



WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES

Monika Dhadwal
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Central University of Himachal Pradesh,
Dharamshala, H.P., India

Abstract:

A woman is a wonderful gift given by God to the world. The discussion about women's positions, their status in the families, and society has contributed to providing numerous rights that were formerly denied. Although women are claimed to be in better circumstances than their predecessors, they remain marginalized because diverse gender patterns function differently on women in the form of different ways due to cultural influences. This study examines the women protagonists from two distinct socioeconomic backgrounds in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé to better understand their marginalization. This research tries to explore the predicament of women who are considered affluent and marginalized. In Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé, the protagonist, Akhila, is an independent unmarried lady who travels alone to Kanyakumari in search of a place to live peacefully. The paper highlights the difficulties and dilemmas of a woman who is feeling isolated in a world of people. This paper analyzed how human behaviour is responsible for women's oppression, and later the reason for the growth and realization of the 'Self'. The human mentality, which is heavily impacted by society, has often played a critical role in victimizing humans themselves, particularly women. So, in some ways, it incorporates the profound cultural impacts on the human psyche that lead to the oppression of a certain group and provides solutions to them.

Keywords: *Predicament, Dilemma, Self, Oppression, Victim, Culture, Psyche, etc.*

Women's empowerment is essential to a society's progress and growth. Improving the status and empowering women may have a significant impact on the outcome of many development initiatives which result in constructive social change. The study has explored the experiences of the woman to unravel the chapters of suffering and pain. The novel is about the exploration of the journey of a woman whose name is Akhila or Akhilandeshwari, the title of the novel pirouettes around the women who were travelling by train and therefore, the conversation between them ultimately helped Akhila to think and decide for herself regarding her future journey of life. The story captures the metaphorical journey of an Indian woman who is struggling hard to come out of the hypocritical structures of society. The protagonist named, Akhila after reaching her place of destination, had made up her mind to live independently on her terms. She was a 45-year-old spinster from a Tamil family and was an income tax clerk. Anita Nair observes,

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Akhila is that sort of a woman. She does what is expected of her; . . . Which is why she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs? To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires. Blue skies, silver linings, a break in the clouds. Akhila knows these to be mere illusions caused by putting on rose-coloured spectacles. She has long ago trodden to shards of her rose-glassed spectacles and switched to metal-framed glasses that remain plain indoors and turn photo-chromatic outdoors. Even the sun ceases to shine when Akhila's glasses turn a dusky brown. . . Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect (Nair, 6-7).

Thus, she was an innocent girl who felt herself trapped in the web of situations and circumstances. Resultant, she was obliged by her household responsibilities and duties but now she had realised that while performing her social roles she had forgotten about herself. As a result, she took a break from her conservative family and boarded the train for Kanyakumari to explore the new horizon of life. Anita Nair through the medium of her writings traces the existential struggle of woman's life who struggles hard to make an independent place for herself in society. Hence, the journey connotatively denotes, the journey of 'self-assertion, self-affirmation, self-recognition' from the self-scarification and self-victimisation.

The storyline of the novel emphasises social, cultural, and psychological issues which deal with the gendered binary relationships and the related issues of marriage and divorce. On the train, Akhila came across six different women who had their own experiences of life. For instance, Margaret Shanthi, a co-passenger travelling on the same train with Akhila, narrated her experience of life when she got married to Ebenezer Paulraj who did not allow her to do a doctorate which she wanted and forced her to go for another degree. But in the end, she did which made her independent and empowered. Another passenger named Janaki belonged to a traditional family who believed in the conservative roles of women as mother, daughter, sister, and wife. Then, Marikolundhu, a fellow passenger had a poor financial condition. She worked as a helper in Chettiar's home where she was seduced at the age of nineteen and had a child whom she abandoned at first but later she changed her mind and took proper care of him. Through her character, Anita Nair has projected an ironic picture of a society where a woman was reduced to the object of a commodity and how men took advantage of the situation to harass and dominate a woman and also bring forth the process of self-awakening of a woman. On the contrary, Anita Nair also reflected upon the other side of the social and cultural scenario through the projection of the character Prabha Devi who was the rich wife of Jagdish, a diamond merchant. She was confident and considered herself fortunate to have such a man as her husband, "How lucky I am to be me" (Nair, 179). No doubt she also had to obey her husband but she broke those boundaries of subjugation and made her empowered. The other passenger was Sheela Vasudevan who was a fourteen-year-old school-going girl. She was a keen observant and deep-sighted attitude and had a deep analysis of her surroundings. She had a deep attachment with her grandmother who taught her to be more practical in life. Although her grandmother was no more, her teachings were reflected in her granddaughter's behaviour. She believed that "Women turn to their mother when they have no one else to turn to. Women know that a mother alone will find it possible to unearth some shred of compassion and love

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that in everyone else has become ashes” (Nair, 71). The story of Margaret Paulraj also reflected the same ideology of patriarchal society where woman has to act as per the demands of other beings around. She was a chemistry teacher and her husband was the principal as a result everything was compared in terms of actions and reactions of chemistry elements which projected the rigid approach of human society.

Hence, the stories of all these co-passengers ponder upon the issues of the social and cultural scenario of society which reduced a person to submissive and restricted boundaries. A person's opinions of themselves, their skills, or their individuality, define their notion of self. The topic of whether a woman can live alone is one that Anita Nair's character Akhila is always grappling with. She is an unmarried lady in her mid-fifties who constantly wonders about the freedom and happiness she has and could have had but was unable to experience because of her conditioning as a submissive woman.

Another important element in the formation and evolution of their ‘Self’ is cultural impact. “Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society,” states the Oxford Dictionary. The ladies who ride in the Ladies Coupé eventually lose their sense of self as a result of assimilating their personalities into their husbands'. Prabhadevi, Janaki, Akhila, and her mother are among the most outstanding examples of this. As they give up their own ‘Self’ to conform to the expectations of a patriarchal society. They comply with the expectations of their culture without question. In *The Second Sex* (1953), Simon de Beauvoir made the argument that while women’s economic circumstances can change, moral, social, cultural, and psychological changes must also occur before women’s circumstances can also change. Until they both continue to be themselves and stop becoming the ‘Other’ to others, their situation cannot get any better (Beauvoir, 859).

The major influence which affects the condition of women is the patriarchal structure that makes the condition of a woman pathetic and deplorable. As a result, a woman is confined to the boundaries which restrict the prosperous growth of her overall personality and therefore, hinder her in grooming her real self.

Akhila after carefully observing and listening to the traveller's experiences ultimately helped her in the realisation of ‘self’, she succeeded in her journey after subverting the forces of a patriarchal society which held her in the clutches of social and cultural chains. Thus, the feeling of empowerment sparks the light of confidence which made her break the boundaries of stereotypical structures of the society.

Conclusion:

The above-mentioned stories reflect the social and cultural standards of the social world which compel an individual to always behave artificially on the balance of manmade chains. These boundaries are responsible for blurring the real talent and reducing the identity to subjugated and docile. But if a woman realises her capabilities then nothing can hamper her transformation as the phoenix. Anita Nair uses her writing abilities to the utmost in order to portray society via the discussion of these six people in a ladies' coupe. In this society, a woman doesn't even have control over her own body unless she chooses to. By telling Akhila, who is trying to find her own identity, their stories, all the ladies in the coupe attempted, in a



sense, to reflect on their own behaviour. Towards the conclusion, the protagonist has gained more freedom and clarity, and she can now honour her own desires.

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