

Bound by Tradition: Women's Identity and Cultural Expectations in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*"

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Introduction

Cultural expectations exert a profound and often inescapable influence on the formation of women's identities, shaping their roles, duties, and aspirations from birth. These expectations are not merely societal suggestions; they are deeply embedded frameworks passed down through generations, rooted in tradition, religious belief, social norms, and family customs. They dictate how women should behave, what they should value, and who they should become. These prescribed roles often revolve around ideas of obedience, modesty, self-sacrifice, and familial duty. Across many cultures, a woman's worth is frequently measured by her willingness and ability to nurture others—whether as a daughter, wife, mother, or caregiver—rather than her individual ambitions, intellect, or desires.

In many societies, these cultural norms prioritize communal and familial expectations over personal freedom. Women are often expected to put the needs of others before their own, to conform to rigid gender roles that privilege submission over autonomy, and to aspire toward ideals of femininity that emphasize beauty, chastity, and obedience. Personal ambition, sexual agency, and intellectual independence are, in many contexts, seen as secondary—if not entirely unacceptable—for women. Such social conditioning limits women's agency and enforces conformity, creating internal conflicts for those who dream of more than what tradition allows. These expectations act like invisible shackles, subtly and overtly guiding women into lives that may feel predetermined and inescapable. In such environments, identity formation becomes not only a deeply personal journey but also an act of negotiation, resistance, and, in many cases, rebellion.

For countless women, the process of defining oneself is a continuous and often painful struggle between personal desire and cultural demand. To step beyond the boundaries of socially sanctioned roles is to risk criticism, ostracization, and shame. Women who challenge these roles are frequently labelled as deviant, selfish, or unnatural, while those who adhere to them may experience a quiet but persistent sense of disconnection from their authentic selves. The cost of conformity can be invisibility, while the cost of defiance may be alienation. This dynamic creates a painful paradox for women: remain within the comfort of societal approval but feel confined, or seek personal liberation at the risk of abandonment and judgment.

Literature, as both a reflection of and response to societal norms, has long served as a vital space for exploring the complex relationship between cultural expectations and women's identities. Fiction allows for an intimate exploration of women's inner lives, their suppressed voices, and their quests for selfhood in societies that often seek to silence them. Through narrative, character development, and thematic exploration, literature reveals the multifaceted ways women navigate, resist, and sometimes even internalize the cultural norms that seek to define them. Three novels that engage profoundly with these tensions are *Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe*, *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, and *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club*. Each of these texts presents unique yet interrelated perspectives on how women wrestle with culturally-imposed identities and strive to assert agency in societies that often deny them autonomy.

In *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair constructs a compelling narrative centered around Akhilandeswari, or Akhila, a middle-aged Indian woman who sets out on a train journey that becomes a metaphorical voyage into the self. Throughout her life, Akhila has conformed to the expectations of being a dutiful daughter and responsible provider, silently sacrificing her

own dreams and desires. In a society that considers a woman complete only when she is married and embedded within the structure of a family, Akhila's decision to travel alone is radical. The coupe, a reserved compartment for women, becomes a confessional space where she meets fellow travelers, each of whom recounts her own struggles with societal expectations. These stories offer Akhila different perspectives on womanhood and autonomy, prompting her to ask the fundamental question: *Can a woman live alone and be happy?* Nair uses Akhila's journey to explore the psychological burden of cultural conformity and the courage it takes to seek self-definition outside patriarchal norms. Akhila's story is not just about rejecting traditional roles but also about reclaiming the right to choose one's own life path, on one's own terms.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* presents an even starker portrayal of cultural and gender-based oppression. Set in the American South during the early 20th century, the novel follows Celie, a Black woman who is subjected to relentless abuse, exploitation, and dehumanization from childhood. Her early life is marked by sexual assault, physical violence, and emotional neglect, all of which are justified and perpetuated by the societal norms of the time, which see Black women as subhuman and expendable. Celie is conditioned to believe she is worthless, her voice and desires irrelevant. However, the novel charts her gradual journey toward self-recognition and empowerment, largely through the support of other women—most notably Shug Avery and Sofia—who challenge dominant paradigms and model alternative ways of being. Through letter-writing, self-reflection, and female solidarity, Celie transforms from a passive sufferer into a self-possessed individual who claims her own spiritual and emotional space. Walker's narrative demonstrates how internalized oppression can be confronted and undone through sisterhood, literacy, and the radical act of self-love. The novel illustrates the possibility of rebirth, even for those who have been systematically denied identity and agency.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan explores the cultural tensions experienced by Chinese-American women navigating the intersection of traditional Chinese values and modern American ideals. The novel unfolds through the interwoven stories of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, revealing the generational and cultural dissonance between them. The mothers, shaped by trauma, war, and sacrifice in their native China, seek to instill values of obedience, endurance, and filial piety in their daughters. Yet, the daughters, growing up in America, struggle to reconcile these expectations with their own desires for autonomy, self-expression, and identity in a vastly different cultural landscape. The novel poignantly illustrates how cultural expectations are often carried across borders and generations, continuing to shape women's lives in new and often conflicting ways. Tan emphasizes the difficulties of communication and understanding between mothers and daughters, as well as the deep need for recognition and acceptance on both sides. Ultimately, *The Joy Luck Club* suggests that while cultural heritage can be a source of strength and identity, it must be renegotiated and reinterpreted to allow for personal growth and self-realization.

