CHAPTER-III

PROTEST AGAINST SUBJUGATION

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin? What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company. (Morrison)

For infinite centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The various religions practiced in India as well as the personal laws based on them consigned women to a status inferior to men. The condition of upper-class women was in this respect worse than that of peasant women. They could not find any other expression to their innate talents or wishes except as housewives. In fact, they were seen as mere accessories to men. Women's struggle for equality took a big step forward with the coming of independence. The icon of the ‘New Woman’ and her search for individuality, her willpower to realize identity, and to achieve self-definition through life, development and experience, is portrayed convincingly and very forcefully by the Indian women writers of this century. Exploring a wide range of female experiences that trouble the recurring face of patriarchy, the modern women writers describe both the blend of women and diversity within each woman. After Rig Vedic and Post-Vedic the concept of “pativratam” developed in the days of Ramayana. Sita is considered as an ideal of feminine perfections. From the time of Brahminic ideal of wifehood was established, Sita has been held as an example, to be followed by Hindu women down the centuries to the present day. The deterioration in the position of women begins with the puranic and Dharma Sastra period which is considered to be the darkest period in the history of India.
Women are considered as Sudra, polluted, untouchable and marginalised. She is just the shadow of man; no dreams of her own no desires of her own, no life of her own. ‘Manusmriti’ is considered the word of Brahma, in Indian myths and it is classified as the most respected statement on Dharma. Manu—an ardent supporter of patriarchy and an advocate of male-dominated society in his law book called *Manu Smriti* declares the perpetuating a dependent role for woman.

In the childhood the father looks after the girl,
In youth her husband, in old age her sons;
A woman is never free. (Haughton)

Day and night woman must be kept back in dependence by the males of their families. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for freedom. The morality set up by Manu get worsened the situation of women and this further gone down in later years due to lack of education and introduction of child marriage during the Mughal period.

The traditional conception of matrimony in patriarchal society makes a woman a dependent being, a depressed character, innocent of her own survival, her own desires. Indian writers play the task of a social critic, as no writer can segregate themselves from the society, the violence, the system and the injustice around them. Anita Nair, a budding voice in the prospect of Indian English Fiction, reverberate the gamut of history by opening up postcolonial concerns in her novels. Her debut novel, *The Better Man*, a novel of great promise, tilted her as one of the better writers of the time and has established Nair as an excellent writer with a great intellect of character, inspiring knowledge of South Indian culture.

In her novel *The Better Man*, she sets out to explore the themes of loyalty, betrayal and the self-fulfillment against the backdrop of a contemporary village in Kerala. These
themes are accessed through the characters of Anjana, Paru Kutty, Valsala and Meenakshi. The characters in the novel have often become the mouthpieces to voice the writer’s own self thoughts, attitudes, ideologies and at other times their experiences, incidents, events and problems that have been seen in her social background. *The Better Man* unveils the reality of Indian women who are still deprived of their rights in love and marriage. Marriage is a social institution which plays an important role in shaping the lives of a human being. Sociologists define it as,

> A cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their off spring. (Abercrombie127)

In a patriarchal society wedding is the future habitually offered to women by society. The Hindus view of marriage is that it is a repression that extends beyond the husband’s death. According to Manu, the law giver

> A woman should youth and if fate condemns her to widowhood. She must lean on her son. (Haughton134)

While Hindus feel that the goal of life of a woman is to worship her husband. In marriage, oneness, companionship and mutuality are stressed. It is assumed that the interests of the husband and wife are one and that whatever is the benefit of the one is the other also. In today’s civilization there are three kinds of women, a large group of Indian women, both uneducated and educated are very conservative. They are totally reliant on their husbands and are fully loyal to the family. Secondly, there are women who are educated and economically independent but want both economic independence as well as family life. They are incapable to rupture the framework of the family. Such women are in ephemeral state. There is a third collection of a handful of women who are educated, economically independent and authorized. They are ready to pay a high price for their aspirations and accomplishments and bother least about the social and traditional norms of the society. They are democratic.
Woman in reality is essentially an obedient partner in marriage. In a way marriage for her is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self-realization. Usually in the institution of marriage a woman is reduced as an object for decoration, for possession and for man’s sexual gratification. It turns out to be an institution of oppression for her in various forms rather than of her protection for which it was primarily instituted. According to German social scientist, author, political theorist and philosopher Friedrich Engles, observes the opinion that marriage is not a reconciliation of man and woman but the subjugation of female at the hands of the male. As a man is a taker of woman and the woman is a giver in marriage she becomes man’s half and take his name, religion, family and class. She is truly reduced to the figure of a nurse-maid of the children. Before marriage, woman is forced to lives under the care of her parents. After marriage woman is transformed to the jurisdiction of her husband. Like a citizen in the communist government, one who is forced to follow the decree of government with almost sincerity, she too is destined to follow her husband’s norms with devotion. While Karl Marx says,

Marriage is incontestably a form of exclusive private property. (Mitchell110).

Anita Nair in her novels depicts marriage as a tyrannical institution for woman. Her characters assert their individuality and try to liberate themselves from the clutches of man. The story of The Better Man revolves round through Mukundan, a recently retired government employee, besieged by bitterness and self-doubt, who returns halfheartedly to his village Kaikurisi. He is not only the narrator but even as a buffer and gets linked with all the other characters. He is a son Achuthan Nair, who oppressed him and frightened him since his childhood. He is haunted with the memories of his dead mother and ancestors. He fights within himself to get relief from his traumatic distress. He is haunted by a sense of culpability for not saving his mother from his father.
Mukundan’s mother died in mysterious circumstances, falling down from the steep stairs of the taravad. Mukundan suspects his father’s hand in her death and feels terrible guilt about his mother; especially she had begged him to take her away just weeks before she died. Coming back to Kaikurussi, Mukundan has to face a lifetime’s feelings of inadequacy. His need for his father’s approval, which was never given, prevented him from marrying; instead he sought shelter in discontinuous, transitory relationships.

The earliest imaginary village to be made literally famous was R.K. Narayan’s Malgudi but in Kaikurisi, Anita Nair has formed a new homestead that could become just as well recognized. Kaikurisi is, like all fictional villages, a self-contained and complete universe. It has the full gamut of human virtue and vice. There is ‘one-screw-loose Bhasi’, house painter and self-appointed emotional healer of the village. There are others in the village of Kaikurisi. In *The Better Man*, woman characters are marginal and they often resemble the obedient and passive Indian-woman-wife thus repeating the literary prototype of the Pativrata woman- the husband worshipper and self-sacrificing wife. All the female characters in *The Better Man* - Meenakshi, Paru Kutty, Neeli, Valsala and Anjana surrender to their fate as woman, living lives they hate offering to male dominators.

Paru Kutty, wife of Achuthan Nair and mother of Mukundan Nair is a dependent woman. She hates her husband and all her thoughts stands for the Indian wife who is compelled to carry her tradition and culture. She always tries to satisfy all her needs of her husband but always feels like a fish out of water. In Indian context, one such comprehensive hallucination, where the oppressed and the oppressor appear equally out of sorts, make itself visible in this novel.

Paru Kutty not only receives brutality for her activities but also for her son she receives the same from her husband. For instance, Mukundan in his school days when he read the novel of Bronte’s, Dickens, Goldsmith and Chesterton his father scolded and pounced on
his mother. She as a wife, her duty is to convince her husband by telling him that it might be homework for her son. The author tries to depict the picture of Achuthan Nair who tyrannises his wife and his son and imposes his male superiority by thrashing and attacking her suddenly.

Then Achuthan Nair pounced on Paru Kutty. ‘He must have got this vagrant steak from your family. Didn’t you have an uncle who went away to someplace in Tamilnadu to study music? No one in my family has ever had any pretensions of artistic ability. And let me tell you how glad I am about that. We are a family of capable and hardworking men. Not namby-pamby creatures rattling away lines of useless poetry or drawing pretty pictures or strutting around towns and villages bleating. What is the use of it all?’ (TBM: 16)

Anita Nair, like all great authors, seeks to give a picture of the action that evades the apparent eye and exposes the unexpressed vulnerability of Achuthan Nair. Though Achuthan Nair looks callous, powerful and talented actually, the author niftily perceives the nervous wreck that lurks behind the obviously vehement and vicious person. Despite his evident cruelty, Paru Kutty manages and lives in the house in loneliness. In delineating Paru Kutty, Nair portrays the picture of a woman who has been victimized by the male dominated society.

According to Manu, the only aim of a wife is to obey and follow the command of her husband as it is said, “Pitru Vakya Hanardanam.” The father’s will or husband’s will is the will of god. Before fifty years and even today in traditional middle class family the function of a woman is to look after the home and family. Her life is caged in four walls. She has no right to ask the question why? Paru Kutty’s husband too has a mistress but nobody can ask him because he was the head of the family and a man with status in his village. Social rules have always been harsh on women in India. It is justified that a man as an independent being
can have extra marital affairs. The society doesn’t raise eye brows to persons (men) who leave their wife at home and get pleasure from either prostitutes or mistress by paying them in cash or kind. Nobody worries to think about the woman who is lonely in her home waiting for her husband who doesn’t come nights after nights. What she would do in such situation? She can’t take her life or ruin herself by crying. A woman is socially not complete without the existence of man in her life and it’s barred to enjoy any sexual relationship with any man other than her husband.

Women since early days of civilization have been subjected to ill-treatment, harassment and torture. As yielding targets they have been put even to aggression. Men have been dominating and women have been forced to feel alienated and depressed. In Introduction to the first edition of feminism Angela Miles rightly says,

The domination of women by men precedes the emergence of class domination and is structured deeply into the relations of production and reproduction of almost all known societies. Although understanding of the dynamics of gender oppression across class, culture and time is at an embryonic stage, we know that this oppression is the most profound condition of alienation, the deepest division of humanity within itself, upon which all other fragmentation and domination has been built. (17)

Paru Kutty echoes the feelings of loss and dissatisfaction in her life. As a married woman she becomes enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of mother for her child. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation don’t encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Paru Kutty understands a married woman’s place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave with an obedient mouth.
On the whole Paru Kutty remains as a passive listener and survived as reserved figure or a voiceless creature to her husband’s dominating voice. Like her, Mukundan also feels insignificant and hopeless. But it is significant that in this framework both are suppressed by the dominator and made voiceless. Her inescapable practicality always collides with his presence converts her into a ‘selfless’ being and she begins to perform like a machine without interest. This nuptial routine life leads her to expect more from her son.

