

# Eclipsing Oppression: Unravelling the Labyrinth of Patriarchal Hegemony in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the labyrinthine structure of patriarchy—a pervasive and insidious societal framework that has enshrined male dominance and curtailed women's autonomy across cultures and epochs. It unravels the myth of biologically determined gender roles, exposing them as constructs meticulously fashioned by social, cultural, and institutional paradigms to uphold systemic inequities. Through the lens of feminist theory, this exploration illuminates how patriarchy stealthily wields its influence, embedding itself within cultural rituals, religious doctrines, and institutional hierarchies, thereby narrowing the horizons of women's agency and potential. The lives of women portrayed in *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair provide a resonant critique of the chasm between the societal roles ascribed to women and their lived realities of subjugation. Through their diverse yet interconnected struggles for identity and emancipation, Nair's characters unveil the silent fortitude and quiet rebellion necessary to challenge the patriarchal edifice. In tracing these narratives, the paper seeks to celebrate resilience while urging a reevaluation of the cultural and systemic forces that bind and shape women's experiences.

**Keywords**-Marginalization, Oppression, Patriarchy, Resilience, Societal Norms

## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy, a deeply entrenched social system, perpetuates male dominance and privilege. In anthropological terms, it refers to a familial or clan hierarchy guided by the father, the eldest male, or a coterie of men. Feminist theory, however, expands this to a societal structure where men, as a collective, subjugate women and children. Proponents of patriarchy often invoke natural law or divine mandate to justify male supremacy. Yet, sociologists dismantle this narrative, asserting that gender roles are primarily social constructs, not innate traits, leading to systemic discrimination against women. Virginia Woolf incisively remarked, "Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically, she is completely insignificant" (Woolfe 88). This highlights the dissonance between women's idealized roles and their actual subjugation. Critics of patriarchal ideology argue that human gender dynamics transcend biological differences, emphasizing that societal norms and institutions meticulously perpetuate these roles to maintain female subordination.

Despite significant strides toward equality, contemporary societies largely remain patriarchal. Helene Cixous exhorts us to "write through our bodies" (Cixous 880), advocating for a profound reclamation of female autonomy and identity. Thus, patriarchy transcends individual men; it is a sinister system sustained by both men and women, privileging male interests at the expense of the bodily integrity, autonomy, and dignity of girls and women. This intricate web of oppression demands a radical reimagining of societal norms to dismantle the structures that perpetuate female subordination and cultivate genuine gender equality.

In this intricate tapestry of power dynamics, patriarchy unfurls as a multifaceted force, intertwining cultural, religious, and institutional threads. It subtly yet pervasively infiltrates societal norms, expectations, and behaviours. This deceptive system curtails women's potential, constrains their choices, and erodes their agency, often cloaked in the guise of tradition or moral righteousness. Understanding patriarchy requires dissecting these

layers, recognizing its pervasive grip on both public and private spheres, and striving for a more equitable reconfiguration of societal values and structures. It is subtle, insidious, and never more dangerous than when women passionately deny that they themselves are engaging in it (Judd).

In a patriarchal society, the exaltation of traditional values and practices often becomes a mechanism to curtail women's human rights. These entrenched values forge rigid gender roles, compelling women into the confines of wives, mothers, and caretakers, thus perpetuating inequality within the household. Such restrictions extend beyond domestic spheres, severely limiting educational and professional opportunities for women. Angela Carter eloquently states, "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" (Carter 9), highlighting the radical reimagining needed to transcend patriarchal confines. To dismantle patriarchy, we must challenge these entrenched values and forge a path towards genuine gender equality. In this quest, it is imperative to unveil the subtle, pervasive forces of patriarchy and strive to reconstruct a society that values the bodily integrity, autonomy, and dignity of women.

