

## Redefining Personhood In Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe.

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### Abstract

Anita Nair's work is a Postmodern work. Anita Nair is a celebrated Post-modern Indian writer in English who delves deep into the inner minds of people by virtue of their sensibility and psychological insights and brings to the light the issues faced by them in society. Anita Nair as a Postmodernist believes that in the contemporary world, people's identities are chosen rather than ascribed. In the past identity tended to be simpler and more fixed, being defined by class, gender and age in a more straightforward way. Identity is inseparably linked to postmodernism. Postmodernists are of the opinion that no single source of knowledge can legitimize itself as a universal measure of identity. Postmodernism no longer theorizes society into homogenous identities which can be totalised in a meta-narrative. This is the case with the identification of self too. Postmodern perspective of identity is fluid and is dependent upon the self historically and culturally. The conception of the self threatens the possibility of self-identity. The loss of self-identity is threatened because the self is situated in real historical circumstances and in things that are continually and constantly changing. The real self is in a flux and does not have a continuing identity.....

**Keywords:** Dependent, Homogenous, Identity, Meta- Narrative, Postmodern..

### Introduction

Anita Nair eventually projects the multicultural perspectives of her fiction as a postmodern artist. Postmodern theories of gender argue that gender is not a fixed or stable category across the world. Gender, like a text, is a performance, the playing out of roles, that has to be repeated and validated within specific social and cultural contexts, but which is also open to contest and negotiations. As Judith Butler puts it: "Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (24-25). The postmodern theories of gender also reject notions of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity. Jean Francis Lyotard says in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* states:

Postmodern science by concerning itself with such things as undecidable, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta', catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes-is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non rectifiable, and paradoxical. (244)

Postmodernism characterises fear of totalizing explanations postmodern feminism believes that gender and its meaning depends on location, it cannot be universal because meanings are local, it cannot be fixed because it demands and depends on repeated performances and in relation to other performances, one cannot step outside the performance as 'male' to be objective.

Throughout their life of change, their structural relationships with each other remain constant. Such diverse identity themes can be envisioned through which the millions of ego choices that make up the visible human being can be envisioned. The permeating immutable essence, of 'individuality' or 'character' of every individual constantly changes and differs, but always continues with what came before and can be abstracted from life choices. In her postcolonial society, parallels are drawn between colonialism and the position of women. Men are seen as the 'norm' and women are the other; he is the colonizer, she, the colonized; he is rational and assertive, she is emotional and submissive. A kind of binary opposite exists. In such phallogocentric societies, there is always, as Toril Moi observes, "intellectual, emotional and physical victimization of women by men. Ashcroft, Griffiths

and Tiffin claim that women “in many societies have been relegated to the position of ‘other’ marginalized... they share with colonized races and people an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression” (174-175). A similar view is shared by Susan Santag too: all women “live in an ‘imperialist’ situation in which men are colonialists and women are native... some basic relations of inferiority and superiority, of powerlessness and power, ... prevail between women and men in all countries”(53). Even today when physical labor is replaced by mechanical and intellectual labor and where a number of women have an equal footing with men yet Bradley states “... the prevailing discursive frameworks are constructed by men, around men, and have at their center the male subject as a norm”. (68)

Create variations that define his life in history. The Center for Life Psychology has found that examining the differences in the personalities of the performers can explain such differences in interpretation. More specifically, interpretation is a function of identity, and in particular identity is understood as a variation of the identity theme. Finally, the third modality completes the restoration of an individual's identity or lifestyle from a literary work. No one can do it alone without the others. The concept of self-identity or its equivalent, One's own perception has a long history in philosophical thinking and social sciences. R S Pathak, is of the view that “the quest for identity is a spiritual odyssey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots”(62). Modern literature shows the urge and plight of both modern men and women. The protagonists of Nair emerge as a new being who awakes satisfying their mental, physical and psychological needs. She has delineated a clear picture of modern society. Nair's protagonists redefine themselves and emerge as a new being and mold themselves. Virmati's quest for identity deprived her of her family, her mother boycotted her, the man for whom she sacrificed so much did not even give her the status of a wife. The path of proving herself was full of agonies, which made her a social bankrupt. Mrs. Sahgal is not confined to the women-centered world, which is evident from the fact that her male protagonists have roles as important as those of female characters in every novel.