Being a woman herself Paru Kutty has very vividly and sensitively revealed the inner workings, her insecurities, her pain and her feelings of loss and betrayal both from her husband and son. Anita Nair as a socially conscious writer through her writings throws light on dark corners of India where women are vulnerable abuse in terms of tradition and culture that destroys the existence of the inescapable part of humanity. In this novel through the character of Paru Kutty, Anita Nair presents the brutal faces of matriarchal space that threatens the survival of women. The profound rooted legends about women have not allowed them to lead a realistically free life. The destitute situation of women is seen to be effect by the conventionally accepted critical perspectives. As Sukrita Paulkumar observes:

Woman is delineated as a mother and protector, as an inspirer and cherisher; as Shakthi the primal force and as the chaste suffering wife or as a charmer. (Sree 10)

Paru Kutty seems to represent the women of 1950’s, who in a patriarchal society of that period were subjugated to man-made injustices and indignities. Paru Kutty appears to be the woman who has to undergo all the tortures and torments of life because she belongs to weaker sex. Thus she represents the bleak past of Indian women who were not given any voice to assert their rights. The psychic trauma of her character foregrounds the narrator’s feelings of inferiority, guilt and inadequacy. The novel demonstrates that her trauma is related to the way in which her subjectivity is constructed in terms of gender. Her gender identity is mainly constructed in terms of the differences between her and her husband. He is
described as intellectual, capable of thinking in macro-political terms, intolerant of contradictions or ambivalence, prepared to go to war and sacrifice the safety of his bourgeois home and nuclear family to achieve his political ideal of freedom for the oppressed. According to her own analysis she is a vessel filled with ideological content by her husband who dreams of a whole that will accommodate ambivalence and contradiction, wants to establish the confines of their nuclear family rather than break it open, and thinks of opposing the system but not of leaving their home and finally died.

The next character in this novel is Valsala, she is a bored housewife and there was something more about Valsala that tackled description. Valsala’s beauty has been highlighted by Nair in the following lines and that is what attracts male attention.

A lusciously plump woman with a blooming complexion and a head of jet-black curly hair, she attracted attention wherever she went. Men craned their necks to take a second look at her, and women eyed her surreptitiously, wondering what secret beauty treatment she used to keep her hair so black and her skin so radiant……Each syllable bore the hollowness of emptiness, a blackness that matched her opaque eyes until he began to wonder if she under some special spell and was what people referred to as the ‘living dead’. A creature whose soul had been destroyed by the Odiyan’s powerful magic and yet continued to go through the motions of life till one day some trivial illness caused her to drop dead. (TBM: 126)

Valsala is another housewife like Paru Kutty entangled in her daily household tasks, the maintenance of the compound and watching television every evening. She is the lonely wife of the ageing schoolmaster Prabhakaran. There were no astonishments in her life. Even the coconut, cashew and pepper grow in her garden has ceased to fill her with marvel. Like her they also plainly followed the routine nature by just going behind the track of nature and yielded revenue in quantity to their numbers.
Valasla’s marriage therefore does not appear to be the realization of a well-cherished dream, but seems to have been resorted to because of lack of pleasures in her marital life. She had never known an awakening of her senses. Not once in her life had an odd and exotic flower bloomed in her yard, filled the air with its overwhelming fragrance. Her existence and her senses suddenly blossomed due to the fragrance of the flowers of the pala tree. She thought about the words of her when she was young. It is the beloved odour for the Gandharvas who always looks for virgins to seduce. They will make the virgins slave for them and no mortal can satisfy her sexual desires. She also tries to separate from herself, of the memories of her past because she is dissatisfied with her married life.

The author uses the tree and flower as a metaphor for the character Valsala. The image of the flower and trees and other coupled terms like ripening, blooming, pruning etc. forms the theme or the core of the character and also denotes the natural qualities of a tree and a woman. The metaphor of flowers is very apt here and suggestive too. The novelist wants to bring in that the nature of the tree and the innate of a female. Here the use of metaphor seems to suggest all the meaning of the life, which is framed by God for the human being to follow it in the life. Nair takes in the images of a girl and a woman through the figure of flower and tree which is very apt in this context. It is the nature of a tree to bloom and to produce flowers and fruits in that way it is the innate that she wants to devote herself fully to attain feminine qualities.

She takes the rebellious step to taste the world of her desires that tempted her initially to undergo the pleasures. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first after many years of her married life she believes she needs a perfect man to satisfy her sensual pleasures. The writing style of Kamala Das is similar to Nair’s and Das’s dealing of female sexuality is free from any sense of guilt happens to be the basic ingredient. Her main theme revolved around love, its betrayal and the subsequent anger. Without any hesitations
she frankly brings in relation to sexual matters expressed with decorum is remarkable. She focused on the marriage, motherhood, women's concerns to their bodies and sexual explorations in the background of conventional Indian society. Das considered male as monster full of envy and ego which is instrumental in crushing the identity of women ruthlessly. Like the heroines in Ms. De’s novels who rebuild their lost fortunes Valsala also make all efforts to look glamorous tries to look and cook differently from the conventional and traditional women. She loves to fall in love with the appearance by which she tries to attract Sridharan, who first appears in her life as a neighbour. It gives her immense pleasure when he fall head to heels in love with her and she is least concerned about her husband. The new conception of pleasure envisages complete sexual freedom which is accompanied by economic freedom; uncontrolled passion is required by her in the form of contentment.

Obviously her life gives an impression that marital problem has the answer in extramarital relationship. As a matter of fact, she is aware of the fact that every woman needs the tonic of love, freedom, equality and sex. But she is also certain, that it is quite impossible from hostile men. Accordingly she is willing to trap the new system against the backdrop of traditional concept of Indian Womanhood. She stirs the entire society with her liberal views and attitude, and puts forth the new issues of woman’s sexuality and gender.

I am just forty years old. I don’t want to be pushed into old age before it is time. I want to live. I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself, night after night. *(TBM: 130)*

As a consequence, Valsala’s search emerges as a battle, of course, the battle of female soul and psyche. Actually, life is an issue of the pleasant and unpleasant moments. When a woman gets to be dissatisfied, the result is that she rebels against the existing system and seeks to divorce from the relationship. The first sign of change in her life is her cooking. She rejuvenated all the old system of cooking and experimented with the modern type of cooking
like instead oil it is replaced as ghee. When Prabhakaran master complained regarding his indigestion she never concerned about his health. It was projected that Sridharan and Valsala became partners under the concealed nuptial knot. In spite of her frustration with her spouse, she sustained to remain along with him because of the reason to enjoy his wealth. The following words aptly express the complication entailed in Valsala’s understanding of power,

While women are denied other forms of power (political, educational, legal), they will make use of whatever power is left to theM: in particular their sexual power to attract men because they are taught, and have learned their lesson well, that they can only draw power from sexual relationships rather than having any autonomous potency of their own. (Robbins 27)

Soon after Prabhakaran master departed. Police Inspector enquired Valsala and she preserved silence that it was mistaken as shock. Valsala wailed and bang her forehead against the wooden pillar. There was a great deal of sympathy for her as a widow. But everything changed when it was discovered that she along with Sridharan has assassinated Prabhakaran master and his body has been abridged into twelve fragments.

In this novel, we come across Valsala, who feels contrite as she betrayed and murdered her husband mercilessly and does not feel guilt and grief. She breaks the traditional Indian consciousness built under the name of society. The Indian people, sealed up in the traditional philosophy have bewildered the world they live in and do not gather courage to comprehend reality. Anita Nair puts forth emotional display and the painful feelings along with sensitive emotions of women in a bold manner. She sets out the twenty first century woman, for whom sex is a new sort of religion. She casts light on female psyche, where she brings into open that a woman should be treated as human and should not be ignored or suppressed.
A study of the man-woman relationship as portrayed in the modern literature of the East and the West shows a disruption of and breakdown in the conventional expectations of female behaviour. Women are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past. (Krishnamayi 64)

The male prejudiced outlook usually disregards the passions and aspirations of womenfolk and labels them as unnatural. Women are trained to gratify the needs and demands of the males. When she demands she is treated as a wicked woman and ultimately the male-invented ideology chastity is also under question. In this novel Valsala is unable to voice her emotions directly, for her unwillingness to associate herself from the routine chores ended in frustration. According to her it was not a life it is just a place to live. In order to lead her life blissfully she utilized her loneliness and spends it with Sridharan to persuade her desires. The narrator registers her rebellion against the various forms of domination which gives rise to her feelings of inadequacy and inferiority on a narrative level. The novel extricates itself from traditional narrative patterns (interpreted by feminists as patriarchal determined) by subverting linear causality, closure and authorial control. Unlike Paru Kutty, Valsala outwardly follows the linear progress of the seasons but gives priority to the chaotic and unresolved inner life of the narrative as a structuring device. The novel also takes as its terrain the personal, the intuitive, the subconscious and the microphysical domain rather than the unrestricted.

The next character is Anjana, an unhappy woman married to a monster who brutalizes her physically and mentally. Her parents hide their worry and encouraged her to study and keep herself engaged. Soon through the marriage adviser they find an alliance for Anjana and his name is Ravindran. Her marriage according to Hindu tradition is an arranged one and has been performed hurriedly. As a woman grows, she is inculcated with the ideas of marriage
and tendency to know about her future environment. Anjana gathered all the information about Kozhikode and starts to dream about her marital home.

Anjana comes with big dreams to Kozhikode, but she ends up doing odd jobs there and she is dissatisfied with her life. She wears a pink cotton sari and waits for her husband, in order to please him. The result is that he is not interested in her. Anjana enters the threshold of marriage with the husband chosen by her elders which she later regrets. She longs for love in marriage, but it breeds pain, discontent and anger. She develops hatred to all the things around her, even to herself. She feels she been victimized in the name of customs and practices. In the world of Anjana, marriage is used conventionally. Apparently communication in the Indian society marriage brings together man and woman under one roof, but she skins over the sexual relationship. She conveniently gives up the fact that every relationship, of course, sexual relationship also incomplete without the involvement of emotional relationship. There was no fine exchange between them. Her marital relation with her husband is marked by loneliness and improper communication.

Anjana moved to her parents’ home in order to look after her mother. Her entrance to her mother’s house is kind of escape from her loveless conjugal life. For the first time after four months he speak an extended discussion about his plans to give up the house and start a new factory on his own. In course of the married life on that night she feels really happy and she flavours the conjugal bond with him. Anjana tries to understand him because all her thoughts stand for the Indian wife who is compelled to carry her tradition and culture.