### **Unshackling the Silent Rebellion of Women**

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* delves into the nuanced struggles of women who, despite being cloaked in the veneer of privilege, find themselves profoundly marginalized. The novel poignantly explores how cultural and traditional forces sculpt women's psyches, eroding their sense of self and reducing their identities to mere extensions of their husbands. Through the intricate tales of its characters, Nair captures the silent, pervasive despair that accompanies such erasure of identity. *Ladies Coupe* transcends a mere feminist critique; it serves as a reflective mirror, capturing the myriad challenges faced by women in contemporary Indian society. Nair's narrative deftly weaves through the lives of her characters, painting a vivid tableau of their silent battles and subdued aspirations. The novel illuminates the treacherous ways societal norms imprison women, compelling them to navigate a labyrinth of expectations that stifle their true potential and personal growth.

In the women-only compartment of a train, six women converge, each offering their unique response to Akhilandeshwari's poignant query: "Can a woman live by herself?" Their stories unravel the varied yet uniformly oppressive lives shaped by a patriarchal society. Each woman Akhila, Janaki Prabhakar, Prabha Rani, Sheela Vasudevan, Margaret Paulraj, and Marikolanthu has been ensnared by the roles imposed upon them, suffering at the hands of men either directly or indirectly. Nair's narrative brilliance lies in her ability to evoke empathy and introspection, highlighting the silent yet potent rebellion of these women. *Ladies Coupe* is a symphony of voices, each echoing the silent screams of countless women, urging readers to reflect on the devious, pervasive forces of patriarchy that continue to shape and often stifle women's lives. This novel is not merely a story but a powerful commentary on the resilient spirit of women navigating a society riddled with oppressive norms.

These women, hailing from diverse social strata, epitomize societal ideals of perfection, yet their identities are confined within emotional gilded cages. Akhila, the protagonist, alongside her companions, navigates the oppressive labyrinth of societal expectations, their spirits bruised yet resilient. Their lives, although distinct, are bound by the common thread of patriarchal exploitation, highlighting a system that continues to thrive in contemporary society. Nair deftly explores their individual struggles and the methods they employ to challenge the conditioning that perpetually binds them to unhappiness. Akhila's quest for self-discovery and independence resonates with the silent battles each woman fights, seeking liberation from their metaphorical shackles. Janaki grapples with the expectations of a dutiful wife; Prabha Rani confronts the loss of her youthful dreams; Sheela, a young girl, faces the harsh realities of womanhood; Margaret endures a loveless marriage; and Marikolanthu, a victim of sexual violence, battles the stigma attached to her trauma.

Through the novel Anita Nair weaves a masterful tapestry of feminine resilience and defiance, portraying the courage required to confront and dismantle the patriarchal forces that seek to confine the women characters. Through their stories, she illuminates the silent, pervasive strength of women striving to reclaim their identities and lives amidst the crushing weight of societal norms. Bell Hooks once wrote, "The process begins with the individual woman's acceptance that she is worthy of change" (Hooks 124). This acceptance reverberates through Nair's narrative, emphasizing the quiet yet potent rebellion of women reclaiming their identities.

## Unveiling the Illusion of Privilege and the Struggle for Selfhood

Anita Nair illuminates the arduous conditions endured by Indian women in a traditionally patriarchal society through the compelling narratives of the six women, each navigating their solitary journeys. These characters epitomize the struggle for identity and purpose in a milieu inimical to their desires and needs. Far from being a feminist manifesto, Nair's narrative offers an unflinching portrayal of the trials and tribulations faced by women ensnared in the rigid confines of cultural expectations. The novel explores themes of grooming, abuse, sisterly rivalry, jealousy, and a profound lack of self-identity. These women, moulded by their traditional upbringing, are conditioned to sacrifice their individuality for the perceived betterment of others. Raised to be exemplary wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law, their aspirations and true personalities are often suppressed, expected to remain beneath the surface.

Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other," the novel underscores how men fundamentally oppress women by defining them in opposition to men. De Beauvoir posits that men are regarded as the 'self,' while women are relegated to the 'other,' a notion vividly depicted through Nair's characters. The perceived privilege of these women stems from their marriages into affluent families, where societal norms dictate that they will be cared for by their husbands or caretakers throughout their lives. This so-called privilege imposes a facade of security, masking the deeper marginalization they experience due to their gender. The novel's characters, though married and integrated into well-to-do families, are expected to embody dependence and fragility. Their societal roles as mothers and wives of 'good men' do not afford them genuine independence or self-reliance. This systemic expectation erodes their personal agency and diminishes their individuality. Nair's narrative poignantly reveals how these ostensibly privileged women are, in reality, marginalized, their lives circumscribed by the very societal structures that claim to protect them.

