FROM SELF-SACRIFICE TO SELF-DISCOVERY: SUBALTERN WOMEN IN ANITA NAIR’S LADIES COUPE

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Introduction:

In terms of literature, gender relations have been one of the most prominent themes in the last decades of the twentieth century. Women at the hands of patriarchy in the native society are reduced to an object of reproduction and labour. In the postcolonial time, woman is split between modernity and tradition, and is allotted a repository position of all that is ethical in the tradition. In the post-colonial nation state, modern Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamla Markandya, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair etc. with their acquired feminist consciousness, have focused upon gender relations and women’s status in their writings.

Anita Nair is one of the most well-known modern women writers from India, her novel Ladies Coupe has been translated in more than twenty five languages. The Coupe in the present novel symbolizes the circumscribed space that women are offered within the society. The six women characters of the novel are from different age group, religion, class and community. Janki, Margaret, Sheela, Praba devi and Marikolanthu share their personal stories with Akhila, the protagonist of the novel. They are travelling in Ladies Coupe, a second-class compartment of the Indian Railway. The women try to counsel Akhila, by sharing their own problems of subalternity and marginalization, and showing an appropriate path to her.
Can the Subaltern Woman Speak?

Subaltern means a person or a group of persons of lower rank or subordinated status. They are at the margins of the society. Gayatri Chakroarty Spivak in her highly acclaimed essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* focuses on the “double colonization” of the marginalized women. She asserts that a subaltern woman is silent and cannot speak. By her assertion she means that the subaltern doesn’t speak in a language that gets hearing in the locations of power. Spivak in her essay requests the intellectuals, postcolonialists and feminists to hear what could not be said in the old discourses and make new discourses that would have a closer look into the reasons behind the muting of women.

Six Women in the Coupe:

The novel begins with Akhila or Akhilandeshwari, the protagonist who is a forty five year old spinster, in search of escape from her current life. She is an Income Tax official and the only meal ticket for her family after the death of her father. In performing her role as a daughter, sister, aunt and a breadwinner, her own identity is perplexed. As Jhon Mcleaod rightly states in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, “We do not construct our own identities but have them written for us; the subject cannot be ‘sovereign’ over the construction of selfhood.” (McLeod 192) Thus, she takes a one way ticket to Kanyakumari and commences a quest of selfhood. Despite of being the income producer of the family Akhila is never considered the head of the family; nobody cares for her inclinations and choices. “Akhila is that sort of a woman. She does what is expected of her; she dreams about the rest.” (Nair 1) She literally becomes the Other in the family. As Simone De Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, “No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One.” (Beauvoir 27) By escaping from her present life, Akhila tries to find answer to the question whether a woman could live by herself or not. When Akhila’s brothers Narsi and Narayan get married on the same day and at same place, nobody bothers to ask Akhila if she wanted a husband, children and a home of her own. “In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster.” (Nair 77)
Janki is a pampered daughter, wife and a mother who likes being looked after. She got married at the age of eighteen and has led forty years of married life. When Janki says, “I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left off.” she signifies the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology from cradle to grave. Janki becomes a woman who, “subsumes her identity under that of the family’s.” (Nayar 131)

Sheela is the youngest of all the six women, a fourteen year old girl who has been a victim of girl child abuse. She is hurt by the unwanted touch of Nazar, her friend Hasina’s father when “one Sunday afternoon when Sheela went to their house, rushing in from the heat with a line of sweat beading her upper lip, Nazar had reached forward and wiped it with his finger. The touch of his finger tingled on her skin for a long time.” (Nair 66) Although hurt by Nazar’s gesture Sheela is unable to speak about it in front of anyone.

Prabha Devi is another character that emphasizes the issue on an Indian family’s preference for a son than daughter. Prabha’s father was downhearted when she was born. “If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance.” he says. (Nair 169) She is persuaded to get married to a diamond merchant’s only son at the age of eighteen. As Motherhood is considered the pinnacle of womanhood. Later her husband Jagdeesh insists her to have babies as his parents keep asking for grandchildren. All her life Prabha Devi waits for her husband and then for her children. Thus, Prabha Devi is pushed to the margins and so she loses vitality and becomes the Other of the family. Later in her life she realizes that she has missed something in her life. She wishes to learn swimming but Jagdeesh doesn’t show any concern. Finally she learns swimming own her own without anyone’s guidance. She cherishes the memory of being afloat once and finds herself to be fearless.

Margaret Shanti delineates how patriarchy operates in different forms. She is a chemistry teacher in the school where her husband Ebenezer Paulraj is the Principal. She married Ebenezer Paulraj at her own choice. But Paulraj however becomes the worst example of chauvinism in the novel. She quits her career despite of being a brilliant student. She is forced to pursue B.ed when she wants to pursue PH.d. Margaret, a dynamic personality merely becomes a silent on looker. In Beauvoir’s word Margaret becomes a woman, “Doomed to procreation and secondary tasks, stripped of her practical importance and her mystical prestige…”(Beauvoir 113) She is a
subaltern woman whose identity is located in subordination to the codes of patriarchy, for her action to some extent is validated by those in power. She is even more hurt when Ebenezer forces her to abort her first child. There comes a time when Margaret feels, “Where was I in all this? Margret Shanti, the women.” (Nair 111) However, Margaret finds a way out for her suffering; she flatters her husband and makes him eat fatty food until the fat makes a home in him. She felt that Ebe had become more of an easy man to live with.

Marikolanthu is the character which can be considered a subaltern in true sense. She is the most poignant of all the six women. She represents the lower castes and rural subalterns. She seats at farthest end of the compartment. The subjectivity of a subaltern woman is always circumscribed by the language of the colonizer and by the loss of her own native language. As Marikolanthu doesn’t know English she cannot talk to the other ladies. Her silence also delineates the troubles of minority communities which exist among insecurities. After the death of her father she starts working as a maid at Chettiyar’s house. Murugasen one of the relatives of Chettiyar rapes Marikolanthu but she cannot raise her voce against him and tries to conceal the issue as she belonged to lower class nobody would believe her. She becomes untimely mother of an illegitimate child whom she names Muthu. As quoted by Simone De Beauvoir in The Second Sex, “Motherhood in particular is respected only in the married woman; the unwed mother remains an object of scandal, and a child is a severe handicap for her.” (Beauvoir 508) Furthermore, her younger brothers ask Marikolanthu to leave the house with her son. Finally Marikolanthu decides that she will leave by herself. She joins a mission hospital as helper and proves that even she can have a good life.

Karpagam: A Feminist in the Novel

Apart from the women in the couple, Karpagam, Akhila’s childhood friend emerges as a feminist in true sense. She is a widow who lives by herself, wears colorful clothes and kumkum. When Akhila is shocked by her dressing she says, “I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose.” (Nair 202) While Akhila had wallowed in a pond of self-pity, Karpagam had learnt to survive. Karpagam is the character who finally shows Akhila, the path she must lead on when she says, “I live alone. I have for many years now… we are strong Akhi. We are if we want to be.” (Nair 202)
Conclusion:
Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* focuses on the issue of Self Discovery. Although Nair doesn’t consider herself to be a feminist, she presents a realistic picture of Indian women and their relationships, their anguish and choices. But Nair at the end brings a ray of hope by showing that there can be a change by initiatives and courage. This ray of hope becomes significant when Marikolanthu says, “Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally.” (Nair 210)

Works Cited:

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