A STUDY OF FEMINISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANITA NAIR’S “LADIES COUPE”
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Abstract: The Feminism advocacy of women’s right on the ground of the equality of the sexes. Many feminist women writers who have contributed literature to the society wrote chivalric novels. Most of their novels had women protagonist and were based on the glory of women in the world. Feminist women writers still strive to uphold the rights of women through their works like poems and novels. Anita Nair is an Indian bestselling author of fiction and poetry. She always had an affinity towards writing and the courage to pursue it under all the situations. Nair relates to the many roles women play in their lives and it is reflected in her work too. She writes with great energy and creates amazing works at ease
Key words: Feminism, Strive, Amaze, Chivalry

I. Feminism
Feminism is a belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and chances as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. This is the definition one can notice in the oxford dictionary. The expression is as old as the English Language. For centuries women were merely portrayed as the souls of dependence and this dependence can be effectively identified with a couplet from Manu, the ancient codifier of Hindu law, who has rightly summed up the dependence of a female in our society in these lines:

Duteous girl obeys her father,
Husband sways the duteous wife,
Son controls the widowed mother,
Never free is a women’s life. (23)

Men and women are complementary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But in human civilization, women are often allocated a secondary role. However, they possess the power of endurance, affinity, love and foresight which contribute to the happiness of others. Feminism can also be defined as a global phenomenon which addresses various issues related to women across the world in a specific manner as applicable to a particular culture or society. Though the issues related to feminism may differ for different societies and culture, they are broadly tied together with the underlying philosophy of achieving equality of gender in every sphere of life. So feminism cannot be tied to any narrow definition based on particular class or race of religion. This can be observed clearly by Ernestine’s words in his History of woman suffrage:

Humani
ty recognizes no sex, mind recognizes no sex, life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex, like a man woman comes involuntarily into existence. Like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers. Like him she was to pay the penalty for disobeying nature’s laws, and for greater penalties she has to suffer from ignorance. Like men she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal. (1)

Beginning from the inception of the Universe, there has been a fascinating myth associated with the creation of woman by the Supreme Creator, Lord Brahma. And indeed, beginning from Brahma Himself, the idea of feminism in Indian literature, both oral and written, had begun to be established, though perhaps not as blatant as it is today. It is said that Brahma had first created man and in his generosity, had desired to give man a companion. But by then, he had depleted all the materials in the creation of man and hence he had borrowed umpteen components from the handsome creation of nature and hence had made woman out of them. Lord Brahma had introduced woman to his earlier creation man stating, “She will serve you lifelong and if you cannot live with her, neither can you live without her”. The primeval myth carries an unambiguous implication of woman’s image in life and literature for centuries. (Genres in Indian Literature, 2012)

As Amarnath Prasad says, Plato has a very sound opinion about women. He in his book The Republic, observes:
The only difference between men and women is one of physical function—one begets, the other bears children. Apart from that, both can and both should follow the same range of occupation and perform the same functions (though men will on the whole, perform them better): they should receive the same education to enable them to do so. In this way society will get the best value from both. (225)

From this point, it’s clear that the women in the ancient times were sometimes upgraded and at other times were degraded. According to Gandhi’s conception of the essential oneness of humanity, men and women could not be regarded as different in essence. Truly in his nationalist project for independence, women played a decisive role, both as symbols and as makers of the future nation. While addressing the women once Gandhi argued that they should rebel against men and refuse to be treated as things or as objects of lust. He insisted firmly that women had a superior capacity compared to men in their ability to work out for the cause of truth and ahimsa. Gandhi maintained that at the core of a woman’s nature were the personification of self sacrifice, the embodiment of silent suffering, and the incarnation of ahimsa, non violence.

Indian women writers explore the feminine subjectivity and apply the theme that ranges from childhood to complete womanhood. In India, the women writers are doing very well and their contribution is immense. The struggle of an Indian woman for her true identity clearly emerges in the Indian English novels. The hidden thoughts, feelings and the realization of a woman are found in the feministic oriented English novels of India. The Indian women authors have not only exhorted an exposition of the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive towards feminine growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of counteracting those attitudes. “Are you allowed to live your own life”? If you ask this question to an Indian woman, the answer will be a definite “No” even, when the times have changed, women’s movements have sprung up and women have started earning their own incomes. Indian women are constrained to the roles of a daughter, sister, wife, mother and grandmother. India’s latest celebrity writer, Anita Nair explores this theme in Ladies Coupe. Over the past few years a new trend can be seen in the work of a younger generation. The images of women have to be rethought and redefined. Indeed, these thoughts have brought changes in the novelists as well, especially women writers. Under extreme pressure, women must look at themselves not only as members of their society or their country, but as individuals whose very private lives and liberties are being redefined. Feminist writers in India today proudly uphold their cause of ‘womanhood’, through their write-ups. The literary field is more bold to present feminism in Indian literature in the hands of writers like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi) and Sarojini Sahoo (Odiya), who count amongst the most distinguished writers, making a link between sexuality and feminism and writing for the idea “a woman’s body, a woman’s right” in Indian languages.

