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2. Theme of Search for Self-Identity in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe

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A diaspora is a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographic locate. Daispora has come to refer to involuntary mass dispersion of a population from its indigenous territories. Most probably note the expulsion of Jews from the land of Israel known as Jewish diaspora and the fleeing of Greeks after the fall of Constantinople. The African transatlantic slave trady, the southern Chinese or Indians during the coolie trade, the Irish during and after the Irish famine are other examples.

Now a days, scholars have distinguished between different kinds of diaspora based on its causes such as imperialism trade or labor migrations. And also by the kind of social coherence within the diaspora community and its ties to the ancestral land. Some diaspora communities maintain strong political ties with their homeland. Other qualities that may be typical of many diasporas are thoughts of return relationship with other communities in the diaspora and lack of full intergration into the host countries. Diasporas often maintain ties to the country of their historical affiliation and influence the policies of the country where they located.

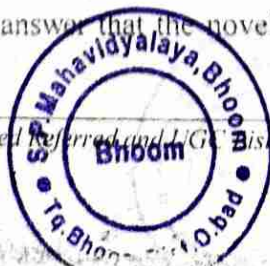
While talking about Indian Diaspora fiction in English. So many questions prop up in our mind, such as, does it have its independent identity? Does it possess some unique characteristics that determined its separate status? Does it reflects 'Indianness' in the true sense? Right from its inception Indian writing in English has been a thwarted soul thriving an imitation translation, borrowing and compromise and sometimes encounter. The present scenario is not altogether different and Indian Diaspora in English that forms the major volume of Indian English writing. Exile in the form of migration has been the cause of emergence of a large number of writers who have given direction to the progress of English literature. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Salman Rushdie and V.S.Naipul, who are accepted as word citizens a global manifestation of the exile condition. Indian English writers like Anitha Desai, Bharari Mukharjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Gosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton

Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair have established themselves as fine writers in the tradition of Indian Diasporic writing.

Writers of the Indian Diaspora have been at the centre stage in the last decade chiefly because of the theoretical formulation being generated by their works. Language and cultures are transformed when they come in contact with the others. These writers are often pre-occupied with the elements of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. They write in relation with culture of their homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land. In border prespective diasporic literature helps in understanding various culture, breaking the barriers between different countries, globalizing the global and spreading universal peace. Diasporic writing occupies a place of great significance between countries and cultures. Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories. The term possess an ambiguous statues of being both as a refugee and an ambassador. The two roles being different, the writers attempt at doing justice to both as a refugee he seeks security and protection and as an ambassador projects his own culture and helps enhance its comprehensibility.

The chief characteristic features of the diasporic writings are the quest for identity uprooting and re-rooting insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. Anita Nair is staunch demonstrator of feminism of this age among the writers of the Indian Daispora which has been at the centre stage in the last decade. Anita Nair is one of India's popular female writers. She depicts through her expression, the present condition of women in society with wit and humour. She dwells deep into human psyche and allows the reader to enjoy a wonderful journey by stories with colourful and unique characters.

Anita Nair's debut novel *The Better Man* is a novel of great promise which tipped her as one of the better young writers of the time. She has successfully unraveled the deepest recesses of man's psyche in *The Better Man*. The novel describes every individual's attempt to find a degree of inner peace and manner. Her second novel *Ladies Coupe*, deals with multiple lives and **multiple voices, where she answers few questions that every woman would have faced in her life questions related to her role in society, the about the role of women in contemporary post-colonial feminist literature.** The question was about vulnerable position of women and whether she could survive alone. The answer that the novel provided her was that "there was a certain



strength deep inside that every individual has" and that "women must be courageous and claim their own lives and possibilities."2 Ladies Coupe is a story of a woman's search for strength and independence evoking experiences from everyday life and endowing it with epic dimensions. She beautifully fleshes out the minutest details of her women characters being alive their everyday dilemmas, desires and thoughts. These stories describes the expectations of married Indian women and the choices they make, the relationships they are entangled in and convey a strong message of hope through change.

Nair uses the fictional strategy of the ladies compartment to bring her six characters relating their own story though each story is separate in the Ladies Coupe. However each story illuminates the central story of Akhila, who is alone at forty-five and wondering whether a woman can survive alone. She is born in middle class Brahmin family struggle to keep herself afloat in Chennai hanging on the rigid pattern of lives. Akhila is a frustrated spinster who has spent all her younger years looking after her parents, siblings and their offspring. She assumes the role of family head after the death of her father. Her own wishes and desires are forgotten by everyone and they shamelessly keep living off her fed up with the multiple roles of a daughter, a sister, an aunt she decides to go on a train journey away from family and responsibilities-seeking an escape from them, hoping to discover her identity. "This is the way it has always been." The smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape."3(p.1). Finding herself adrift with no life of her own. She expects the answers to her questions to emerge from the sea at Kanyakumari. The land's end where she intends to go. Waiting for her train to come she sees reunions, farewells. A smile, tears, anger, irritation, anxiety boredom and stillness which are very much a part of her life too. She gives in and finds herself in a train with other women. Janaki Prabhakar Prabha Devi, Margaret Paulraj Sheela Vasudevam and Marikalanthu. Her fellow travellers are both curious and giving and share not only their tiffin but also their lives with her. Akhila begins to tell and in the process learn that she could tell her secrets, desires, and fears to these women. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted. She wants to convince herself that a woman can live alone.