Miller's self-identity is explained in terms of cognitive aspects; Miller's theory of self-identity and subsequent improvements by Sherwood provided a more systematic statement. Thus depending on how it's used by the author or reader, literature can function as an external world in and of itself, a replacement for social interactions, a sort of hyper reality; a tool for inner deliberation by the individual via projection and reflection; and as an agent of distortion for distancing from the empirical self and his or her world, the crafting of an aesthetic phenomenon. Literature is an indicator of the understanding of the self throughout history. The concept of transmitting a life through story went through various evolutions before arriving at this most 'self' centered art form. The American psychologist Erik Erikson rightly points out the importance of identity in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* as, “In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (130). This 'self-building' process occurs unconsciously in an individual's life. Thus, the search for one's self is an ongoing process. One feels rootless, lonely, and alienated when they lack identity. To gain a personal perspective on life and the world, one looks for real life experiences that make life meaningful and provide a sense of belonging. Nair's novels depict the self-crisis, the quest, and the subsequent discoveries. It's a two-pronged quest for female characters. The search for one's identity as a woman and as a human being. Her modern female characters face a variety of tensions in their lives, which stimulates their psyche's progression from tradition to modernity.

Self-existence allows the development of character-based stories in which the actor triggers the event, as opposed to the action-based story in which the event occurs in the character. Themes such as alienation from society and the quest for self-have become themes that reflect the evolving self-problems of the real world at the historical stage. The subjective nature of modern and postmodern literature pierces assumptions about the objective world and reflects the reaction to formal rationalism that emerged when the shadow of religious prediction receded. And as a result man had the belief that it was a world that objective and empirical actors could see, and it is also seen as unacceptable. Existential development also allows a perspective on the character's life; Narration reflects the postmodern frenzy of modern life. People play multiple fleeting roles and stay away from those roles. Therefore, multiple fluctuating situations are normal. Collins declares that the image of the core self is a myth that emerges as a central sacred object of modern society, as unrealistic as the gods studied by Durkheim. In *Mistaken Identity*, Nair writes:

Some thoughts on the puzzle of Identity. It is through this deepening, expanding, metamorphosing consciousness that identity takes a beating or blossoms, and is perpetually renewed and reshaped through this open awareness, historians reinterpret history and people everywhere continually reinvent themselves. We are not what we were yesterday nor what we will be tomorrow. But our intelligent recycling of whatever happens to us, the human race either individually or collectively can help us transcend even the most brutal and agonizing of these experiences and transform them into patterns ever more human and humane. (14)

The mythical self is made in the same way. They are symbols that humans interact with and infuse with sacred emotions. It is a symbol that reflects the structure of society. “We are forced to have an individual self, not because we actually have an individual, but because social interactions require us to act as if we had an individual” (256). Each category has a set of attributes that determine that members of a particular category are general and natural.

Categories and attributes form expectations in a particular social environment. Social convention helps human beings to understand society in a positive way. These social attitudes determine the categories and attributes that one may expect. People who meet take advantage of these expectations and turn them into normative expectations and well-stated demands. Personal identities have more or less permanent functionality. This is a unique combination of life history events that are tied to people with the help of identity. Personal identity “plays a structured, every day and standardized role in social organizations only because of its uniqueness” (57). Social and personal identities are primarily the concerns of others and the definition of an individual. These concerns and identities, what Collins calls the cultural capital of reputation, circulate among non-individuals. It is the identity of the ego that points to something else. The identity of a person is mostly expressed by the pronoun ‘I’. As Collins states, “First of all, it is a subjective and reflective issue, which must be inevitably felt by the individual whose identity is at stake” (106). The personal and social identities of those who most resemble oneself.

Akhila shares her ladies compartment of the train with five different women. Janaki, a pampered wife and confused mother; Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher married to the poetry of elements and an insensitive tyrant too self-absorbed to recognize her needs; Prabha Devi, the perfect daughter and wife, transformed for life by a glimpse of a swimming pool; Fourteen year old Sheela, with her ability to perceive what others cannot; Marikolunthu, whose innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. In fact, as they all swap stories about their lives, Akhila questions them about her eternal dilemma: whether a woman needs a man to complete her or whether she can stay single and happy. In the space of one night, the women change her life with their stories, while at the same time, reminding her to think for herself.

