

Reflections on the Interconnectedness of Narrative Strategies and Identity Crisis in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

Women experience subjugation, suppression, discrimination, and marginalization within patriarchal societies. Anita Nair's literary works explore the varied roles that women assume in their everyday existence and their challenges in the process of self-exploration. Anita Nair's first novel, *Ladies Coupe*, explores the protagonist's psychology and examines the suppression of women's identity in Indian society through her storytelling technique. To address the unfortunate situation of women, Nair briefly focuses on the condition of contemporary women in a culture dominated by men and their suffering due to the institution of marriage. The objective of this article is to examine the narrative tactics and strategies utilized in the novel *Ladies Coupe*. Nair's narration serves as a critique of gender norms and the subjugation of women inside a patriarchal culture. She focused her plot narration strategies on depicting women as independent, strong, and outspoken which reflects her changed role from the traditional norm. This paper tries to explore the different narrative techniques subtly interwoven into the texture and structure of her novel *Ladies Coupe*.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women, Narrative perspectives, strategies, modern woman, Anita Nair, Identity Crisis, *Ladies Coupe*.

Narratives are works that provide an account of connected events along with exposition, argumentation, and description which are broadly defined as four rhetorical modes of discourse. "A narrative technique, also known as a literary technique is a specific method that the creator of a narrative uses to convey what he/she wants. It is a strategy used in the making of a narrative to relay information to the audience and, particularly, to "develop" the narrative, usually to make it complete, complicated, or critical" (Anita 5192, en.m.wikipedia.org, List of Narrative Techniques, November 2019). It provides deeper meaning for the reader and helps the reader to use imagination to visualize situations. There are many literary techniques, relevant to narrative perspectives, style, and plot. Owen Flanagan of Duke University, a leading consciousness researcher, writes that "Evidence strongly suggests that humans in all cultures come to cast their own identity in some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers". (Owen Flanagan, 198)

Desai's novels portray the internal struggles experienced by its heroines, while Nair subjects her characters to suffering and facilitates their eventual resolution. Desai's female protagonists display feelings of sulking, sobbing, and immersing themselves in their misfortunes. In contrast, Nair's characters

transform their sufferings into sources of strength and use them as weapons to overcome their difficult situations. This sparks a contentious discussion, as Anita Nair herself responds to the argument made by reputable journals that *Ladies Coupe* is a significant work of feminism.

In the novel *Ladies Coupe* six women are squeezed into a three-tiered women's cabin on a train journeying from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. The only similarity they have is their gender. Some individuals experienced a joyful union, while others did not find happiness. One person was subjected to sexual assault and sought retribution, while another enticed a man far younger than herself. A personal domain to act according to her desires. To live according to her preferences without any limitations or concern for criticism. Anita Nair has introduced a prevalent notion of patriarchy, wherein women are bound by tradition to rely on males, so impeding their ability to recognize and use their power. She has depicted women facing the challenges imposed by patriarchy and ultimately empowering them with a defiant act against it. Her female characters have been depicted as clever and inquisitive individuals who refuse to accept injustice and actively resist it.

Akhila, approximately forty-five, is unmarried and employed as a clerk at an income-tax office. Throughout her life, she has never had the opportunity to fully embrace her womanhood due to her responsibilities as a daughter, sister, aunt, and provider for her family. Akhila, becoming more frustrated with her numerous responsibilities, resolves to break free from the constraints of her traditional Brahmin lifestyle. She decides to embark on a journey to the coastal town of Kanyakumari as a means of seeking solace and liberation. Within the coupe, there is a collective curiosity among the women regarding Akhila's marital status, given that she is forty-five years old and still unmarried. Janaki asserts that she is reliant on male support to live her life. Hindu women must observe many precautions during menstruation to ensure their well-being. She must abstain from numerous things and remain unaffected by various things. However, Akhila disregards these taboos. Akhila tends to disregard Padma's objections and ideas. It demonstrates that Hindu Brahmin women are subjected to the influence of rituals as well. Men devise these rituals specifically for women. If she fails to adhere to these traditions, she faces criticism not only from males but also from females, as is the case with Akhila.

