

# SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF WOMEN IN ORTHODOX INDIAN SCENARIO – AN ANALYSIS OF ANITA NAIR’S LADIES COUPE<sup>1</sup>

## CONSTRUÇÃO SOCIAL DAS MULHERES NO CENÁRIO INDIANO ORTODOXO – UMA ANÁLISE DO LADIES COUPE DE ANITA NAIR

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meio de obras de autores proeminentes que alcançaram reconhecimento internacional. Anita Nair, autora indiana, é uma das proeminentes escritoras contemporâneas da literatura inglesa indiana. Ela geralmente aborda questões associadas à libertação das mulheres devido à crescente consciência da importância da distinção. O pacto com o dilema da mulher contemporânea em relação a questões como feminismo, abuso sexual infantil, isolamento, alienação, crise de identidade ou apenas a crise existencial de lutar para ser ela mesma. O presente trabalho de pesquisa tenta discutir a construção social da mulher em um

**Abstract:** Fiction is a prose narrative in the form of a book, mostly exemplifying the characters and actions with some degree of pragmatism. The Indian novel in English evolved in the last hundred and fifty years and has contributed significantly to world literature through the works of prominent authors who have achieved international recognition. Anita Nair, Indian Author, is one of the prominent contemporary writers of Indian English Literature. She typically edges on issues associated with women's liberation due to the rising consciousness of the significance of distinctiveness. The compact with the quandary of the contemporary woman regarding issues similar to feminism, child sexual abuse, isolation, alienation, identity crisis, or just the existential crisis of struggling to be herself. The present research paper attempts to discuss the social construct of women in an Indian social orthodox scenario in the novel Ladies Coupe. The main character is Akhilandeshwari. She relates her story in fragments while listening to the experiences of the other five ladies in the compartment, trying to find a solution to the dilemma that has troubled her entire life: "Can a woman be happy without a man, or does she need a man to feel complete?" The author uses the literary device of "flashback". The story jumps back and forth between the past and the present, showing us glimpses of women who are humiliated and debased in addition to the five women in the compartment.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Liberation, Suppression, Identity Crisis, Child Sexual Abuse.

**Resumo:** A ficção é uma narrativa em prosa na forma de um livro, principalmente exemplificando os personagens e ações com algum grau de pragmatismo. O romance indiano em inglês evoluiu nos últimos cento e cinquenta anos e contribuiu significativamente para a literatura mundial por

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cenário social ortodoxo indiano no romance *Ladies Coupe*. O personagem principal é Akhilandeshwari. Ela relata sua história em fragmentos enquanto ouve as experiências das outras cinco senhoras do compartimento, tentando encontrar uma solução para o dilema que perturbou toda a sua vida: "Uma mulher pode ser feliz sem um homem, ou ela precisa de um homem se sentir completo?" O autor usa o recurso literário do "flashback". A história salta entre o passado e o presente, mostrando-nos vislumbres de mulheres humilhadas e rebaixadas, além das cinco mulheres no compartimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Feminismo, Libertação, Repressão, Crise de Identidade, Abuso Sexual Infantil.

## Introduction

The tale of six ladies who met while travelling by train and shared their life's journey is entitled *Ladies Coupé*. It tells the tale of how women sought strength and power. Akhila is a 45-year-old single-income tax clerk who has never been allowed to live on her terms; she has always been treated as a daughter, sister, aunt, and contributor. She discussed the stories of the five other women in the ladies' coupe, including Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher married to the foundations of poetry and a mindless autocrat, and Janaki, a loving wife and bewildered mother. Prabha Devi, the ideal daughter and wife changed for life by a glance at a swimming pool; the fourteen-year-old Sheela, with her aptitude to identify what others cannot; and Marikolunthu, whose past makes us feel pity for her. These women radiate the same tranquillity at different periods of their life.

