

OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN *LADIES COUPE*

Siti Masitah Md Zin

Siti Hawa Muhamad

Zamila Abdul Rani

Department of English and Communication,

Faculty of Management & Muamalah,

International Islamic University College Selangor, Malaysia

sitimasitah@kuis.edu.my, sitihawa.m@kuis.edu.my, & zamila@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Oppressions and injustice among women are the issues that continually explored by female writers in many female-centered novels around the world. Women are being subjugated in various levels by culture and society, especially the males. A woman's roles in society are usually determined by culture, which plays an important role in setting the 'ideal' image or roles of a woman. This study will apply the Postcolonial Feminism theory as the main theory in foregrounding the analysis of the novel, *Ladies Coupe*. The analysis will also focus on the six characters such as Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, and Morikolanthu. Each character will tell a different story of a woman's dilemma. In general, patriarchal oppression is the main factor that oppresses the women in the novel. Due to patriarchal oppression, the status of women in society can be degraded and commodified as objects to please men. Therefore, this study will explore the women's struggles through the feminist lense.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Feminism; Patriarhal Opression; Cultural Oppression, Commodification*

1. Introduction

The novel, *Ladies Coupe* (2001), written by Anita Nair, follows the journey of a middle-aged Indian woman named Akhila as she travels from Bangalore to Kanyakumari in her search for independence. On the train's ladies' coupe, she swaps stories with 5 different women – Janaki, a pampered wife and confused mother, Margaret Shanti, a chemistry teacher married to an insensitive tyrant, and Marikolanthu, whose innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. These women inspire Akhila to live her own life. This story also tackles the issues of gender and social injustice that the characters face in their society.

2. Theoretical Framework

The issue that is more often than not highlighted in this novel is oppression towards women. The issue is analysed through postcolonial feminism theoretical framework. Postcolonial feminism is a form of feminism that developed as a response to the fact that feminism seemed to focus solely on the experiences of women in Western cultures. Postcolonial feminism explores women's lives, work, identity, sexuality, and rights in the light of colonialism and neocolonialism (Mishra, 2013). Mohanty in her influential article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* first published in 1991, criticizes Western feminism on the grounds that it is ethnocentric and does not pay attention to the unique experiences of women residing in postcolonial nations. Women in postcolonial nations face simultaneous oppressions; being colonized subjects while at the same time being women oppressed by the patriarchal society they are in. This is clarified by Mohanty when she stated that women suffered double colonization, first as a colonized subject and second as simply being a woman by patriarchy (Mohanty, 2006).

Moreover, Gayatri Spivak in *In Other Worlds* (1988) writes, "The matter of fact is that postcolonial women to remain passive and continue to bear male-oppressive environments. These women seek to emancipate themselves through education, struggle, and hard work. The postcolonial men re-colonized the bodies and minds of their women in the name of preserving their cultural values..... Postcolonial feminism is primarily concerned with deplorable plight of women in postcolonial environment". In Nair's novel, the characters face some deplorable state of oppression by the men and their society. Therefore, there is a need to analyse the issue in the concerned novel by deploying the said theoretical framework to further understand it.

3. Analysis

Akhila is the the only unmarried adult character in this novel. Being an unmarried woman brings a lot of challenges to Akhila as she struggles with her role as the head in the family and also dealing with the continuous negative perception of people regarding her status. She has always sacrifices her needs in order to cater to her family since the father passed away as seen in this excerpt;

"What about you? You've been the head of this family ever since Appa died. Don't you want a husband, children, and a home of your own? In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster." (page:77)

Akhila longs for a marriage and having a family of her own. Unfortunately, her mother, or Amma, and her younger siblings have never asked her if she wants to get married. It seems to Akhila that her femininity has been reduced to the role of the main provider in the family. As the eldest sister, Akhila has always put the need of her Amma and younger siblings first. She provided the dowry for her younger sister so that she could get married, funded their studies and basically every aspect in life. On the surface, Akhila is the 'man' in the family, which is traditionally reserved for the patriarch. However, she does not get the recognition of being the head of the family. This is due to the patriarchal system where the husband/father are considered as the most important members in a family. Akhila felt neglected as her Amma and siblings never seem to care about her dreams as stated by Alice Cherian in her article, *Indian Feminism in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe and Mistress* (2013), "she is expected to be an

obedient daughter, affectionate and motherly sister and everything but an individual.” In brief, while Akhila is not suffering physically, she is certainly being oppressed mentally by her family and society. She has put aside all her needs for the sake of her mother and siblings. Not only that, she has lost her sense of self as she has been living as someone else in order to please them.

Janaki is another character who experience patriarchal domination in her life as seen from this excerpt;

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 fragile (page: 22)

Janaki fits in the role of a ‘good wife’ in Indian culture. In Indian culture, the image of an ideal or a good wife is represented by the mythical Goddess, Sita. She is the wife of Rama in the ancient epic of Ramayana. According to C.V Abraham (2015); male discourse has popularized the image of Sita and constructed the image of female subjectivity to the “pathivrata” (dutiful and faithful wife; chaste woman). These ‘female virtues’ play a significant role in setting the social role of a woman. A woman is always someone’s mother, wife, daughter or sister. A woman must also be obedient to the patriarch in her family. Prem Chowdhry in *Women of India: Colonial and Postcolonial Periods* (2005) rightly observes:

“One of the dominant images of woman that has survived through history is that of the chaste woman/wife..... It continues to gain popularity, particularly in popular cultural forms, which project this image as quintessentially that of an Indian woman and as an intrinsic part of Indian culture” (110-111).

