

Existentialism in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the fragrance of existentialism in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. She was born on 26th Jan., 1966. She has penned down three very famous novels; *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005). She happens to be a multi-talented literary figure, holding her authority not only in the field of fiction but also that of poetry. She is better known as a competent modern woman-novelist in the realm of Indian English literature of the modern age. Currently she lives in Bangalore. *Ladies Coupe* is basically a novel of the "feminine sensibility" but it remains unsuited to the category of the female-writing that represented women as "battered, bartered and abandoned" on the shoals of low self-worth. It rides triumphantly against the tide giving us a glimpse of the innate strength that a woman has to rebuild up her life. This is why Nair has called her novel a story revealing about "ordinary women with indomitable spirit". Unlike her first novel – 'The Better Man', having a male protagonist, Nair's 'Ladies Coupe', rotates around the 45 year old bachelor Akhila or Akhilendeswari, being a pen pusher in the Income Tax Department. She has gone fed up with the lone provider in her family. One day, she happens to get a ticket booked for Kanyakumari to explore certain answers for herself, mainly to the question if a woman is able to make her survival alone, being away from her family. There are five other women accompanying her for the overnight journey. They are Janaki, married with Margaret, a forty year old young Chemistry-teacher, Prabha Devi, very close to Akhila's age, the fifteen year old Sheela and Mariakonthu, a woman who is obviously different from the rest of them. All these women connect their life-stories to Akhila, helping the latter to gain her full potential woman and struggle with the response to the questions she has been searching out so long. Thus this paper analyses the search-operation of Akhila as she arrives by degrees as to how she should live her life freely and maintain her own identity in this patriarchal society. Anita Nair has paid emphasis on the fact that it is not the response to the question which has been alluding Akhila so long, but the search for exploring it which is more pleasant to the protagonist. The central character Akhila's responsibility has been considerably exposed. She has found the potential to come out more afresh from the prison-house of her old-self as symbolized by the stiffness of the cotton saris she always used to put on while working. She can at least switch back to her previous life where perhaps nothing could have changed on the surface but on a mental plane a sure process of development has occurred.

Keywords- Existentialism, Humanism, Modernism, Individualism

The term existentialism refers to a philosophical theory which tends to emphasize the survival of the individual person as an independent and accountable person determining their own development through acts of the will. Thus it is a form of the philosophical investigation that keeps searching out the problems of the human survival. It is focused upon the free thinking, free living and free acting as the individual. The distinguished practitioners of this term are Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Steven Crowell, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Michael Foucault, Walter Kaufmann etc. Thus this philosophy is intended to emphasize the individual existence, freedom and choice. It propounds that there is no God existing in this world nor is there any transcendental force-the only way to counter this nothingness.

Aldous Huxley very appropriately remarks; “I do not so much care about what the woman feels.... I only care about what the woman is... what she is...in humanly, physiologically, materially”.¹

This paper is intended to throw light upon Akhila’s character, the central character of the novel; *Ladies Coupe* from the perspective of existentialism. This exploration leads us to analyze Akhila’s character on the grounds of observations and commentaries made by some critics and Anita Nair, the novelist herself. Urvashi Butalia remarks; “She (Akhila) releases herself from the hold of convention and family expectations, at least mentally”.² Geeta Doctor is highly surprised to search out Akhila suddenly- “filled with the idea of revolt”. She finds Nair’s story “filled with the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek a new destination”.³ Anita Nair in one of the interviews with Bindu Menon affirms; “There is a lot of strength in women that does not come out naturally, it has to be forced out of them- it could be circumstances or a change in lifestyle”.⁴ Here it would not be impertinent to discuss some of the tenets of existentialism. Existentialism tends to emphasize- “the risk, the voidness of human reality” and admits that- “the human-being is thrown into the world in the which pain, frustration, sickness, contempt, malaise and death dominates”.⁵