Together, these novels offer rich and varied portrayals of women confronting cultural expectations and redefining their identities. They reveal that the path to selfhood is rarely linear or uncomplicated. It is often fraught with pain, loss, and resistance—but also with profound moments of connection, resilience, and triumph. Whether through Akhila's quiet rebellion, Celie's transformative awakening, or the intergenerational dialogue in Tan's narrative, each story underscores the idea that identity is not fixed but forged through experience, struggle, and choice. Cultural expectations may cast long shadows, but within those shadows, women continue to find ways to assert light—through voice, memory, and narrative.

Cultural Expectations and Women's Identity in Ladies Coupe

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* offers a nuanced investigation into the extent to which Indian cultural norms define women's roles, constructing their identities in terms of a repression of personal aspiration and autonomy. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, is a middle-aged woman who has dedicated her life to meeting familial expectations over her own desires. Once her father dies, she is to be a caretaker to her siblings and mother at the expense of any aspirations that she might have for

herself. This is consistent with wider Indian cultural norms where women are made to prioritize family over personal realization in order to remain tied to the traditional frame.

"A woman has to prove herself every day. She has to justify her existence in man's world."

This quote encapsulates the central conflict Akhila faces in *Ladies Coupe*: the burden of societal expectations that dictate a woman's identity should be tied to her roles as a daughter, wife, or mother. In this reflection, Akhila speaks to the oppressive cultural structures in Indian society that define a woman's worth through her relationships with men. The need to "justify her existence" signals a denial of autonomy, compelling women to constantly perform and validate their roles in patriarchal systems. Akhila's journey toward self-discovery involves rejecting these cultural norms and constructing an identity rooted in personal freedom and individuality.

Akhila's conflict has its origin in the social perception that the life of a woman is incomplete outside marriage. Even though she is economically independent, there remains the constant reminder that fulfillment is possible only through marriage and motherhood.

"Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete?"

This question is at the heart of Akhila's identity crisis. The cultural norm expects women to marry and subordinate their identity to their husbands. Akhila's question is a challenge to this cultural blueprint, symbolizing the internal struggle many women face when considering paths outside of traditional marriage. Her family also reinforces this, assuring her that it is not her purpose to live for herself but to live for others. But Akhila's own train journey becomes an encounter with truth when she finds herself among other women who share their own stories of living through cultural restrictions. In their lives, the novel offers various avenues through which women conform or resist societal norms.

Janaki is the example of the conventional woman who has accepted her assigned role without questions. She feels that a woman's role is wife and mother, and she derives security from performing this function. Margaret, however, grapples with the expectations placed on her, especially in her marriage, and seeks means of defining herself while still performing her societal role.

"I was trained to think of others. No one taught me to think of myself."

Janaki's confession speaks to the traditional roles imposed on women – to serve as caretakers, mothers, and wives. This cultural conditioning discourages self-reflection and prioritizes collective duty over individual identity, often leading to a lack of self-awareness or fulfillment. Prabha Devi's realization that she has spent her life conforming to expectations without ever questioning them highlights the internalized nature of cultural norms. Meanwhile, Marikolanthu's story reveals how class and economic status further complicate the expectations placed upon women.

Akhila, through these interactions, starts questioning if she can establish her identity independent of societal norms. Her process is one of self-emancipation, pushing against the notion that a woman's value is based on her relationships to men and family.

"Is independence a state of mind or a state of being?"

This introspective line examines how women internalize societal expectations. Independence is framed not just as a physical reality, but a mental liberation from ingrained cultural narratives. Akhila's journey involves realizing that true freedom starts with rejecting these internalized limitations.

At the conclusion of the novel, she begins to take control of her own life again, marking a rejection of the idea that a woman's identity must be prescribed by cultural norms.