In the case of women protagonists, they seem to expand a feel of self-through their experiences, which accumulates strength. In Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* there are five women and a girl who suffer in the set-up of a family. Some women might not get a possibility to consider their personal self, but these women seek their self on their journey. *Ladies Coupe* deals with the unique identification of women and their yearnings for an area in their personal lives. Rohma Khan, writer of Karachi states: “The Coupe, therefore, acts as a stimulus which triggers a response of self- discovery in those Women” (37). This adventure takes them to their dream world which they constantly crave for and convert them into ambitious and sturdy personalities with deeper knowledge of life. *Ladies Coupe* is similar to that of Chaucer’s *Prologue to Canterbury Tales* in which absolutely each person begins off by narrating a tale for the consolation adventure. The readers are into action with Akhilandeshwari, in short Akhila, a woman of forty- five and single, an income - tax clerk, and a lady who has by no means been allowed to live her personal life. She has constantly been a daughter, sister, aunt and the provider. She starts alone gloriously for the first time in her life and decides to free herself from the conservative Tamil Brahmin lifestyle that has imposed on her. In the intimate ecosystem of the *Ladies Coupe*, She gets acquainted with five different women. The protagonist of *Ladies Coupe* along with other women companions continue with two contradictory visions: the commonality of female experiences and ‘positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female selfhood’. *India Today* has complimented the author in these words: Anita Nair’s tale is light enough to relieve the tedium of a long journey, get filled with the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek a new destination to challenge. These fictional women, Akhila, Janaki, Margaret Shanthi, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikounthu, can be seen as mirror images of real Indian women. According to Kalamani:

Ainta Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and compassion for all women and for the choices and regrets they can not avoid. She portrays women as not totally cut off from familial social ties but women who remains with those orbits and protest against injustice and humiliation.(143)

Akhila finds the strength to break free from the prison of her old self through this wonderful spectrum of female experiences as related to her co-passengers in the *Ladies Coupe*. In a patriarchal society, women are dominated by men. As Wally defines “Patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). “Akhila shed all the tears that she had been allocated for a lifetime. She cried when she watched her brothers perform the funeral rites. They looked so young and frail. How could she burden them with any kind of responsibility?”(LC 59). Akhila becomes the savior of the family, but her act of saving means her sacrifice for her family. She is a quiet worker and she is behind the scenes while all the young kids get their modest moment. Even her own mother is vigilant and avoids worrying about her desires. She understands and feels her mother, but her mother finds it convenient to ignore Akhila’s life. She depends on others’ expectations. According to Woolf, “Akhila is a combination of the man and the woman, or ‘man-womanly’, and ‘woman-manly’, as she termed it” (103).

Margaret Shanthi becomes a perfect cook and stuffs him with gourmet food so that his body is quickly covered with a layer of fat. As a fat man, it's now blunting its ‘razor blade’, making it easier to live with. She becomes pregnant again and gives birth to a girl. She takes Ebenzer to the clinic and then returns from Bangalore to lose his extra weight. Margaret leaves the train with her daughter to Coimbatore, without worrying about what others think of her. In the story of Margaret, Akhila finds that every woman is a repressed person who is relentlessly struggling to justify her identity. Simone de Beauvoir explains woman’s situation in *The Second Sex*:

The woman herself recognises that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it, ruled it and who still today dominate it; as for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never emerged as a subject in front of other members of the group; enclosed in her flesh, in her home, she grasps herself as passive opposite to these human -faced gods who set goals and standards. (654)

Prabha Devi, another traveller of the coupe, suffers due to gender discrimination. She becomes an undesirable child of her father. When she was born her father expressed his anger thus: “has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, added to your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance” (LC 169). All her decisions were made with the wishes of her husband and her parents in mind, including her pregnancy. At the age of forty, she resolutely learned the art of swimming.

Prabha Devi was married at a younger age of eighteen to a diamond merchant. After marriage, her identification became restricted to a spouse and a mother. Her journey to New York along with her husband modified her whole belief of existence. After returning to India, she started to find a different way of life. She modified her fashion and transformed herself into a present day woman. But quickly she finds out she is not secure with her new way of life and reverts to her old ways. Her yearnings for an existence of her personal life brings about revival at the age of forty. She decides to study swimming, which has been her longest loved dream. She feels liberated whilst she floats on the water of the swimming pool. The contact of water soothes her thoughts and spirit. She enjoys being with herself for the first time in her life. She tells herself: “You are doing this for yourself. For the first time in many years, you are doing what you want and not what everyone else thinks you ought to want, she told herself sternly” (LC 187).

Every day a woman desires independence and dignity. As a woman Nair is acquainted with the predicaments of Indian women's roles and their yearnings to preserve their identification. She portrays the lifestyles of girls from different prospects. Both wealthy and poor search for an identification that's vital for them and, via their personal life, locate it. Nair inwardly preaches that each girl has a self-inside which ought to emerge out of it which best can destroy the so-called 'norms' which stops girls to perform their roles as they wish. The Characters of Anita Nair seek their identity through analysis of themselves in relation to society. The process may be slow but it gives a better quality of life. As they leave urgency behind, their life takes on a new meaning. They get rid of the people and situations that generate losses and make them vulnerable. They get stronger, refine their lifestyle and focus on the purpose of life and finally succeed in their quest.

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