Ravindran’s business failed and started a new one. He is a selfish man and he wants to achieve his goals. He becomes self-obsessed man. He concerns about himself and rarely does he think about her. His visits were reduced. During his last visit he violently attacked Anjana. Ravindran began to insult her in another way. Anjana has her own set of emotional explosions which prove that she has been practicing extreme control over herself in order to
protect her marriage. It becomes hard for her at one point of time to accept when it comes in terms of insulting.

Later she finds a job as a teacher and made many friends. She prefers to read magazines, books and carried the transistor radio along with her like a baby. She tries to come out from the married life which she considers it as a disaster. Anjana seeks human relationships that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows and she deserves. Years went by and on one morning she realizes that she has to live her life with no symbols of marriage and decided to live as a spinster.

She gave away her colourful saris and took to wearing starched cottons in shades as insipid and dull as her life. She locked up all her jewellery in a safe deposit box at the bank and swept all her fripperies away into the waste basket. (TBM: 234)

Accordingly she starts carving for autonomous and self-dependent condition in life.

She is an educated, modern woman struggling against the society. Education gives her courage and through it she can attain an independent life financially too. The education provided them the privilege to be aware of themselves, especially of their rights. The women of the oriental countries, however more or less, remained confined to the four walls of the houses. With the spread of knowledge and greater independence, now available, even oriental women have start raising the voices of the protest against oppression of any kind. Educated women demands equality, freedom and justice to bring about a radical change in their lives.

Anjana breaks the traditional Indian consciousness and creates the world of her own. Anjana’s emergence from her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual, is an assertion of her personal freedom. She meets Mukundan and falls in love with him. She finds in Mukundan everything which she had been searching for in Ravindran. Mukundan does not ignore her presence or over ride her thoughts, but instead helps her to
regain her freedom of herself as an individual, a human being with her own identity. In Mukundan’s company she realizes that she has to free herself from her unhappy married life. The concerned need to assert her, combined with the attraction she feels for Mukundan, and the compatibility he shares makes Anjana take a bold step in yielding herself to him. She refuses to be consumed by guilt and in fact intentionally tastes the freedom, and ready to wipe it out of her mind. Anjana is a blend of both traditional and modern elements and she wants uniqueness and autonomy. Unable to get recognition of her identity from Ravindran, she shapes out a new lane for herself.

Anita Nair seems to be deeply concerned with women’s freedom as Anjana wants to stand on her own wishes and liberty. It is Anjana’s longing for contentment and serenity that urges her to take divorce from her husband. Only after a long struggle, Anjana turns out to be a woman who can make choices, take decisions and makes up her mind to start life anew with Mukundan from whom she can get what she longs for—love, care, affection and understanding.

Meenakshi, a young woman who longs for an exciting life dreams about leaving Kaikurrusi her sleepy little village. In the beginning both Meenakshi and Mukundan were intimate and secure friends and they know each other’s bodies and minds as well as they know their own. Later, Meenakshi was not allowed to wander along with him because she is woman and her name can ruin her life. Then the lives changed. Mukundan got a job in Trichy and when he visited for the first time after he secured a job he could nowhere else found Meenakshi. When he inquired about Meenakshi to his mother, Achuthan Nair replies that she had troubled him a lot more than ten elephants can harm him.

Meenakshi had become a Naxalite. Armed with books on revolutions and driven away by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin, Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of bourgeois vermin. And her first target of attack was Achuthan

*(TBM: 56)*

When she tries to escape from the village unfortunately she falls in love with Balan, a Kathakali dancer. Soon after the marriage he left her and promised to take her along with him. Meenakshi expects for Balan to escape from this prison. He never came back. He went to Europe with his troop and settled in Delhi and found a job as a teacher of Kathakali dance. As a result of their passionate nights she gives birth to a child. It is the only happiness for Meenakshi in her life.

Meenakshi, bold and enthusiastic figure avoids the sympathy of the people in her village. She carved out a new place for herself. Permitted by the panchayat, she was paid a small remuneration to run a nursery school. She had chosen to extend it to include slightly elder children. Meenakshi was more educated than most other woman in the village. When they sent their children to her, not only did she get them used to a school-like regimen in preparation of the year in advance, but she also shaped a small phenomenon by teaching them their alphabet. So that the mothers were free from the most irritating job. For this they also paid her some fee. Then the crèche was turned as “Meenakshi’s Balwadi.”

Anita Nair through Meenakshi symbolizes a new woman who are educated and who live in close association with society brushing aside all narrow conventions. A woman’s role is not only confined towards needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than her domestic role as a wife. One day she received a letter from her husband and conveyed his regret. Now he is in his death bed and affected by spine Tuberculosis. Meenakshi made up her mind to visit Kotakkal and wants to know about the condition of her husband. He became a weak and lonely creature god has punished him for his activities. She reconciled with him and took him along with her to the village.
Mukundan noticed the two figures one was the frail-spirited, skimpman and the other was the ample-hearted, comely woman. She is the one who is very strong and needs to be strong. She asserts her individuality as a woman and also as a partaker in the endless succession of life. She lives to see life with the possibilities of growth. Thus she has discovered the meaning of life in her journey. Victory is there, not in the subjugation and destruction of male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other’s space. The reflective and hidden anxiety of Meenakshi represents the girl child brought up in the middle-class families in the post-Independent India. Parents in this class instill in their girls a certain duality, sometimes unconsciously, on the one hand an impulsive desire to be emancipated and liberated, and on the other hand, an almost instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative as Shakuntala Bharvani aptly comments thus:

The women of today, therefore, speaking in the language of psychology, has a near schizophrenic personality; One side steadily “accepts” while the other craves to speak, to think and express the life on the mind. (150)

Meenakshi is the replica of middle class working women modern India, rebels against her fate but ultimately tries to compromise with existing reality. She emerges as a woman who can control herself and shed her passivity. All these women characters they struggle under suppression and try to overcome from their problems. Although this novel is not exclusively occupied with gender issues it demonstrates more eloquently than any feminist discourse could the position of women in such conditions. The characters in this novel are oppressed on the grounds of gender by the patriarchal system which is prevalent in the society. The writer illustrates the intricate relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial that has to be negotiated when writing the new India. Nair’s novel demonstrates an awareness of the fact that the colonial cannot be eliminated from the postcolonial in a
simple act of biased forgetfulness and that the past has to be dealt with rather than eluded when constructing a postcolonial discourse in India.

Anita Nair, in her second novel, *Ladies Coupe* gives the picture of different women characters. The novel does not deal only with one story. It deals with the lives and experiences of six women which have been welded together by the author into a skillful whole, with Akhila or Akhilendeswari as a magnet in the centre. The story of each woman provides a learning experience for Akhila who contemplates upon the various aspects of her life after each session of tale-telling. Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the women’s stories. The author places a major emphasis on examining women’s lives and their psyche within the context of South Indian family, representing women in their traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters. Nair has an emotional understanding of human motivations and a sharp flexible intelligence.

The novel *Ladies Coupe* is an explicit visual portrayal of feminine consciousness and strength of passions it produces. It is a novel about women and for women. As the title suggests the story was set in the ladies coupé of the Indian railways based on the assumption that one sex was weaker than the other needed to be protected from wandering eyes and hands. Six women could lock themselves in safety and respectability in this mysterious coupé, while the mass tossed and pushed in the rest of the train. Naturally, in age of increasingly vocal feminism, it has gone the way of the steam engine.

The word *coupé* has two different intonations, one with the mounting stress on the last letter, which is a common pronunciation, and another with no stress of the last letter é, similar to the pronunciation of *coop*; the meaning of *coupé* is a restricted area such as that used for fowl. Nair’s preference of the setting for the core part of the story, especially relating to self-discovery, and the word coupé to illustrate the environment, seems to be a planned selection. As we concentrate on the meaning of the word, there is a suggestion of limited or constrained
or packed space. Akhila’s world, without a doubt, had been a restricted space and the story of self-discovery shatters out in yet another confined place, the ladies’ compartment as usually called in India, taking her to a wider world outside of it.

Indian women’s identity is usually connected to and defined by society and cultural customs of a patriarchal familial code. Her identity and liberty is defined within the strictures of her social relationship to men. The Indian woman is a symbol for purity, chastity and sanctity for the ancient spirit that is India. This essential spirit of India lies in its God, religion, spirituality, culture, tradition and family.

When Anita Nair was questioned as to how she was able to produce a book full of sensual and surprising details in her novel *Ladies Coupe*, she replies

Some years ago, I was buying a ticket and I found this special ladies line clubbed with the handicapped and senior citizens. I was a little disturbed by the blatant inequality and wanted to write about it. Either you discuss it or write essays. In my case, whenever things perplex me, I write fiction. (*HINDU*)

*Ladies Coupe* is the story of a woman’s search for strength and independence. Can a woman live by herself? Can a woman do whatever she wants to do without bothering about social approval? These are the questions which are destined by their nature to analyse and examine the validity of the customs of conventional value system which attaches great importance to and states the way women should lead their lives. These questions are an evident outcome of the postmodern epoch which recognizes and establishes the value of individual freedom and thought which are said to be crucial to emancipate oneself from an outside agent, say, family, society and so on and to estrange oneself from the established norms to establish oneself.

This is the purpose of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* which she establishes through the protagonist of the novel- Akhilandeswari, Akhila for short, forty five years old and single.
She is typical of that generation. She is an income tax clerk and a woman who has never been allowed to live her own life. She has always been the daughter, the sister, the aunt and the provider of the family. She has been the backbone of her unbearably demanding family. She at first does not have the nerve to say ‘no’ and shatter away. It seems as if she enjoyed being a sacrificial victim. She is not an outstanding or a strong spirited woman. All she wanted was to be a good wife and mother: the simple trance of a simple woman.

Akhila’s mother, who had married her own maternal uncle in the matrilineal tradition of the Tamil Brahmins, hero-worships him. Akhila’s parents and her neighbourhood Sarasa Mami and her husband are perfect and it is a formative and an exemplary influence on Akhila. The relationship between these two couples gives Akhila an insight in the relationship of a husband and wife. Akhila’s mother is a very traditional and conservative Brahmin woman following strictly the prescriptions of her own caste. Her mother being a Brahmin woman means to live a very sheltered life. According to her mother,

A good wife listened to her husband and did as he said. “There is no such thing as an equal marriage,” Amma said. “It is best to accept the wife is inferior to the husband.”

(LC: 14)

She embodies the ideal Hindu good wife- the pativarta- and she does not revolt to the role forced on her by the society and tradition. Her father is given importance in the family. On Sundays, her father reads the newspaper from the beginning till the end. Her mother prepares his favourite dishes and only after her father finishes eating the others in the family eat their meals. She blindly accepts her role and also inculcates her daughters with these principles. She is a good wife and she is always afraid of what other people can think about her family. Ramabai in her book on the High Caste Hindu Woman in which she explains a typical arranged marriage and aptly stated on the married satisfaction of women in terms of their marriage. Susie Tharu and K.Lalita views marriage as,
When the conjugal relation is brightened of mutual Love, the happy wife has nothing to complain except the absence of freedom of thought and action; but since wives have never known from the beginning what freedom is, they are well content to remain in bondage. (Tharu 247)

From the above lines it is obvious that a “Brahmin woman” is a subsequent identity. Indian women are often considered as appendixes of their male relations or husbands, but in case of Brahmin women the shackles are even stronger than in any other caste. Akhila was a nineteen year old girl and the eldest of the four children completed her PUC and was learning the skills of running a household when her father dies. She learnt that through her mother, all the qualities to become a good housewife. But she never had a chance to fulfill the responsibilities of a housewife. Without gaining perfection in drawing kolams she understood her role in life. She is a provider of basic needs of her family. When her father passed away, her mother becomes a widow and she undergoes the ritual of widowhood. Her mother is deprived of the symbols of marriage and she is forced into the dreadful life of a Brahmin widow. Akhila realizes that being a Brahmin woman means to live rigidly under norms.

In Indian context the widow appears to be a mutilated woman, she is driven out of the symbols of marriage. The widow is the most inauspicious thing of all; she must lead a simple, poor, disciplined and restricted life. Akhila’s life was interrupted after the death of her father. At that time, her brother Narsi was eight years, Padma six years old and Narayan was fifteen years old. Akhila had to shoulder the responsibilities of the family. In other words, she became the man of the family. When Narayan asked Akhila about their future, anger has replaced grief. Anger prepares one to face things better.

After her father’s death Akhila was given the job in his office on the impassionate grounds. She has to take the responsibility of the family. She becomes the head of the family. According to her mother, Akhila is the boss of the household, who can chart and steer the
course of the family’s destiny. Her mother has her daughter to replace her husband. When her father was alive her mother brings up Akhila in such a way that she should become a good housewife and a good mother. Naturally Akhila also dreams of such a kind of life as any other middle class Indian girl.

Now her existence has changed. Her life moves by bringing up her sister Padma and two brothers Narayan and Narsi. One of her brothers gets a job. He declares that he decided to marry. Akhila suggested the other brother should also get married. Everyone accepted Akhila’s decision but no one voices about her marriage. No one is worried about her life and marriage, neither her mother nor her siblings. She is completely repressed under the burden of the society and playing the role of a responsible breadwinner. In our society the stamp that is put on one is very difficult to shake off. Akhila is at the centrist position and still she continues to remain at the periphery because she is still seen as a woman and her needs are never considered important enough to take precedence over the needs of other family members.

Subramanyam Iyer, husband of Sarasa Mami also departed. Iyer is just a peon and has a growing daughter and dependent blind son. His death too has an element of mystery. In comparison, Nair shows a parallel situation. It is Akhila’s neighbor Mr. Iyer’s family. When the man of the house dies, the widow Sarasa Mami, a Brahmin widow, is forced to sell her daughter Jaya for bread, the Brahmin community harshly criticizes her choice and immediately isolates her. Both the families are Brahmins and have lost the man of the family. The difference is that the neighbor family makes their survival in an undignified way.

Akhila’s family situation could have been the same but as Akhila’s mother says, “But I had you” (LC: 84) again Akhila feels that her identity being lost in the role, she expected to play.

Akhila becomes stiff and starchy. The house is in order but the members have forgotten about Akhila’s emotion and her emotional needs. Akhila handles all burdensome
tasks delicately and she’s allowed a bigger identity. Being fixed to play the role of the man in the family, Akhila deletes the essence of womanhood from herself. Not called by her name, she gets the treatment of Akka, elder or older sister, the customary respectful address reserved to women either inside or outside the family group. Even her mother used to call her Ammadi. She feels at a conflict with her emotions. The flow in her inner nook tries to kindle her. She suffers an identity crisis. This reminds the readers about the Indian female condition where she is expected to spend her time to perform the role of the daughter, sister and breadwinner of the family to satisfy their needs. The readers are handled to the feeling when Akhila gets out of control and ask over her,

So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when she saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? Did the feel of rain on her bare akin send a line of goose bumps down her spine? Did she sing? Did she dream? Did she weep for no reason? (LC: 84)

Where does she exist? Does she have a space socially, psychologically, physically and mentally? When she becomes the breadwinner of the family she often thinks of a Tamil film ‘Aval Oru Thodarkadhai’ she has seen some years before, of a woman like her who was destined to be nothing more than a workhouse, a woman who devoted her life for the sake and love of her family. She searches for her identity. She wants to be Akhilandeswari. She successfully completed her role as Akka to her siblings and as a daughter to her mother. Both her brothers and sister Padma get good positions in life, get married and settled well. At this stage, she thought about her ‘self.’

It is in this unclear and depressing shadow of self-confusing thoughts that Akhila’s flexible self begins to take form and shape. She sorts out her own problems with clarity and arrives at the conclusion that she now needs is an education, which can give her a sense of stiff identity. She perceives her own needs and begins to take care of herself. Akhila enrolls
her name in the Open University and chooses history as her main subject. Like Nora in Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*,

…I must take steps to educate myself.

You are not the man to help me there.

That’s something I must do on my own. (Act III)

Akhila realizes the need of education enrolls her name in the Open University and chooses history as her main subject. Akhila is amazed by the behaviour of her colleague; she introduced eggs in the life of Akhila. She is the only spinster in her office and Katherine, her old friend brings revolution into the life of Akhila. Her sister and brothers never thought about her desires and wishes, they all seem to be selfish. Her mother is grateful to her as she is saved from any kind of disgrace as Akhila has shouldered the responsibilities of her family. It is this feeling of gratefulness, which in a way compels her to accept Akhila’s decision of eating eggs at home.

Akhila’s yearnings for tenderness, hard and erotic fulfillment are never expressed with her voice. They exist only in her dreams and her unexpressed sub-consciousness. The quest for recognition of her womanhood is articulated through the dream. Akhila’s longings are beautifully revealed through the bus incident. When she is touched by a stranger in the bus, she does not oppose him and looks forward to it. She is also an ordinary woman so her yearning for the touch of the male fingers is very natural.

She prefers and enjoys the personal warmth through this touch and in a strange way appeased her thought it is insubstantial. She is now emboldened to seek out emotional nutrients in order to gratify to her sensation-starved body. When the bus conductor notices it, becomes rather angry with her and makes a malevolent remark, Akhila is ashamed of herself thinking about what the conductor must have thought about her. She has no courage to face the conductor, so that she stops going by the bus. Needless to declare, Akhila accepts the
opinion of patriarchal society and, terribly humiliated, she punishes herself by never taking that bus again.

Akhila travels by train to her office and it is the hour of peace and new beginnings. A new meaning to existence comes, when she meets Hari. She now experiences the flow of life, as she surrenders herself to Hari. Thus the accidental meeting with Hari marks the first phase of her transition to fulfillment and freedom. She pays hardly enough attention to her mother’s oppositions about her going out for a day with her colleagues on an office trip although she uses this camouflage to spend a day with Hari. Contrary to the social norm she goes to Mahabalipuram and spends some time with him.

She enjoys sensual pleasure unknown to her so far for a small period of time and realises completeness, a flowering of her personality. Later in her trip to Mahabalipuram she makes love with Hari for the first time and she feels elated. Akhila’s life changes and she begins to break the boundary of her personal space and lets in freshness and newness by letting in Hari. The surfacing woman in Akhila throws violently to the winds the suffocating and restricting customs and man-made laws. This proper adult love was different from all those wavering misuse of wholesome of lovemaking. She gets pleasure from Hari’s company but this rapport has a very short life span. This relation dies very soon partly because of her social responsiveness of any such relationship being an outlawed and also for the reason that Hari is younger to her.

Akhila would have benefited from security in this relation, but her sense of awareness towards her family pressures compels her to break ties with Hari. After this short episode, her life continues as habitual. These thoughts throw light on the fact that Akhila was not given access to any kind of imaginary notions and all her feminine dreams were nipped in the bud. A brief love affair with a much younger man also turns out to be fruitless because more than her own urges she is concerned about what people will think or say. She finds life working its
own mechanical way. Although the provider, she was not recognised and preferred the status of being the real 'head of the family'.

Anita Nair carefully examines the temporary insanity and desires of a single woman, through the incident of a man exploring Akhila’s body with his hands in a packed bus, and also Akhila’s encounter with Hari and the subsequent burgeoning of their lives, lead to the endless possibilities for the flowering of a liberal man-woman relationship. It is neither that of a master nor of a slave. The novelist stresses the importance of healthy male-female friendship for reciprocal well being.

After her mother’s death, the other members of the family, particularly her brothers, converse and choose where and with whom she should live. They decide it for her just because they are males of the family. Akhila is taken for granted displaying a typical patriarchal attitude. Ultimately it is decided that she should live with Padma’s family. No one can think that an educated, economically independent woman can live alone even at the age of forty-five. She accepts their decision and decides to stay along with her sister Padma. Her life is governed by her brothers and her bloodsucking sister’s family wipes off her.

Akhila continues to tolerate the incursion of her space and isolation when she starts living with Padma’s family. In fact Padma is an ordinary house wife, but does not fail to spot single opportunity to condemn Akhila in every possible way. Actually Akhila supports Padma’s family but Padma does not crave to admit it. Instead of being grateful to her, Padma always find faults and gossips Akhila. However when Padma comes to know about the eating habits of her elder sister, she is furious and shocked with disgust. Padma cannot accept that inside a Brahmin household someone is eating eggs. She rebukes Akhila. Padma just cannot identify why her sister is going against the norms of their caste.

Padma is a traditional and orthodox Brahmin who does not rebel against the instructions of her caste. Her identity as a woman and as a human being is defined by the
norms of their own caste. She seems not to have an identity of her own, but only a Brahmin identity. Akhila is unlike Padma because she fights back to shape her own identity. Akhila managed to be with Padma for four years in her own flat. Akhila soon realized that Padma’s feelings for her had attained an intricacy that Akhila no longer knew how to crack or clasp. Padma needed to make Akhila look incomplete to feel complete herself. Unfortunately, her younger sister, Padma, who is ungrateful to her and even, condemns her in front of her friends. Padma wanted that everyone should treat her like a martyr.

Padma gossips about her sister with her friends. Akhila’s life has been spent committed to her siblings and mother as she has been the provider of the family. However, none of her siblings have reciprocated her devotion and have taken her for granted. Instead, her younger sister does not allow her to act independently in her house and criticize of Akhila’s presence in her household. Padma’s marital status has granted a special liberty and thus has allowed her to grousse her spinster sister. Padma is a typical representation shows how much value is attached to marriage in the Indian society.

After many years Akhila meets her school friend Karpagam in the supermarket and she helps her to discover the own identity. It is Karpagam who is able to instill a sense of self-esteem in Akhila which makes her to be acquainted with to live her life on her personal stipulations, and not be ordered by other members in the family, who are in reality dependent on her. She suggests, insists and makes Akhila realize that she has every right to find happiness projected for her. She suddenly remembers the lines on greeting-card, she has sent to her Anglo-Indian friend, Katherine.

Happiness is being allowed to choose one’s own life; to live it the way one wants.

Happiness is knowing one is loved and having someone to love.

Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow. (LC: 200)
Karpagam persuades Akhila to think about herself and not to bother about anything else. She is a Hindu Brahmin widow, but very modern and exceptional one. She represents a ‘new woman’ who lives independently along with her daughter following her own wishes and senses. Karpagam enunciated that her daughter was twenty-three and she is allowed to do whatever she wants. She is not worried of what the others think of her attitude. She is an individual, contemporary woman who has untied herself from the saddle of tradition. She enlightens Akhila that it is expected for a woman to be feminine because it is in her personality. Feminity has nothing to do with being married or being a widow.

Karpagam represents an unconventional widow who lives her life absolutely and ignores the legacy of code. The reunion with her gives self-confidence to Akhila, to think about herself and to put off concern about other people’s desires. The expedition from the margin towards the middle helps the woman to accomplish her goal by way of radical independence in which marriage is not vital. It is undeniably impossible that the woman who took over the responsibility of the entire family years ago is not meticulous capable of looking after herself even at the age of forty five. Sometimes Akhila thought what she hated most was not having an identity of her own. She is always an extension of someone else’s identity. In fact Akhila is depressed with Padma; she decides to live alone, her siblings do not accept her decision and they protested against her. Narsi, her younger brother said that it is offense for a woman to live alone in the society.

After her father’s death Akhila completely dedicated herself to her family, ignoring her own individuality. The reactions of Narsi and Padma reveal the mind-set of the people towards a single woman. But this time Akhila is firm and declares that she has completed her tasks towards her family and now she is resolute to live for herself and she need not ask anybody’s permission for it. Akhila has the answers ready for the question:
For twenty-six years, I gave all of myself to this family. I asked for nothing in return.
And now I wish to make a life of my own…’I know I can. I did once before when you
were children. Now I can for me, for Akhilandeswari. Nobody’s daughter. Nobody’s

Akhila is a branded sacrificing elder sister and a spinster. Akhila affirms her own self
by cutting all her ties with her family and discarding her old derived and forced identity. She
needs to be herself, not a supplement of someone else. Education can definitely help her in
this forward voyage from the edge towards the nucleus. Economic independence, boost the
travel towards the core. The empowerment of women and her ability to hold power centers
like employment and decision making at home and in society will accelerate this journey
from the boundary to the centre. Getting fed up with these multiple roles, Akhila tries to
break of all her conservative Brahmin life and decides to take life in her hands. She makes a
decision to bolt, to take a long train journey from Chennai to the seaside town Kanyakumari.

So this then is Akhila. Forty five years old. Sans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans
husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life
and experience. Aching to connect. (LC: 2)

Akhila undertakes this route as a form of escape, a longing to go away alone, a sense
of excitement of being able to do something all by herself, not having to take approval, of
captivating an independent decision. Akhila’s story is a tale of desire, of memory and of loss.
Anita Nair chooses to make Akhila travel, as travel is progress through territorialized spaces.
Travel enables one physically to cross cultural limits, infringe, visit and at times even
capture. When travelling, one dislocates oneself, makes oneself a new identity, which paves
the way for a review of identity. The decision to go on a journey is Akhila’s celebration of
her newly attained freedom. The journey implies both a physical escape from the patriarchal
world she has occupied and also the conventional symbolic value consistently attached to the
concept of the journey - that of pragmatic growth and an expansion of horizons. She gets a ticket in the Ladies Coupe. Ladies Coupe is a compartment on a train that is held in reserve exclusively for women. It is the second-class reservation compartments which the Indian railways set aside for women until early 1998 and the common gender identity that women from different backgrounds share in it. This compartment is safe, quiet, chosen by women who travel alone. Akhila meets five different women representing different generations.

On her way to Kanyakumari her five co-travellers of different age and family background together weave their own world. In the intimate atmosphere of the ladies coupe which she shares with five other women, Akhila gets to know about her fellow travellers: Janaki Prabhakar, the old woman in the coupe whose relationship with her husband is a “friendly love”, Prabha Devi, the rich passive wife who loves swimming because it metaphorically, gives her a sense of achievement, Margaret Paulraj, the chemistry teacher who succeeds in “discipling” her narcissistic husband, Sheela Vasudevan, the fourteen year old girl whose understanding of her dying grandmother paves the way for own future liberation and Marikolunthu, whose rape, literally and metaphorically, coupled with extreme poverty and class exploitation is the culmination of all other stories.

One thing all these six women have one thing in common is their exploration for the authentic meaning of life. As the story develops the coupe turns into a place where five women share some of their life’s most personal moments about their early days, their husbands, their sons and their lovers. The passengers has shed all their humiliations and converse freely as they know that these words would never be repeated to harmful effect as these women would perhaps never meet up again. Anita Nair is a powerful writer, who through this tender story shows great understanding and concern for all women and for the options and regrets they cannot reject. She portrays women totally cut off from domestic, public ties but women who remain within those track and protest against injustice and
embarrassment. In an interview to Hindustan Times, Anita Nair was asked whether all her characters were ordinary people leading everyday lives. She answered,

I never believe in heroic heroes. We only look at the people when they achieve something. I know people who’re extraordinary, but who lead quiet lives. So, whatever I write is not going to be about larger-than-life characters. Probably they would have quirks that would make them misfits, but they’d be ordinary people. (De)

The portrayal of characters in Ladies Coupe and the development of these characters into mature individuals who become aware of who they are, follows a painful course of suppression, revolution and resolution. Akhila, the presenter of the story begins the discussion after the preliminary introductions and the train is mechanically moving ahead. This is the first journey she is undertaking alone, hoping to meet five other women who would help her to resolve a dilemma she has been tackling: do women need men? She says:

As far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman cannot live alone. What do you think? Can a woman live by herself? (LC: 21)

In an impetuous moment she buys a one-way ticket for herself to Kanyakumari and in the compartment mutely listens to the stories of other women, which finally make Akhila to take the vital decision of her life, something only meant for herself. This work of creative writing raises many taboo questions regarding the role of women in post-colonial India. They have been subdued, subjugated and dishonored by the society, their own families and their male counterparts. All the women in this effort belong to different age groups, varied cultural and financial backgrounds representing different aspects of life. This work of novel can also be visioned in terms of combined women’s psyche. This psyche is a result of female culture rooted in different classes, nationalities and races.
As the five other women attempt to answer her question she goes deep into their lives. Akhila listens patiently to the ups and downs of their life and she tries to find a solution to the question which torments her all her life: “Can a woman stay single and be happy or does a woman need a man to feel complete?”

For Akhila the quest for an answer to this troublesome question becomes the quest for her identity. Akhila’s responsibilities include maintenance of the house and ejecting her duties to the satisfaction of everyone. The quest for identity is carried out during the train journey; she focussed on to the tale of the first person Janaki. Janaki Prabhakar got married when she was eighteen and Prabhakar was twenty-seven. She has had a happy comfortable long (forty) years of married life. She is returning after meeting her son and daughter-in-law. She starts to narrate the trajectory of her married life with Prabhakar for forty years.

After forty years, there were no more surprises, no jarring notes, no peek-a-boos from behind doors. There was just this friendly love advertising liked to capitalize on

\((LC: 27)\)

According to Akhila, Janaki was a woman of a certain age. Janaki’s husband is caring and she has a son and a daughter-in-law. A sense of repression and belonging begins for Janaki when discovers that she is pregnant, she hated Prabhakar when he comes near to her. The only time she had felt some stirring of revolt was when she saw that her husband wanted to control everybody even their grown up son. She felt an unexpected wrath uncoil in her, and bursts out that their son was grown up and he has his own wishes to do. Why should he disturb him? His exactness and precision had irritated her but her life had gone on smoothly and they had been the “golden couple”, the perfect parents, and were now very cordial in-laws. There is perfect communication between them. She is completely dependent on him.

With a sense of pride, Prabhakar said that she is very capable when she wants to be. Janaki wanted her daughter-in-law to think of her as a composed and contented woman.
Janaki avoids the talk with Siddharth when he started to ask about her life without his father. Janaki refused to think of life without her husband. After Siddharth got married, almost everything his mother said or did annoy him. It was as if he had started to measure his mother with a new yardstick and each time she fell short of what he expected of her. Prabhakar thought, Janaki was the same.

Janaki and Siddharth quarrelled for no reason. Prabhakar was a ball in centre, unwilling to take sides. Prabhakar loved Janaki and he never wants her to be scolded or find fault by anybody even their son. Later she discovered the fact that in accommodation lay her true happiness. As they are living together for such a long period, she frankly admits to her husband that she is not willing to share him with anyone and she is need of his complete love and affection. A short stay at their son’s house makes her realize that she had developed friendly love for her husband at this stage. In the autumn of their life, their marital relationship has flourished into companionship. This friendship would act as a bonding to unite them forever.

Janaki is confined in the oppression of a wife, mother and most notably the woman that patriarchy has moulded her. Janaki accommodates her body and mind to marriage and what it had to offer her in life. Her initial response to Akhila’s question was why a woman has to live alone when there is a man willing to safeguard her. However, now she understands that a woman must be able to walk on her own legs and take decisions alone. She tells Akhila,

I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and 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 a fragile……(LC: 22)
Her sacred predicament was short lived and she changed to adapt to being the well looked after fragile creature forever. And also she suggests Akhila that our life is not designed for solitude. Janaki rebels against the sweet and sugary world she has built around herself and later in her life she questions her beliefs finding out that most of them are now meaningless. Janaki wants to be something more than the weak creature. Janaki has finally discovered the power of being a strong and capable woman, a woman who can decide on her own.

The next entity in the coupe is Sheela. She is the youngest woman in the compartment. Sheela is a responsive fourteen year old girl. She is blessed with an intense insight. She is at the beginning of her life journey but she has realized that women are distinguished on the grounds of gender. During her journey she rethinks about the death of her grandmother, Ammumma, and how her joint family has reacted towards her corpse. She sees the family around her and the relationship between her grandmother, her mother and her brother and sister. Sheela has liking towards her maternal mother rather than her paternal mother.

Ammumma was very careful about the behaviours of Sheela and insists that she was not a little girl, she is a grown up. Her grandmother hated imperfections of any kind. She impresses upon Sheela the fact that a woman has to be physically appealing; even though she is old. When her grandmother was hospitalized, it caused a lot of stress in Sheela’s house. She feels the hypocrisy of the process. For the first time, when her grandmother was in hospital, Sheela’s mother felt the burden of the responsibility that would come to rest with her now. Sheela’s daddy, her kind daddy behaves like a beast to her; it is because she talks like a razor-edged wit. Her father never behaved in such a manner when she was a child. Sheela felt repression in the attitude of her father. She was very often the cause of his anger. She is in the process of being repressed. Sheela knew there was no escaping the beast’s rage
until grandmother left or died. She understands the importance of a mother in the life of a
girl. Sheela had seen the three generation of women. She can understand womanhood. She
knew that grandmother always wanted to be neatly dressed and she takes care about her body
even though she is old. So Sheela dresses up the corpse of her grandmother because she
hated to look her grandmother disorderly. She is rebuked but she knows that her
grandmother would be happy with her.

Though, she is warned about by her father, she knows that there is line that keeps
family bonded together. Patriarchal hands are moulding her. She is kept within the limits but
she gains control by her force that is through her grandmother. Unconsciously, Sheela makes
it obvious to Akhila that it is essential on one’s part to do what one feel is the best although it
is against the orthodox value system. It is fourteen years old Sheela who proves more capable
and aware to her Ammumma’s feelings than any other adult member of the family. We have
a complete picture of a middle class South Indian family, their attitude, when gathered during
the last days of an old sick parent. The writer’s native consciousness makes her ardently
aware of the corruption of family values and makes a dispassionate Psychological analysis of
these values.

These reflections, coming through the mind of Sheela, Nair shows how a child is a
potent sensitive tape that can able to register, record and pick the feeblest sensations and note
those details that escape elders because their senses have caused something to become rigid
or selfishness dominates. Anita Nair has delicately brought about the issue of child abuse
when Sheela wonders why one of the friends father behaves the way he does, touching her
and why Ammumma outlawed her going there.

The third saga narrated in the Coupe is Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher was a
depressing one. She nurtured romantic fantasies about marriage with the hardworking,
efficient and ambitious Ebenezer. Margaret is a picture of contrast in the women’s dream of
individuality and equality, with the actual way of life. A chemistry gold medalist wounded in many ways by her egoistic, dominating and hypocritic husband is unconsciously compelled to teach him a lesson. She uses chemistry as a metaphor for existence and also to destroy.

Among the five elements that constitute life, Margaret classifies herself as water:

- What that moistens.
- Water that heals.
- Water that forgets.
- Water that accepts.
- Water that flows tirelessly.
- Water that also destroys.

For the power to dissolve and destroy is as much a part of being water as wetness is. In the world of chemicals, water is the universal solvent. (*LC*: 96)

Margaret’s life goes through many physical, psychological and spiritual difficulties. She keeps on changing till she finds a state where she finds comfort. She realized that she hated him more than she had hated anyone. Margaret’s marriage to Ebenezer was a fairly tale. He loved her but she feels that she have no self- respect or individuality. She uttered,

**I HATE HIM, I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EXENEZER PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. I HATE HIM** (*LC*: 98)

Ebenezer listens to anyone but himself. As for her coterie, they thought of him as their chief: and a fair chief. Ebenezer’s features were finely formed and he was tall and well built, with a dark complexion. Before marriage, Ebenezer was Margaret’s favourite Mills & Boons authors would have approved that she wanted to know him better. Ebenezer was strong and capable; he has a soft heart and a sensitive soul. She loved Ebenezer more than her parents and she wanted everyone in her family to love him. According to her, Love lights and burns and also love is venom cloaked as the spirit of wine. Ebe’s every action steadily transforms Margaret’s love into hatred. She starts losing her individuality. Like Mohan in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* who changes Jaya’s name as Suhasini, Ebe changes Margaret’s name as Maragatham. He said both Margaret and Shanthi were common sounding names. All along she was catering to his needs and never expressed her views.
Like Margaret, Jaya too does not protest the change of her name just they both want to keep their marriage, parents and husband happy. They have thoroughly suppressed their free will as long, since they were taught the moral values of life right from their childhood and also the importance of stable marriage and family. They represent the urban, educated and had the exposure to liberal western ideas. But still their upbringing demands the suppression of the self and hence the marriage life survives. Unable to free themselves from the clutches of traditional society, their inner voice remains inarticulate. The authors Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair are very realistic in the sense that they suggest marriages are not based on love but convenience. Margaret in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe* and Jaya in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* are content to play the role of an ideal wife as long as the social conditions are fine.

Margaret initially says ‘yes’ to whatever he says and is out to give pleasure to him always. She is shocked out of this role when she has to go through an abortion of her first pregnancy due to Ebenezer’s insistence. Ebenezer controls her completely. She is forced to do B.Ed though she wanted to do Ph.D. She has to work wherever he wants her to work. Margaret suppressed on an infrequent burst of frustration at his conceit. He becomes more and more domineering after he becomes the principal of the school. He begins to scold continuously and find fault in her housekeeping and cooking. He does not share any household tedious tasks. She begins to hate him and the day she utters it she feels she is set free. She even thinks of leaving him. But she was not sure whether her family will allow her decision, for her family had great regard for him.

She then thinks of other alternatives. She tried to talk with her mother about his nature. But as a typical mother she says that it is quite natural to quarrel with one’s husband. Moreover she says that it is a women’s responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have so many concerns that they might not have the time or the tendency to keep the wheels of
marriage lubricated. Margaret’s family cannot acknowledge her idea of a divorce and though she feels concealed in her marriage she continues living with Ebe.

As expected of her she bends to his will. She is the one who holds the marriage chord from splintering by mere compromise, indifference, acceptance with no expectations and she does this for the sake of her parents. She cannot able to have a peaceful sleep. It looks as if women have to forfeit their self, individuality to maintain harmony in their married life. The coterie was Ebe’s audience and he enjoyed tempting them with his sweet sounding voice and wickedness disguised as humour. Then Ebe was given a new role of “Father of the state’. His power became supreme. He never argues, never loses his temper and never raises his voice when nothing is needed for him. His double nature, artificial politeness and warmth and inner cruelty; his ego, his damage books with ugly drawings, his various theories and his constant ridicule contempt of her, make her suffer intensely.

Ebe is very aware of his looks; he does a lot of exercises to keep up himself. But yummy food is his weakness. Margaret offers him tasty, oily food and also she indulges him with sex. Ebe becomes fat, loses his egotism and brutality seeks her more and more. There is complete reverse of roles. Earlier Ebe used to control her life. Now she has him completely in her hands. He becomes a man with whom she can live again. After suffering mutely for many years she finds an exclusive way of resolving scores with her husband. It is more trustworthy as she does so without breaking family or making parents miserable by seeking divorce.

Margaret’s suppression can be called one of sexual stereotyping. She was forced to live like a model wife and daughter. Psychoanalyst, Jean Baker Miller analyses gender attitudes as a part of attitudes common to all dominant and subordinate group: in his words.

Subordinates are described in terms of, and encouraged to develop psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominate groups. These characteristics from a certain familiar cluster’ submissiveness, passivity, docility, lack of initiative, inability
to decide, to think and the like […] If subordinates adopt these characteristics they are considered well adjusted. (7)

Margaret had continued in the same condition within the above definition till she revolted, insulted and resulted to be a subordinate. She lives life routinely until one day James, their goldfish is seen floating dead. This is the turning point in her life. Margaret became master to her husband. She is another example of how women are dominated by male power- the powerless are like the colonized who fail to see and appreciate their true worth. When she marries Ebenezer, she has made the ideal choice according to her family but later on she realized the wrong step that she moved by marrying him. She wakes up and planned her own strategy to prove her strength. Margaret develops the ability to work for her own independent personality. Though she is married, in the beginning Margaret replies and answers to Akhila’s query that

A woman doesn’t really need a man. That is myth that men have tried to twist into a reality (LC: 95)

Margaret instead of surrendering to patriarchy takes a clever revenge in which there is no bloodshed or tears but peace. She also saved her marriage from divorce without losing her individualism. Her careful and steady move helps her family from disintegration. Nair is not a victim to the social beliefs about the subsidiary status of women as men. Margaret’s mantra is that each should trust their instincts and they have to find their own answers. There is no one to help.

The next storyteller is Prabha Devi, who was brought up in the lap of luxury, finds her rebellious self after her marriage. Her story is entirely different from the others in the couple. She is married to a rich and royal person. Prabha Devi was prepared to be good wife. On her fortieth birthday she realized that she had forgotten the sound of her own voice and testing her name. When Prabha Devi was born, her father grimaced. It was a pleasure to her mother
than her four sons. Prabha Devi was married when she was eighteen years. Her craze was to sit at the edge of the pond with her feet dangling in the water. When she called her husband, Jagadeesh to accompany her, he showed his highness. Her trip to New York makes her feel an intense longing to be like those women. In earlier days of her marriage she nursed ambitions of being unconventional. She began to flirt with a man in the club.

With swinging hair and a confident stride. Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Such power, such confidence such celebrations of life and beauty (LC: 177).