### 1. Review of Literature

The ideas and customs that Indian women are supposed to follow are reflected in Anita Nair's art. Anita Nair, as a woman, addresses a variety of human needs, particularly those of women, uniquely. K. A. Agalya, in his research article "*Resuscitation of Relationship in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe*", expressed his views that Anita Nair has Indianness in her writings. Nair rightly exposes contemporary society's problems from a woman's perspective. Arzoo. A. Rode, in his research article "*Feminism as portrayed in Anita Nair's Novel Ladies Coupe*", illustrated that Akhila is a typical generation character. She dares to break the rules, where most women fail to voice their feelings. She is feministic in her tone and behaviour. Looking deep into the views of all the other women in the novel makes us realise that they come out of their kitchen and bedroom for the first time to think about themselves, which is against the so-called ideological, pious, and traditional society. The social construct of women oppressed them from the freedom to voice their feelings. Deepa. In her research article "*The Portrayal of Women in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe*", K studied from different perspectives by analysing the characters of all six ladies and the prime

character Akhilandeshwari. Many articles got published by concentrating mainly on Akhila, but this article casts light on all the characters.

## 2. Results and Discussion

In her book *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair proposed the widely popular notion of patriarchy, in which a woman is compelled by culture to be reliant on males and thus unable to see her power. She has shown her ladies as being oppressed by patriarchy together, but she has also offered them a final act of revolt against it. Her female characters are shown as wise, curious individuals fed up with the injustice and revolt done to them. Because of this, Anita Nair's female characters raise the topic of patriarchy's entrenchment in their way of life, viewing it as both a setting for injustice at home and in society and a location where they may fight against their oppressors.

Akhila wants to discover herself as she sacrifices everything for the sake of her family. Akhila is a 45-year-old woman. She thinks of escaping from her responsibilities to find herself in an unnoticed place by the people she has been with for the past 45 years. Her every concern revolves around her family to give a comfortable life to them. After her father got stuck in a road accident, she became the family's sole breadwinner. Her life becomes mechanical by earning and fulfilling the needs of the family. She does not even think about her identity. However, she notices the difference in the respect given to a male and a female in society and even in her family. Even though Akhila does her obligations as the family's head for her siblings and sisters, she is not regarded as an actual head since she is a woman. Amma anticipates that before she leaves on an office trip, her brothers and the family's males will have given their consent.

*"Perhaps you should ask your brothers for permission first". (LC 122)*

When Akhila argues that she should not ask permission because she is the older sister, her mother responds,

*"You might be older, but you are a woman, and they are the men of the family". (LC 122)*

During her childhood, her father was the head of the family; whatever food was cooked by her mother must be offered to their father first. It became a custom to be followed. However, besides earning the same as her father and fulfilling the family's needs during her headship, she needed more respect than her father once reserved. This discrimination makes her think from a different perspective on self-discovery. The fact that Akhila saved the family members demonstrates a sacrifice on his part. She is left to do her tasks while the small kids are having

fun, and he is a quiet man who keeps to himself. Even her mother carefully refrains from challenging her preferences. Akhila empathises and understands her mother, but because she has been inside for years planning plans, her mother finds it simple to ignore Akhila's femininity. Akhila's expectations guide his actions rather than his desires. According to Manu Samhita, a woman should not live independently and must depend on a man from her womb to her tomb. Akhila's encounter with her school classmate lifts her spirits and causes her to reflect on her life. However, patriarchal control develops. Akhila brazenly informs Padma of her choice to be alone, saying, according to Manu Samhita, a woman should not live independently and must depend on a man from her womb to her tomb. Akhila's encounter with her school classmate lifts her spirits and causes her to reflect on her life. However, patriarchal control develops. Akhila brazenly informs Padma of her choice to be alone, saying,

*“Do you think the brothers will consent to this? Do you think they will let you live alone?”* (LC163)

There Akhila defends herself and replies,

*“For heaven's sake, I do not need anyone's consent. Look at me; I'm forty-five years old, And older than all of you. I will do exactly as I please, and I don't give a damn about what you or anyone else thinks ...”* (LC163)

Padma nods in agreement. They are the family's male members. Everyone in the family, including Padma, Narsi, and Narayan, has solid patriarchal roots. They forbid a woman from being self-reliant. To find her identity, Akhila boarded a train precisely for that reason.

