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## Margaret's Revenge to Gain Self-Esteem and Individuality in Anita Nair's existentialist novel *Ladies Coupe*.

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**ABSTRACT:** *What is imperative in our life voyage? At times, we ask ourselves. Our existence or our essence? And our quest for the answer ends in one of the aspect of Existentialism, i.e, "Existence precedes essence" established by French existentialist Jean-Paul-Sartre. Existentialism emerged as a movement and gained its popularity in the years following World War II. Importance of individuality, freedom and responsibility are major aspects of Existentialism. Anita Nair's Novel Ladies Coupe elaborates Existentialism through her different female characters. Margaret Shanti, one of the major characters of the novel demonstrates that Existence precedes essence through her resistance against her husband's chauvinism. She neglects her identity only as a wife (essence) and gives importance to her individual existence. Her story is about revenge to gain self esteem.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Alienation, Existentialism, Freedom of choice, Individuality, Revenge.*

### INTRODUCTION

Were it possible for us to wait for ourselves to come into the room, not many of us would find our hearts breaking into flower as we heard the door, handle turn. But we fight for our rights, we will not let anybody take our breath away from us and we resist all attempts to prevent us from using our wills.

Rebecca West

These opening lines of Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* are gist of the novel. Anita Nair through this novel trying to explore the concept of will power and individuality in Existentialism. Anita Nair is a significant Indian English novelist. Her noteworthy works including *Ladies Coupe* are *Lessons in forgetting*, *The Better Man* and *Cut Like wound*, etc. She is a writer of common people, their dreams and journey of life. Her stories are the works of her imagination in layman language.

As the novel's name suggests *Ladies Coupe* is an amalgam of stories revolves around six culturally diversified and common females of Indian society, namely "Akhila", "Sheela Vasudevan", "Prabha Devi", "Janaki Prabhakar", "Margaret Paulraj" and "Marikolanthu". Anita Nair projects these female protagonists' as existentialist who struggle to discover their identity, individuality, strength and independence against male chauvinism, with the succor of freedom and responsibility. Existentialism provides the strength to face problems in life and to create our own path. Following the year after Second World War, Existentialism came forward as a rebellious movement against Determinism. It was a crucial time, humanity was facing after effects of Second World War and was in a traumatic position. Faith in God was lost (spiritual suicide) because of the after effects humanity had to face. Uncertainty and despair was in the air. At that time Existentialism turned humanity to establish new goals and values for their life. Existentialists tried to raise people's faith in humanity to find new values for their future. They wanted to establish the faith that only man can understand the problems they are facing and solve them.

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Theory of Existentialism is subjective and believes in the consciousness of human existence which can't be predicted or manipulated.

Major Representatives of Existentialism are Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Rene le Senne, Louis Lavelle, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus Franz Kafka. We can understand Existentialism through its definition: "What we mean by "Existentialism" is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity."

Existentialism's concepts like freedom of choice and responsibility, authenticity, individuality, search for identity, being for itself, existence precedes essence and transcendence are a remarkable source of strength to deal with day to day life. Its other notions like alienation, bad-faith, inauthenticity, nothingness and absurd gives us life lessons. These all hypotheses are part of this novel. All these considerations complete our life cycle,.

All characters of Ladies Coupe are common people with their struggle to achieve their own identity. Novel covers the female characters under individual chapters and among them the chapter "Oil of Vitriol" is based on the story of Margaret Shanthi, a chemistry teacher. It is about her revenge from the chauvinist husband Ebenezer Paulraj. Margaret is stuck with a husband who is like the most vicious chemical compound of them all -concentrated sulphuric acid, oil of vitriol. She confesses, "I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with the sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundation of his being." P 96.

Margaret's marriage to Ebenezer Paulraj is like a fairy tale for her. In the initial years of their marriage everything was perfect for Margaret. She was deeply in love with Ebenezer Paulraj. "in the first year, my love for Ebe worked like a solvent. It loosened the tenacity, weakened the purposefulness that had until then been a part of my mental make-up. I was so drunk on my feelings for him that all I wanted to do was be with him."104. Although Ebe also loves Margaret Shanti from the bottom of his heart but, not ready to accept her individuality. Her likes and dislikes, whims and fancies and dreams and aims. He loves her but, he did not accept her individuality.

