

Cruelty and Conflict in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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Abstract: *Gender relations in India involve influence dynamics. Woman's distinctiveness is constructed by gender, social class, caste, religion etc. Colonialism had rendered the doubly colonized identity of woman as a fixed and unchangeable one. Patriarchy, tradition, and Hindu religion had endorsed this inequality and injustice by legitimizing the control and oppression of women. Confined in the 'pativrata' ideal of Indian wifehood set by the images of Sita, Damayanti, Gandhari, Savitri etc., the Indian woman finds herself silenced. In the post colonial period, the decolonized male continued oppressing the female. Marriage, the promised end and ultimatum for an Indian girl continued to subjugate her. Under the banner of family, men continued to dominate over women in the name of love and security. This paper focus on the struggle and sufferings of women in Ladies Coupe*

Key words: *gender, oppression, suppression, sub-alternity,*

I. Introduction

Man, the sheltering tree curbed women's growth and nullified her identity. She was forced to deny herself her 'self'. Patriarchy 'colonized' her into being the 'other'. Her subaltern position deprived her of any chances of liberation. This paper deals with the conflict and cruelty in the life of the character Marikolundhu in *Ladies Coupe*. Gender relations in India involve influence dynamics. Woman's distinctiveness is constructed by gender, social class, caste, religion etc. Colonialism had rendered the doubly colonized identity of woman as a fixed and unchangeable one. Patriarchy, tradition, and Hindu religion had endorsed this inequality and injustice by legitimizing the control and oppression of women. Confined in the 'pativrata' ideal of Indian wifehood set by the images of Sita, Damayanti, Gandhari, Savitri etc., the Indian woman finds herself silenced. In the post colonial period, the decolonized male continued oppressing the female. Yet many Indian women have shown resilience and revolted against their positioning on the periphery. They have dared to defy the patriarchal image of woman as a silence and as an absence by confronting it, by challenging it to assert and appropriate their voice. They refused to be cocooned in the repressive ideologies. It is this image of the subaltern woman making her journey slowly but steadily towards the centre that we find as the central theme of many novels written by women writers in English.

Many Indian women writers in English with their newly acquired Feminist consciousness have given their writings a new dimension in the portrayal of the 'new' woman. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair etc. have probed deep into the female psyche and have created an awareness of different kinds and forms of female experience. Their protagonists are mostly upper-class and middle-class women, educated and intelligent yet dislocated individuals who go through a crisis in life as a result of repression within the family, their constrained relationship with their husbands, their disillusionment in marriage, and their own lack of assertion and realization of self. Poverty also has reduced women powerless. Nayantara Sahgal in her 'Rich Like Us' and Kamala Markandaya in 'Nectar in a Sieve' and 'A Handful of Rice' and Anita Nair in 'Ladies Coupe' have attempted to relate poverty to subservience. This paper is an attempt to trace within the post-colonial context, the evolution of Marikolanthu, one of the six female characters in Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe', from her subaltern position into a strong, liberated woman 'from whom anger poured forth like a stream of lava' (LC 209) at any kind of oppression.

Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' has a journey motif. With a narrative that journeys backwards and forwards into the past and the present to determine the future, it deals with the diverse experiences of women as subalterns and exposes the diversity within and among women. It is about the chance meeting of six women of different age, class, and experience- Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, Sheela, Praba Devi and Marikolanthu in the Ladies Coupe, a second-class compartment of Indian Railways. The Coupe is symbolic of their existence and the space they occupied in life and in society . They narrate their stories in an attempt to help Akhila, the protagonist, find an answer as to whether a woman in a male-dominated society could lead an autonomous life, independent of man. They approach the problem of sub alternity of women from different perspectives, and suggest to Akhila equally different yet successful strategies appropriated by them in life.

At the outset itself, one can find divisions among these women themselves, which is a typical feature of the colonized. Marikolanthu, the woman "seated at the farthest end" (LC 17) is relegated to the periphery within their female enclave because the other five women, who share a bond of sisterhood, know that "She wasn't one of them. She didn't look like one of them." (LC 18) Marikolanthu's subalternity here within her gender, which is double otherness is a result of the crucial function of the English language-the Imperial language of the colonizer, as a medium of power: "Besides, they were sure that she didn't speak English as they all did. That was enough to put a distance between them and her." (LC 18) The uneducated, rural woman Marikolanthu's denial of privilege to English silences her and denies her a place and a voice. She finds herself negated and neglected and dehumanized by the other women who are visible and have a voice. By not interacting with Mari, the other gendered subalterns assign her an empty space or absence which she doesn't resist. Acutely conscious of her dislocation and difference as a doubly marginalized subaltern, she "... shows clear signs of alienation, and manifests a tendency to seek an alternative differentiated identity" (B. Ashcroft et al. 9) She makes no attempt to give herself a voice now, among the women. This may seem to be in accordance with what Gayatri Spivak had contented: the subaltern cannot speak. Mari is aware that her poverty and experience differentiated her from the others: "...these women are making such a fuss about little things. What do they know of how cruel the world can be to women?" (LC 209) She waits for her chance to 'speak' only after she was spoken to by Akhila in Tamil, the language of the colonized. Marikolanthu, who had been cocooned in her silence so far, will be heard now. Because a colonized subaltern can come to terms with her identity only through speech and resist and overpower the destructive powers of ideologies that operate against her. Through her voice, she tries to assert herself and give herself a face, a past, a name, a voice and an identity. She reconstructs her identity by reconstructing her past.

