



कोल्हापूर

NAAC Reaccredited 'A'
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'ज्ञान, विज्ञान आणि सुसंस्कार यांसाठी शिक्षणप्रसार'

-शिक्षणमहर्षी डॉ. बापूजी साळुंखे

ISSN : 2281-8848

VIVEK RESEARCH JOURNAL

A Biannual Peer Reviewed National Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research Articles

A Special Issue on

Indian Council of
Social Science Research

SPONSORED

विमुक्त और घुमंतू जन समुदाय : दशा और दिशा
(भारतीय साहित्य के परिप्रेक्ष्य में)

March, 2022

VIVEK RESEARCH JOURNAL

A Biannual Peer Reviewed National Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research Articles

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**Akhila, a Nomad: Exploring the Element of Nomadism in Anita Nair's
*Ladies Coupe***

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The spirit of man is nomad, his blood Bedouin, and love is the aboriginal tracker on the faded desert spoor of his lost self; and so I came to live my life not by conscious plan or prearranged design but as someone following the flight of a bird.

- Lauren Van Der

Abstract

Anita Nair is one of the leading Indian English novelists known for raising many crucial issues in her novels and making bold statement regarding them. With the publication of *Ladies Coupe* (2001) the world of literature started taking note of her. This novel has been translated in more than 25 languages both regional and international. The novel is a communion of the central character Akhila with other five women in the ladies coupe of a train to Kanyakumari. As the novel majorly deals with women characters, it has mostly been discussed as a feminist novel. Through the major part of the novel Akhila is searching answer to a question: Can women lead a happy life on their own or they need a male partner? Akhila finds the answer during the journey to Kanyakumari. The nomadic element appears as the motif in many of Nair's novels. In the present novel it becomes even more significant as it helps to solve the question in the mind of Akhila. The present research article tries to explore the character of Akhila and appreciate the nomad in her.

Key Words: Nomad, nomadic, nomadicism, patriarchy, escape, wandering.

Introduction:

Ladies Coupe is Anita Nair's most famous and well acclaimed novel. It was published in 2001 and it placed Nair among the leading Indian English novelists. The novel has been received in a very well manner all around the world. Still it has mostly been critically

discussed as a feminist novel. But it stands apart from the run of women's novels. The present research article tries to explore the element of Nomadism.

Anita Nair

Anita Nair is mostly discussed as a feminist writer who writes about women and their problems. She is sometimes called a regional novelist as she is among the few Indian English writers who brought the colours of South India especially Kerala into fiction. M. K. Naik while defining Nair's place in Indian English literature states, "Anita Nair's first novel, *The Better Man* (1999), is a welcome change from the hackneyed East-West encounter theme. It is perhaps, the only novel written by a woman which is not about an Indian woman; nor is it freely peppered with incest." (98) Her novels have been translated into around twenty five languages; both regional and international. She received Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 2012. She has also been honoured with Arch of Excellence Award by the All India Achievers' Conference, New Delhi for Literature and FLO FICCI Women Achievers Award in 2008 for Literature. *Mistress* was in the long list for the Orange prize for fiction for 2008 and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in 2014

Research Gap

. Nair is a versatile writer whose writing is preceded by a thorough research of the content and she experiments with the narrative structures. Despite this her writing has not been discussed from various perspectives. Nair has mostly been discussed from the perspective of feminist theories and only occasionally from other concerns like depiction of caste system, marriage or human relationships. The present research article will analyse the novel from the perspective of Nomadism.

Hypothesis and Objectives:

The hypothesis of the present research article is the following: **The central character of Ladies Coupe accepts being a nomad to escape the patriarchal society.** And the objectives of the present research paper are as follows:

- To discuss the basic terms like Nomads, Nomadic and Nomadism.
- To Analyse *Ladies Coupe* from the perspective of Nomadism.
- To explore the nomad as a motif in Nair *Ladies Coupe*

Nomadic Tribes in India

British Colonial State in India passed an Act in 1971 under which millions of nomadic communities were declared criminals and were put under continuous surveillance. In 1952 a denotification act was signed and around 200 'Criminal Tribes' were included in ST, SC and OBC categories. In India these Nomadic tribes are mostly found in the arid, hilly areas with dense forests like Western, Deccan and mountain areas in the North India. Nomadic Tribes have been choosing these areas in order to escape the caste prone main stream community in India. These tribes had a nomadic way of living which was totally different from the mainstream society. The Modern British State of the pre-independence time found it a challenge and hence declared these tribes criminal. One major part of British complacency was their 'civilizing mission'. They found themselves supremely civilised and took the responsibilities to teach civil ways of living to the societies in their colonies. The present Research paper, instead of doing a diachronic study of the Nomadic Tribes in India, uses Nomadism as a perspective to analyse Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe*.