Narrative context refers to the point of view from which the tale is being told. It encompasses several perspectives such as first-person, second-person, third-person, and third-person omniscient. Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* employs third-person storytelling. The third-person modes are often classified based on two axes. The first axis is the subjectivity/objectivity continuum, where third-person subjective narration is employed to depict the emotions and thoughts of one or more characters. This novel explores the inner thoughts of six individuals, making it a third-person subjective narrative. The second axis pertains to the omniscient/limited dichotomy, which delineates the extent of knowledge accessible to the narrator. The narrative of this work is presented from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator, who possesses comprehensive knowledge of all temporal, spatial, and personal aspects, as well as the thoughts of all characters. The narrator in this work possesses knowledge of events that occurred before or after the narrative's current time, exhibits awareness of the character's emotions and thoughts, and maintains a presence even during moments when the characters are alone. Anita Nair herself described this story structure as consisting of distinct and independent stories.

Akhila possesses the characteristics of such a woman. She fulfills her obligations while fantasizing about everything else. That is the reason she gathers hopeful nicknames like toddlers gather ticket stubs. Hope, in her perspective, is intricately intertwined with unreciprocated longings. Cerulean heavens, glistening streaks, a rupture in the overcast. Akhila recognizes these as just illusions resulting from

wearing rose-tinted glasses. She discarded her rose-tinted glasses a long time ago and replaced them with metal-framed glasses that are clear indoors and darken in sunlight. The sun loses its radiance when Akhila's spectacles take on a murky brown hue. Akhila. Age forty-five idealistic or overly optimistic views. Destitute of a spouse, offspring, residence, and relatives. Envisioning liberation and vastness. Craving for a fulfilling existence and diverse encounters. "I had a lot of difficulty with the structure and I didn't know how to put them together. It was a bit like piecing together a patchwork quilt- you have the individual pieces, but how do you make them into one? Then there were the individual stories by themselves." (quoted in Goglio and Monti, 'Streaming Up Memory In-between Past and Present: A River of Words, Meeting the Indian Writers Alka Saraogi and Anita Nair', p.42).

Following the demise of their mother, Akhila relocates to reside with her sister Padma. She believes she is solitary and requires a companion to cohabitate. Padma assumes the role of a housewife, while Akhila persists in her employment. Padma's spouse has a low salary. Padma has two offspring. Padma's family currently resides at Akhila's flat. Akhila also contributes to the financial needs of their family. Padma apprehends that she is unable to raise her children unassisted by Akhila. However, Padma frequently causes Akhila to feel unsettled. Her freedom to dwell there is restricted. They persist in discussing household expenses, their personal life, and even Akhila.

Anita Nair is therefore able to present six characters' thoughts and actions with shifting perspectives. This form of narration possesses the benefit of being capable of introducing a fresh setting with a distinct individual on each occasion. For example, chapter two describes Janaki's story whereas chapter four describes Sheela's story. Anita Nair, through this novel, tries to deal with an issue that has subtly existed in Indian society. Each chapter of the novel is dedicated to one woman and that's how we meet the five other women protagonists. Each woman possessed her unique narrative, yet they all shared a common pursuit: the quest to uncover the true essence of existence. The narrator has a bird-eye view that he/she looks through the eyes of the characters in the story. In this narration, the author ostensibly focuses on the central character but has the advantage of getting within the skin of all other characters.

A writer's choice of narrator is crucial for the way a work of fiction is perceived by the reader. Anita Nair uses two distinct narrative voices in the novel: a third-person omniscient narrator and a first-person obvious narrator to describe Margeret's and Marikolanthu's story. These two characters narrate their own story to the protagonist (Akhila). Then, the heterodiegetic narrator in the novel describes the remaining character's story that appears in the past in which he/she does not participate. The main story happens on one level that is happening inside the ladies' coupe (compartment) where the six characters are talking to each other. And the other stories happen on another level through flashbacks. A flashback is a narrative device in which the tale temporarily shifts to a previous time, disrupting the linear progression of events. Each character in the story narrated their own story in shifting perspectives. The mode of the narration is distinguished according to each character's age, lifestyle, and attitude.