II. Six Women in a Box

Nair’s Ladies Coupe mirrors the intimate feelings of middle class women in Indian society. The characters are the reflections of women’s status in India. The real middle class home and the irony of the petty problems of the daily living are described sensitively by Nair. The heroine of Ladies Coupe is like a common woman victims of exploitation in the men dominated society. As the title of the novel indicates the plot in Ladies Coupe, where six women who meet for the first time in their lives, share their experiences, even though they differ in age, educational backgrounds and cultural upbringing, their lives have a common thread that is an Indian woman’s life dominated by a man or woman in one way or another.

Ladies Coupe has an all woman cast and is about a single women’s decision to break from claustrophobic traditions and multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt, provider and live life on her own terms. Nair in one of her interviews says “Whenever things perplex me, I write fiction”. She said I wanted to show the Equality of strength in women in this novel. Indian women don’t consider themselves important enough and so we tend to put our needs and desires on the back burner. This is what needs to be addressed and this is what feminism ought to tackle. Nair compared the strength of women with water. “Among the five elements that constitute life, I classify myself as water. Water that moisture, water that heals. Water that forgets. Water that accepts. Water that flows tirelessly. Water that also destroys is as much a part being water as wetness is” (LC 96).

In Ladies Coupe, Margaret Shanty, the successful chemistry teacher, is the victim of an unhappy marriage with an insensitive tyrant and too self-absorbed husband who neglects her. She says, “What else could I do? Hadn’t I done everything he wanted me to? I didn’t know what it was he expected of me now. And suddenly, I felt much too weary to care” (LC 109). From the beginning itself the prevailing fact in Indian marriage is hinted. It is normal to quarrel with one’s husband. Everyday won’t be the same when you’ve been married to a man for years. There will be bad days and there will be good days. The trick is to remember the good days. And like I have said many times before, it is a women’s responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have some many preoccupations that they might not have the time or the inclination to keep the wheels of a marriage oiled. (LC 112)

Simone de Beauvoir in The second sex remarks:

Just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden; he wishes her to establish him in a fixed place on the earth and to leave him free, to assume monotonous daily round and to bore him, to be always at hand and never importunate. He wants to have her all to himself and not
to belong to her; to live as one of a couple and to remain alone. Thus she is betrayed from the day he marries her. (465)

In this context, Marriage has become the destiny usually offered to women by society. In India where arranged marriages are widely prevalent, the wife is all through her life forced to obey the whims and fancies of man. Janaki, on the other hand, is a pampered wife but confused mother. Janaki married Prabharak when she was eighteen and he was twenty-seven. Janaki didn’t know what to expect of marriage. While talking to Akhila, Janaki says: I don’t know enough about the world or you to offer advice. All I can do is to tell you about myself, about my marriage and what it means to me”. “I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son waiting to take off from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves. Do you understand what I am saying? (LC 22-23)

The words of Janaki shows clearly, how the slavery starts from home and why the women become tired of being a fragile creature. As Sunita Sinha says, Nair’s India suffers from a patriarchal system which has tried in many ways to repress, humiliate and debase women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological ground of man’s patriarchal role in our traditional society but also imply the existence of an alternative reality.

The next is Prabha Devi. Prabha Devi’s mother is not pleased when a daughter is born as her thoughts are confined that a daughter is someone who will take her recipes to the other house and preserve her jewellery to someone who will say that she did this and that in her mother’s house. Even while playing games as a child, a girl is destined to choose to play cooking or baby – sitting games as it is said, “A kitchen was set up for her to play house and mother games. Sometimes, Prabha Devi’s mother joined in her daughter’s games, pretending to be an adult – child while her daughter tried hard to be a child adult” (LC 170).

Even with wealth and all kinds of sophistication, Prabha Devi’s childhood was not that much happy one. Her marriage with Jagdeesh was also not a successful one. “For the next many years that was all Prabha Devi did. Wait for Jagdeesh to come home. For the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph… waiting for something to happen while her life swished past in a blur of insignificant days”(LC 172). Here from Nair’s words, Prabha Devi’s waiting for something shows vividly her disappointment in life and her waiting for some happiness to happen.

The next character is that of Marikolunthu, the victim of Man’s lust, whose innocence was forcefully destroyed in one night. She is the most pathetic women among the six. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry woman on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even in her childhood she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, “It’s not just the money but how can I send a young girl by herself….there is too much risk” (LC 215). As a child she suffers as a victim of social and economic repression. Her mother works as a cook in Chettiar Kottai. Nair’s introduction of Marikolunthu mirrors her life well, “I’m not telling you that women are weak. 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 210). This can be considered as an echo of Nair herself.