Margaret Shanthi is one among the other five women in the coupe. Her marriage relationship is just a replica of the ideology of men towards women for years. Margaret Shanti is one of the six explorers in the women's car. The tale of Margaret is one of a woman who discovers how to make her wishes would come true. Ebenezer Paulraj, Margaret's better half, is a role model for a strong man. He portrays Margaret as an unnoticed, ordinary young woman, moving her into a welcoming stillness. A young lady with a splendid scholarly vocation and a warm and lively character is decreased to a typical young lady. His unpretentious cold-bloodedness to the youngsters in his school gets rehashed with his significant other. Even at their first meeting, it was clear that he was hooked on Margaret's positive qualities. When she excitedly announces her pregnancy, he requests to have the kid aborted to maintain the naive charm in her. Margaret's emotions are disarrayed, outraged, distressed, and tormented, and she dives into self-indulgence. Burnt out on her accommodation at her home, she finally assumes control over her life. With incomparable determination, she summons her might and throws the ball into his territory. Having learned the tactics from his frequent game-playing, he completed his tasks.

Margaret has experienced medical, psychological, and paranormal crises throughout her life. She keeps growing until she achieves a happy and peaceful condition. For Margaret, marrying Ebenezer Paulraj feels like a fairy tale. In all seriousness, Ebenezer Paulraj adores acknowledging her unique choices, inclinations, likes, dreams, and points. Anita Nair does a fantastic job of capturing Margaret's situation of little opportunities. Although Ebenezer loves her, he forbids her from being unique. At the start, Margaret is a young woman who readily agrees to everything her partner requests and will go to any lengths for him. When she needs to get a fetus removed, she is horrified to be let off of her work. He is in charge of her. She must complete her B.Ed., but she must also get her PhD. She is made to seem good just for her better half, who continually bothers her. She starts to detest him, and the day she realises why, she feels liberated from some mysterious grips:

Margaret uses Ebenezer's love of food and sex as a plot element. She starts pampering Ebenezer with the sex and cuisine he values most in life. As he gains weight, he loses his sense of self and needs her more and more. He previously held her captive, and now she is holding him. Margaret returns to the public and alters her family's perspective and attitude about her better half through a unique approach she devises. Anita Nair employs inventive ways to cope with the strategy of identifying and exploiting the opponent's weakness to win him over. Margaret's intense melancholy, her soft voice, her struggles with her physical and mental health, and the effort she makes to be strong stand out where Anita Nair ends up being an outstanding author of Indian English.

An example of the long-held Indian cultural belief that a woman should depend on a male in her life is Janaki, another individual traveller of Ladies Coupe. This approach is also required when comparing a woman to the epic figures of Indian literature Sita or Savitri.

When a woman is young, she must depend on her father; when she is older, she must depend on her husband; if her husband is deceased, she must depend on her sons; if she has no sons, she must depend on her husband's close relatives; if she had no paternal kinsmen, she must depend on the Sovereign. A woman is never allowed to rule herself as she pleases.

As indicated by Indian custom, a lady is consistently inseparable from a great spouse. A decent spouse ought to be loyal, dutiful, and temperate. Janaki is required to take up this regular job of ladies. She plays various roles, including that of a mother, wife, and daughter, but never that of an independent woman. She is given permanent employment as an auxiliary. It is primarily due to her general public's male-centric example, recognised as a typical marvel.

Janaki marries Prabhakar when she is 18 years old, and they have had a happy, contented marriage for a very long time. They have a child and a daughter-in-law together, and Janaki enjoys her life until she realises her accommodation. At this point, she experiences some revolt and tells her husband, "I do not like how you control everyone, even our adult child. She says to her husband,

*"You just want to control him. You want to control everybody. You want everyone to do your bidding."* (LC 30).

Prabhakar's oppressive predominance, precision, and exactness disturb Janaki. The existence that has gone quickly discovers its high and low points. She finds herself and the actual bliss in her. However, she cannot remove the web under which she is covered for an extensive stretch.

