

Research Article

Gender and Exclusion: Female Voices in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to underline the different ways in which women face exclusion and which gets manifested in different forms. It is a detailed analysis of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* where Akhila, the narrator is on a journey to Kanyakumari with five other women. All these women are from varied age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. The only thing that binds them is their quest for identity. This work is an attempt to study the exclusion in the lives of these characters including that of Akhila. On a surface level, these characters look happy with their lives and positions in their families but the reality is different. This train journey becomes a life-changing experience for Akhila as she decides to break free from all the obligations that had been shackling her so far.

Keywords: Identity, Exclusion, Women, Gender, *Ladies Coupe*

The history of language and gender has always been pervaded by a gendered otherness when it comes to women writers. There are many factors that affect the experiences of an individual and gender is also one among them. It is also imperative here to take note of the fact that gender is a social construct and not a biological attribute. This otherness that we are talking about is a kind of exclusion faced by the women in general. While there are terms like female writers and women writers everywhere, we do not have counterparts like men writers although the usage of male writers could be found in some places. The writings by female authors have been given different names while the writings by men continue to be

the unmarked category. The mention of differences between the writings of male and female first came up with the work of Virginia Woolf. She gave a specific name to the language used by females and called it the 'female sentence' (Mills: 2005: 33). Some other names were 'women's language' by Lakoff (1973) and 'gendered sentence' by Mills, (2005).

Talking about the history of female writers, Robbins (2000) as in Lange (2008) opined that writing became an acceptable profession for women because it did not impact their household chores. They would write about fiercely independent female characters in their novels but in the real life they still had to fulfill all the responsibilities as wives and mothers. According to Robbins (ibid), interaction with the members of one's society contributes a great deal towards the identity formation of an individual. Hence only those women who have the awareness about feminism can reflect it in their writings.

Annis Pratt, 1981 a female, theorist is of the view that gender roles have a huge impact on the way women write because they affect the women in real lives as well as in literature. She opines, "Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender". She believes that the effects of patriarchy along with the marginal position that the women are given in the society is clearly visible in the novels they write. She further adds, "Our quests for being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do" (Lange: 2008). To sum up the point made by Pratt, it can be said that the oppression and other effects of patriarchy that are present in novels written by women are there for a reason and that is because a woman experiences it firsthand through the course of her life.

According to Lange (ibid), the perceptions of the readers about the novel depend upon the sex of the author. Gardiner (1980) mentions another critic, Carolyn Heilbrun who said that women novelists assume that only a man can depict the full range of experience by humans and not women. Such stereotypes can have detrimental effects because if the readers believe in them, they will have preconceived notions about the novels based on whether the author is a female or a male.

According to a different stereotype, male authors write about the truths whereas female authors only describe experiences. (Lange: 2008). It seems quite difficult to understand this stereotype itself. The definition of truth may vary from one person to another and if women writers write about the hardships of their life, that is the truth for them. Men, however, find it difficult to relate with them because they do not have to go through the same set of gendered biases.

Moving to the discussion of *Ladies Coupe*, by Anita Nair, Akhila who is one of the protagonists and also the narrator has been elevated to a high pedestal in her family. She lost her father at the tender age of nineteen and so the responsibility of the entire family fell on her shoulders as she was the eldest child of her parents. Her two brothers, Narayan and Narsi were fifteen and eight, respectively, while the youngest was her sister, Padma, aged six. As her father died while he was still employed, Akhila was offered a job in the income tax department on 'compassionate grounds'. Akhila assumed the role of the bread winner of her family without any complaints. As a provider of the family, she looked after everyone. This sounds like the story of a strong woman, trying to pull through a difficult situation in a brilliant way. This, however, is far from reality. Akhila had been elevated to this position only to make her the mother of all sacrifices. She kept on fulfilling all the responsibilities of her father but her family never thought that she too had a life and that she might be willing to marry and have children. Even her mother did not think about her eldest daughter as if Akhila had no right to live her life. Nair very rightly captures the essence of Akhila's agony in the following lines: 'In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster' (77). Both her brothers found suitable jobs and Akhila also got Padma married after arranging for her dowry. Akhila was thirty-four by the time she was free from the responsibilities of her brothers and sister.

