

The Familial Tension: A Study of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract: The family has inevitably been the site for challenges, changes and compromises. Infact, it is the metaphor for the most sacred and most natural of relationships between children and parents, wife and husband, sister and brother. These relationships which provide emotional security, material support, care, a sense of belonging, status, legitimacy and social identity, in recent times in is under transition. The paper seeks to analyse the family dynamics Nair's *Ladies Coupe* and view the relationships as a gendered stucture and look into the power relation that characterise them.

Keywords: Family, Security, Gender, Power- relations.

“If there is one ism that governs Indian society and its institutions, it is familyism” (Sudhir Kakar and Katharine Kakar, *The Indians*, 2007). In fact it is very hard to imagine an individual without a family as it is the site of power, trust and interdependence. Anderson and Sabatelli define family as an interdependent group of individuals who have shared a sense of history, experience, some degree of emotional bonding, and device strategies for meeting the needs of individual members and the group as a whole” (1999:16). Going by this definition of a family, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* can be read as a family text where the protagonist Akhila, during her quest for identity journeys through a number of familial sites and views the power relations that characterise each of these sets of families and the role of women as outsider/ insider, in terms of her position as daughter, wife, lover, mother as well as mother-in-law and grandmother, vicious and benign stereotypes respectively. *Ladies Coupe* is the story of a forty-five- year-old Akhilanandeswari alias Akhila and her encounter with six other women on a train journey. Nair uses the 'chance encounter' device used by Chaucer in *Canterbury Tales* and brings together, in a ladies coupe, women of different age-groups, experiences and social strata who narrate their agonising and tormented lives in the context of familial inter-actions. The novel begins with Akhila's decision to go on a journey to Kanyakumari with the wish to escape the confinement of the house and explore the life she has always longed for: “I am a part of a ripple that will escape this city tonight. I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognise” (8). The first family we meet is that of Akhila. Nair makes use of the flash-back technique to introduce her family. Akhila's family consists of six members- the parents and their four children including Akhila. It is a typical Indian family with a male head – a typical patriarchal family. Her family can be characterised as a glued- together family, with no scope for individuality. Akhila's parents were married for almost twenty-two years. They were a couple suited to each other: “Often her father only had to think about something and her mother would voice exactly the same

sentiment within a fraction of a second” (10). Her mother had been a devoted wife ever since they were married. She wouldn't let anyone else iron his clothes because she “liked to perpetuate this myth about a tyrant husband who was easily annoyed and could be placated only by her complete devotion unlike other husbands in the neighbourhood who let their wives rule them” (11). Akhila's father does not in any way exercise his power over the wife, but the wife sticks to the traditional power structure where the male is the head of the family and the female has a defined gendered role governed by subservience and unconditional obedience. She herself blatantly says that “A good wife learnt to put her husband's interest before anyone else” and the best way to avoid strife in a family is to “accept that a wife is inferior to the husband” (14).

The bonding of the family rests on the security provided by the male's earnings which, in turn, determine emotional and inter-personal relationships. “Every year Akhila and her mother would wait for Appa to be promoted, for his increment plus benefits to grow so that Appa's face would finally be wreathed in a smile and Amma would have more spending money” (44). The emotional bonding in a family is also enhanced and strengthened through small things such as having breakfast, watching TV shows together etc. Parents exert decisive influence on children. Akhila remembers her teenage days when she would not relish her parents' display of affection. She would “read with her back to them: an unwilling witness to this Sunday noon ritual of loving, giving and healing” (47). She considers this distasteful and wonders when her parents would realise that she is no longer a child. As is customary with any traditional Indian family, Akhila's marriage is the prime concern of her parents and they are basically concerned with Akhila's grooming as an efficient home maker so that she can prove herself as a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law: “Now that she had finished her pre university course, her parents considered her education complete and she was expected to fine tune all her house keeping abilities in preparation for the day she would be married” (48). The family, as Mukul Mukherjee aptly comments, “fails to take into account the subterranean pulls and pressures of domination and subjugation that are incessantly played out among the members of the family at many levels....” (62).

Another important feature that is reflected in Akhila's family is the breakdown of the family after the death of her father. With the death of the father, things fell apart. The two young members Narsi and Padma hardly realise the implications of death. Narayan who is fifteen tries to hold back his tears. All the responsibilities of the family now falls on Akhila. She becomes the 'man' of the family ready to tread the path of self reliance, a role that has been assigned to men only. She helps her brothers complete their education and get married. She does not think about her own marriage. She finds that no one in the family including her mother seems interested in the subject of her marriage: “In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster” (77). For Akhila, “family thus becomes a site of struggle where they have expectations of security and mutuality yet experience denial,

