



The Conflict between Tradition and Modernity Conflict in Nair's Ladies Coupe and Mistress

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English is well known for its novelty and creativity. Many creative minds contributed to its advancement. Among them the women writers are leading one. A new generation of women novelists emerged on the canvas of Indian English Literature which added new dimension to it. There is not a long tradition of women novelists but whatever the tradition is, it is highly commendable one due to distinction and novelty with which the Indian women novelists are writing and broadening the horizon of Indian English Literature. Many eminent women novelists emerged on the horizon of Indian writing in English. One of such an attention arresting woman novelists is Anita Nair. Nair enjoys a special place in the realm of Indian Writing in English due to her Feminist writing. As a woman, Nair has best presented the problems faced by the Indian women living and breathing in an orthodox male dominated society in India. Revolt against traditions, search for identity and struggle for Independence are some of the themes which frequently occur in her novels. 'Ladies Coupe' and Mistress are the best example of it. Anita Nair's writing is an effort on her part to create awareness among women about their social status, their fundamental rights and their worth as an individual in a typical orthodox and male dominated society where woman has been considered to be weak, worthless creature, a parasite and a mere nonentity. Nair's novels show that it is no longer easy for the



male dominated society to confine women within the four walls of the house and impose upon them the unbearable traditions and monotonous responsibilities of feeding the children and pleasing their husbands. It is a growing awareness among women that it is possible to be something more than a wife. This modernity in their thinking makes them break the traditions and accept the new ways of life which give them the desired place and dignity in society. They have become fully aware of the fact that they are made to play many roles besides a wife, a mother and a sister. This rejection of traditions and newness in attitude and in thinking creates conflict in their lives. They find themselves to be sandwiched between the past and the present between old and the new and between traditions and modernity.

How an Indian woman is sandwiched between the old and the new ways of life is best shown in Nair's novels. The female characters in her novels seem to be in a flummoxed state and struggling with the period of transition in their lives which is caused due to rejection of the old values on one side and acceptance of the new on other. They want to come out of the severe restraints of the old society which treat them insignificantly and want to breathe freely and breathe for themselves. But the male dominated society makes all possible efforts to suppress these desires of women and wants them to live and die within the fixed boundaries of the society. Violation of it is not acceptable. Women feel suffocated in these circumstances. This suffocation, humiliation subordination and trivial treatment make them restless and provoke them to stand and raise voice against this society which always thinks of men's interest.

Anita Nair's novels like 'Ladies Coupe' and 'Mistress' throw light on transition taking place the condition of women living in Indian Society.

Exploitation and Suffocation of women in Nair's Ladies Coupe:-

In Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe', Akhila is a female protagonist who is a representation of a change taking place in the attitude and sensibility of the Indian women. Akhila's attitude at life marks the beginning of a new social system where woman will be an independent entity with equal social status and would be free to live her life as she wishes. Akhila is a representation of a modern woman who does not believe in the age old traditions and social morality which deprived women of their right to live and made them suffer.



This rejection of social traditions by Akhila and her attitude brings about her suffocation in a patriarchal system.

Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' is a story of a girl, Akhila, who wants an escape from the age old traditions and family relations. Family's negligent attitude and family responsibilities makes Akhila a 45 years old bachelor with no proposal of marriage. In the beginning, Akhila works as a clerk in an Income tax office at her native place in Kerala. But sudden demise of her father disturbs the whole family. During this period of hard times, Akhila becomes the father of the family and supports it by working as a clerk in her father's place. She becomes a responsible shoulder of the family shouldering the responsibility of feeding a fatherless family. The futurity and settlement of her brothers and sisters become a prime concern of her life. Every day she travels some distance to reach to her working place with great pleasure.