Sheela, the following narrator in the Ladies Coupe, is a tender-hearted, fourteen-year-old woman endowed with profound perception. She observes the dynamics of her own family, including the bond between her grandma, mother, and father. Her granny imparts vital lessons to her. As her grandma ages, she grows devoted to her. Sheela matures as a result of the bond. Her interactions with other passengers seem to be mature. Sheela possesses the wisdom of three generations of women, including her own, her mother's, and her grandmother's. She knows that Sheela's grandmother also portrays a terrible picture of males physically and mentally dominating women. Sheela is censured by her dad unendingly for using the word poop in each sentence, addressing young men, and being discourteous. He urges her to talk *"with a razor-edged mind and a finely evolved expertise of repartee"* (70). Sheela's father frequently expresses an interest in her as his child. However, as she starts to speak with the authority of a grown woman, he changes and tries to dominate her. Sheela dresses her grandmother in respectable attire with diamonds after she passes away from a cancerous tumour, and her body is prepared for a memorial ceremony. She does it because she remembers her grandmother's facial expressions,

*"The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy"* (LC 67).

Marikolunthu, on the other hand, stands out from the others. She had a very tragic past, where she was isolated and abused without her mistake. With an impossible, psychosomatic knowledge, Anita Nair skilfully uses the tale of Marikolunthu to discuss the sexual maltreatment of a lady in India from a rustic foundation. Marikolunthu's story reviews her run-over with men and why most men exploit depression, lack of education, reliance, obliviousness, and women's disappointment. They never wonder whether or not to fault the lady toward the end. The general



public, overwhelmed by male-centric culture, set out the standard that a lady's obligation towards the family is all out. At the same time, such another authority is helpfully denied to her.

Marikolunthu was a thirty-one-year-old lady whose childhood was filled with happiness and memories though they were poor and had a small family. They were contented with what they had until her father died when she turned nine. There the actual plot conceals so many ups and downs in her life. Her mother had to take the family responsibility for daily needs. She pleads with the Chettiar family, the district's only rich and royal family. Her mother starts working in the Chettiar fort. Marikolunthu was still a young girl and had been learning things her way.

When her mother did not have enough money, she sacrificed her school for her brothers, whom her mother sent to school by bus. She thought of helping her mother by working in Chettiar Fort. She wanted to obey her mother because of the movie's reflection.

*Good girls always listened to their mothers in the black-and-white films I saw in the village tent. My favourite heroines did – Savithri and B. Saroja Devi, Vijayakumari, and even Jayalalitha. (LC 116)*

Marikolunthu was asked to look after the baby of a lady called Sujathakka, the wife of Chettiar. She was pleased to undertake the responsibility of a baby. She takes care of the young baby very much. Sujathakka was impressed by the way she did things like an older person who might be in her mid-sixties. Once when Prabhu papu was ill, she tried something that amused Sujathakka.

It shows the intense love of Marikolunthu towards Prabhu papu. She gets very attached to the child. Her days pass so fast without her notice, filled with joy and happiness. She always finds taking responsibility for a child or household things accessible in her mother's absence. Since she had never considered their separate responsibilities, she took that as her way of life given by God. The love and affection from Sujathakka are also another reason for her comfort in the Fort. Days move very quickly; one day, while she plays with the kid, Sujathakka comes and blesses her emotionally, which surprises her. Then her mother and other ladies tell her that she is no longer a child but a grown-up. She does not understand what they are talking about her. They laugh and say she has matured. She must stop playing and jumping regularly in her daily routine. From her psychological perspective, everything remains as usual, but that draining blood suddenly makes her a mature girl. Her mother's instructions and extra care in terms of safety and security become a significant part of her life. One day Sujathakka observes that her brother Murugesan had terrible intentions toward Marikolunthu. Sujathakka immediately sends her away from the house to avoid unwanted consequences in the future. She sends her to a nearby town

by convincing her she would have better exposure to enjoy being in a city. However, Marikolunthu does not want to go there but finally leaves the Fort to work for two young lady doctors. In no time, she makes her mark in their lives and becomes one among them. Her adaptability and acceptance reveal her identity. Everything goes on very smoothly; she goes home on leave to spend with her mother. There her life changes with the interference of the man that was the reason to leave the Fort.

Just before Pongal celebrations, everybody is busy decorating their houses. Children go to collect some wood to burn on Bhoghi, the festival's first day. After she remains helpless, she thinks her chastity was burnt in the anger of Murugesan. She does not understand the reason behind his attack and abuse. Later she conceives that it was the result of her maturity as a grown-up girl that led things differently.