Kate Chopin's observation that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (Chopin 83) echoes deeply within Nair's portrayal of feminine resilience. The six women's stories, interwoven with themes of struggle and silent defiance, underscore the silent yet profound strength required to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal norms that seek to confine them. Through their journeys, Nair shines a light on the indomitable spirit of women striving to reclaim their identities and assert their autonomy in the face of societal constraints. Toril Moi aptly notes, "What is important is not so much the discovery that women are oppressed but that they are oppressed in such a systematic way that they internalize this oppression and reproduce it" (Moi 202). Nair's narrative masterfully explores this internalization and the profound courage needed to transcend it.

### Women's Struggles for Identity in a Patriarchal Cage

Akhila embodies the profound struggle for self-identity amidst the stifling constraints of a patriarchal society. Initially destined for traditional roles, Akhila's life transforms with her father's untimely death, thrusting her into the role of breadwinner. Despite her sacrifices and responsibilities, her authority is usurped by her brothers upon their coming of age, relegating her to a mere figurehead. Akhila's journey of self-discovery begins through her friendship with Katherine Webber, symbolized by her secret indulgence in forbidden eggs, rebelling against her Brahmin upbringing. Inspired by empowered women like Katherine and Karpagam, Akhila resolves to reclaim her life. Booking a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari, she breaks free from her oppressive past. Her journey from dutiful sister to empowered woman underscores her triumph over patriarchal confines, celebrating her emergence as a self-determined individual. Kate Millett's assertion, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett 33), reverberates through Akhila's narrative, highlighting her victory over societal norms that once sought to define her.

Janaki and Prabhadevi's lives are emblematic of the oppressive standards imposed upon women by society. Their entire existence has been a performance of roles dictated by societal expectations, leading to the desecration of their identities. Janaki, in particular, fails to recognize the injustices she endures. This resonates with Kate Millett's observations in *Sexual Politics*, where she notes, "It is interesting that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning" (Millett 55). Janaki's conditioned acceptance of her plight is evident in her response to Akhila's question, stating that a woman need not cope alone because there is always a man willing to be with her (Nair

21). This deep-seated conditioning regarding gender roles and power dynamics in relationships convinces women like Janaki and Prabhadevi that life without a man is inconceivable. Their chattel status continues through their loss of name, the obligation to adopt their husband's domicile, and the societal assumption that marriage involves an exchange of the woman's domestic service and (sexual) consortium for financial support (Millet 34).

Tradition, religion and culture stand in Margaret Paulraj's way of being liberated from her life. The fear of disappointing and hurting her family and the fear of breaking the norms of the religion she adhered to, forces her to stay with Ebenezer instead of leaving him and getting a fresh start. Unable to escape, she decides to fight her situation by turning Ebenezer's weakness for food against him, inadvertently ruining his self-esteem and pride, and making him truly dependent on her by making him a glutton, and thus wrenching back the control of her life. Their relation is that of "politics"; that refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another (Millet 23). Women like Margaret are disadvantaged by the environment they are brought up in. No matter how awful the circumstances might be, they are forced to adjust to it. They do not have a home or a place to go back to. If they go against the whims of society, they will be abandoned for the rest of their life. The sinister workings of a heavily patriarchal society, supported by religion and tradition, shackle these women to fates worse than death. The character of Margaret is not someone to be shamed or set as an example. It is simply a way of fighting back against the society that is inherently hostile to the interests of women. Margaret's way of fighting back is in tandem with Mary Wollstonecraft's remark for women in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft 69).

Sheela inhabits a household steeped in hypocrisy and familial tension. Her mother is dependently tethered to her grandmother, while her father's fragile ego manifests in cruel outbursts. Feeling like an outsider, Sheela's truths about Naazer's advances face derision and victim-blaming. Her compassionate act for her grandmother is dismissed as teenage antics. Misunderstood and isolated, Sheela embodies the tragic failures of familial greed and pride. Susan Gubar's insight, "Women's miseries are often cloaked in domesticity" (Gubar et al, p. 85), echoes in her plight. The manner in which Marikolanthu is at first alienated and ignored by the members of the coupe is an example of how women themselves marginalize other women due to differing backgrounds. Women's mutual understanding comes from the fact that they identify themselves with each other; but for the same reason each is against the other (Beauvoir 666).

### **Unshackling Silence: Women's Battle against Patriarchal Bonds**

Throughout Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, the marginalization of women is starkly portrayed, highlighting the unfair societal standards imposed upon them. Familial expectations, societal norms, gender roles, and age all conspire to confine women to restrictive roles. Women are expected to serve as mere accessories of comfort for men, with their lives dictated by a hostile society. Even motherhood is portrayed not as a choice but as a societal mandate. As Simone de Beauvoir insightfully states, "One is not born, but becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 330); this imposed identity becomes the root of their suffering.

These women are also grievously failed by their families. Mary Eagleton observes, "The cultural production of gender roles ensures women's subordination" (Eagleton 120). This subordination is evident in the systematic ignorance and oppression perpetuated by patriarchy, as Kate Millett notes, "If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women" (Millet 42). Akhila's financial independence incites jealousy in her sister, who seeks to shackle her instead of allowing her to live freely after years of sacrifice. Sheela is left isolated and vulnerable, with no one to turn to after Naazer's advances. Margaret remains trapped in a loveless marriage due to religious, familial, and societal pressures. Marikolanthu, assaulted and forced to bear a child from violence, finds no solace or support from her family. These women, unable to seek refuge or protection from their families—the very symbols of shelter—highlight the pervasive and insidious nature of patriarchal oppression. Their narratives underscore the silent strength required to endure and eventually challenge the societal constraints imposed upon them.



The behavioral pattern of the male characters of the novel can be understood with reference to the introduction of Bell Hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000).

Males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are superior to females and should rule over us. But those benefits have come with a price. In return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress us, using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact. Most men find it difficult to be patriarchs. Most men are disturbed by hatred and fear of women, by male violence against women, even the men who perpetuate this violence. But they fear letting go of the benefits. They are not certain what will happen to the world they know most intimately if patriarchy changes. So they find it easier to passively support male domination even when they know in their minds and hearts that it is wrong. Again and again men tell me they have no idea what it is feminists want. I believe them. I believe in their capacity to change and grow. And I believe that if they knew more about feminism, they would no longer fear it, for they would find in feminist movement the hope of their own release from the bondage of patriarchy. (Hooks 9)

Anita Nair portrays the suppression of women by their male counterparts as a pervasive and intricate theme. These men, consciously or unconsciously, claim an inherent right to control the lives of the women in their families, bolstered by the notion that they are the 'men of the family.' This deep-seated entitlement allows them to occupy an assumed position of authority, unchallenged in a society where male privilege is the norm. Thus, men are reared with an ingrained sense of entitlement, a power never questioned but passively accepted by society.

Traditionally, daughters are seen as transient members of their natal families, destined to belong to their husbands' households. This perception relegates them to the status of outsiders within their own homes, fueling the societal preference for sons. Daughters, viewed as financial burdens due to the costs associated with marriage, are groomed from birth to be obedient wives, nurturing mothers, and selfless caretakers. This cycle of marginalization is vividly illustrated through Nair's characters, who find themselves unable to seek solace within their own families, leaving them stripped of any semblance of security.

Akhila's relationship with Hari is sacrificed on the altar of familial expectations, highlighting the relentless pressures women face to conform. Sheela's experience further exemplifies this marginalization. After Hasina's father's advances, she finds no support within her family, knowing her revelations would be met with derision and victim-blaming. Her compassionate act of helping her grandmother regain a sense of femininity is dismissed as teenage rebellion, underscoring her isolation. Margaret, trapped in a loveless marriage, endures the suffocating constraints of religious, familial, and societal pressures. Her mother's advice to 'adjust' rather than acknowledge her suffering encapsulates the systemic dismissal of women's struggles. Marikolanthu, a victim of sexual violence, is forced to bear and care for a child born of trauma, finding no solace or support from her family. Her brothers' refusal to care for her son upon her mother's passing starkly reveals the harsh realities women face when they defy societal expectations.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the novel, these women grapple with the erosion of their identities. However, a transformative journey unfolds as these women gradually reclaim their sense of self. Akhila, inspired by women like Katherine Webber and Karpagam, resolves to live for herself, booking a one-way ticket to Kanyakumari and symbolically breaking free from her oppressive past. Marikolanthu similarly decides to live on her terms, rejecting societal expectations. Prabhadevi takes up swimming, rediscovering her identity beyond the confines of motherhood and wifely duties. Margaret seizes her power, dismantling her husband's pride and making him dependent on her, a profound act of self-assertion. Nair's *Ladies Coupe* celebrates the resilience and defiance of women striving to reclaim their identities amidst the crushing weight of societal norms. Their journeys underscore the indomitable spirit required to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal forces that seek to confine them, illuminating the path to self-discovery and autonomy.

When the world still judges a woman by her usefulness to the others, her capacity to nurture, to serve, to conform, *Ladies Coupe* breaks through the borders of a simple novel and becomes an unquestionably strong and timeless

exhortation to the self-examination, to spiritual awakening, to change. The novel turns out to be nothing less than a mirror, as it shows the society things that it does not realise are there, things that make the life of women, in many large and small ways, patriarchal. This patriarchy does not necessarily have to be violent or loud: more frequently, it is lurking behind the veils of everyday domesticity and duty, incorporated into the language, traditions, and relations. It functions in the areas of love, silence, tradition and sacrifice and silently rules women about what they should or should not be and how they should live. The characters created by Nair are not the same in age, background, or circumstance but provide an overarching picture of how penetrative these structures are in the mind of a woman, shaping them to gauge their value by measuring their obedience, stamina, and the ability to deny a self. Through the depiction of the personal background of Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, Marikolanthu, Sheela and Prabha Devi, Nair lends voice to those silent dilemmas of thousands of women who have merely been obliged to live a life in the name of others where their very dreams, wishes and personality have been sacrificed at altar of others. But, what strikes one, is not only the trenchant feminist critique to the scale of patriarchal oppression brought out in *Ladies Coupe*, but also the uttermost hymn to the inner revolt and regeneration. All the characters experience the journey of self-discovery, no matter how silent and imperfect it might sound. Nair has a world in which liberation is not necessarily accompanied by external upheaval; liberation is frequently slower, individual, and torturously personal. It can be the ticket to somewhere you do not know, a stolen pleasurable experience, a swim in a pool you have long forgotten, or no longer being quiet. These seemingly modest acts of self-assertion become deeply political when enacted within a culture that denies women even the right to think for themselves.

In resisting the need to offer a linear or triumphant resolution, Nair instead offers something more powerful: the acknowledgment that emancipation is a continuous process. It unfolds in layers, demanding the unlearning of inherited beliefs and the courage to envision a life beyond the boundaries prescribed by others. The act of choosing oneself—of stepping away from the roles that have long defined a woman's place in the world—is, in itself, an act of resistance. And this choice is not rooted in selfishness, as patriarchal narratives often claim, but in an assertion of dignity, worth, and autonomy.

Ultimately, *Ladies Coupe* invites a reimagining of womanhood not as a series of imposed roles, but as a spectrum of possibilities. Through the layered, honest portrayals of her women, Anita Nair affirms that the most radical and redemptive act in a patriarchal world is for a woman to name herself—to live not in reaction to others, but in pursuit of her own truth. In doing so, she transforms her silence into speech, her pain into power, and her existence into resistance.

In conclusion, in the words of Bell Hooks, “All girls continue to be taught when they are young, if not by their parents, then by the culture around them, that they must earn the right to be loved. That femaleness is not good enough. This is a female's first lesson in the school of patriarchal thinking and values. She must earn love. She is not entitled. She must be good enough to be loved. And good is always defined by someone else, someone on the outside (Hooks 12)”.

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