In fact, during the IInd World War (1939-1945), when the whole of Europe underwent a setback of death and destruction at a very large scale and naturally it was a sweet time when the movement of existentialism started flourishing. It was the time when they kept believing that there is almost a complete lack of design and purpose in the universe. The most important pioneer of existentialism happened to be the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

This paper exposes the character of Akhila with a view to the certain beliefs of the existentialists taking into consideration. They hold the belief that “the human-being has freedom to do as according to his pleasing will but this is surely not the case, as his freedom is shortened not only but the objective reality he encounters, but also by his own limitations”.⁶

This paper is an attempt to find out the realities whether Akhila is leading totally an authentic life, while pursuing her dreams, hopes and aspirations or such a life which has been designated by the society for her — a life without any value to her personal happiness and self-importance or such one where she is being identified by her self-sacrificing character, while spending her time in helping others.

Akhila was only 19 year old when she lost her father, an income-tax clerk. He passed away because of accidental death. Since she happens to be the eldest of four children (two brothers and two sisters), she becomes the sheet-anchor of her family. In the same department on her father’s place, she is getting employed. She has to take over the responsibility of her whole family with this job. She has to arrange two marriages of her two brothers- one elder and the other younger the same day, but none is ever thinking of her matrimonial happiness, having a husband, children, or her own home. Despite getting married at the age of 34, she is not getting delighted in it. On every Monday, she along with her mother happens to visit the shrine of Lord Shiv at Thirumulavayil.

Once while her mother was performing her worship over there, she was standing at the entry point and thinking of herself- “Akhila would touch the flanks of the stone bull that unlike all other

Nandis rested with its back to the sanctum sanctorum. An aberration “like me, she told herself with a wry smile ever Monday” (78). She is often getting reminded of a Tamil film whose heroine is just similar to Akhila – a workhouse and a woman having deserted her life and hope of her marriage. ... “when Akhila thought of the film, she felt darkness lick at her. Would her life end like that of the woman in the film?”

Akhila gets mentally troubled by her constant realization of a vacuum and sometimes listens to the call of her existence and also dares to project them into reality in the practical life. While asserting her own existence, she gets admitted in the Open University to pursue a B.A. Later on she falls in love with Hari, much junior to her. Just contrary to the social rules and norms and on her 29th birth anniversary, she happens to visit Mahabalipuram while dating with him. She enjoys her privacy freely satisfying her innermost desire. She is telling lies to her mother when she is asking her about getting out. She responds to her mother that she does not exist as an object but as a woman having the free will and the free choice. This is the beauty and the glory of her existentialism.

Later in her trip to Mahabalipuram, she keeps loving with Hari for the first time and feels ecstatic pleasure while dating with him. But this love relationship ended in smoke because of her social awareness. On most of the occasions, Akhila has been represented as a social-being who tends to abide by all the written or unwritten social rules and regulations. So there is always a struggle between her existence and vacuum.

The above discussion leads us to conclude that Akhila’s free will has been reduced to a greater extent, by her own family and the society, but she is bold enough to listen to the voice of her own existence. On some occasions, she happens to take up some drastic steps very boldly to please her own existence. But she is not willing to change the course of the society or the family substantially. To an existentialist, she might prove to be a weak character, as she remains prejudiced, while living in a predetermined world. She lacks freedom to realize her destination, to pursue her dreams into realities. Existentialists hold the belief that the human-being has the freedom to do whatever he pleases. But this is not true always. Man is bound to survive according to his own circumstances and situations. His existence in the world is confined to the little choice and freedom. So far as Akhila is concerned, she lacks self-control, instantly, regarding her father’s death and her being the eldest in the family of four children. However there are some situations which could have been changed or better handled. For instance, her maidenhood throughout her life could have been replaced into the matrimonial relationship. She could have taken a strong step for it. Further, she could have lived alone and not in the midst of her sister’s family. Apart from it, she should have enjoyed the freedom in picking up her friend and maintaining the everlasting friendship. While taking her mother to the Shiva Temple on every Monday and collecting dowry for her sister, arranging a marriage for her brothers, she does not entertain the freedom of her preferable food (like eggs) even in her own house along with Padma. She remains fully conscious of Hari being much elder to her. Thus she is leading an expectable life. Even Virginia Woolf was fully aware of the complexity of a character and, therefore, she observed the character as a flux and wanted to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind”.⁷

While talking of the issue of Akhila’s character, we come across many similar characters even in real life. We don’t have many such characters leading such a life as propagated by existential philosophers.