In the case of Janaki, she admitted that her sheltered life caused her to be fragile and dependent on other people especially the males. It is impossible for her to live on her own terms as it is culturally accepted by society that a woman must always be obedient and follow everything the husband/father said. This situation shows how patriarchal system and cultural belief shape the roles of men and women. Just like Sita, Janaki is the typical obedient wife to a husband, with less voice in the family. She is expected to be obedient by her husband and society in general as it is the ‘ideal’ image of a wife and mother in Indian society.

Margaret Shanti is the chemistry teacher who teaches at a high school where the principle is also her husband, Ebenezer Paulraj. They were married out of love until one day, Margaret felt trapped emotionally by her egocentric husband as seen from this excerpt;

“What’s the point of working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn’t suit you. Cut it off. You’ll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob” (page:105).

Margaret used to be a high achiever and also an independent woman before she married her husband. After her marriage, she found out that Paulraj was self-absorbed narcissist man who constantly put her down so that he would feel better in comparison. She cannot make her own decisions on every aspect of her life as she had to get her husband’s approval first. She cannot change her hairstyle, or pursuing her dream to get a PhD as her husband would disapprove. In order to please him, she obediently followed his desires even though she silently protested his actions. The last

straw that broke the camel's back is when Paulraj asked her to abort their unborn baby. She reluctantly succumbed to his request and that was the starting point when she realized that Paulraj had gone too far with his self-ego and that she had sacrificed many things for his sake. Paulraj is the product of patriarchal system, embedded for generations in a rather conservative society as shown in *Ramayana* when Lord Rama tells his mother: "A woman attains the highest heaven merely by serving her husband..... With her only interest the welfare of her husband, a woman should constantly serve him—this has been the dharma of women from ancient times, this is what the Vedas and the Smritis say" (qtd. in Chaitanya 180). Similarly, Manu instructs women: "Whether a drunkard, leper, sadist or wife-beater, a husband is to be worshipped as god" (qtd. in Seshadri 31). As the result, the male domination continues even in the contemporary world. No matter what the husband does, he is to be respected and worshipped by the wife. A wife cannot question the husband's misconduct or she will be regarded as a bad wife. A wife's role is to serve and please her husband even though she has to swallow her own feelings. Margaret has suffered under her husband's domination as he always asks her to fulfil his wishes without taking her opinion into consideration. Clearly, Paulraj has asserted his power to control Margaret through the patriarchal system.

The last analysis will look at the struggles of Marikolanthu as a woman from the lower caste. Marikolanthu works at the Chettiar's house. As a growing young woman, she often attracts the attention from the males namely the Chettiar sons and Murugesan himself. Murugesan took upon himself to rape her as he thought that as a relative to the Chettiar, he could do anything on her as mentioned in this excerpt;

"...if the Chettiar's sons can feast on this body of yours... remember I'm a relative, even if only a poor one, and I'm entitled to their pickings before anyone else." (page: 239)

Marikolanthu suffered from physical and also mental oppressions. S. Hiremath (2016) mentions that, "*Her female body now becomes the site of violence*". The rape is used as a medium to 'put her on the ground' or a way to silence her. The words 'feast' and 'pickings' show Murugesan's view on Marikolanthu as a woman. She is regarded as a sexual object whose sole function is to please the men's sexual need. Hence, her female body has been commodified into a tool to suppress her. This does not only show the conflict of gender but also social class as well. Among the others, Marikolanthu is the most tragic character as she is uneducated and comes from the lower caste. Her social position makes her sufferings unquestionable. She is not only oppressed by the patriarchal system but also by her culture. Being a woman in a lower caste does not give her the same privileges received by other women from the higher class. She is always regarded as a property or a voiceless commodity that can be exploited by men. While people like the Chettiar family and Marikolanthu do not socialize together except for the purpose of work, the males from the upper class do not find any restriction in manipulating and sexually abusing her body. Patriarchal system creates a belief that females are powerless compared to men. Marikolanthu is one of the victims of patriarchal system. Her suffering is unheard as she does not have a voice in her society. The lower caste people are expected by society to serve the upper class, which gives the upper class people an upper hand towards the lower caste. In this situation, Murugesan used his status to sexually abuse Marikolanthu knowing that nobody believed what he did. As the matter of fact, people will blame Marikolanthu for someone else's crime.

4. Conclusion

In brief, all characters in the novel struggle with conflicts from patriarchal system and also culture. The impact of patriarchal oppression is very significant in the novel as the characters live in a patriarchal society which allows the men to have a control over the women. Akhila, Janaki, Margaret, and Marikolanthu are the victims of this belief created by their society. Patriarchal system is used as a tool to foreground the idea that women must not challenge a man's authority and that women must always abide by the cultural norms. Culture also plays an important role in empowering the patriarchal system as it serves as an unwritten doctrine to segregate the roles of men and women. There are many things that are allowed to men but not to women, be it educational rights, social rights and many others.

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