Akhila sacrifices many valuable years of her life for the welfare of her family. She leaves no stone unturned to settle down her brothers and sisters. Her mother always reminds her of responsibility towards family. But she forgets her own responsibility of marrying Akhila. Instead, she victimizes Akhila for the survival of her other children. This negligent attitude hurts Akhila a lot. Her sacrifice for family brings nothing but frustration which shakes her faith in family relationships. She cares for all but no one cares for her. She gets sandwiched between her desire to live for herself and the family responsibilities. She is so suffocated and fed up with family relations that she strongly expresses her need for escape in the following words:

'Now I can for me, for Akhilandeshwari. Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother.' (P.No. 206.207)

Burden of family responsibilities make her un-notice her own interest in life. She becomes so much concerned with the settlement and marriages of her brothers and sisters that she forgets her own settlement and marriage. There was a chance for Akhila to marry with a boy whom she loved but due to age gap between them and the futurity of this marriage and its consequence prevents her from marrying. Her native place becomes hot for her to live in. She makes up her mind to come out of this suffocation otherwise she would go mad:

"She would go. She had to or she would go mad confined within the walls of the house and the life she was expected to live."



Akhila's frustration further intensifies when her own sister Padma who stays in her flat, speaks negative and abuses Akhila in her absence. This ungrateful behavior of her sister makes her lose faith in family relation. She feels that the years of her life which she spent for family seems to have gone in vain. When Akhila determines to leave her flat and her sister Padma, her sister asks her to take consent from her brothers. At this she gets irritated and expresses her anger:

"For heaven's sake I don't need anyone's consent. Look at me I am forty-five years old. And older than all of you. I will do exactly as I please and I don't give a damm about what you any one else thinks. (P.No. 209)

Akhila is so much irritated with the relations. Now she wants to go and live for herself. She breaks all her relation with the family which gave her nothing but anguish and decides to go on a journey to Kanyakumari to enjoy her life. She is very much obsessed to find a solution to a question, can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?

With the help of her friend, she manages to get a seat in a 'Ladies Coupe' a railway compartment meant for ladies only. Akhila is very happy to know that some other ladies would accompany her during her journey. Her curiosity aggravates further to know a lot about their life experiences. She wants to know whether their living their lives are like her. Initially, all the women in the ladies coupe are reserved and silent, but as the journey progresses, there progresses their discussion.

Ladies very frankly share their life experiences. Akhila comes to know how some of them 'struggled a lot to be independent in their lives and others prepared to live within the traditions of life. She questions them about the independent life of women and place of a man in woman's life. Some reply favorably that if woman wants, she can be independent without a man. They further add that she does not need the crutches of a man to go ahead in her life. But others views are contrary. Akhila told them how she sacrificed her life for the welfare of her family and about her decision to remain bachelor. Akhila's decision is appreciated by some but others insist on her to get married and settle down in her life. One of the ladies Karpagam in Ladies coupe justifies Akhila's decision to leave her family and to breathe independently in the following words.

"So, what do you suggest I do? Akhila asked."

Whatever you think you want to. Live alone. Build a life for yourself where your needs come first. Tell your family to go to hell or wherever." (P. 202)



Through their discussion, Akhila realizes that there is growing awareness among women about their social status and their desire for free life. Akhila's discussion with these ladies gives her strength to continue her life as she wishes it to be.

While wandering lonely on the beach of Kanyakumari she enjoys the freedom of life which she desired for. But at the same time she understands how a society looks at a woman wandering on the beach without a man. On this beach, she meets a man and cannot avoid the temptation of having sex with him. This incident reminds her first union with her lover Hari. She hurries to find out her number to continue her past relation. It shows woman's dependency on man. Akhila realizes that a woman may be complete in many respects except the gratification of sex. She can be independent in many things but her dependency on many for sexual gratification is inevitable. She realizes that man's place in woman's life is a biological necessity. Eventually, Akhila escapes from the traditions and social customs of her Conservative Brahmin life.