Janaki Prabhakar, the oldest of the women has been married forty years her relation with her husband is 'friendly love.' She is a pampered wife- "I am a woman who has always been looked after first there was my father and my brothers; the my husband. When my husband is gone, there will my son.... Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princess.



And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves (pp22-23). She also talks of her sudden disinterest in that same home, of her sudden urge to be a confident being no longer fragile. But at the end she says that even if she were alone and even though she managed to cope alone." "It wouldn't be the same if he wasn't there with me" (p.23) Janaki's story disturbs her a lot and Akhila is left wondering if she had made a mistake by wishing to escape from loneliness. Her fellow travelers couldn't help her make up her mind-"your lives are different from mine. And it is silly of me to think that if you told me about yourselves, your lives, that would guide me in my decision. And yet..." (p.40)

● Prabha Devi asks Akhila not to give it up so easily having heard just Janaki's story. Travelling in the train and lulled asleep, Akhila slips occasionally into the past, into the family setup with flitting images of her & family members. Nair tenderly draws Akhila's family scenes and builds up her story into something very absorbing Appa, her father was an income tax office clerk, who in his office was the butt of jokes because of the way he walked, he dressed, the food he ate. He never reacted to the insults hurled at him thinking if he didn't react, he would leave him alone. He denied being a part of the corruption at home he was the head of the family and Sunday were "full fledged weekly dress rehearsal for that day when he could retire and could live life on his own (p.42) Nair details everything that happens in Akshila's household. There is Sarasa Mamils invitation for Akhila to make vadaam. The anger of Tamil teacher scolding Akhila for fultering while reciting Thiruvalluvar and finally Appa's death and the image of Amma dressed as a bride, when other windows stripped her of her marks of marriage. Akhila is deeply hurt to see her Amma like that and realizes "what is meant to be a woman" (p.59)

The next portrait is that of Sheela Vasudevan a fourteen year old girl who had the ability to perceive what others could not. The story switches over to present again Sheela had a perfect understanding for her dead grandmother-Ammamma. When her grandmother dies, she dresses up her body, because she can't bear to have her face the world looking so unprepared. Her parents disapproved of all this as if she had committed a sacrilege but she didn't care, she knew Amamma would have been pleased. Her understanding for her dead grandmother paves the way for her own future liberation.

Margaret Paulraj, a chemistry teacher is the next figure who reduces everything into combinations of acids, alkalines and gases. She explains to Akhila that Prabha Devi and Janaki were women "who don't feel complete without a man Deep in their hearts, they think world



has no use for a single woman." (p.95) she herself believes that a woman needs a man but not to make her complete. She tells Akhila that when she saw that Akhila was beginning to feel unsure after Janaki, related her story, she felt very angry and vexed. A married woman talking of not needing a man is something that needs an explanation. She tries to shatter the myth of woman needing a man to be complete by relating the story of Benezar Paulraj and herself. Her husband is a narcissistic, self-opinioned prig who wants to reduce her to being a simple housekeeper and a cook. When she conceives he said it wasn't the right time for a boy and convinces her to undergo an abortion Ebenezer Paulraj liked her to cook lavish meals to entertain sycophants.

Prabha Devi is another woman doesn't go by the norms set by men. She has her own opinions and plans for her life. She does something out of routine to make her interesting, who likes to be the way she is who knows what she wants and what she doesn't. Thus at the end only one passenger the is left with Akhila the sixth passenger the rest have got off the train offering her advice. The sixth passenger was Marikolanthu a woman, "from whome anger poured forth like a stream of love" (p.29) She was angry about the fuss the other travelers made about what she thoughts were little things. She wonders what they would ever do if real tragedy confronted them. She believes they couldn't fathom how cruel the world could be to women. She thinks women are strong, women can do everything as well as men in the end, on reaching kanyakumari, she finds herself in a hotel Sea Breeze and decides to make her own private rebellion. She is empowered to reclaim her lost love and releases herself from the hold of conventions and family expectations. Now she can go back to her life but with the knowledge that she is free of some of shackles at least.

All these women who wear their own self sufficiency as a halo are trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who would listen. The lives of these women that she encounters in the Ladies Coupe, form a kind of mirror in which Akhila may see her reflection and grasp the happiness she has a right to she wants to live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure because as she says, "Happiness is being allowed to choose one's life to live the way one wants." These women travelling with her are bound by their common human experience their voyage of self-discovery. The novel is remarkable because of the strong message of hope through change and even the ending is revealed as a new beginning.



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