fragmentation, subordination and consequently alienation” (Chaudhury: 179). Akhila is obliged to sacrifice her personal aspirations and dreams in order to bring up and support the members of her family. The next family we meet is that of Janaki. Janaki's marriage to Prabhakar followed all norms of a negotiated marriage where the horoscopes were matched, the family liked each other and they perfectly suited each other. Janaki finds it difficult to succumb to the bodily desires of her husband but then accepts that as a part of her life. In the initial years of their marriage there was pleasure hidden in the rituals of togetherness and then, after forty years, “there were no more surprises, no jarring notes, no peak-a-boos from behind doors. There was just this friendly love advertising liked to capitalize on” (27). The husband and wife relationship becomes a matter of sheer mechanical habit. The two of them of course make good parents. Their child becomes an extension of their image, and helps them feel a sense of fulfilment. As a husband Prabhakar, even in his advanced years, “didn't forget his place as a husband, father and provider”(31). Prabhakar strictly conforms to the image of an ideal husband and father – egalitarian, sensitive, understanding and supportive. He belongs to that group of men who function as alter egos to women in a true sense of the term. The relationship he shares with his wife rests on understanding: “there was a certain something that he and she shared. A tensile connection that is there between most couples who have married a long time. She didn't know how to describe it. As companionship? As friendship? Or a complicity that springs between people who share a bed, a child, and a life”(31-32).

The kind of relationship that Janaki shares with her husband is missing in her son and daughter-in-law. Jaya, her daughter-in-law remarks, “Mummy, you are so lucky to have a man like uncle for your husband. He helps you in just about every way he can, doesn't he?” (34). Janaki knows that it is true. He is supporting and doting and would never miss an opportunity to boast about her. He would say, “she might seem delicate and cosseted to you, but she is a strong woman. Mummy is very capable when she wants to be” (34). The relationship between Janaki and Siddharth gets embittered with his marriage. “Ever since Siddharth got married almost everything his mother said or did infuriated him. It was as if he had to begum to measure his mother with a new yardstick and each time she fell short of what he expected of her” (36). They get into quarrels for no reasons at all and hurl veil insults at each other while Prabhakar would stand in the middle unwilling to take sides. The son even goes to the extent of calling his mother spoilt, an insult that Prabhakar would not put up with. They leave their son and thus, there is the virtual disintegration of a family. The next passenger Akhila meets is Sheela, a teenage girl who is going to see her grandmother for the last time. The story of Sheela reflects the relationship of a girl with her grandmother. Sheela's grandmother Ammumma hates any kind of reminders that she is getting old. “Ammumma was ambiguous whereas Ammamma meant only one thing – grandmother. The logic eluded everyone but Sheela knew that replacing the vowel made all the difference to her grandmother” (63). The day Ammumma is taken to the

hospital, she eats a lot to her heart's content. The mother is surprised at this behaviour. - "Why? Is she behaving so strangely? What's wrong with her?" (67). Sheela knows the reason but keeps it to herself. Ammumma would give constant pieces of advice to Sheela and Sheela's mother would object to it, to which she would reply, "you call this nonsense. You forget I am her grandmother and entitled to tell her whatever I choose to" (68). Ammumma's illness makes Sheela's mother feel lost and helpless. "Sheela knew that for the first time, Mummy felt the burden of the responsibility that would come to rest with her now that Ammumma was dying. Her sister and brothers would seek in her the wisdom and strength Ammumma had. While all she wished to do was to continue in a state of forever daughterhood. Petted, cosseted and absolved of all motherly virtues for the rest of her life" (69). When Ammumma is about to die, she goes into a state of delirium and starts talking to her own mother. "Women turn to their mothers when they have no one else to turn to. Women know that a mother alone will find it possible to unearth some shred of compassion and love that in everyone has become ashes" (71). When Ammumma dies, Sheela puts fresh makeup on her grandmother's face. Everyone gets angry but Sheela knows that her grandmother would have preferred this look to looking diseased and haggard.

The next member Akhila meets is Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher. She shares a hateful relationship with her husband Ebenezer Paul Raj, a fat man. Although they had a love marriage their love has ebbed away and the marriage is now a suffocating experience. Paul Raj is a male chauvinist and the relationship with his wife is no better than a power struggle. Initially Paul Raj was a supportive husband ready to do his share of household chores but as the days pass by, their relationship turns bitter: "As my fatigue increased, of quarrels between more and more petty. I stopped hiding my annoyance at his callousness. He retaliated with sarcasm. The more derisive he was, the more I nagged. We were little children competing to see who could be nastier" (116). They fight over every little thing- over food, spider webs, cleanliness and slowly this culminates in diminished levels of mutual communication and Their snapping at each other increased to such an extent that Margaret's sceptical attitude towards marriage as a relationship of mutual love and trust. Gradually, their relationship takes the form of revenge. Margaret wants to teach Paul Raj a lesson and she targets his weakest point – food. She flatters him and makes him eat his breakfast, lunch and dinner in huge quantities to ensure that he puts on a lot of weight. As Margaret provokes his greed for food, he seeks her more and more. Margaret thus wins his dependence on her. "He needed me like he had never before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again" (134). In Margaret we find a woman, who is tired of her subaltern position in his house and decides to take her life in her own hands. She gathers her forces with supreme will power and turns the tables on her husband. Prabha Devi, the next passenger Akhila meets, says that her birth was not welcomed or celebrated in her family because she was a girl child. Her father said, "If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance" (169). But her mother

