhila's mother, who once controlled her daughter's choices, eventually becomes dependent on Akhila after her husband's death. Sarasa Mami's story is even more tragic. Left with three daughters and a blind son, she prays for survival. After selling her jewellery to feed them, she contemplates selling her eldest daughter, Jaya, and teaches her to dress attractively to lure men. Though this act is painful, Sarasa Mami is driven by desperation. Society, instead of offering help, humiliates her by giving her mere handfuls of rice and treating her as a beggar.

Akhila, as a feminist, begins to understand herself and the women around her. She is selfless and tries to see the reason behind everyone's behaviour. She understands life and starts looking at people from an existential point of view. When Padma says she is not fit to be a woman because she doesn't cook, iron clothes or sew buttons, Akhila positively sees this. She tells herself that maybe Padma wants to escape the duties of home and enjoy financial independence like her. But later, Akhila realizes that Padma makes her feel she is not capable of managing life. Padma tries to convince her that she is incomplete. This becomes a major problem for Akhila, who is trying to live life on her terms.

3.1.Social Dominance

Society trains women to believe that they cannot live alone. Once they accept this idea, society finds it easy to control them. After her mother's death, Akhila stays with Padma for about nine months. During this time, many of her freedoms were taken away. She tries hard not to upset Padma. But Padma always sees Akhila as a lonely spinster who must help her. Even when Akhila moves to her own house, she cannot restart her daily egg-eating habit because Padma disapproves. Padma wants to control Akhila. Though she once gave eggs to her children, she now says Akhila is doing something wrong. Padma forgets she is Akhila's sister and tells others that Akhila is not a proper woman. Akhila already struggles with the fear of being alone. Padma's criticism makes her feel worse. Her life feels heavy and lonely. True happiness does not come from success alone. It comes from living a unique life without blindly following others. This is what Feminist Existentialism teaches. Even though life can be absurd, a person can face it bravely if she knows who she is and what she truly wants.

Akhila decides to travel to Kanyakumari to find answers about her life. Inspired by Swami Vivekananda's words, she wants to rise and find her purpose. Her friend Niloufer

jokingly says that the five other women in the Ladies Coupé will ask her life story. Akhila, feeling lonely despite being surrounded by family and colleagues, realizes that sharing her story is exactly what she needs. She meets five women in the coupé: Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj, and Marikolanthu. Akhila opens up about her struggles, how she had to care for her family after her father's death, and never got a chance to marry. All six women, though strong in their ways, suffer from emotional and existential struggles.

4.Ladies Coupe - a Real Self

The train becomes a safe and symbolic space for Akhila. It represents freedom and comfort. For the first time, she sleeps peacefully, trusting the train to watch over her. Throughout her life, she sacrificed her dreams while others around her lived without worry. Akhila's dream on the train reveals her hidden longing for freedom and love, but also her fear of society's judgment. The journey becomes both a literal and metaphorical search for identity for all the women. They find comfort in each other's company and open up, knowing they won't meet again. The train compartment becomes a private, safe space for the women to speak freely, like a womb protecting their voices from the outside world. The train also symbolizes the long journey of a woman's life. While many women don't know their destination, the five women in the coupé help Akhila find her own. Margaret encourages Akhila to listen to her instincts and find her answers, because no one else can do that for her.

4.1.Exploitation of Women in Society

Each woman in the coupe brings a unique story that challenges conventional roles. Janaki is a pampered wife who later realizes her subjugation. Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher, poisons her abusive husband slowly through symbolic resistance. Prabha Devi reclaims her body and spirit through swimming, breaking free from societal constraints. Sheela, a perceptive teenager, sees the world through an uncorrupted lens, while Marikolanthu, a rape survivor, battles deep trauma and stigma. These stories collectively defy the "ideal woman" image. As Meenakshi Mukherjee in *Realism and Reality* notes, "Women in Indian fiction are increasingly rejecting roles imposed by tradition and are instead creating alternative identities through narrative" (112). Nair's women do just that. In their telling, each woman reclaims control over her narrative, echoing Audre Lorde's in *Sister Outsider* assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112). They construct their metaphoric tools of resistance: honesty, memory, and solidarity.

Patriarchal control over female bodies and choices is a recurring motif. Akhila's brother assumes authority over her life decisions. Margaret Shanti's husband dictates her appearance and silences her intellect. Marikolanthu's rape by a wealthy employer's son reflects both gender and class exploitation. In all these cases, male dominance is naturalized within familial and social structures. Nair's narrative critiques this normalization. The women's stories reveal that compliance often leads to emotional death, while resistance, though painful, opens a path to self-realization. As Gayatri Spivak *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Emphasizes, "To be truly free, women must be allowed to speak and represent themselves" (87). Ladies Coupe provides that space. The text affirms that change begins with narrative self-possession, a woman's ability to tell her story.

Sexuality, long suppressed in Indian female characters, is reclaimed in this novel. Akhila, who once feared her sexual desires, ultimately chooses to embrace them. Marikolanthu, despite being a victim of sexual violence, owns her narrative and identity as a

mother. Prabha Devi's awakening through swimming is not just physical but deeply sensual. These portrayals mark a shift in Indian fiction toward validating female desire as natural and empowering. As Adrienne Rich points out in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, "Women have been driven to deny the reality of their own impulses" (652). By presenting Akhila and others as sexual beings with agency, Nair challenges this repression. The novel reclaims female pleasure as not only permissible but essential to self-knowledge. Akhila chooses to assert her identity as a single, self-sufficient woman. She states: "I have come to the end of my journey. I am no longer waiting to live my life" (262). This assertion symbolizes a significant departure from the passive roles traditionally assigned to women. Anita Nair, through a deceptively simple narrative, opens up a complex dialogue about womanhood, autonomy, and resistance.

4.2. Identifying the Inner Voice

Ladies Coupé is not just a story about six women on a train. It is a powerful message about women's struggles and strength. It shows how women from different places and backgrounds face similar problems. The novel says that a woman does not have to depend on marriage, motherhood, or others to feel complete. Her identity can come from her own choices and courage. As bell hooks writes in *Feminism is for Everybody*, "Feminism is for everybody" (20). Anita Nair's novel reflects this belief in a simple and strong way.

Akhila's life shows how women are often expected to take care of others and stay quiet. She works, supports her family, and follows the rules of society. But deep inside, she wants to live for herself. During the train journey, she listens to five other women. Each woman tells her story. These stories help Akhila see that she is not alone. They give her hope and strength. These women also fight against society's unfair rules in their own way. By the end of the novel, Akhila makes a brave choice. She decides to live life on her own terms. Whether she wants to stay single, love someone, or just be alone, the choice is hers. This change in her thinking is powerful. She moves from silence to voice, from fear to confidence. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). Akhila's journey shows how a woman can grow and find herself through her own decisions. In the end, *Ladies Coupé* tells us that every woman has the right to ask: "Can a woman stay single and be happy?" Akhila answers this question for herself. Her answer gives hope to many others. She finds her voice, her freedom, and her self-respect. This story speaks for all women who wish to live freely and be heard.

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