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Gendered Identities and the Culture of Constraint in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe`*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

This paper explores how gendered identities are set up and negotiated under the popular culture of constraint represented in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe`* (2001). The present study uses a close textual analysis to discover how patriarchal social norms affect, restrict, and define women's lived experiences in a different social setting. Akhila's story and the lives of the women she meets in the ladies' compartment depict a microcosm of a culture that normalizes gender-based expectations, emotional imprisonment, and declination of autonomy. Drawing on feminist literary theory and sociocultural viewpoints, this paper looks at how the characters deal with limits such as marriage, movement, sexuality, economic reliance, and self-hood. It also emphasises on important moments of resistance, self-realization, and agency that undermine dominant structures. The study asserts that by highlighting the distance between the prescriptions of institutions and individual aspirations, *Ladies Coupe`* not only discloses a prevailing tradition of self-control, but also provides conceptual position for reconfiguring female empowerment. Lastly, this paper has relevance to broader concerns with gender, identity, and resistance in contemporary Indian literature.

Keywords: Gender identity, cultural constraints, patriarchy, and feminist literary criticism.

Introduction:

Anita Nair is a prolific Indian writer whose works, including *Ladies Coupé* and *The Better Man*, explore the lives of women, cultural limitations, and self-discovery. Her works comprises fiction, poetry, and children's literature. She has earned international acclaim and adaptations. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* is a powerful accusation of the patriarchal mechanisms that define and limit female identity in modern Indian society. The novel is mostly set on a rail journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari, bringing together six ladies of various ages, origins, and experiences. Anita Nair produces a polyphonic narrative in which she reveals their life stories; encapsulate how gendered expectations, cultural standards, and societal supervision influence their experiences. The novel discovers how women internalize patriarchal ideals, navigate unequal power hierarchies, and carve out places for autonomy within cultural systems that are designed to limit them. Akhila, 45-year-old single woman, an unmarried, middle-aged Brahmin lady, acts as the novel's core consciousness. Her struggle for identity holdback from the tension between who she wants to be and who she is expected to be. She asks herself repeatedly: "Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does she need a man to complete her?" (Nair 3), Anita Nair's emotional journey upholds how women struggle to create and cohesive identities while facing the ardent demands of tradition and personal desire. Akhila's life narrative, along with those of Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolanthu, discloses how patriarchy acts not only as an outward societal force but also as an internalized ideology that determines how women see themselves and their positions in society. In this connection Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has observed that "Indian women's identities are often constructed through relational roles, daughter, wife, and mother - rather than individuated selves." (Rajan 112)

Akhila's experience reveals the discrepancies in gendered expectations. Following her father's death, she becomes the family's principal income, yet she is denied control in the



home. Her earnings are regarded as communal property, and her personal interests are subjected to familial obligations. As she reflects, “She wondered if she had been born solely to provide for others” (Nair 32). Although she assumes responsibilities traditionally associated with masculinity, she remains positioned as subordinate, illustrating Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “women are relegated to the position of the “Other” even when performing essential labour” (Beauvoir 17). Akhila's brief romance with Hari highlights how patriarchal conventions suppress women's desires. The stigma around a woman loving a younger man causes her to end the relationship. She does not do this because it lacks emotional value. Instead, she feels pressure from society, which deems it inappropriate. Akhila's ardent connection with Hari exhibits her struggle to gain control over her emotional and sexual life. Anita Nair uses Akhila's emotional restraint to question the taboo around female desire. Akhila betrays her past and admits, “I was afraid of wanting too much” (Nair 178) This internalization of cultural norms shows how patriarchy restricts women's choices by defining what behaviours are acceptable for women.