It becomes slightly unnerving when one tries to go through the established prerequisites of being a good girl or a good woman in the traditional Indian society. There is an exhausting list of do's and don'ts for women in order for them to be recognized as women bearing good characters. This novel very succinctly presents a lot of different scenarios where those prerequisites have found a mention through one of the characters. One such example is mentioned below.

"A sloppily drawn kolam suggests that the woman of the house is careless, indifferent and incapable an elaborately drawn one indicates self-absorption, a lavish hand and an inability to put others 'needs before yours. Intricate and complicated kolams are something you reserve for special occasions. But your everyday kolam has to show that while you are thrifty, you are not mean. It should speak of your love for beauty and your eye for detail. A restraint, a certain elegance and most importantly, an understanding of your role in life. Your kolam should reflect who you are: a good housewife,' (50)

In the above lines, Akhila's mother is trying to tell her that how a woman's nature is judged through the patterns of kolam¹ and an ideal woman should excel at this art. This reveals just one of the many characteristics that women in our society

¹Kolam is a form of drawing that is drawn by using rice flour/chalk/chalk powder/white rock powder often using naturally/synthetically colored powders in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and some parts of Goa and Maharashtra.

are expected to have. In every phase of their lives, they are expected to perform all their duties without any glitches as they are the ones who is judged by the society for every single thing they do.

In Ladies Coupe when Akhila became tired of her responsibilities, she booked a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari to break the monotony of her daily drudgeries. She could only manage to get a berth in a second-class compartment in the ladies coupe which meant she would be travelling with five other women. They were Sheela Vasudevan, Prabha Devi, Janaki Prabhakar, Margaret Paulraj and Marikolanthu. As the journey began these women narrated their life stories to each other and it seemed that all of them had been struggling in their respective families and situations.

The first woman who told Akhila about her life was Janaki. She was the kind who firmly believed that it was the duty of a woman to be a good wife and a good mother. She was married to Prabhakar when he was twenty-seven and she was eighteen. They had now been living together for the past forty years. They had a son Siddhartha who made their lives so complete. He was a bright child and his parents were proud of him. They did not mind him invading their privacy. Siddhartha was married to Jaya. When Jaya was about to have a baby, Siddhartha called his parents as he wanted them to be with Jaya while she was having a baby. However only a few days after their stay, a few disagreements cropped up between Janaki and her son. Siddhartha said that her mother was selfish and also that she had been spoilt by everybody including her father and husband and acted like such a princess. As a result, Janaki decided to leave at once.

This can also be seen as the manifestation of Janaki's insecurity. There was nothing wrong when her son Siddhartha said that she had been pampered by everyone in her life which had made her completely dependant. Prabhakar helped her with each and every household chore and she was so used to it for the last forty years that it seemed impossible for her to do anything on her own. It was also apparent how threatened she got when Jaya had said she was lucky to have a husband who helped her in every possible way. But soon she spoke of her mother who had to do everything alone after Jaya's father passed away. Janaki also added that this had made Jaya's mother stronger than most other women. On hearing this Janaki felt inadequate.

After she told Prabhakar about her wish to leave the next day, she was happy with the thought that she would have her husband to herself. She knew Prabhakar was there for her and felt cocooned with his presence. She realized what she had been missing all these years. At this stage of her life, after forty years of togetherness, she said to her husband. "I am tired of sharing you with everyone. I want you to myself" (38).

That episode made Janaki realize that no matter how much she loved Siddhartha, he would never be able to understand what she wanted. She knew no one else could replace Prabhakar and the comfort she felt when she was close to him. For the first time she was not shy to admit this to her husband.