Her first pregnancy was the turning point of her married life and the end of her blind love towards Ebe. This point onwards she starts realizing changes in Ebe's behavior and a sense of alienation from him and from her own identity. The Theme of alienation was established by G.W.Hegel. We can understand alienation through the definition by The Encyclopedia Britannica: "Alienation, in social sciences, the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self". Hegel explains different types of Alienation-alienation from social system government, family, law and others. His focus though was on the alienation of a human being from his own consciousness and freedom.

Ebe's dominant behaviour was the basis of Margaret's alienation from her own consciousness and her freedom as a lady. Margaret was not free to take decisions of her life. She didn't have right to say that she wants to enjoy her motherhood. He wanted to abort their first child "I,m not so sure if we should have a baby now".104 After that, almost at every step of her life she had to follow Ebe's decisions. After losing her baby, on the professional front also she had to sacrifice her dream of PhD. Ebe was not in favor of her professional growth. He said, "What's the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B. Ed so you can become a teacher". P105.

Initially Margaret did not understand the deep rooted male egoism in Ebenezer Paulraj, as her extreme love for him had made her blind. Though at times she felt the pain of it, she convinced herself saying, "He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was right. He was always right" (109). As Indra Devi says, "She silences her aspirations in order to what Ebenezer wants her to be"

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She leads a routine life and struggling alone by sub missing herself as a puppet of Ebe. But gradually she starts questioning herself about her identity. Who is she for Ebe a wife or her follower? She asks herself, “Where was I in all this? Maragret Shanthi, the woman. In Ebe’s eyes, had I ceased to be? What did he see me as? A little girl he could rule and mould, make love to and jolly around.<sup>111</sup> A restlessness she has begun to fill to break her routine life and to do things differently. She starts hating Ebe to disrespect her as wife and human being. She mouthed the words: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZAR PAULRAJ. I HATE HIM. HATE HIM. I waited for a clap of thunder, a hurling meteor, a whirlwind, a dust storm... for some super phenomenon that is usually meant to accompany such momentous and perhaps sacrilegious revelations.

And the day she realizes her hatred towards him, she feels liberated from some unknown clutches. She thought, “all that was good and noble about my life that he had destroyed, the baby that died even before it had a soul, .....there was nothing left for me to dream of and the words rose to the surface again: I HATE HIM. I HATE HIM. What am I going to do? (131).

They had a pair of fish, James and Joyce and one day James died of overeating. That incident stuck in Margaret’s mind. Ebe was food lover and she now decides to take revenge with Ebe by making him a fat man. “My cooking would have a sense of purpose now. But first, I had to persuade Ebe to let down his defences. To open his senses and taste buds to me.<sup>132</sup> The moment proves to be a turning point in her life. She started cooking fattening food for Ebe. “Your time begins now Now Ebe, I told a sleeping Ebe. Your time begins with this breakfast. Puris fried in ghee and a potato, peas and cauliflower corma”<sup>133</sup>. It’s her unique way to take revenge by changing Ebe’s personality. As Dr.T.Vara Lakshmi says,

“By making him fat she erodes his self-esteem and feels he is an easy man to live with now, in and out of health institute. Margaret gains self-esteem by eroding Ebe’s self-esteem. She succeeds in achieving her emotional fulfillment keeping the family ties intact, though some justifications contain a modicum of sense” (69). She makes herself “Aqua Regia, Royal water capable of dissolving even gold.” It means she added her softness in the arrogance of her husband to make him what she wanted but by a trick. She says, “When you add water to sulphuric acid, it splutters at first. But soon it loses its strength it loses its bits. The trick is to know when to add it, and how much” P 134

Revenge was must for Margarar because it’s high time for her to taste freedom from her shackled married life. She seeks her Freedom to prove her individuality. Existentialism gives space to Freedom of choice and individuality. According to Thomas. R. Flynn, “Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. Its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we are always ‘more’ than ourselves. But we are as responsible as we are free.”

She aspires for her own identity and to destroy Ebe’s identity as a male chauvinist. her decision to take revenge is her freedom of choice to regain her lost identity and gradually, she saw the results of her efforts in the form of Ebe’s change personality and discovery of her individuality. “Ebe, slowly became fat man. A quiet man. An easy man, a man I could live with once again.<sup>134</sup>.

**CONCLUSION:** Margaret’s character is an existential one. She was struggling with alienation and her lost identity. But rather than to stop dreaming, she uses her freedom of choice to gain her individuality. She decides to fight back in the form of soft revenge. And finally she got what she dreamed earlier. “While Ebe remained fat, there were no adrenaline surges, no power struggles. All was quiet and calm and watered down in our life.”<sup>134</sup>.

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