Suffocation of woman in Mistress:

In her second novel, 'Mistress' Nair deals with the socially unacceptable behavior of a woman called Radha. It is the result of her suffocation and suppression in matrimonial relations. The novel shows how women are victimized in traditional marriage system.

'Mistress' is a story of a woman Radha whose marriage with Shyam is based on the foundation of a compromise gets shattered due to Radha's misconduct of adultery. Radha gets fascinated towards a travel writer, Chris, which results in her adultery. This undesirable action on the part of Radha is the result of her husband's traditional attitude and the way he treats her. Shyam is a man with typical orthodox mentality who denies freedom to his wife, which causes conflict and disharmony in their married life. Radha vacillates like a pendulum between family traditions and modernity and feels suppressed and suffocated.

The arrival of a travel writer, Chris, causes a great havoc in the life of Radha and Shyam. Chris comes to Kerala to write an article on the life of a classical dancer, Koman, Radha's uncle. In their very first meeting, Radha's interest in the travel writer becomes clear which marks the beginning of a new relationship of illicit love. Chris, the travel writer, stays in Shyam's resort. Initially Shyam is very happy with Chris's stay because he thinks that his resort would figure in his article which would give his business a worldwide recognition. But everything happens contrary to his expectations. The work of article writing on the life of the classical dancer brings all together. They meet regularly. Their frequent



meetings bring Radha and Chris together. Their intimacy results in Radha's adultery. This relationship does not last long as it is against the social taboos.

It makes us think why and what makes Radha to go on the path of adultery and enjoy a socially unacceptable undesirable sexual relationship with a person other than her husband. A woman happy in her matrimonial life can not dare to go on such path which ends in frustration and endless anguish. It is made clear in the novel that Radha is absolutely unhappy in her married life because this relationship gives her nothing but slavery and confinement. She prefers to go on the path of adultery because she does not find Shyam to be a good husband. For him, Radha is like a bird in a cage, which can enjoy 'everything but not freedom. Shyam's poor understanding of his wife's feelings and his orthodox mentality steals harmony from their relationship.

Radha dies for freedom. Radha wants to live her life as she wants. But Shyam wants her to live her life as he wants as he is her husband that makes Radha unhappy. With Shyam, Radha is deprived of freedom and she cannot think of herself more than a wife. At home, she feels very bored. To overcome this boredom, she wants to do some work but it is also not allowed. It irritates Radha. Radha says:

'I hope that is not going to undermine your standing in society. Is there anything I can do that won't? I wanted to teach in one of the primary Schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class you said the same. Then I wanted to start a creche and you said you didn't want the house filled with bawling babies. So I thought I would find something else to do which didn't involve making money. (P.No.73)

Radha wants to fly like a butterfly and enjoy freedom. But Shyam's traditional mentality cuts off her wings. Radha is not happy with the way she is living her life. She also hates Shyam's treatment. She expresses her anger.

Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights. (P.No.73)

Radha feels that she is like a kept woman, a mistress who is kept for sexual needs. Shyam's this attitude is responsible for Radha's misdeed of adultery to a large extent. Shyam's poor understanding of his wife and his negative mentality makes Radha take interest in Chris, a travel writer. This new relationship with Chris gives her pleasure and freedom which she expects from Shyam But the Indian culture and its customs and traditions doesn't approve of this relationship as it is against its taboos. Radha feels



suffocated in these traditions. So, she shows less care for it. She is very happy with her new role as a mistress.

There is female character Maya which supports Radha's action or deeds of adultery. She opines that the marriage system is meant for giving happiness to both men and women. But if the system fails in its objective, then both are free to develop new relations which give them the pleasure and freedom which they expect.

Radha is a woman of a new generation and of different attitude. She criticizes all the social conventions which victimize women. She wants to come out of such traditions of the society. She wants such traditions and social system which will allow her independence and respectable position and happiness which she deserves. For this, Radha is ready to discard all those relations and systems which treat her as a possession, a precious possession and a worthless individual.

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