Another fellow traveler of Akhila was Sheela, a fourteen year old girl. Her grandmother had recently died and she found it hard to control her tears on being asked if she was okay. Nair has described Sheela as a girl who is too mature for her age. She understands sentiments which other children of her age might not have any clue about. Sheela's maternal grandmother whom she called Ammumma went to stay with her parents. She had a tumor in her stomach which needed to be removed. She suffered as her problems went on increasing and after six weeks of struggle, she finally gave way and died. While all this happened, Sheela acted very wisely. Her father had started picking on Sheela for absolutely no reasons but Sheela knew that her father was behaving so due to the then state of affairs. The brothers of Sheela's mother had taken over the house as they had lots of money to spend on different things including the hospital bills. Sheela's father hated this as it made him feel inept. Sheela's grandmother had the realization that she would not be able to survive for too long and so she openly criticized her daughter-in-law and also her sons.

One remarkable thing about Ammumma (Sheela's maternal grandmother) was that she had her own ideas about how a woman should conduct herself in life. She believed that women should look a certain way and considered herself to be far superior than other women. She wanted to look good at all times and also gave a lot of advice to her granddaughter. Ammumma had the habit of judging every woman she came across and most of the women she saw, she found them lacking in some way or the other. The following lines taken from the novel illustrate the kind of woman she was.

'You call that a woman! A proper woman has a good head of hair and a chest full of breasts' (67).

In the above lines she gave a verdict that women must have long hair and fuller breasts. This used to be the most prevalent definition of beauty for women at some point of time. The ones who did not fit in this criterion were not women enough for Ammumma. This is not just a view held by one of the characters of the novel, but actually reflects how deeply rooted are typical beauty standard set by the society based on the likability of none other than men. Ammumma just did not stop here. She further praised Sheela for reminding her of herself but again rebuked her for being very thin and also warned her that no man would find her desirable because of her bony structure. The lines are as follows:

'You remind me of myself when I was your age. Except that I was more buxom and womanly. You don't eat enough. You are so skinny. No man will want you for a wife. Men don't like bones in bed. Men like curves' (68).

The above lines show again how important it is considered for women that they must remain physically attractive to men else their lives would have no meaning. Sheela knew, her Ammumma's last wish was to look good till the end of her breath and even after that. She also did not think it was wrong. After the death of Ammumma, Sheela was pained to see her grandmother like that. She looked nothing like before. Her face looked parched, her lips were dry and chapped along with hair that had stiffened like steel wool. Sheela decided to take charge and please her grandmother for one last time. Sheela brushed her hair and braided it into a plait. She also applied foundation on her face, shoulders, chest and Kohl pencil followed afterwards. Sheela then adorned her with fake jewellery as her aunt had taken the real ones from her grandmother. When Sheela's parents along with her aunts and uncles saw what she had done, they were shocked. Her parents were horrified at the sight and were mad at Sheela. Even though she got disapproving looks from everybody, she did not care. Sheela knew her Ammumma would be very happy with her and that was all she cared about at that moment.

Another fellow passenger Margaret started telling Akhila about her life after she woke up at 3:00 am and decided not to go back to sleep for the fear of missing her destination. Margaret was married to Ebenezer Paulraj. Margaret, a bright student bagged a gold medal in M.Sc. Chemistry. She was barely twenty-two when she first met Ebenezer. They got attracted towards each other and within two months of their meeting, Ebenezer sent his parents to meet Margaret's parents and fix their marriage. This was like a fairytale wedding for Margaret. Everybody praised her for choosing Ebenezer who was already a vice-principal of a reputed school at the age of twenty-nine. The first year of marriage passed on in a jiffy. The only purpose of Margaret during those days was to be with Ebenezer and make him happy in all ways possible. Trouble started brewing after the eighteenth month when Margaret found out that she was pregnant. Ebenezer did not want them to have a baby at that moment and asked his wife to abort. She had agreed without much argument. She had begun to realize how Ebe (as she fondly called him) forced everything on her.