In the postcolonial context, the name matters, in the construction of subaltern identity. Doomed by patriarchy and tradition, Marikolanthu finds herself reduced to the status of the sister to the real thing, even in her name. "I wish you had called me Roja or Chempakam,' I cried one day." (LC 214). Later when Missy V finds her name a mouthful and prefers to call her Mari, she has no grudges. Even the comment of Missy V on her name when she brings in a sprig of marikolanthu, is not understood by her: "It is rather like the lavender, but it is not lavender. So, Marikolanthu, is that what you are? Sister to the real thing?" (LC 229) Like a typical colonized, gendered subaltern, she had readily accepted and tolerated the place and space reserved for a girl in a patriarchal society. She was content to 'play house'-doing most of the domestic chores in the absence of her mother, the breadwinner of the family. She happily sacrifices her education for the sake of her younger brothers. She gets trained in the colonial and traditional ways of subordination: "...I was not to hug my brothers or cuddle up to them when we slept; ...I was to always cover my bosom with the davani ; ...I was a woman and nothing was the same again." (LC 225) Her inception into the Chettiar Kottai-the powerful symbol of the colonizer-as a caretaker of Prabhu-papa, Sujata Akka's son, marks her inception into subalternity. She surrenders herself instantly and willingly to the superiority of Sujata Akka, the second daughter-in-law of the Chettiar, whose every whim and fancy was fulfilled. Just like the 'brown' colonized who was silenced by the 'white' complexion of the colonizer, Mari was enslaved by the fairer Sujata: "Sujata Akka was fairer than anyone I had ever seen. ... all I wanted to do was worship her."(LC 219-20) She rejoices in her simple collection of Sujata's cast away glass bangles, a pair of old silver anklets, a rolled gold chain, old cotton drawers and frayed brassiers. At Vellore especially, she succumbs to the postcolonial subject's inordinate passion to embrace the superior ways of the colonial culture though she had been warned by Rukmini Akka to retain her own colonial ways of living: '...Now don't you start behaving like them, and ..don't eat beef mistaking it for mutton' "(LC 227) She tastes the strange foods stored in the fridge, tries Missy V's shampoo, becomes drab in her appearance, "looking like a widow even before being married", as her mother would tell her later. This aping of the colonizer culminates in her access to the imperial language: "Instead of glass bangles, I began to collect words and these would always be with me. (LC 232) Mari's consciousness is an embedded colonial consciousness. She thus becomes what Chandra Talpade Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (196-220) calls the average third world woman in contrast to the feminist representation of Sujata Akka and the other five women passengers in the Ladies Coupe: This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest is in contrast with the (implicit) self-representation of ...women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and their 'freedom' to make their own decisions."(199)

The feminine construct in India gives more importance and significance to a woman's physical appearance than her psyche. The female body is always treated as a commodity. Sujata decides to send Mari away to Vellore because she finds the male members of her family attracted by Mari, bubbling with youth. Mari understands that Sujata "... could no longer accept that I was just Marikolanthu. Suddenly I had become a woman to her as well." (LC 226) Her identity as an individual is rejected by Sujata, the superior gendered