Priyanka Sinha very relevantly comments in this regard, while mentioning the similarity of Anita Nair’s characters: “Hers are commonplace, everyday characters. They are alive, their tears real, their exasperation genuine and undramatic and their dilemma understandable. It could very well be a story of anyone of us. We could be them, they us”.⁸

Geeta Doctor also strongly favours Priyanka Sinha's observation: "Nair's characters... are life-affirming". Even Anita Nair in an interview with Sheela Reddy expresses the similar feeling and the same idea- "I would like to write about ordinary people and don't want to write about characters larger than life".⁹

Thus the novel has also been called a 'novel in parts' perhaps because the lives and experiences of six women have been welded together by the author into a consummate whole, with Akhila as a magnet in the centre. Nair is supposed to have borrowed the story of this novel from the oldest plays, i.e. by picking a "leaf out of Chaucer's mixed crowd of pilgrims" travelling to Canterbury, telling tales to one another. There are several stories interconnected in this novel like those of Chaucer's Prologue. These stories about the six women as depicted in 'Ladies Coupe' come to be a great learning experience for Akhila who starts meditating upon the various aspects of her life after each session of story-telling. It helps her a lot to break free from the claustrophobic multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt and provider. This paper intends to analyze the soul-searching journey of Akhila. As far as Akhila is concerned as an essentialist, she has developed her own opinions. She has come to know how her father's rash decision to sell off the small piece of land.

Akhila's friendship with Catherine, a colleague and an Anglo-Indian introduces her to the pleasures of eating an egg, a strictly-prohibited item in her Brahmin household. She brings the egg into the house and her Kitchen. This is perhaps her only act of rebellion and self-indulgence, as the head of the family. The guilt of self-indulgence runs deep into the psyche of Akhila. In one of her erotic dreams, she confronts her erotic dreams, she confronts her sexual desires, gives into them. But even as allows herself to be swallowed by its pleasures, she observes the ashamed and accusing faces of her family-members.

After listening to Margaret's love-story, Akhila starts doing self-assessment about the same. Love seemed to be beastly for Margaret. But if Akhila had picked up Hari as her life-partner, would her love prove to be like this one. She is bound to think of her love-affair with Hari whom she had come across on the daily train to work. Due to the age-factor as Hari is much junior to her, she is withdrawing herself from blossoming the relationship any longer. Finally she happens to break up her relationship with him despite the pangs of regret and loss.

She does get a 'second chance' which is to break free of her family, when she is transferred to Bangalore and bound to live alone. But her sister Padma insists on staying with her, along with her own family, in name of duty. As an existentialist, she gets an opportunity to break free of the traditional attire and put on the western clothes during her first foreign trip. She uses precious cosmetics to enhance her good looks in order to fascinate every male.

Thus it can be very briefly summed-up to say that Anita Nair, as a leading female-novelist has beautifully scattered the fragrance of existentialism in portraying the character of Akhila in the novel; *Ladies Coupe*.

Ultimately Akhila has learnt how to lead her life on the surface without flying too high in the pursuit of her rosy dreams and high aspirations. This is why she feels the primal strength inherent in every individual, and in every woman, while boosting her confidence. She discovers power within herself, having refused Hari's proposal of marriage. This is the beauty and glory of her existentialism. She prefers being alone leading her life freely without any confusion and doubts.

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