She starts consoling herself as her mother learns this; she will not survive with this guilt as her life is spoiled. So, she tried to hide the disastrous event in her life. She takes a head bath, changes her clothes, and starts her daily routine. Being a man, he can behave as if nothing had happened to his life, but being a girl, she had to pay for that.

Though she hid the thing before others, time did not leave her. In just weeks after that, her maturity again becomes a victim of sexual abuse. To her utter surprise and her mother's distrust, she becomes pregnant, which brings out the reality of what had happened to her that night. Society always blames women first without even inquiring into what has happened. The same thing happens in the case of Marikolunthu also. Her mother also does not believe that there was no mistake with her. She concludes that Marikolunthu had a sexual affair with somebody. She goes on asking by whom she was seduced. Marikolunthu was shocked to know the perspective of her mother. Later, she understands that a man ruined her life, but society starts pointing out her.

*"I saw the only suspect in her eyes. Moreover, disbelief he was right, I knew with bitterness that made me want to walk away from that room, from her gaze. No one would believe me; he had said he was right."* (133)

The lovely and joyful childhood of Marikolunthu is spoiled due to sexual abuse. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child without intention. The innocence she had, the happiness she experienced, everything was taken away from her with this act. At the beginning of her story, Nair describes her fondness for children and how affectionately she cared for Prabhu papu but now refuses to see her child. She asked her mother to take him out—sexual intercourse before marriage and having a baby out of that.



Marikolunthu was very reluctant to have sight of her baby. The real love of motherhood she experienced with Prabhu papu. Though he is the child of Sujathakka, still she loves him a lot. However, love, concern, care, and everything have turned dark. Her baby remains abandoned.

### 3. Conclusion

Through characters like Akhila's mother, Nair illustrates how women are ardent advocates of the patriarchal system that has severely restricted women's social, political, and economic freedoms. Marikolunthu represents exploitation and marginalisation at the hands of the upper caste. Marikolunthu rape is not a unique incidence. Men's privilege to oppress women has become rape. For women, it is the most humiliating and terrifying experience. Nair depicts the inner struggles that develop in a woman and how she undergoes a metamorphosis through the character of Prabha Devi. She underlines the gender prejudice that exists in Indian culture. We can see many families give less importance to women. Nair mirrored this through the character of Margaret Shanthi, a successful chemistry teacher. She wants to pursue chemistry research to achieve her goal, but her husband Ebenezer Paul dominates, forcing her to join in B.Ed. In another instance, she shares her happiness with him when she realises she conceived a baby. Again, he compels her to abort it. She loses her individuality and self-esteem in the marriage relationship. Nair's characterisation gives a clear insight into male dominance in society through Ebenezer Paulraj. He loves his wife a lot but not her individuality. He might only love her when she adheres to him in all ways and means. He loves her as his wife only, not as Shanthi. This mentality makes Shanthi fed up. She started liberating herself from all the duties. An example of the long-held Indian cultural belief that a woman should depend on a male in her life is Janaki, another solo traveller with Ladies Coupe. This approach is also required when comparing a woman to the epic figures of Indian literature Sita or Savitri. Sheela, the following narrator in the Ladies Coupe, is a tender-hearted, fourteen-year-old woman endowed with profound perception. She observes the dynamics of her own family, including the bond between her grandma, mother, and father. Her granny imparts vital lessons to her.

Women and men must reciprocate their relationship to establish an excellent societal family. However, even in this 21st-century technological society - women are not treated equally to men. This discrimination starts in the family and continues in society. Anita Nair illustrates the sufferings of women through the novel Ladies Coupe. She has spent time dwelling on femininity,

their place in the world, and their sorrows. The ideas and customs that Indian women are supposed to follow are reflected in Anita Nair's art. Akhilandeshwari, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolunthu are all fictional women who can be seen as mirror images of real Indian women. Without a doubt, Anita Nair depicts the dilemmas of women stuck in social and emotional situations, battling injustice and destiny. She discusses the psychological distress that women face in a variety of situations.

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