'What's the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together' (105).

Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob (105).

He also had problems with them going to the church on every Sunday. Every other thing she did, was problematic for Ebe. He could not have anybody live on

their own terms. He had to take control of everyone's life especially his wife's. The realization that there is more trouble ahead dawned upon Margaret when she heard Ebb speaking to her around midnight. He said "I love it when you call me Ebe,...like a little girl. I like you like this, Ebe murmured. 'So untainted and clean. My little darling. My lovely girl. With no big bouncy breasts and horrible woman's bush.I want you to remain like this all your life' (111).

This was beyond Margaret's understanding as she felt that Ebe had completely rejected the woman inside her. She knew that she could not be the same forever and the change would play havoc in their married life.

Ebe was offered the post of a principal at some school in Coimbatore. Margaret was made the Head of Chemistry Department as she had a Post Graduate and a degree in Education with good experience. Life became even more difficult for Margaret as her responsibilities increased manifold and she felt unable to do the same along with managing the house. Ebe too never gave her a hand and expected everything to run on its own without any problems. This led to frequent arguments between the couple. Also Margaret could never conceive after the abortion and also gained weight. Ebe remained the same; in fact he grew more indifferent to the needs of his wife. They almost stopped conversing with each other and things grew worse. Margaret felt unwanted due to her so called bareness and her body which gave way to fat. People made her feel that she was Ebe's misfortune. Margaret decided that this could not go on forever and hence she took the matter in her hands. She was full of hatred for her husband and knew that he would not change until and he was agile and alert. Margaret started flattering Paulraj through her food. She continued doing so for a year. As a result, Ebe became a fat man. His breath shortened and his pace slowed. He became a man who was easy to handle. Since Margaret was the one to appease his appetite for food, he sought her more and more. They also had a girl child after sometime. This made it even more imperative for Margaret to keep Ebe from returning to his older self.

As Margaret got off at Coimbatore and advised Akhila to stop worrying about what others thought of her and life would be much easier after that.

Margaret's story reminded Akhila of Hari. When Akhila met Hari a few years back, he was twenty-eight years old and worked as a draftsman in the railway engineering department. He was a north-Indian from a small town in M.P. They met each other in train while going to their workplace and also while returning. A few days later Hari confessed his love for Akhila. They became lovers. They cherished each other's company. Hari wanted to take Akhila to a beach resort for his birthday. Akhila lied to her mother about going for an office trip. Amma was visibly annoyed at this prospect and said 'Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first.' When Akhila objected, her mother said 'you might be older

but you are a woman and they are the men of the family,' (150). This again shows the typical attitude of the society which places a man on a higher platform than a woman despite his age and other factors. A man is undoubtedly always superior. The next morning, Amma grudgingly gave her the permission to go and asked her to be careful. It was on Hari's birthday that both of them celebrated their unison. However, very soon Akhila realized that she would never be able to bridge the age gap between them. She would always feel insecure as age would show up on Akhila with the passage of time. She therefore parted ways with Hari.

Akhila's course of life was bound to change again after her mother died. It was decided that being a single woman she could not stay alone and hence she would shift to Bangalore with Padma or to Trichy with her brother Narsi. She got a transfer to Bangalore and started living with Padma. Nine months had passed by the time she got her own accommodation. Akhila was thrilled with the idea of staying alone but her happiness was short-lived. Padma also decided to shift to Akhila's flat along with her children. The fact that her husband would be promoted soon which would require him to travel frequently was used as an excuse here. She also said she would not be able to manage everything alone. Akhila could not protest and had to give up the fight. This did not stop here. Padma often let Akhila down in front of her neighbors. She always made her feel inadequate in order to make her feel better about herself. The worst that Akhila had to face was the togetherness of Padma and her husband Murthy. She missed Hari during those days.