cradled her against her breast and said, “we have four sons. A daughter can do no harm. Besides, when it is time for her to be married, you can choose a family that will aid your business interests” (169). The mother and daughter relationship is an ideal one. Prabha Devi's mother saw to it that a child had a near perfect childhood. She ordered expensive things for her, played with her, pretending to be adult – child while her daughter tried hard to be a child –adult. Prabha Devi turned out to be the kind of woman her mother has envisioned she would be when she was born, “A replica of herself” (170). The news of Prabha Devi's marriage is not soothing to her mother, because with Prabha's departure, there would be nothing that she would do. Prabha's marriage to Jagdeesh changes her life. Although she enjoys the moments spent with him, she also feels and understands the restrictions imposed on her. Jagdeesh is a conservative male, a loyal son to his parents. His relationship with his wife is governed by his mother. Their relationship changes even more with the arrival of the child, “Some nights Jagdeesh would lie awake as she slept. He would turn towards her and gaze at her sleeping face. What had happened to the woman who had wrapped her legs around his body and teased his senses with her lips?” (184). Prabha devi did not want to be known as the extension of someone else's personality. “Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality? Jagdeesh's Mrs. And no more”(180). Her marriage had taken away all the freedom from her. She suffers from a lack of self identity. When she looks into the mirror she realizes that she had become a woman “neither heard nor seen”(184). She becomes a woman who has to account for her every hour besides every rupee spent. She let her husband rule her and now he knows no other way to treat her. Prabha Devi learns a lesson from this and decides that she would never let her daughter face the same fate as her. She decides to teach her daughter “how women set the tone of a marriage”(188). It is only after the realization that she relaxes and feels free.

Anita Nair, with a deep, psychological insight, skillfully utilizes the story of Marikolanthu to comment upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women from rural background. Marikolanthu's story recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. They never hesitate to blame the woman at the end. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that a woman's responsibility towards the family is total whereas any sort of other authority is conveniently denied to her. This society shuns to think that the woman is strong willed to create disastrous consequences. Marikolanthu undergoes humiliation and debasement, which result in negating her son Muthu. Marikolanthu's character reveals the physical as well as mental suffering due to ignorance. Marikolanthu comes from a poor background. Her mother works as a cook at Chettiar's house, which is one of the richest families in their village. Even as a child she is the victim of social and economic repression. She loses her education by this. She looks after her house when her mother goes for work; later when her mother is seriously ill, she is employed at the Chettiar's house. There, she

is assigned with the work of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. She showers love and affection upon the child. She takes care of him well, but hates her son Muthu, the one who escaped many attempts of abortion. He is the result of her rape by Murugesan. She does not want the child which is the result of seduction but the circumstances do not help her. So she leaves her son at her mother's care and takes care of the household of Chettiar family.

Marikolanthu, deprived from the society, and Sujata Akka, deprived from her husband, find mutual happiness in their nearness. Later Sujata's husband also uses Marikolanthu to fulfill his sexual desires. When Sujata Akka comes to know this, instead of punishing her husband, she pushes Marikolanthu out of her household. She gets the responsibility of her own child after her mother's death. Mercilessly she mortgages him at one of Murugesan's looms for Rs. 5000/-. The anger she has on Murugesan, the society which saves him from punishment, her inability and the hatred of her son, everything comes to an end only at the death of Murugesan. The turning point in her life comes when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre and she sees Muthu tends to the pyre. She is shocked at the realization that she has reduced her son to a very lower state for no fault of his. All the hatred she has on him goes with the flames. She feels love for her child. She decides to look after him and makes up her mind to call him back to her. Marikolanthu is surrounded by social, familial and financial problems. Her resolve to bring up her child enables her to begin a new chapter. Finally Marikolanthu, a voiceless victim, forced motherhood and lesbianism, finds peace only after accepting her responsibility of the child, whom she has negated and neglected. Marikolanthu's constant search for meanings and values of life ends here. At the end of the novel, we find Akhila, a completely transformed person- one who is ready to use her new found confidence to live a life of her own. The experience of struggles of the passengers she hears fills her with a new confidence and she finally is able to know herself. The novel ends by identifying Akhila with Durga, a shakti, indicating the potential of womankind. Her experiences through the narrations of the families she meets helps her identify herself and realise her identity. She understands that none of the women she meets is in real sense happy. Each one of them has been compromising at one point or another. While one is a victim of patriarchy, the other has never found love. Sometimes it is failure of communication and while sometimes it is social, economic and sexual exploitation. But despite all the familial neglect and hostility, all the women characters emerge strong and manage to live with courage and fortitude.

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