She becomes conscious of her beauty and sexualility. She starts reading magazines and visits beauty parlour very often. She looks more beautiful, charming, senuous and confident woman. She becomes more westernized. Prabha Devi starts imitating the western culture. She is happy. She has got herself transformed into a beautiful object; a commodity to treasure. She feels proud when appreciative eyes follow her. The transformation in her is notable and it gives her immense fulfillment. She shocks her husband by asking him to use condoms as she does not want to become pregnant very soon. It is this pride that makes her consciously attract Pramod. When he appreciates her good looks, the woman in her is pleased. But when his sexual demands grew bold, she realized her stupidity. She is ready to quit the polished, fashionable, socialite and decided to become a good housewife. She changes completely and she forgets her beauty and charm. Prabha Devi tries to avoid the club.

Prabha Devi turns herself into a submissive, docile woman and stops caring for herself and denies her feminity, her life becomes monotonous and mechanical day by day. Her life was changed. Her life fell into a predictable and conventional style. Her hours and thoughts were filled from seam to seam with geometry kits, drawing books, school uniforms, vitamin tablets, homework and vacations. Years later, she discovered the sensual magic and
wanted to learn swimming that too without the knowledge of her husband. Floating in a pool, when water gives a gentle stroke to her raw nerves, and the body had become a cluster of desires. Her days in the pool slowly awoke her. She had discovered that desire spawns desire and fulfillment gives rise to fulfillment. She became the blue of the pool and the water discovered her.

Time ceased. A weightlessness. A haze of memories. A cloud of unconnected thoughts. Of being and not being. From the tips of her toes to the tips of her fingers, a straight line, a slow triumph. I am afloat. I am afloat. My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear. *(LC: 195)*

Prabha Devi knew that life would never be the same again. She has to think of a life of her own. She achieves her desire and fulfillment of desire blossoms the new Prabha Devi. She is a woman who has been forced by life to hide her true self in order to please her parents and to avoid other men’s attentions. Her high-spirited way of being is mistaken for something else by the traditional Indian society. Now, she is grateful to her swimming lessons, because through it she is able to care for her body yet again. Through this story, the author very capably gives her remarks on society. She never embellishes the minds of women and they are presented as their actual personalities with all the Achilles' heel of mind and body.

None of the women’s weakness escapes, Anita Nair yet exhibits a very real esteem for them. Living in luxury when her life has lost its freshness and vigour and grew more mechanical and monotonous, at the age of thirty seven, she restarts her life. By learning to stay afloat she reaches the self-actualization. She triumphs over her inborn timidity and achieves ‘peak experience’ of ultimate happiness bringing incredible pleasure.

The last character that Anita Nair has introduced into her novel is Marikolunthu. Among the five passengers in the compartment Marikolunthu is entirely different from them because her experiences are far more painful. Marikolunthu is a victim of rape, forced
motherhood and lesbianism. Marikolunthu’s life was tragic and she is from a poor family. As a child sufferer of societal and economic oppression she endures. Marikolunthu’s mother works as a housemaid in Chettiar Kottai. The Chettiar Kottai was enormous with countless rooms and annexes. It stood three floors high and from the outside it seemed impregnable. Its original name was Rajvilas, everyone in the village and the nearby villages referred to it as the Chettiar Kottai – the Chettiar fort. The Chettiar was the rich man and he owned many looms.

Marikolunthu’s mother leaves home by seven in the morning and returns only after six in the evening. For the villagers, Chettiar was god but to her father, Chettiar was a slave king. She accepts to whatever her mother says and she assisted her mother in the Chettiar’s household. Marikolunthu has to take care of Sujatha Akka’s baby. Sujathawas very kind to Marikolunthu. In the Chettiar Kottai, Sujathawas special and Chettiar insisted that every whim and wish was to be fulfilled. Marikolunthu left Chettiar Kottai and reached Vellore to work for the two Anglo-Indian doctors. Then she returned to Chettiar Kottai and became Sujatha Akka’s handmaid. In January, the village was at its best during the festival. A tragedy occurred in the life of Marikolunthu. As she was passing through the mango orchard, Murugesan who was following the footsteps of Marikolunthu trapped and contented his sensual pleasure. Marikolunthu narrated the incident happened to her mother. No one cares about the incident and also steps are not taken to punish Murugesan.

Murugesan was left unpunished. Marikolunthu along with her mother went to her relatives place and made futile attempts to abort the child. She was not taken to the hospital to abort the child because she was not yet married. She does not want the child because it was an unlawful child. When the man who raped her leads a happy life, it is always the woman who tolerates the burden of it and the entire of her life becomes one of pain and endless misery. She has shown all her love to Sujatha Akka’s son but at the same time she
felt a hatred for her child. She spent all her maternal love on Sujatha Akka’s baby and had none left for her own child. And she said that everything was Brahma’s doing:

…when Brahma writes our destiny, they say, he allots a specific number of years to each one of us to experience all aspects of living. My time as housewife was spent long before I became an adult. In my mother’s house, I did all that a woman with her own house does. (LC: 213).

Marikolunthu said that the child for her mother was a baby to be treasured and sheltered. To her, he was blameless, and he was her support for tomorrow. He left the child and went back to Vellore and she recollects the scene, which happened in the mango orchard. Sujatha recalled Marikolunthu to work in Chettiar Kottai. Her son was named as Muthu, ‘rare pearl’. He is the result of her rape by Murugesan. Even though her rapist is known he is not punished life-long. She too ends up as a helper like her mother at the Chettiar household, after a brief stay at Vellore with two lady doctors. They had promised her nursing education but after the rape incident they feel she has no sympathy and so cannot turn out to be a nurse. She was forced to be with Sujathain the Chettiar Kottai and her life passes.

Marikolunthu looks after the Chettiar Amma, Sujatha fed up with her husband hates to be with him in bed yet she offers her body to him only to stop him from flaunting with others. Paradoxically, she longs for an adoring unification, which Marikolunthu provides her. Marikolunthu has become a loyal servant to Sujatha. Slipping into a lesbianism relationship with Sujatha and also she recognizes and realizes how easy it is to delight a woman. Sujatha is in search of her personal freedom. She expresses her anger by resorting to what might be termed as immoral acts like indulging in extramarital affairs. Lesbianism is a counter revolution against the foundation of male restricted society. It rejects male authority in sexual terms where woman’s feelings and longing for sexual pleasure are discarded. When Sujathais aware of her husband’s exploits with her, she throws her out of the Chettiar household.
As an alternative type of female bonding, Nair introduces lesbianism between Misses K and V and later between Sujatha and Marikolunthu. In the latter case, the female union is all the more significant because it breaks away from class distinctions. The suppressed (women) happen to one against the males. The same concept has been deployed by Manju Kapur in her novel *A Married Woman* to display another form of relationship. No power, no tricks, just plain love. The characters Aastha and Pipeelika both love each other and their physical relationship is a proof of that. They make each other’s life happy and treat each other with extreme love till situations do them apart. With her, Aastha discovers the long forgotten bliss of life. It is more of a mutual dependence, an urge for company and the capability to let their hair fall down by shedding all embarrassment that brings the two closer. Aastha realizes the joys of living and Pipeelika becomes an inseparable part of her being. They both even get bodily intimate. In sexual arena, women don’t want to be dominated as an object as a subordinate person.

Therefore the women writers tried to prove a point that a woman is so independent that she doesn’t have to depend on a man for in search of pleasure always. She can also find her options where she can discard a man out of her life as she has successfully done while seeking economic independence and marriage. Pleasure may be the source of happiness for a woman but it is not the man who is the only alternative, rather a woman can also prove to be a seeker as well as a provider of pleasure.

The turning point in her life comes when she sees the corpse of Murugesan. Marikolunthu waited for this to happen. When his body was reduced to ashes and when everyone had left, the place she would stand on his ashes and spit on them. She is shocked at the realization that Muthu was left to tend to the pyre and she had reduced anger towards her son chandala. A keeper of graves, the supervisor of the dead he has no fault of his. Finally the creature is being punished for his sin. She felt guilty for not caring for her child. She
decided to look after him. She suffers extreme agony in all her life. It is at last love that brings her on the exact track where she will find happiness and fulfillment. Her struggle has been one of hatred for herself (rape) and accepting with embarrassing relationships thereafter. Her resolution to bring up her child shows her forming into a new character. Akhila was left alone and pondered at the words of Marikolunthu.

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 the vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally. \textit{LC}: (209-210)

Marikolunthu lives in a restrained and prohibited environment. She lives in a strident psycho-social group and she is strained by it. As Hans Seyle says that Stress is the rate of wear and tear in the body. We all understanding that during life we use ourselves up, just as any inanimate machine, an automobile, will gradually use itself up by the stresses and strains to which the machinery is exposed. (12)

Marikolunthu has to face the strains of life herself. Hers was the most terrible story of a woman raped, cast out deserted, ahead of hope, a thirty one year old woman with a son and no husband. She is a practical slave, the victim of men, of casteism and of numerous social prejudices. It is evident that gender bias and suppression of women emerges as a powerful theme of this novel.

Akhila listens to the stories of these women. Janaki Prabhakar, Prabhadevi, Margaret Paulraj these three married women are victims of Pygmalion Effect (The Pygmalion effect is the form of self-fulfilling prophecy, and, in this respect, people will internalize their optimistic labels, and those with positive labels succeed accordingly). They are the examples of adjustments. Janaki Prabhakar recognizes that she has no identity as such, she is very traditional. Prabhadevi tries to attain sexual autonomy, and does not identify with its obstacles. She tries to ignore the traditions by secretly learning how to swim. Margaret
Paulraj is learned, economically independent, empowered, but even that has become crippled. No one think that she is unhappy, what her husband does, and hence she becomes a Praying Mantis. Her misfortune represents the story of millions of educated and financially autonomous women. Akhila hopes to find answers to too many of the questions that have been disturbing her, but she realizes that there can be no desired answers and that no one can tutor her how to lead her own life, that she cannot replica her life on the lives of others.

The combined experiences of her co-passengers help Akhila to develop the new dignity that signs her behaviour after she lands the metaphor of journey is further developed into the metaphor of the destination- Kanyakumari is a seaside town with the majestic landscape of the gathering of three seas. The openness of the scene signifies the range of possibilities open to Akhila. Akhila who was wrapped up in her family situation in a small interior town in Tamilnadu now sits at watching at a sapphire sky and playing with the sand. Three oceans assemble and merge at her feet, she realizes with excitement. Her realization of her own independence is a sudden intuitive leap of understanding.