Another fellow passenger, Prabha Devi started with her account after breakfast. She told Akhila that she was born after four sons to wealthy parents. Her father was not happy as he did not want a girl child. Prabha Devi's mother explained to her husband that one girl among so many boys would be of no harm. Prabha Devi grew up to be the so called perfect daughter. Nair defines her in the following way.

Her embroidery was done with stitches so fine that you could barely see them. Just shadows and shapes. Her idlies were light and soft. But the true test of a woman lies in the curd she makes and even there Prabha Devi excelled. Sweet and tart... Her voice rose pleasingly full when she was asked to join in the singing at a puja. She walked with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant, womanly". Prabha Devi's skin remained fair, dewy and spotless; other girls of her age had acne....' (170).

To be precise, she excelled at everything she did. This is another example to show the stereotypes related to a perfect woman who would go on to make a perfect marriage material. As soon as Prabha Devi was eighteen, her father found a suitable match for her. The name of the boy was Jagdeesh. He was the only son and heir

of a prosperous diamond merchant. Though this was a happy news for everybody, Prabha Devi's mother was not very elated. This was because she knew that after marriage she would miss her daughter. A few months after Prabha Devi's marriage, Jagdeesh took her on a business trip to New York. After spending a few days in New York, Prabha Devi became a different person altogether. She wanted to be like the women there. Their confidence and the swing in the walk, the 'poise', 'celebration of life and beauty', were things that she wanted for herself. She did not want a baby as she felt there were many more things she wanted to do before having a baby.

Wherever Prabha Devi went, she revelled in the attention that she got. She always wanted to be the centre of attraction. She accompanied Jagdeesh to the club on weekends as he played tennis there. At the club she came across Pramod who was one of Jagdeesh's friends whom he met on weekends for a game of tennis. Pramod did not pay attention to Prabha Devi apart from exchanging greetings when she was accompanied by her husband. She felt that Pramod denied her existence as a woman and only treated her as someone's wife. She could not bear this thought and made sure he noticed her through the gestures and smiles. It did not take her very long to grab his attention and a few days later Pramod was madly in love with her. Prabha Devi had not realized the intensity of his feelings until one afternoon he went to her place. Pramod confessed his feelings for Prabha Devi in front of her. She tried to evade him but ultimately she had to ask him to leave her house. This incident left her shocked. She decided to change to her former self so that nobody would be drawn to her like Pramod. Once again she became the woman with downcast eyes. Later she had two children, the girl was called Nitya and the boy was called Vikram.

Time passed by and Nitya was in college and Vikram was fifteen. Prabha Devi took him for his tennis lessons. There she acquired a new interest. She developed a fascination for swimming and wanted to do it herself. After having known that there was no trainer to train the adults to swim, she decided to learn it herself. After a lot of efforts when she learnt to stay afloat in the water, it was a moment of supreme joy for her. She knew what it was to live on one's own terms. She got a new lease of life and she knew she could demand everything. Nair describes it saying "that nothing else that happened would even measure up to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had stayed afloat" (195).

This gave a new sense of achievement and a purpose to Prabha Devi. She felt there were other things she could try her hand, at other than parenting and being a good wife. She was blissfully happy. There was another thing that had been pestering her all her life. She always wondered how she would face Jagdeesh if he knew about her desires. Nayar says; 'All of her married life, she had wondered

what would happen if she let Jagdeesh know that she wanted to make love. Would he be repelled by the nakedness of her hunger? Would he turn away? Would he lose his respect for her?' (195). It was towards the end that she learnt that her husband was more than happy to know that his wife still loved him. As readers we could probably infer that she could again become a woman who would be open about her demands to her husband without feeling shy about it.

