A Trip towards Self-discovery in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*

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The more a person understands about himself the more he will praise his uniqueness and achieve his goal in a successful manner. Self-identity is essential for one’s life that shows what the person is and how the person is. Identifying one’s self is the most difficult process and for that one must come across so many obstacles. This is even more complicated in women’s case. Women’s identity is hidden behind sacrifice and dependence. Hence this paper deals about female identity in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*.

Anita Nair is one of the famous Indian women writers. She has won many awards and her works are highly acclaimed. *Ladies Coupe*, her second novel was selected as one of the five best books in India in the year 2002. This is a novel in parts about stories of different women. The central concept of the novel is the protagonist’s search for self-identity. In order to find her own self she takes a train journey. So this is the story of a middle aged spinster Akhiladeshwari alias Akhila who finds the courage to live independently. The writing style of the author in this novel can be compared with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing*.

In *Canterbury Tales* a group of people gather together at Tabard Inn, to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. That evening their host suggests that each one must tell tales in order to make the trip a pleasant one. So they accept and tell about stories. Similarly Divakaruni in her novel *One Amazing Thing* has used story telling technique. There are nine characters confined in a visa office after an earthquake. They struggle for their survival. Among the group, a teenager suggests that should tell about one amazing thing that happened in their life, in order to reduce their tension. In both these works a group of people gather at one place, they are from different social setups, and share their stories.

In a similar manner Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* consists of different stories of women who are from varied social setup and family backgrounds. The author has shown the transcendent power of stories which help the protagonist to identify herself. *Ladies Coupe* is the kingdom of women. In order to discover herself and life of own, Akhila takes a trip to Kanyakumari in train. Therese meets her fellow passengers and they share their stories. This train journey becomes the back bone of the novel.

Thus in this novel the author has expressed the picture of Indian women and their search for strength and own identity. Society and family play an immense role in every individual’s life. Family gives strength and helps the individual to achieve his or her goal. Family and relationships shape the individual’s life. Without these things good physical and mental health cannot be attained by the individual. Thus a family, which is one of the social institutions, has an important responsibility. But if a family fails to fulfill this responsibility, then it affects the person in a negative way.

There are certain norms and duties to be fulfilled by women. Because of this the protagonist, Akhila suffers and loses her younger years for the sake of her family. The novel *Ladies Coupe* talks about how such social practices have negatively affected the protagonist and her strong determination to break all barriers to get a life of her own. In order to bring up her family and fulfill their needs she has sacrificed half of her life. In return the family gives nothing to her. Her family makes her become a forty five year old spinster and “hungry for life and experience” (Nair 2). Thus her longing for these is strongly registered in her unconscious mind. It creates tension and frustration. In order to avoid the stressful situation and for her self –identity she escapes from her engagements. During her train journey she happens to meet five different women as her fellow passengers and they share their stories and experiences. At the end of the novel with her unconscious desires and the stories of these women she finds a solution for her question whether it was possible for a woman to live by herself, and at last she takes a decision, the turning point of her life.
Akhila, a “Forty-five years old. Sans rose coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience” (2). Now Akhila is in her mid-adulthood which is a period that brings financial security, emotional maturity and satisfaction from family growth. But in Akhila’s case it is different; she was unsatisfied with what her mid-adulthood had given her. It is the period when a person experiences marriage and children which Akhila is deprived of. This happened only because of her family. Thus her family fails to do its responsibility and it deeply affected Akhila.

Akhila came from a Brahmin family, was a daughter to her parents, sister to brothers Narsi, Narayan and Padma. But she feels that she does not have a life and an identity of her own. After the death of her father the responsibilities of her family were given to her. She was the head of the family, and she had to settle them and this too because she is the eldest daughter of the house. It is the tradition and custom of Indian societies that the eldest one should bear the burden of the family. The death of her father totally upsets the life of Akhila. It transformed her into a serious person whose action and words were loaded with stiffness. This became her nature. She devoted her life for her family. Now Akhila’s position evolved from that of a young and energetic college girl into a dutiful and responsible woman. But she completely lost her identity.

When her brothers grew up and went for jobs, Akhila feels relieved and remarked that, “Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again” (77)? Her brothers and sister wanted to marry but nobody asked her “don’t you want a husband, children, and a home of your own?!”(77). Living for herself was taken away from her by the family. Her repressed desires affected her mentally. Though she faced some of the actual problems her hunger for life and physical desire strongly registered in her unconscious mind.

In her trip, by listening to these stories, she was awakened to the fact that she had sacrificed a lot. That night time she dreamt about life and physical desire. It is true that dreams are the wish fulfilment. She dreamt about a man physically approaching her in front of her family members and that they wanted to stop her from accepting him. The man in the dream said to her, “Everyone else might have forgotten about the woman within you. But I see her. I see the desire in her eyes, the colours in her heart” (92). This shows that in real life she longs for her individuality and how the family is an obstacle to her.

The stories she heard helped Akhila to take the decision. Janaki, opined that “why should a woman live by herself? There is always a man who is willing to be with her” (21). From Sheela a fourteen year old girl, Akhila understands her quality of looking behind things, even though she is very young to realize the life fully. Next story teller is Margaret Shanthi, a Chemistry teacher speaks about male domination and how she took revenge for that. The next was Prabha Devi from rich family, whose story was about her happy and successful marriage life. Prabha Devi achieved her desire by learning to swim. From Marikolanthu; she learns how the former had faced many problems like ill treatment, poverty, and lesbianism. Marikolanthu became an unwed mother to a boy fathered by Murukeshan. At first she did not accept the child but later accepted and started living on her own, without bothering about the society.

These stories and her strong desire to assert her individuality of her own reminds her former love with Hari, who was younger than her. She loved him a lot but she came away from him because she was afraid to face the society. With the help of her unconscious desire and stories she realized that she did not need a man to protect her but only as a companion to share her feelings and thoughts. The feel made her contact Hari. She was inspired by Karapagam who was Akila’s friend defied the rules and traditions of the society. Through this character author has expressed the importance of need for self-expression.

Finally she decided to go back to her loved one. She realized that life is not same for everyone and their perspective about life also is not the same. Akhila who once played a multi-dimensional role for her family members now starts a life of her own. Her trip towards self-discovery ends when she finds her choice and her identity. So this is a novel of a single woman’s desire to break the norms and tradition in order to establish her own identity.

Works cited: