

A STUDY OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPÉ*

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Abstract

Ladies Coupé is a strong message recommending women's individuality which has been delivered efficiently by Anita Nair through multiple voices belonging to different sections of Indian society and age groups; however, all these voices are of women. The present research paper discusses Nair's treatment to the relationship between the major characters and their parents. In the novel, five women share their stories to the central character that functions as a common thread weaving these narratives together and creating a bigger picture of the patriarchal society. Each story dismantles the battle women are fighting in their own families and it shows how terribly hard it is to win one. These women belong to different castes, classes and age groups but the genesis of their loss of identity and failure to realize and actualize their right to a blissful life is likely to be the same. . The present paper finds that though this battle is at the centre of the novel and pushes the exploration of the parent-child relationship to the periphery, the very relationship carries the seeds of the central issue/battle. The present research paper, using some major psychoanalytical, biological and sociological theories regarding parent- child relationship, investigates the many parent-child relationships in the novel and to see why they are not centre-stage. It elaborates how the broken and baffled adult women reflect on their vulnerable childhood and their damaged relationships with their parents as well as with their children and concludes that though seemingly on the periphery, these relationships are in a way responsible for the central battle of the novel.

Key words: parent-child relationship, parenting styles, bidirectionality, paternal function

“It is better to build strong children than to repair broken adults”.

- F. Douglass

Introduction

Ladies Coupé (2001) is considered to be an important milestone in the career of Anita Nair, a renowned Indian English novelist. The protagonist of the novel is a forty year old unmarried woman called Akhilandeshwari alias Akhila. After the death of her father, Akhila is forced to shoulder the responsibilities of the family but she is never granted the freedom and power the head of the family is entitled to. At the expense of her own progress and growth she becomes an earning hand feeding the family and educating her younger siblings, two brothers Narayan and Narsi and a sister, Padma. She starts working in the income tax office at the place of her father, Pattabhi Iyer. Despite her sacrifice she is never given due affection either by her mother or her siblings. In her middle age she craves for companionship and intimacy but her ‘family’ is indifferent and ignorant of her emotional and physical needs. On the verge of collapse, she decides to find out whether a woman can live alone or she needs a man to feel complete. To search answer to this question she travels to Kanyakumari in *Ladies Coupé*. There she meets five other women belonging to different age groups, classes and castes naming, Janaki, an elderly lady from a higher middle class nuclear family; Prabha Devi from a rich business family; Margaret Shanti, a Chemistry teacher and wife of a tyrant Head Master of the same school; Sheela, a teenage girl baffled after the death of her beloved grandmother and Marikolanthu, a poor peasant class woman who has been a rape victim. They all share their stories with Akhila which help her clear up the doubts and answer the question in her mind. While listening to them, Akhila inspects her past and deliberate on her present condition. The wide range of characters in the novel drags in many parent-child relationships with them. The present research paper analyses the depiction of parent-child relationship in the novel and the connection between the present condition of these characters and the way they have been parented.

Parent-child relationship is the most fundamental of all relationships in an individual’s life. Almost all psychoanalysts, sociologists and all developmental psychologists believe that adult development is largely defined by the relationship that they had with their parents during their infancy and childhood. The outcome of huge empirical research done in this area also connects asocial and antisocial behaviour of adults to impressions from their early childhood. *Encyclopedia of Children’s Health* defines parent-child relationship as “a combination of behaviour, feelings and expectations that are unique to a particular parent and a particular child. The relationship involves the full extent of a child’s development”. Theorists and researchers may disagree on the nature of PCR or the dimensions along which it develops but they all agree upon the crucial role parent-child relationship plays in the survival and wellbeing of the society.

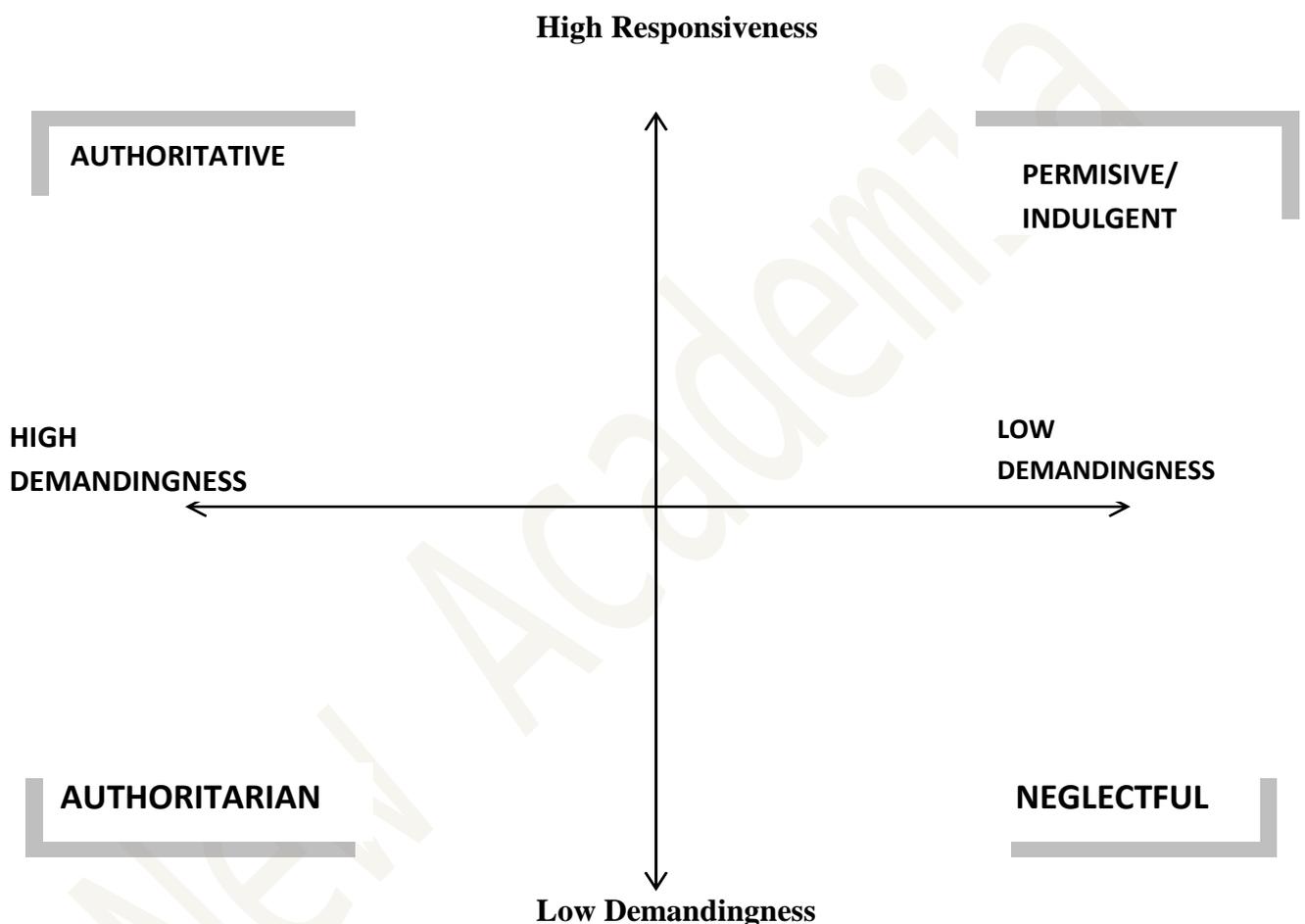
A novel has many aspects and elements that are blended together to create an organically whole entity. *Ladies Coupé* has been told in ten chapters narrated and voiced through six female characters. It is a series of five narratives woven together with the major and base thread of Akhila's narrative. The end product is a tapestry that shows mirror to malpractices of patriarchal Indian society. These characters struggle hard to know and find themselves as individuals, seeking their own strengths and accepting their weaknesses breaking boundaries enforced upon them by the patriarchal hegemony. The researcher observes that the present condition of these characters has been influenced directly or indirectly by their relationship with their parents and this influence in turn has a huge impact on their relationship with their children. Nair sometimes shows these undercurrents noticeably as in the case of Akhila and her father but mostly these connections are kept in the background where they remain unobserved. As all elements of the novel march towards or surrender to the very purpose of the novel, the present research paper explores an unacknowledged aspect of the novel that is parent-child relationship. It focuses on twelve parent-child relationships between the protagonists and their parents.

Parent-child relationship goes through many critical stages. Each relationship is coloured with different shades of love and hatred. It is clear through their narration that all six ladies in the coupe are not happy or satisfied with their relationship with their parents. Perhaps, as a reflection of their unidirectional parent-child relationship, the writer uses the ladies coupe in the train not as a place but as a space. It is like a womb of the mother who cradles and rocks these women and pets them encouraging them to speak out. It seems that Akhila never gets the unconditional love, an intimate commune and communication that a daughter needs from her biological family especially her mother and sister. So recurrently Nair represents the coupe in which Akhila is traveling as a womb and all women as "foetuses jostling within the walls of the womb" (22). In the Coupé Janaki, the elderly lady becomes the mother; Margaret and Prabha Devi become her sisters. The coupe is a family where they can have free conversation as "they are aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls would not go beyond this night or the contained space" (22). Nair implicitly shows the failure of their families to provide such space.

Considering the two aspects of parenting behaviour- warmth and demand, Diana Baumrind, a well-known clinical and developmental psychologist has identified four parenting styles: Authoritarian, Authoritative, Neglectful and Indulgent. Authoritarian parents are not responsive but demanding. They use restrictive methods in order to socialize their children. On the other hand Authoritative parents are less demanding and more responsive. They understand their children's feelings and teach them to regulate those feelings. They achieve the delicate balance between autonomy and warmth to be given to children. Indulgent parents are very warm but not at all demanding with their children. They allow self-regulation and avoid confrontation. On the extreme end where there is absence of both warmth and demand is Neglectful parenting style. They are not involved and interested in their children's lives. If

we put these parenting styles on a scale measuring their demandingness and responsiveness then it can be put in a diagram in the following way:

Baumrind's 3 Parenting Styles Model



(Figure1.1Baumrind's Parenting Styles Adopted from Positive-Parenting-Ally.Com)

It has been observed that almost all parenting styles depicted in the present novel might be categorized either as Authoritarian or Neglectful parenting. Hardly one or two parent-child relationships show strong shades of Authoritative parenting. One of the major functions of parents is to socialize their children in order to initiate them as an able member of the society. Nair has depicted that the socialization of all women characters in the novel is gender- biased. For their parents, socializing their daughters means passing on the patriarchal ideologies in

order to assure the consistency of the rule of the Father. Almost all the protagonists are on the verge of depression and self-destruction. But their parents are neglectful of this. On the contrary they keep on demanding that their daughters do not disobey the constraints of the society.

Akhila's mother, Chandra, is married to her maternal uncle, Pattabhi Iyer. For Chandra children come second as her first priority has always been her husband. They are always lost in each other's company, reacting to each other's needs. Akhila, as a child, always feels a part of their enchanted circle but in her adolescence she starts feeling excluded from it; she feels embarrassed. But both her parents fail to observe this change in their daughter and remain oblivious to it. Their family is a typical adult-centered family where children are vulnerable and neglected. Their problems remain either unobserved or unattended. The same happens with Janaki, Margaret Shanti and Sheela.

H. Rudolph Schaffer (2006) has elaborated family as a dynamic system. He defines dynamic system as, "Any complex organization that is composed of multiple parts each with its own function but also involved in a pattern of reciprocal influences with other parts" (39). Parent-child relationship functions in multiple contexts. To be specific, Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) has developed Ecological System theory which specifies five nested environmental systems: the Microsystem, the Mesosystem, the Exosystem, the Macrosystem, and the Chronosystem. Whatever happens in one system affects the workings in the other systems. The following diagram can explain the working of these systems.

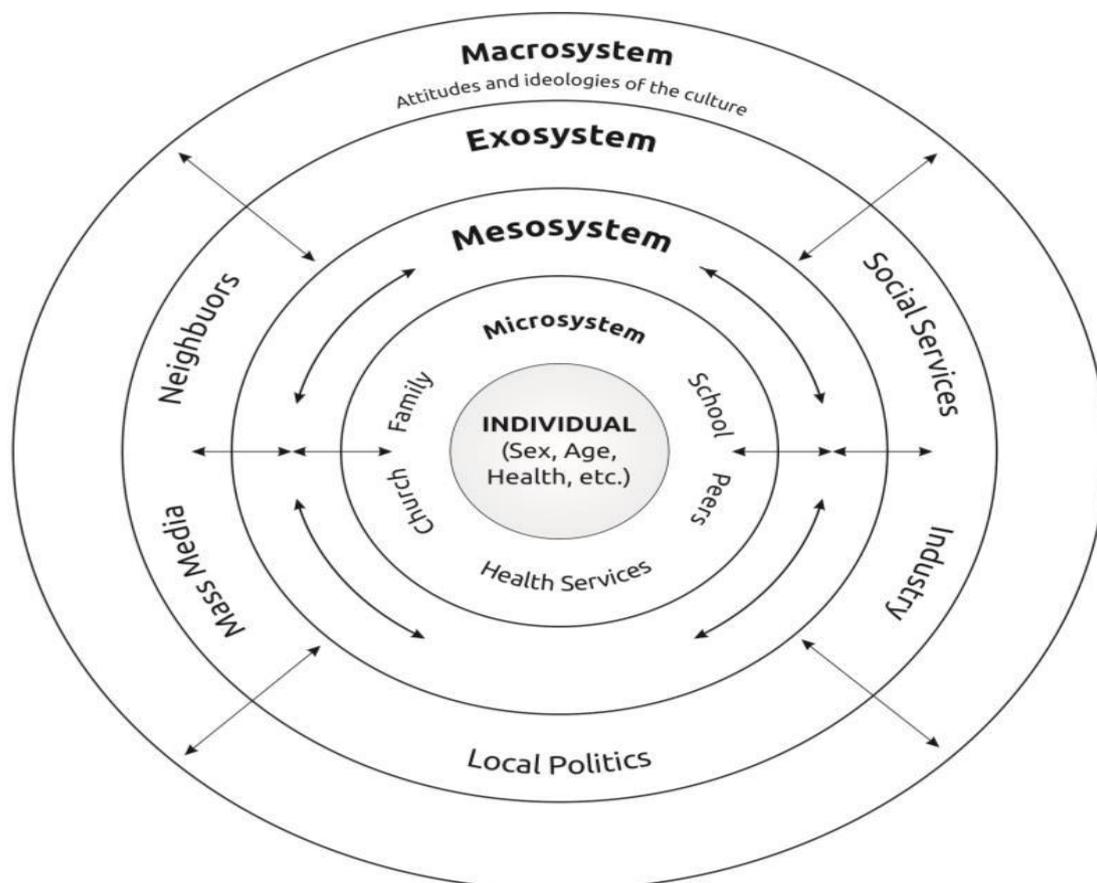


Figure: 1.2- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (Adopted from Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health)

This theory dismantles the reason behind the lack of warmth and responsiveness in Pattabhi Iyer's relationship with his children. Being the only honest employee among all other corrupt colleagues and higher authorities, Pattabhi Iyer is never happy working at his office. Instead of being admired for his hard work and honesty, he is tortured and bullied. Now Pattabhi Iyer's relationship with his children does not remain unaffected from the agonies at his workplace. He brings that stress home. Avoiding more stress at home becomes the central concern of the family. Sundays are made as soothing as possible for Pattabhi Iyer. Though Akhila pines for a happy and united family and simple activities and gestures like eating together, Chandra prefers to serve Pattabhi Iyer separately. Children are kept waiting till their father finishes his meal.

Akhila and the other children knew that they had to wait till Amma had attended him first. If

their stomachs rumbled, they were expected to stay out of hearing distance so that he did not hurry through his meals. (45)

Pattabhi Iyer could never come out of his depression and be a good father. He fails to show warmth, responsiveness and emotional availability to his children. He fails to admire his children on their achievements. When Akhila and Narayan win prizes at school, instead of appreciating them he responds with the following negative and discouraging words:

All this is well but will it help you in real life? What use is getting a certificate for English recitation or for the best handwriting? They ought to give you lessons on how to hurt those who hurt you; on how to trample upon other people's hopes; that will help you survive and not all this. (55)

According to Carl Jung the father figure performs two roles: the harsh role of setting the rule in order to save child from incestuous actions and the good role of providing care and warmth to children. He mediates between the family and the society. Pattabhi Iyer fails to perform all these functions. He lacks that force of a Father figure. He fails to sell their land at a proper price; he marries his niece Chandra (which is described by Akhila's friend as incest); he fails to earn respect and power in the society. Still his rule and authority is maintained due to the mediation of Chandra, Akhila's mother. Derek Hook (2006) stresses the role of mother in mediating the rule of father through her discourse. This mediation continues even after Pattabhi Iyer's death. He is omnipresent in the form of patriarchal constraints. He keeps on affecting Akhila's life through paternal functions enforced on her. Akhila in her middle age is pining for male companionship. She loves Hari who is much younger than her. She is aware that Chandra will not give consent to this relation. Akhila goes on a trip with Hari but conceals it from her mother as she knows:

Amma would never understand. In Amma's world, men married women younger than themselves. Women never offered their bodies to men before their union was sanctified by marriage. Women never went away with men who were not their husbands. Women never know what it was to desire (151).

Akhila, in-the-name-of-the-father, performs all paternal functions sacrificing her own happiness and desires. On her father's death she cries a lot and never cries thereafter. She replaces sadness with anger because she thinks that anger will make her strong. She takes care of all responsibilities that her father left incomplete. But the family remains blind to the unpleasant person Akhila is turning into. They are oblivious to, "the stiffness that became her natural way of talk and being" (76). Nair wants to stress how deep the malpractices of patriarchy have blended into the ideologies of the society that they seem obvious and like a slow poison keep destructing the spirit of women. The possibility of a good father who loves his children irrespective of the dominant ideologies is absent in the present novel.

An example of toxically authoritarian parenting is that of Margaret Shanti's parents. They force their decisions on her. They accompany her as proud parents in her victories but desert her in her critical times. Ebenezer Paulraj, her husband is a hypocrite. He forces her to abort

her child because he feels they have not yet settled down. She is gradually broken from within due to the guilt of killing her own child. When she shares her conditions with her mother, she responds, “It is normal to quarrel with one’s husband... there will be good days and bad days... do not greet him with your glum silences and bitter words” (112). They understand her agony but they are so selfish and neglectful parents that they do not want her to come back and disturb the idyllic world they have created for them with her bitterness. It becomes unbearable for her to live with her husband but unsupported by her parents she decides to avenge Ebe Paulraj in her own way. Marikolanthu’s father is the only good and sentimental father who performs all paternal functions. But he lives for a very short span. His untimely death turns Marikolanthu and her family’s life topsy-turvy.

This analysis of the negligence on the part of parents of the central characters leads towards another important feature of parent-child relationships in the present novel: unidirectionality. Prabha Devi, another traveler in the coupe, belongs to a rich business family. She is adored and pampered by her family. She is given good education. She is even allowed to go for matinee show; however, this is not to make her an independent individual but because her father thinks, “these days, boys prefer girls who are friendly and can hold their own in a conversation” (170). All her decisions are taken by her parents. They decide for her what to learn, what to wear, in which school to go and even whom to marry. This over protectiveness has snatched away her autonomy. As a result she fails to deal with unwanted advances of one of her admirers later in her married life. Similarly, lack of emotional support and warmth of Margaret Shanti’s parents has filled her with bitterness. Her husband is a tyrant. Her forbearance is tapped out, however, one day she decides to have revenge on him but in her own special way. She starts feeding him spicy and tasty food and turns him into a fatty man. Now he totally depends on her for the supply of such food.

While negligence on the part of Akhila’s mother towards Akhila’s emotional and bodily needs have transformed her into a stern and stiff person who prefers to rage over than to succumb to sorrow, the self-contradictory demands of Sheela’s father and his rudeness towards her confuse her and are likely to lead her to identity crisis. Marikolanthu’s mother’s support and love gives her strength to keep going despite terrible conditions of life.

However these are all parents’ influences on their children. What about children’s influences on their parents? These characters narrate only one dimension of their relationship with their parents. Parents undoubtedly influence the growth and development of their children whereas children are not mere empty vessels or passive receptors of parental influences. Shaffer (2006) elaborates this bidirectionality of influences in parent-child relationship as, “an idea that in the course of dyadic interaction the behaviour of each partner affects the behaviour of the other partner” (34). According to him parent-child relationship is a joint product of parent influence and child influence. Leone Kuczynsky repeats the same by saying that children are active in shaping their parents. The present researchers observe that almost all parent-child relationships in the novel are unidirectional. Parents have great influence on their children.

Whatever the critical conditions the children are in, they have direct or indirect connection to their relationship with their parents. The central battle of the novel is the choice between actualization of one's true self and sacrifice for the family. The central female characters struggle hard while choosing between these options. The most influential element of this struggle was their patriarchal upbringing and their relationship with their parents. The eldest of them all, Janaki was groomed through her girlhood for one destination-marriage. She herself voices how this has resulted into lack of strength in her personality:

"Perhaps because of the way I was brought up, perhaps because of all that was instilled in me, I believed that a woman's duty was to get married. To be a good wife and mother. I believed in that tired cliché that a home was a woman's kingdom...Janaki didn't know what to expect of marriage

Nair might have secluded the other side of parent-child relationship in the novel in order to trail the central issue. She tries intensively to display how, despite their sacrifice and tolerance, women are denied the right to a blissful life and are prevented by patriarchal constraints from realizing their true powers. She renders her socio-political stand to her readers very well. She narrates the transformation of the six ladies towards a certain conclusion of the novel. At the end of the novel, Akhila, the representative of all women, realizes the spirit within her. She overcomes the societal shackles that avert her from realizing and manifesting the powers within. She transforms into a fearless, opinionated and strong woman.

Conclusion:

Thus, Nair deals extensively with daughters and their parents. Most of the fathers in the novel are either authoritarian or neglectful. Almost all parents in the novel are strong believers and practitioners of patriarchal ideology. Fathers, especially, fail to perform the good paternal role. The possibility of a good father who loves his children, especially daughters, and supports them in their attempt of recognizing and manifesting their true potentials is absent. Nair takes a stand in the novel regarding contemporary socio-political condition in India where women are prevented from realizing and demonstrating their real and total potential. Nair is at her best in conveying this stand to her readers. Akhila has turned into a Stiff and stern spinster, Sheela is on the verge of identity crisis, Shanti has chosen her own way to retaliate her husband, Prabha Devi does not know how to be a confident modern woman and deal with unwanted advances of men. They all are struggling hard while listening and reacting to their inner voices demanding self realization and self actualization. The crises in their life have direct or indirect roots in their relationship with their parents. They have been missing comradeship into their parent-child relationship result of which is evident into their broken adult relationship. Parent-child relationship is the base from which children start exploring the entire web of human relationship. The impact twists and turns and sometimes haunts the further adult relationships. The same can be observed in the present novel.

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