There was still another co-passenger in the coupe that Akhila did not know at all. Akhila finally started a conversation. Her name was Marikolanthu and she was thirty-one years old. She worked as a helper in a mission hospital. Her family consisted of her parents and two brothers named Easwaran and Sivakumar. Despite being poor they all were happy together. But after a few days of Marikolanthu's ninth birthday, her father died. Her mother turned to the Chettiar family for help. They were the richest people in the district. Her mother started working at the Chettiar kothi as a cook. Two years later her mother called her to the kothi for seeking help. She refused to send Marikolanthu to school by saying the following: 'We'll send your brothers to the town school when the time comes but we can't afford it on my salary alone', Amma said, 'You do understand, don't you, that it would be impossible for me to send you to the school by bus every day. It's not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself...there is too much at risk' (215). It can be easily figured out from the above statement that Amma's son's education was far more important to her than her daughter's education. She further tried to rationalise her decision by telling Marikolanthu that it was not just because of money but also for safety concerns that she could not go to school by bus on her own.

After a few days Marikolanthu started babysitting Prabhu who was Chettiar's grandson. With the passage of time, when Marikolanthu was a grown up girl, she became victim a treacherous incident that ruined her life. She was raped by one of the relatives of Chettiar. His name was Murugesan and he was the brother of Chettiar's eldest daughter-in-law. He raped her while she was going to the Chettiar kothi for some work. The people of the village were busy making preparations for Pongal and preparing bonfires and her cries were lost in the din of the festivities. She decided that she would not let anybody know about this incident and hoped that everything would remain the same. But soon she realized that she was pregnant. She narrated the series of events to her mother. They did not go to a clinic to terminate the pregnancy as they feared that the news would spread like a wild fire. They tried conventional ways to terminate the pregnancy but could not succeed. As a result a baby boy was born. Marikolanthu's mother took care of the baby as Marikolanthu hated the child because he reminded her of Murugesan, her rapist. A few years later, Marikolanthu's mother died. Her brothers asked her to

leave the house along with her son. They were not ready to take the responsibility of an illegitimate child. In the meantime she found out that there was a tumour in her womb and to get it operated, she wanted a lot of money. She decided to make the boy pay for his father's deeds. She took the boy to Kanchipuram, to the loom factory. They were Murugesan's looms. She mortgaged the boy for the next two years and used the money to get her tumour operated. She was happy to have punished the boy in some way. A year later, Murugesan died. When Marie saw his funeral pyre burning, her hatred also dissipated. She also spotted her son Muthu amidst the crowd near the funeral pyre and felt sorry for him. She decided to get him freed from the looms and give him a better future.

After her rendezvous with five different women, Akhila reached Kanyakumari in a different state of mind. She stayed at a hotel by the beach enjoying her loneliness. Her life had changed altogether. Unlike her past when she stuck to her old habits, the transformed Akhila tried new things. Every time she ate at the hotel, she tried something new from the menu. She went out for a walk every morning and evening. There she came across a young man and they started talking to each other. She decided to seduce him as a challenge to herself and even invited him to her hotel room. She allowed him to make love to her with the windows open and the lights on. She had decided not to shy away from herself. After a long time she allowed herself to be overwhelmed by lust forgetting her worldly duties. The next morning Akhila woke up with a longing for Hari. She wanted to call him but could not decide if it was okay to do so. She wondered about all the questions Hari would probably ask if they ever spoke to each other. She also thought he might have moved on and married someone else. Suppressing all such doubts in her mind, she took his number from her address book and placed a person to person call to Madras. They started conversing and the readers are told that Hari sounded low, cautious and incredulous. This marks the end of the story.

Nair did not wish to end it like a fairy tale with a happily ever after note. However it ended on a positive note. She left it to the readers to interpret it in their own ways. Whether Akhila unites with Hari again or not is not the crux of the novel. We know that Akhila has learnt to value her needs and happiness over others and this is the most important thing in the novel. She would now be able to live life on her terms without having to worry about her family or the society. She knew that her teasing and sleeping with a stranger would have been an unpardonable thing for her society but she still did so in order to mark a revolt against all the oppression she had been subjected to, so far in her life.

Akhila got something from each of the characters she met on her journey. While listening to their experiences, Akhila knew what it was to play a wife and mother. She vicariously lived their lives or at least portions of them.

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