subaltern because she could relate Mari only in terms of her body. When Mari returns to the village to take care of her sick mother, she is raped by Murugesan. Her female body now becomes the site of violence. She becomes victim of circumstances and gender discrimination, and the worst sufferer because the social norms and moral codes in society are disadvantageous to her. Murugesan, the colonized male had all along wanted to put her in her 'place' as a subordinate being—a maid and a woman: "...What is a servant like you doing wearing a watch?...You have more rights in that house than my poor sister. It's time someone has reminded you of who you are." (LC 239-40) And he could do that only by violating her body: "...if the Chettiar's sons can feast on this body of yours... remember I'm a relative, even if only a poor one, and I'm entitled to their pickings before anyone else." (LC 239) Here the female body is unleashed by the powerful decolonized male, on the powerless, colonized woman. To restrain the effect of the sexual invasion of Murugesan on her body, Mari tries to develop the 'avoidance' mechanisms of the colonized. She tries to 'purify' her 'impure' and 'polluted' body and silence her mind: "I bathed. ... I scrubbed myself relentlessly, trying to erase what had happened to me, trying to muffle the drumming in my head..." (LC 241) She decides to delve back into the past and begin afresh her old life as if nothing has changed. She longs to go back to the Missies in Vellore so that she thinks she can hold on the reins of her life. But her resultant motherhood puts an end to her dreams. Marriage and motherhood, which are supposed to be the promised end for a woman is rejected by Mari. Though a subaltern, she resists the system and makes a choice not to marry Murugesan as her ignorant mother fondly hopes: "I'd rather die than marry him." (LC 246) She scorns Murugesan and a husband's protection. Nor is she in a position to marry him (or any other man) because of her subordinate position as a poor woman and a rape victim who is much below the rank of Murugesan, a poor man. Even Sujata cannot help her because she herself is a subaltern in the male world, silenced by her husband Sridhar. Probably, "...if she has a job, that will replace a husband's protection." (LC 246) But her motherhood becomes a barrier to this. Mari, who had taken care of Prabhu-papa with utmost love can feel only disgust and hatred for her own child Muthu-no, Murugesan's. Motherhood, a blessing for other women becomes a bane for Mari. She negates it by rejecting her son. Her expatriate existence at Vellore had opened up new avenues not only to the ways of the colonizer but also an opportunity to assert herself as an autonomous being. When she returns to Vellore, after the tragedies in her life, she had become a changed person—a person without compassion for her own child. Her dreams for a better future which she had pinned on her training for a helper at a hospital shatters when Missy K tells her: "A helper's job is difficult and thankless. You need to be at peace with yourself to be able to do your job well. More than anything else you need to have compassion. And you ..." (LC 253) The repression Mari had faced all along had stripped her of compassion, the foremost quality in a mother, simply because she had chosen to 'avoid' and 'escape' motherhood. She had become a changed woman who prefers to pretend that nothing has changed though she had been swept off feet by the whirlwind of repression. Deprived of her chances of empowerment through education and employment, a disappointed Mari returns to her village. Sujata had inherited the Chettiar Kottai after the death of the Chettiar and needed the young Mari to replace Vadivu to take care of the lunatic Chettiar Amma. To escape despair, Mari embraces despair: "Sometimes I think I'm going mad myself and if I'm with a mad woman all day, perhaps I will learn to curb my own madness." (LC 254) To escape the responsibilities of motherhood, the drudgery of life, the cynicism of her brothers and society, and the hopes of her mother which drive her mad, she agrees to take care of the mad Chettiar Amma. Her desolate condition as a rape victim, an unmarried mother, and a poor daughter drives her to find a home in the company of the mad woman. Had she been a married woman, she would have unconsciously severed her ties with her paternal family from the day she was wed. But now, homeless as she is, she consciously severs her ties with her family and the society. Nothing can fill the void in her life. Her fragmented self can derive peace only in being alone with the mad Chettiar Amma. After the death of the Chettiar Amma, her life takes a new turn in an alternative type of female bonding. Mari had believed that her special bond with Sujata had sustained her all along. She had built her world around Sujata. She is aware that she is the only one left for Sujata to relate to the past. She comprehends the hunger and the frustrated desires in Sujata because of her revulsion for heterosexual relationship. Probably the same revulsion might have driven the Chettiar Amma mad. Mari who had been exposed to the intricacies of female bonding through the Missies seek to give Sujata the pleasure, happiness and peace which she cannot find as a married woman. Mari who had loved Sujata with her heart, now loves her with her body. For her, lesbianism is better than rape. Mari, the lesbian, involves herself in heterosexual relationship with Sujata's husband Sridhar so that Sujata can find peace. Mari who had felt only revulsion for sex, now indulges in it— in its two different forms, only to please Sujata and Sridhar, none of whom loved her but needed her. She is thrown out when Sujata, a typical married woman, cannot tolerate the encroachment of Mari in her 'place' as a wife. She leaves without accepting her wages and gets ready to face the strains of life herself to overcome her subaltern consciousness. To assert herself as a separate entity, she gathers resilience to resist resistance. To challenge patriarchy, she mortgages Muthu to one of the silk looms in Kancheepuram, owned by Murugesan, a rich man now. She feels even with patriarchy by selling the son to the father and mocks the age old reverence

attached to motherhood: "A perverse satisfaction flared within me. Murugesan might not know it but I had sold him his own son. I had finally collected rent for nine months of housing the boy." (p.265) She attains empowerment when she experiences the revival of compassion and motherhood on seeing Muthu play the role of a chandala at his father's funeral pyre. With a sense of shame, she reconciles herself with her 'self' by claiming her son and settling down with Missy K as a caretaker. She is no longer sister to the real thing but the real thing itself.

II. Conclusion

Mari's attainment of selfhood gives her the power not only to speak for herself but for all dislocated, isolated, marginalized women in India. By realizing her inner strength as a woman, she had made a success of her arduous journey from being a victim to a victor " ... 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." (LC 209-10)

Works Cited

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