

Women's Search for Identity in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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Abstract

The quest for emotional fulfilment and the identity of women in a patriarchal society is the core element of *Ladies Coupe* (2001). This influential novel voices out the journey of different women and their turmoil in the society. The journey of the protagonist Akhila travelling in a train's ladies compartment is interconnected with her fellow passenger's journey. Her inner constrains is left to wonder through these five women's life narratives. This paper tracing a thematic approach, traces the emotions, discrimination and exploring identity of self. Betty Freidan, an American activist's concept *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is drawn for analysing domestic constrains, patriarchy, societal norms structure and control a women's life and identity. This study employing the said notions, focuses on how the characters from different ages and classes of society struggles in a similar way with the same concepts. The primary focus is laid on the importance of self-identity by discovering self.

Keywords: Identity, journey, patriarchy, discrimination and emotions

1. Introduction

Across cultures and class in various geographical boundaries, the violence of gender-based discriminations is highly prevalent. It does not just stick with being just physical, rather these actions tigger the emotions and psychological constraints of a person. The current scenario prevailing in an Indian society, the community expectations on a female is vase. Irrespective of being at various stages in life, a mother, daughter, wife or even a single woman, the requirements placed on them has been striving in the community for ages. Literature being a platform for voicing out these kinds of struggles, allows space for creating a betterment in these lives. *Ladies Coupe* (2001) by Anita Nair is a narrative foregrounding these kinds of oppressions and overcoming them to create an identity.

The plot revolves around Akhila, an unmarried lady who had sacrifices her life and lived for her family. *Ladies Coupe* (2001) revolves around this forty-five-year-old woman's train journey, a journey that changes her opinion on life drastically. She encounters five other women enroute. She is able to connect with their identity, suffering and turmoil in life, "The main thing in the novel is that they do not know each other still they are comfortable speaking their heart" (Bhardwaj and Karnwal 3). They seem to share a vast set of unsolved conflicts. Nair sketches their doomed suffering through the emotions that they exhibit.

Establishing a recognition for oneself and the emotions attached with the same, are the core elements for exploration in this research. Betty Friedan idea that, “the problem that has no name” is referred for analysis, it brings out the restrictions, sufferings and deprived emotions, which women undergo for complete fulfilment of attaining the norms thrust upon them by the community. The paper follows simple thematic structure to relate the struggles of women and the journey they undergo to attain self-discovery.

2. Method

The journey Ahkila undertakes in the novel Ladies Coupe (2001) is not just merely physical but a psychological one that comprises of past traumas. Born and brought up in a traditional orthodox household, after the death of her father, Ahkila being the eldest is forced to take care of the family. With the new trust responsibilities, she loses control over her life and starts living for her family. Though she earns and is financially free, her emotional sides are locked and sealed, she neither has any companion nor does her family try to choose one for her. They become dependant on her and except their sister to take care of everything at the extent of her happiness. Running parallel with Freidan’s ideas, this protagonist faces an emptiness in life that gradually grows at the expense of suppressing self-fulfilment over family and societies pressures.

3. Analysis

Ahkila’s very first act of seeking happiness seems to be this train journey towards Kanyakumari. The coupe filled with other women that she encounters enroute are depictions of various experiences that Akhila gains from different stages and classes of women. The common thread connecting these six individuals are the themes of control, identity and restrained emotions. The elderly Janaki, who is portrayed as a mother figure has had her entire existence shaped by various male characters at various stages of life. And surprisingly, she is doing fine with the way her life seems to navigate. As Friedan states in her work, how domesticity dominates and alienates emotional satisfaction, Janaki is portrayed as an individual whose identity is denoted by her family, she lacks one for herself.

Prabha Devi is an epitome of attaining fulfilment through materialistic pleasures. She is sketches in a way that shows how emotionally challenged her life seems to be, though she very-well hides it behind her appearance and lifestyle choices. The want of identity is lost and constrained beyond temporary happiness showing her distress in life. Sheela, the next character is portrayed as an epitome of patriarchal norms thrust on females from a young age. Though a kid herself, being subjected to abuse in disguise, she realises the attitude and lack of empathy towards a women in labour.

Margaret Paulraj, on the other hand seems to have had everything, from good education, job and husband to being reduced to nothing. Her story narrated the inequality that prevails among married individuals. Thought her husband had been impressive, his real traits are discovered during their later years of marriage. Her emotions and independence are broken and she is reduced to be a nobody by him. Margaret’s realisation and revenge is through manipulation, reflecting how women are pushed to initiate drastic indirect methods for survival and retaining a self-identity.

Marikolanthu, the last member to narrate her distressed life, she is the sole character whose life story is held to be highly disturbing. Though initially, she is judged for her appearance and ignore by others, her story is filled with caste discrimination, societal ignorance and majorly sexual violence, created a change

in attitude from others. Her physical and emotional trauma is left unsolved unlike others who had managed to attain or seek solace in alternative things.

Anita Nair by interconnecting these life narratives manages to connect how though they belong to difference sectors and ages, these women's lives are interloped through common factors. The coupe tends to be symbolic representation of long needed comfort that these women longed, a place of safety to let out what their mind had been holding up for years together. This sharing without any judgemental remarks helps them to ignore their fear temporarily and address things openly. Since, "In surrendering to passion outside the structures of marriage, Akhila refuses the moral script that has governed her existence, reclaiming her right to pleasure, intimacy, and self-definition on her own terms" (Gujar and Meena 365). These stories majorly influence Akhila as she is taking the first step towards seeking personal happiness. Individuality along with societal requirements is put forth as a need for her to pursue a companionship.

4. Conclusion

Emotions blending with patriarchy in various sectors of society is the core ideology behind this work, Ladies Coupe (2001) by Anita Nair. This journey of six women is not only about knowledge over their lives but rather also denotes the journey a women face in form of gender, how society through family emotionally controls and pushes her to an epitome of domesticity. Deprivation of self-happiness seems to be lacking in every one of these characters. The scarcity of attaining an identity despite of following and undergoing what is required of them convey Betty Friedan's concepts.

Though the novels deal with disturbing situations and scenarios, Nair does not talk about any sort of rebellion or disruption in the structure. She solely centres on identity of self and emotions as key elements that is required from every person irrespective of their societal standards. This novel consents in raising queries against discrimination in any form. To conclude, Nair stated how this is an ongoing journey for women to attain identity and emotional independence irrespective of struggles.

Work Cited

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