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THE SCRIPT OF RAPE, RAPE MYTHS AND TRAUMA IN *LADIES COUPE* OF ANITA NAIR

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair as a fiction writer continuously writes about women's issues. Her novels take stand against the secondary position of women in society. She has presented a critique of the position I women holds in Indian family and social milieu. *Ladies Coupe* is her second novel published in 2001. This text is relevant to understand the discourse of socio- cultural discourse of rape in India and also the representation of sexual violence in Indian literary plane. *Ladies Coupe* draws its canvas from the rural lives of women in the post-colonial India. This text unfolds the story of six women but this paper focuses on the life of Morrikolanthu, her life, her violation, trauma and her position as a rape victim and survivor. The cases of sexual violence in India purveys on rape myths. The collective societal response to the plight of victims is also decided by her social class. The theoretical framework of this paper is based on trauma theory and post-colonial feminism. This paper also discusses about the reproductive rights of women.

Keywords - Rape Myth, Trauma, PTSD

Female authors are continuously writing about women's oppression and hence making a way for women emancipation. Women authors try to remold the socio-cultural values from a woman's viewpoint on the complexity of social, cultural and domestic lives of women. In the tradition of Indian English literature women writers have produced literature bringing the different shades of women's lives to the public woes. Anita Nair is one such name who has written some notable fiction about the lives of Indian women. *Ladies Coupe* is her second novel published in 2001. The socio-cultural framework creates an inescapable context for the suffering of women. This text shows women struggling against the framework and setting themselves free of it. In its texture, the novel adheres to postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism explores women's lives, identity, sexuality, and rights and does not homogenize the experiences of all women. This fiction presents the six women characters belonging to different layers of society. *Ladies Coupe* presents the questions about roles and challenges to women in contemporary India. India, as shown in Ladies coupes, struggles between modernity and tradition.

The title *Ladies Coupe* is suggestive of the shared woes of women and also of the possibility of women surviving without men's protection. The story of this fictional text unfolds in the manner of travel narrative. The narrative of the text follows the journey of the protagonist, Akhila, a middle-aged woman in her journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. In this text, the expanded canvas of women's lives has been brought forward. It is a travel narrative. During the journey, she meets five other women of different age groups and social

strata. The stories of these six women unfolding one by one make the texture of the novel. The metaphor of the female body in this novel is constructed in relation to their sexuality, reproductive rights, and violation. The text has an undercurrent of the threat of sexual violence in all six stories. Sheela the teenage girl is lustily eyed by Nazar, her friend's father. Prabha Devi saves herself from being seduced by her husband's friend Pramod. Akhila has a hallucination in which she dreams of being seduced against her will. Apart from control over sexuality women do not even possess control over the reproductive faculty of their body. Morikolanthu is forced to be an unwed mother after her rape. After the death of her husband, Sarsa Maami could not find work for herself, so she started sending her unmarried daughter Jaya to Bachelor quarters, disguised prostitution.

The ownership of women's body is controlled, regulated and abused in the hand of patriarchy.

Women fight back to have control of their bodies. All female characters rich or poor, married, spinster, teenager or old woman are victimized in some ways or face the continuous threat of sexual violence but it is Morikolanthu who is raped and becomes the unwed mother as the consequence of this incident and lives a traumatic life. This fictional text has been undergone multiple studies in the framework of domestic violence and independent agency of womanhood. But most of the studies are based on the character of Akhilandeshwari, the protagonist and the link character among all six stories. In this paper I will discuss the problematics of sexual violence focusing its discourse upon the life of Morikolanthu, linguistic choices and socio-cultural mores as set by the novelist. Morikolanthu presents an example for the poor and marginalized woman on whom male oppression is forced but not questioned. Sexual exploitation of poor women by rich men is an age-old practice in all societies. Women's vulnerability is also decided by her social class and caste. From *Clarrisa* of Richardson to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs; all such texts have the similar pattern in which master class sexually exploits the agency of servant ladies. Terry Eagleton comments that Sexuality, far from being some displacement of class conflict, is the very medium in which it is considered. Previous researches made on this text focus on the agency of selfhood in women and most of the works focus on the character of Akhilandeshwari, the link character of all six characters. The discourse of sexual violence and oppression from the intimate lives of women in post-colonial Indian literary plane has been initiated by the generation of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamla Das. Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy further explored the multi-dimensional nature of sexual violence in their works. This paper is based on the character of Morikolanthu on whose life the writer centers the discourse of rape myths, PTSD and the negative consequences of rape. The text adheres to post-colonial feminism in relation to the story of Morikolanthu. This fictional text also has subaltern undertones with labor issue, sexual exploitation of minor, denial of humanitarian values and gender disparity. Till the last page of the text from the incident of violation, Marri has a stigmatic and ostracized presence. The sexuality of Morikolanthu is expressed in three stages: Rape, Homo sexual relation and a loveless heterosexual relation. All the three are loveless opportunist sexual pleasures for the rich members of Chettiar household. She is forcibly raped by brother-in-law of the house. She shares a homosexual relationship with Sujatha and then she has to sleep with Sridhar, Sujatha's husband. The story of Morikolanthu unfolds as the last unfolded story, a first person narrative told to Akhila by Marri herself. Marri as a narrator of her story adopts a confessional yet critical voice.

Socio Cultural Canvas

The representations of the act of violence are capable of becoming a crucial agency of empowerment and liberation. In this text, the novelist depicts sexuality both as seduction and sexual violence in different incidents. The cautionary tone of the narrative suggests that vigilance and precaution is needed for a woman to safeguard herself from the dangers stalking her. Every mother warns her daughters about the ubiquitous predatory man sexuality outside the safety of home. At vivid point of their parallel stories, both the mother of both Akhila and Morikolanthu speaks of the danger of sexual assault outside for young girls. Celine's story of impregnation by her friend's father is a scandal in the entire neighborhood and her name is being used as an example to warn young girls (Nair 98). Jaya's prostitution is an act of changing the woman body into commodity and Marri's violation is seen as woman body being the sight of violence. But in both the circumstances women are blamed not the society or rapist. Culture plays a decisive role in empowering the patriarchal set up as it discriminates and segregates the role and responsibilities of men and women.

Maragret wants to be mother but she has to abort her foetus because her husband did not want his wife to be a full woman (155). Prabha unknowingly seduces her husband's friend and is slut shamed later when she rejects his sexual advances (270). Socio cultural framework of the text creates the plausible context for the suffering of women.

The Scene of Violation and the Rape Myths

Rape myths are understood as the prejudices, stereotypes and beliefs prevalent in society about sexual violence, rapist, victim and their behaviors. It was Martha Burt who first defined rape myths in 1980. Although the rape myths were formed to fear and condemn the act of rape, they often tend to excuse sexual aggression, create hostility toward victims, and biases in conviction of rapists. Later on prominent feminists and criminologists like Brownmiller, Fitzgerald, Julia and Herman Schwendinger repetitively engaged in the rape myths to criticize the treatment meted out to rape victim. Marri's mother doubts that her pregnancy must be the result of her romantic liaisons. Sujatha the educated lady of Chettiar house appeals on Marri's behalf saying she would have forced the rapist figure Murugsen to marry her, had she could knew it early. The temporal situation of rape in the text is suitable for rape according to the stereotypical understanding of the rape cases in India. It is night; young woman is returning alone visibly dressed in traditional clothes and the perpetrator is drunk. The rapist reasoning to violate Marri is also rooted in patriarchal biases. He comments that her status is high according to the norm so he must teach her lessons (351). He also comments about her being concubines of Chettiar's sons. So being their relative he too has right over her body. Murugesan's reply to Marri's pleas to leave her reflects how the lustful men wait to have their predatory hands on the girl of their target:

"Oh, I can't let you go. You should have thought of that when you set out to tease me with your body" (239).

He threatens her to keep the incident as secret by deliberately pointing towards her lower social status. Murugsen's response to resistance of Marri is similar to that of Pramod. Pramod says to Prabha that there is a word for women like her, does she know it? (269) Murugsen abuses Marri saying "Why are you pretending to be a guileless virgin? I know all about women like you (352). These similarities suggests that education, class does not change the male basic disposition against women. Sridhar, Sujatha's husband after knowing about Marri's rape comments, she must have seduce him (360).

Morrikolanthu is raped in the night returning from Chettiar house. The rapist Murugsen is brother in law of Kishan, the elder brother of Sridhar. The representation of the rape scene is direct and realistic. Still the novelist has successfully removed the elements that could have caused voyeurism in this sexual assault depiction. She has focused on the resistance of the victim instead of the pleasure depiction of the rapist. This rape portrayal rejects the stranger rape myths. The molestation of Prabha by Pramod acts as the 'Foil Scene' parallel to the rape of Marri. The instant psychological responses of both the women are similar. Marri says, 'This is not happening with me, I told myself as his mouth feasted on my breasts' (352).

Likely Prabha thinks, "This violation of my body is not happening to me. This is just a night mare"(269).

Though Prabha is able to safeguard herself in time, Marri is not that fortunate. The novelist does not allow space for the personality of the rapist. While revisiting the traumatic impression of rape, Marri remembers him as faceless personae. She remembers only two muscular hands indicating of the memory how her resistance was useless against his physical stamina. 'Synecdoche' and 'Metaphor' literary devices have been used to describe about Murugsen like sly beast, meaty fingers, and ghost face. Marri says,

"But all I can come up with a face wiped clean of all features. A ghost face" (348).

Trauma, PTSD and Consequences

In R.K.Dhawan's book titled *Indian Women Writers*, Sangeeta Das comments that rape is "the highest injury and insult to the women's pride and dignity (Das 25). Afraid and traumatized after the rape, Marri tries to get rid of the trace of event from her body. She wanted to brush off this incident as a bad dream.

"I scrubbed myself relentlessly, trying to erase what had happened to me" (354).

In the words of Michelle Balaev, trauma refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standard by which one evaluates society (Balaev 1). Marri's proud nature wants to live her life beforehand the incident. She does not tell about rape to anybody and in absence of education has no idea about the possibility of pregnancy.

The rape narratives are shaped by trauma and its reactions by victims. Trauma plays a significant role in the life of a rape victim with a negative impression on the basic psychological state and healthy psycho-sociological relations. The victim of trauma remains in the state of vulnerability. The incident changes the life current of Marri. She loses her cheerful nature. She feels aversion to all heterosexual relationships and easily accepts homo sexual relation with Sujatha. Her aversion to the violent act of Murugsen creates an aversion in her towards Muthu. Due to the traumatic memory of rape, she does not want to embrace her motherhood Apart from the psychological reactions; her trauma also erupts into physical ailments. She starts having sleepless nights and has horrible nightmares. In addition of being insomniac, her womb develops unnatural growth and her womb had to be removed from her body. She remembers her gynecological illness to Akhila with the phrases: flesh upon flesh, a hundred children devouring me alive (388).

The aftermath of sexual assault purveys on the rape myths prevalent in society. The victim-blaming and the rights of normal life do not come to Marri. The question of justice does not receive any mention in this text. After her pregnancy is revealed, Marri's mother says that a man steals your virginity and you think nothing is going to change (358). Simon De Beauvoir quotes in *The Second Sex*, motherhood in particular is respected only in married women, the unwed mother remains an object of scandal, a child is a severe handicap for her (Beauviour 508). Marri's unwed pregnancy is comparative to the aborted pregnancy of Celine and Maragret. Margaret wanted to be mother but her reproductive rights for then was in hand of her husband; Celine being from rich family aborts and settles at different place; but Marri the poor uneducated servant girl becomes mother against her will.

Conclusion

The novels of Anita Nair highlight the secondary position of women in society and women fighting back to change it. The novel discusses the issues of subaltern women with respect to women in general. The fictional strategy of the fiction is that all the male characters are voiceless and have been presented in the voices of female characters. 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. But in her own ways Marri resist the oppressive forces. The texts end on an optimistic note. After being counseled by Missy K, Marri decides to embrace her child Muthu. Marri suggests to spinster Akhila, "A woman has to seek that vain of strength in her. It does not show itself naturally" (Nair 234).

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