Anita Nair used the 'Stream of Consciousness' style in her story, which effectively portrays the protagonist Akhilandeswari's numerous thoughts and emotions as they flow through her mind. In chapter three, after hearing Janaki's story Akhila goes back to her past life. The narrator describes that in the following lines, "Akhila heard their voices drift somewhere in the distance. She was back to staring out of the window. Akhila shut her eyes and tried to let the rhythm of the train lull her to sleep. And into the past." (Nair, p.42)

The author employs Leitwortstil as a narrative style in this novel. Leitwortstil refers to the deliberate repeating of specific words or phrases, frequently with a thematic purpose, throughout a

narrative to captivate the reader's attention. An illustration of leitwortstil can be observed in the recurrent expression. "How lucky I am to be me" is told often by Prabha Devi in chapter eight and another phrase "Sister to the real thing" is repeated by Marikolanthu in the tenth chapter.

This novel is a work of fiction, it closely mirrors reality. The language is straightforward with occasional poetic elements. The perpetual quandary that a woman experiences at every juncture of her existence is depicted in a captivating manner. The analysis of the correlation between life and chemical elements in Margaret Shanti's episode is quite intriguing. For example, in chapter six Margaret says, "Every time I meet someone, after a few minutes, they cease to be a person. To me, that person becomes a chemical." (Nair, p.118) "The lithium girl...Bromine Premilla, Laughing Gas Xavier, Tetra Sulphur Nawaz and Gamma Ray Sankar Narayan." (Nair, p.125)

The author used symbols as well. A symbol is a tangible manifestation, such as an object or mark, that serves as a substitute for another object or concept. In this literary work, Anita Nair uses 'serpent' and 'boiled eggs' to represent Akhila's state in the process of self-discovery. In chapter three she says, "Akhila saw herself as a serpent that had lain curled and dormant for years." (Nair, p.39). Akhila thought that removing the fragments of the shell of an egg "must be the most pleasurable thing anyone could do". She also uses the Latin phrase 'Quo Vadis? Whither goest thou? (where do you go?)' (Nair, p.39) - a recurring question/ theme - symbolizes the need to escape.

Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* chronicles the quest of Akhila, an unmarried woman. She is a 45-year-old unmarried Indian lady from a Tamil Brahmin family who has been compelled to assume subordinate positions as a daughter, sister, aunt, and provider. Throughout generations, women have been expected to embody the position of 'Sita' without having their distinct personalities. She consistently remains in the background, overshadowed by her husband. Within Indian society, women are often depicted as lacking strength, being fragile, susceptible, and consistently reliant on their male counterparts. If she is of a tender age, her father would be the likely candidate. However, if she is married, her spouse would assume the responsibility. Until the day she chooses to liberate herself from the traditional Tamil Brahmin family she was born into, she endeavors to discover the solution to a fundamental question that has always occupied her thoughts. Following her father's demise, she assumes the role of the patriarch in the household. Despite her selfless commitment to the family, none of them show concern for her well-being.

The narrative of Marikolanthu is notably melancholic in contrast to the other two stories, and it might be used as a subject for discourse regarding the perception of ignorant, lower-class women by men in society. Marikolanthu has endured a lifetime of sexual assault, physical harassment, and torment. She was born into a financially disadvantaged family, and following her father's demise, she commenced employment at Chettiar Kottari with her mother. At a tender age, she was subjected to sexual assault by Murugesan, a member of the Chettiar family. She struggled to fulfill her role as a nurturing parent till the day her assailant's cremation ceremony took place. The prevalent pattern of attributing responsibility to women for instances of rape is evident in the case of Marikolanthu.

Finally, the story has an open-ended finishing. Further making possible to multiple end plot structures. At last, Akhila conquers her fear of society. In the final chapter, Akhila contacts her former lover Hari, and it is implied that the person who answers the call is Hari. Whether their relationship will continue is left to our imagination. However, it is evident that Akhila's journey of self-discovery is complete and she has overcome her identity crisis. Despite a few unpleasant incidents in the story, the

author expresses compassion in a way that effectively conveys the intended message without dampening the readers' mood.

Indian society continues to expect women to assume a subordinate position in the male-dominated social structure. The novel explores the inquiry of whether a woman might have contentment while being unmarried. The novel *Ladies Coupe* portrays the phenomenon of women experiencing loneliness as a result of familial dominance. Every character embodies a distinct narrative that serves as a source of inspiration for the main character. The oppression and the physical and psychological victimization experienced by individuals in Indian culture. Anita Nair demonstrates her exceptional writing skills through her use of language, theme, character development, narration, choice of setting, and the stories within the novel. Her evocative language and descriptive storytelling captivate the reader throughout her novels.

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