The narratives told by the ladies in the *Ladies Coupé* enrich the novel's message by demonstrating the variety of restraints encountered by women across class and generational lines. Janaki portrays the idealized domestic woman whose identity is built around care giving roles. She admits that she has never imagined living alone, and says that “dependence had become second nature” (Nair 68). Her narrative illustrates how patriarchal training dehumanizes women by discouraging independence and nurturing adherence to male authority. In contrast, Margaret Shanti's account focuses on psychological dominance in marriage. Her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj, controls both her actions and her ideas, diminish her identity to one of surrender. Her subversive act of changing his diet to undercut his power portrays how women reject patriarchy via everyday actions that reclaim control of their life. As feminist theorist Uma Narayan argues, “Patriarchal power often operates through intimate

relationships where women are expected to sacrifice autonomy for familial stability” (Narayan 104). Margaret's defiance supports Narayan's assertion that agency often originates in little, incremental acts rather than dramatic rebellion.

Prabha Devi's narrative exhibits the limitations of beauty standards and class expectations. She is groomed to embody ideal femininity in an affluent household and becomes a symbol of decorative womanhood. Her discovery of swimming becomes a metaphor for liberation: a space where she is free of the urge to comply. The act allows her to reawaken her body and herself outside of social norms. Anita Nair's portrayal resonates with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of cultural constructions of femininity, which she argues are often linked to the maintenance of class and patriarchal order (Mohanty 42). Prabha's return to herself through physical freedom depicts this tension.

Sheela's story demonstrates the journey from childhood innocence to adolescent awareness of gendered surveillance. Her discomfort with a man's unwanted look symbolizes how the female body becomes a focus of cultural policing. This marks her admission into a world where women are continuously watched, scrutinized, and disciplined. Her experience validates what feminist theorists call the internalization of the masculine gaze in shaping gender identity, demonstrating the early stages of patriarchal socialization.

Marikolanthu's story confronts male atrocity head-on. Her rape by a man from a higher class underscores the intermingling of gender, class, and sexual power. The response of society is to humiliate her, the victim, rather than the molester, a typical example of how cultural norms further victimize women. Her decision to raise her child independently marks a bold statement of autonomy in the face of a system that works to destroy her identity. Her story supports Mohanty's contention that marginalized women face multi-layered oppressions that require resistance both to patriarchal power and socioeconomic hierarchies (Mohanty 51).



The Ladies Coupé may be said to occupy a liminal space where women can share their stories without patriarchal disapproval. It is an enclosed cabin that symbolizes the momentary separation from social roles enacted outside the cabin, allowing the women to express realities kept hidden in everyday life. This space aligns with Victor Turner's theory of liminality, in which individuals occupy transitional zones that enable new identities and social understandings to emerge (Turner 95). The women's collective storytelling functions almost as a form of consciousness-raising—a staple of feminist collectives where personal narratives are used to raise political consciousness. In being exposed to these experiences, Akhila can view her own life not as a matter of individual failure but rather as a part of the larger pattern of gendered oppression.

Akhila's transformation at the end of the novel reinforces Nair's view that identity is not fixed; it is negotiated through experience and introspection. The stories she listens to by other women made Akhila realize that she had been living according to culturally imposed narratives that had restricted her freedom. Her opening up and seeking companionship on her own terms suggests that human agency evolves out of questioning internalized norms. Anita Nair does not offer a utopian vision of freedom, for patriarchal structures still persist, but she insists on women's abilities to reinvent them. Women in the *Ladies Coupé* do not altogether break free from patriarchy but create sites of agency that contest the determinism of female subordination.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, *Ladies Coupé* is a thorough evaluation of the way in which cultural norms affect, maintain, and reinforce gender constructions within Indian society. The characters exemplify a way in which women struggle, fight, and redefine themselves within the patriarchal systems that govern them. By offering multiple perspectives, Nair underscores that oppression is not monolithic but varies according to class, age, and social positioning.

Yet the novel also reveals a shared thread among the women. In revealing the resilience and agency of women whose lives are shaped by cultures of constraint, Nair contributes a powerful feminist narrative that challenges readers to reconsider traditional ideas of Indian womanhood. The power of feminism that Nair offers is profound, in that she shows the power of the women who are impacted by oppressive societies.

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