On her journey, Hari is the foremost being in her mind. She realizes how desire and pleasure has been important in one’s life. Akhila understands mind helps her to identify when to keep rules and when to fling it to the winds. This is yet an additional emerging characteristic of Akhila’s signs of growth. She is in the process of becoming more genuine and truer to her inner self. Akhila’s decision to call off her relationship with Hari becomes Akhila as an independent woman. It is the reflection of the long step she has made in her quest for personal freedom. As Morgan Scott Peck observes,

Love is not simply giving; it is judicious giving and judicious withholding as well. It is judicious praising and judicious criticizing. It is judicious arguing, struggling, confronting, urging, pushing and pulling in addition to comforting. It is leadership.
The word ‘judicious’ means requires thoughtful and often painful decision-making. 

(134)

It is this act of courageous daring that indicates Akhila to take deliberate risks in her long journey to freedom. The narrator optimistically asserts her balanced bend of psyche Akhila was not a creature of impulse. She took time over every decision. She pondered, deliberated, slept over it and only when she had examined every single nuance and point of view did she make up her mind [...] Akhila prided herself on being an organized person. (LC: 2-3)

She is new Akhila now. Akhila reaches Kanyakumari, where she has a brief relationship with a young man called Vinod. It is, in fact, Akhila who initiates the relationship, which has no emotional involvement on the part of both. She is now not bothered about what others would say. She has overcome her fear of the society. After listening to the real-life stories of her co-passengers, she takes resolution. She feels that she is no more under the bondage of her sister, brothers and the society. It is an expression of her freedom from suppressive shackles.

Akhila, having discovered her true self in shared love, experiences a world of pure sensations. The new woman in her is manifested by her body language. She exults in her new found identity and liberty. Akhila learns through all experiences and realizes the futility of clinging to support systems, be it a man, a woman, or institutions, for ultimately everything leads to nothing, but one form of confinement or capture. She realizes the value of freedom. Akhila decides that she needs companion in the journey of her life and she thinks Hari to be the right person. After listening to the life stories of the five women, she relives her experiences and decides that she has a right, even at the age of forty-five to seek her lover Hari and begin a new life. Her decision is her rebellion against the society and its repressive forces. She has had a spiritually and emotionally liberating journey and Akhila
forms herself and discovers life. Akhila will never allow her family members to treat her as a scapegoat.

“Look at me “, she would tell them.

“Look at me: I’m the woman you think you know.

I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered” (LC: 224)

There was a time when a woman needed a man for security but today she needs a man for companionship, she needs a partner who would share her ups and downs. She is not in need of a breadwinner but in need of someone with whom she can share the bread. So, does this realization make Akhila get back in contact with her lover Hari, someone whom she did not accept for the fears of the society? She learnt life is attractive, thrilling and full of wonders. She learnt that it is in her hands to create happiness and it is her responsibility alone. Akhila is undoubtedly a lucid example of the new woman who chooses freedom and sovereignty. Women can be strong if they are able to find the strength hidden into their depths. Akhila learns through all these experiences and realizes the senselessness of clinging it to support organizations, be it a man, be it a woman, or institutions; in the end everything leads to nothing but one form of captivity or capture of some kind.

Akhila wants achievement in life, first satisfaction of sexual needs, then motherhood. From typical Indian middle class woman Akhila varies to a transitional woman. She finds out her way to persuade her physical needs with a relationship. Towards the end of the novel Akhila is described as Sakthi, a model or sign or powerful object of change. To Akhila marriage is an oppressive structure which takes away her personal identity and what she longs for is self-generative identity. Anita Nair draws on the avatars of the Devi, the female principle in Hindu mythology, to insist on the many-headed but unitary subjectivity of women. Responding to the patriarchal Hindu tradition with Hindu mythology may perhaps
seem rather contradictory. Adrienne Rich, to whom we owe the most unforgettable definition of patriarchy as:

The power of the father: a familial –social, ideological, political system in which men, by force, direct pressure, or though ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play has reminded us that, ‘it does not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain powers. (57)

Anita Nair encourages her female readers to delve deep into their own past to regain the strength their inborn and silent bodies. Akhila learns to revolutionize the track of her voyage according to her aspiration and ease without worrying about social approval. At one point of time she respected the values and norms of traditions lay down by the society and so she decided to eliminate the idea of marrying Hari. Now after the revolution takes place, she realizes that she need not follow social conventions when they don’t bother about her joy and pleasure. She identifies the world and wants to get back all those happiness she missed in her life. Now Akhila transforms herself as,

Akhila is lust. Akhila is Sakthi. Akhila is Akhilandeswari decimated into ten entities.
Kali: Ready to destroy all that comes between her and the flow of time.
Tara: With the golden embryo from which new universe will evolve. She will be her own void and infinity.
Sodasi: Fullness at sixteen. Nurturing dreams and hopes. Even now at forty five.
Bhuvaneswari: The forces of the material world surge with her.
Bhairavi: Seeking to find ways and means to fulfill her desires before all is null and void.
Chinnamasta: The naked one continuing the state of self-sustenance in the created world; making possible destruction and renewal in a cyclic order.
Dhumathi: Misfortune personified an old hag riding an ass with a broom in one hand and crow on her banner.

Bagala: The crane-headed one, the ugly side of all living creatures. Jealousy, hatred, cruelty, she is all this and more.

Matangi.: Seeking to dominate.

And then there is Kamala. Pure consciousness of the self, bestowing boons and allaying fears.

This is who Akhila is. Together and separate. *(LC: 274-275)*

The novel ends with happier, stronger Akhila who has found a direction to her life. In narrating the stories of these six women, Nair moves from a state of passivity into a state of active existence. She takes them out from the kitchen and bedroom to the street and the world at large. The stories together make a single story of women rediscovering their lives; the coupe becomes a representation for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by the false binaries. Akhila willfully takes an action at the end of the novel, an action that aims to overcome the contradictions that are typical of the customary world.

Anita Nair gives an answer to the question whether a woman can survive alone by presenting an insight into the way of women live in India. There is an aspect of sympathy in all women. The novel remains an uplifting tale of womanhood, love and endurance. It brings out the preferences women make for themselves and options made for them. Akhila’s experience teaches that a female can survive and get her identity and liberty not by keeping herself secluded from the male-dominated society but by co-operating with them.

After an analysis of *Ladies Coupe*, one can notice that Indian womanhood is altering. Akhila is skilled, educated and economically independent but has no guts to start a relationship and faces the consequences of it. She lacks at first the courage to rebel the norms
imposed by the society. After fulfilling of all her duties as the head of the family, she decides to live for herself. Now she is psychologically prepared to face the effect of her decision. A strong feeling emerges from the novel that woman like Akhila wait for simple things from the society and that is, they should be considered and treated as human beings first and foremost not as women or sexual possessions.

Anita Nair’s novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* have characters and subjects of varied nature, while at the identical point these also contain in common the proposal of self discovery. The women characters of both the novels, as the stories progress, discover that they have never been living for themselves, but for others governed by societal powers. As the novels progress through constant flashbacks we came to know about the life of the protagonists in these novels. The firm message of hope through change everything is attainable runs throughout in both the novels.

The author has touched on many controversial and sensitive subjects, but all with extreme elegance and caliber. She talks about untouchability, casteism, cultural and religious bias, betrayal, abuse and disrespect of women, domination of power and money and even homosexuality. Unfortunately, the women characters Paru Kutty in *The Better Man* and Meenakshi (Akhila’s mother) in *Ladies Coupe* faces disrespect and lived in the old school thought undergoes the domination in their lives. And they cannot able to break the barriers of male subjugation, though after existence of distress.

Indian women have come a long way from the conventional imagery that had enslaved them. Way back that is before years women are not allowed to speak as often as they would have liked to. They were expected to be caretakers, have and do the household duties for her family. It was a typical role of a woman. Men were constantly seen as being way above women; so therefore, they would have always been the one’s organizer. Women were seen as the passive and weak, and not as able to accomplish physically or mentally all
that men could. This is in complete contrast from the way in which the world sees women today. Nair demonstrates more strength and practical energy in her characters. Life is viewed as a longing recollection through the eyes of sensitive, vulnerable and observant characters. The author does not write from the position of a distant observer, rather writings reflect the perspective of someone between a paradisal past and a tormenting present.

The oppressiveness of the present reality and the temporal time are the facts to accept here and now. The writers’ efforts to bring out a meeting point for the past and the present have been intensified by their philosophical representation of characterization. The separation into two divisions that differ widely from or contradict each other with which the writer present the current existence resulted by the visual predicament, which they perceive due to their regretful experience. The characters in the novel live in two worlds- one within and one devoid of and the past keeps interfering into the present. Anita Nair in the formation of her characters and the development of women into mature individuals who became aware of whom they are and follows a painful course of subjugation. The women characters in both the novels *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* reveal that they are strong and capable to rupture their cages. She gives her observations on society, a true picture.

To sum up the discussion it can be said that Nair is interested in astonishing women characters rather than ordinary ones who are not aware of anything that happens within them or outside them. All her characters show a different trend towards anxious behaviour. In some of them there is deviation and peculiarity. Nair has discovered the complicatedness of women which they construct or expand on their own because of their inherent personal individuality. They swab out anything that is practicable for them to construct their life meaningful. They complicate their relationship due to their lack of confidence. Their marital ties are eradicated as a result of their depression and frustration. The man-woman relationship in the novels lacks the necessary requirement, dependence and promise in each other for a happy married
life. The women’s definite ideas about marriage and matriarchy make them impossible never allowing them to face the truth.

Genuineness is unpleasant for most of the characters. They betray themselves in the name of responsibility. They struggle to conquer pleasure and realization at the cost of their freedom to make a choice. There is always doubt and anonymity around these women characters. Their self cheating, surreptitious actions and lies irritate the readers and they wish that these women characters both gradually adjust themselves and their approach towards life in the course of reliability or rebel for reform and walk out of the conditions that threaten their existence. It is true that with the changing times, the women are walking in strides with their male counterparts. The women have slowly started distinguish their true potential. She has started questioning the rules laid down for her by the society. As a result, she becomes successful and started breaking fences and also has earned a respectable position in the world. Today women have excelled in each and every field there is no arena, which remain unconquered by women, be it politics, sports, entertainment, literature or technology. Women have some potential since the medieval times, but she still has to go a long way to go. The longing of women can be summed up in the following lines of *Song of an African Women*:

I have only one request.

I do not ask for money

Although I have need of it,

I do not ask for meat . . .

I have only one request,

And all I ask is

That you remove

The road block

From my path. (p'Bitek)