Nomad, nomadic and Nomadism

Nomad is a noun. It refers to a member of the nomadic tribe or a person with specific traits of living. The following definitions from some good dictionaries will explain the term nomad well. Cambridge dictionary defines nomad as "a person moving from one place to another rather than living in one place all of the time". Your Dictionary website defines nomadic as, "a person or people who are part of a tribe or group that moves from place to place without a permanent home." Webster's dictionary defines a nomad as "a member of a people who have no fixed residence but move from place to place usually seasonally and within a well-defined territory. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Nomadism as the following:

Nomadism {is} a way of life of peoples who do not live continually in the same place but move cyclically or periodically.....and involves a total change of habitat. Nomadism does not imply unrestricted and undirected wandering; rather, it is based on temporary centres whose stability depends on the availability of food supply and the technology for exploiting it.

Considering the above mentioned definitions of nomad, nomadic and Nomadism the following pointers regarding become clear:

- 1. Nomads are people who want to escape their social and harsh environmental conditions.**
- 2. They deny settlement, instead they want to wander.**

3. Their thinking process, driving forces and appearance is governed by the law of safeguarding survival.
4. Nomads live in and with nature.
5. In India nomads wandered to escape the brutal discriminating caste system or harsh geographical conditions like floods or famines

Ladies Coupe: A synopsis

The protagonist of the novel *Ladies Coupé* (2001) 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.

Analysis of *Ladies Coupe*

Despite all the sacrifices and shouldering the responsibilities Akhila could never become the head of the family. Her family and the society has forgotten or sidelined the fact that she too is a human being and she has her needs and instincts. Despite being the only income source of the family she is supposed to be obedient and answerable to her younger brothers only because they are men and she is a woman. She is trapped into a pattern which is in alignment with the constrained life of women in a patriarchal society. Women are always

supposed to be objects in the discourse of such society and never the subject. She is denied authority and power so that the patriarchal structure is maintained and sustained.

But one fine day Akhila realizes that she is needed by her family but hardly loved. She is respected by them only when she is not breaking the constraints of the society. She understands that she cannot address her genuine and instinctive desires and needs. She is expected to be sacrificing all this for the sake of tyrannous rule of patriarchal society. Her own family for whom she lost her individuality and womanhood is nothing but a machine of patriarchal rule. She decides to live alone but she is afraid. Akhila is obsessed to know whether a woman can live alone or needs a man to lead a good life. She decides to go away from her habitat to find the answer of this question. She goes on a train journey to Kanyakumari. There in the ladies coupe she meets five other women. As an answer to Akhila's question mentioned earlier, these women tell their respective stories.

This journey motif recurs in many of Nair's novels right from her first novel *The Better Man* (2000) to her latest novel *Eating Wasps* (2018). This escape from the situation through journey to somewhere is what makes Anita Nair's heroines nomads. Here, in the case of *Ladies Coupe* the journey becomes more crucial as it helps Akhila to find answer to the central question of the novel. Apart from this, Akhila is not the only person who wants to get rid of the patriarchal spaces. She meets a group of ladies belonging to different age groups, class and casts. They are connected together on the ground of being exploited at the loss of individuality by the patriarchy. They all want to escape that tyrannical territory and enter a space where they can be themselves and commune the true emotions with others who are in the same flow. Shown from a third person's perspective, this group of ladies looks like a gypsy group. They are nomads who chose to travel to escape the tyrannical society and find a happy place or better to be called a space. This train is one such space.

Even this group of gypsies is not permanent. After completing the journey all six ladies go to their respective destinations. This is another sign of nomads that their wandering is cyclic. They go back to their native land. Akhila goes to Kanyakumari where she addresses the most powerful urge of her body and mind. She meets a stranger there and spends a night with him. She has the first intercourse in her life. She realises what does it mean to be a female body and what does it mean to gain pleasure. She realises what she was gasping for. It wouldn't have been possible for Akhila, at her hometown or in her family so she travels and gains happiness. Akhila is a nomad and Ladies Coupe presents Nomadism as a tool to escape the tyrannical patriarchal society.

Conclusion

In this way journey is a major and recurrent motif in Anita Nair's novels. In *Ladies Coupe* it becomes even more crucial as it is during the journey the six lady narrators find each other and narrate their stories. As Nomadic Tribes in India or anywhere in the world choose to travel to escape the harsh social and environmental conditions at their native lands, Akhila too travels to escape the exploiting and tyrannical patriarchal space and realizes the true happiness and pleasure. So Akhila strongly reflects a nomad and the novel presents Nomadism as a way to escape patriarchal society. Hence, the hypothesis of this research is achieved.

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