Nair combines the reality with ideal in her presentation of a downtrodden woman through the words of Marikolunthu.

“i grimaced. What happened to me? Ask God. Ask that Brahmin who write my destiny. I have been trained in despair. Despair came easily to us, my mother and me. And we accepted it because we told ourselves that what was meted out to us was what we deserved…” (LC 253). This is somewhat a satire to human society who feel that their sufferings and failures are due to their own karma and destiny. The same idea the readers can find in Indian Women writings by K Lalitha & Susie Tharu:

Let me ask you something”, Gods! You are supposed to be omnipotent and freely accessible to all. You are said to be completely impartial, what does that mean? That you have been known to be partial, but wasn’t it you who created both men and women? Then why did you grant happiness only to Men and brand women with something but anger? Your will was done! But the poor women had to suffer for it down the ages. (223)

Next, the character of Sheela Vasudev is analyzed. She is the youngest of the lot with an ability to perceive what others can miss. Through Sheela’s story, Nair tries her best to depict a society in which women are not only ill treated but are also abused and exploited. That is the reason why Sheela’s Ammumma advised her to stay at home after she comes back from school. “She’s a grown-up girl. You shouldn’t let her wander around. And who are all these men she plays badminton with? She may call them “uncle” but they are not her uncles and how dare that man Naazar put his arm around her? She’s not a little girl…” (LC 65).

Then the last character of Ladies Coupe is the most wanted, referred and criticized Akhilandeswari, a single forty five year old income tax clerk, through whose eyes the stories unfold. Akhila, whose life has been taken out of her control, decides to go on a train journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make her a different woman. The introduction of Akhila, is a great evidence for the readers to feel how she wants to be away from her bonds. “This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape” (LC 1). Her needs are taken for granted when her own siblings
thrive like parasites on her. They milk every opportunity to bolster their lives at the expense of their eldest sister. Even her own mother does not spare a thought for her well-being. Akhila is now catapulted into the position of being the breadwinner of the family to the extent that she experiences an erosion of life. She painfully remembers how her mother so easily loaded her with the burdens of the family: Amma had Akhila to replace her husband as the head or the household. Amma had her—Akhila. Akhilandeswari. Mistress of all worlds. Master of none. What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by Her name any more. Her brothers and sister had always called her Akka. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. All women were Madam and All men Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Ammadi.[…] So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? (LC 84)

Akhila’s mother is the best example for how a woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, portrayed as an excellent home maker with multifarious roles in this male dominated society. According to her, “A good wife listens to her husband and did as he said”. Her blind belief and affection towards her husband shows us that how the women voluntarily becomes slaves to men. “When you have finished folding and sorting the clothes, iron them. But leave your Appa’s shirts for me. He is satisfied only if I do it, she added” (LC 11). Nair emphasizes through Akhila how women should emerge as individuals. Akhila has to undergo many ordeals when she comes out of bondage to evolve as the new, liberated woman. She has never been allowed to live her own life. She is presented as an independent woman who refuses to follow the expectations of the patriarchal life style. The ability to endure under the worst of circumstances is Akhila’s key for survival. Akhila tries to search her own identity and happiness. She questions her family members. Why shouldn’t I live alone! I’m of able body and mind. I can look after myself. I earn reasonably well. Akhila paused when her voice choked with tears, and began again. ‘Has anyone of you ever asked me what my desires were or what my dreams are?’ ‘Did anyone of you ever think of me as a woman? Someone who has needs and longings just like you do?’ (LC 206)

She comes out of the family as a rebel, and her response is rejection of social standard values and the traditional life pattern. Her stoic endurance and perseverance supports her in all matters. Living in such a condition, she has nothing to fall back upon, no shoulder to lean on, and out of her total vacuum, she had to re-create herself and meet the challenges of life.

III. Conclusion

Ever since Ladies Coupe, Anita Nair has been referred as a feminist but she has vehemently opposed this. In one of her interview with Sreeni K. R, she said that she does not want the title feminist. She says she wants to have some changes in society which she feels essential for womanhood. In one of her another interview with Sneha, Nair says, “The creative process begins for me when certain aspects of life trouble me. I then try and explore why it the way it is. But in doing so I merely hold up a mirror to the society we live in. At no point do I delude myself that by doing so I will help start a social revolution. It isn’t my intention in the first place”. In the same interview, she stresses that she is not a feminist because she is not agreeing with everything that feminist theories propound. She does not like to limit her boundaries. Throughout the globe, women novelists are viewed and reviewed with feminism as a major element by readers as well as critics. There is no doubt that Ladies Coupe is a novel about womanist discourse. The above approach makes a judicious attempt, again, only to explore feminism which will guide the future novelists and readers to be subtle but strong in their portrayal of Indian women.

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