Cultural Expectations and Women's Identity in The Color Purple

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* offers a stark and honest account of the ways in which cultural and patriarchal expectations form the identities of Black women in the early 20th-century American South. The heroine, Celie, is taught from an early age to believe in her own subservient and suffering purpose in life. She is physically and emotionally abused by her stepfather and subsequently by her husband, both of whom support the notion that women are expected to suffer silently.

You better not never tell nobody but God."

This opening line sets the tone for Celie's silenced identity. The cultural expectation of silence, especially around abuse and female suffering, is central to how women are stripped of voice. Her eventual breaking of this silence is key to reclaiming identity.

Celie's identity is formed by the cultural context which states that women should be obedient, submissive, and respectful towards men. She has no say in what happens to her body, as she is raped, forcibly married, and refused an education. The absence of economic independence further imprisons her, so she remains subject to men who regard her as less than an asset. Yet the novel also indicates the ways in which women are free to escape such constraints through sisterhood and personal empowerment.

Shug Avery, a blues singer who subverts traditional gender roles, becomes a life-changing force in Celie's life. Through Shug, Celie discovers that she is worth more than what men have led her to believe. She comes to realize that she can define herself instead of accepting the one imposed on her.

"Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug."

This line signals not only intimacy but also solidarity. Celie and Shug's bond transcends romantic and sexual dimensions—it's about mutual support and redefinition. Through this relationship, Celie learns that identity can be reshaped through love, not domination. It contrasts starkly with the oppressive male-female dynamics she's endured.

Celie's path to self-definition is also mirrored in Sofia, who won't conform to cultural norms but is brutally punished for her rebellion. In spite of the penalty, Sofia's refusal to surrender indicates the potential for defying cultural norms.

"Women work, children starve. Men just do the best they can. But mostly they ain't good for much. Just to make children."

Sofia's criticism of traditional gender roles highlights how women are expected to carry the emotional and physical labor of survival while men are excused from responsibility. In this context, female identity is tied to burden and sacrifice, while Sofia herself embodies resistance to these unfair expectations.

"All my life I had to fight."

This simple, powerful line underscores the constant struggle Black women face to assert themselves in a world that systematically devalues them. Sofia's refusal to conform to the “strong, silent” stereotype shows how cultural expectations of docility and endurance are resisted through her outspoken identity.

Celie's final choice to escape her abusive spouse, become an entrepreneur, and take up her own identity is a revolutionary abandonment of the cultural norms that previously held her back.

"I'm me. And he can't do it to me no more. He can't."

Celie claims her identity here, not as a possession but as a person. This is the moment when she reclaims power from Mr. __ and others who tried to erase her. It's the culmination of a long journey from invisibility to self-realization. In taking back her story, she proclaims that women are not limited by the positions society defines for them—they are capable of escaping and forging their own paths.

Cultural Expectations and Women's Identity in The Joy Luck Club

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* reveals the deep-seated conflict between cultural expectations and self-identification, unfolding within the complex emotional landscape of Chinese-American immigrant families. The novel poignantly explores the generational tension between Chinese-born mothers and their American-born daughters, illuminating the chasm between traditional values and individual desires.

The mothers are shaped by Confucian values that emphasize obedience, self-sacrifice, and familial duty. They attempt to pass on these ideals to their daughters, believing these principles will provide guidance and resilience. However, the daughters—raised in the more individualistic American culture—struggle under the weight of these inherited expectations. As one daughter, Lena, expresses,

"I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness."

This line captures the cultural programming that suppresses personal ambition and emotion, portraying the internalized endurance demanded of women in traditional Chinese society. For Lena, this upbringing results in emotional disconnect and a lack of assertiveness in her adult relationships.

Each mother-daughter pair in the novel presents a different aspect of this intergenerational struggle. Lindo Jong, for instance, exemplifies strategic negotiation with tradition. Forced into an arranged marriage at a young age, Lindo ultimately escapes by using clever manipulation of cultural beliefs. She tells her daughter,

"I sacrificed my life to give you opportunity. Don't squander it."

This quote reflects the burden of maternal sacrifice and the expectation that daughters should honor their mothers through achievement. However, Waverly, Lindo's daughter, grows resentful of her mother's relentless pressure to succeed. Her feelings are encapsulated when she says,

"My mother would proudly introduce me as her daughter, the chess champion. And I hated the way she said it, as if it were she who had won."

Waverly's identity is conflated with her mother's pride, leading to tension between independence and familial loyalty.

An-mei Hsu's narrative highlights how cultural expectations can rob women of their agency. She recalls, "*I learned to swallow my own tears. I learned to eat my own bitterness.*" This statement reveals how deeply ingrained emotional suppression becomes a marker of womanhood—one that silences resistance. An-mei's daughter, Rose, inherits this silence, but later confronts it. She reflects, "*I saw what I had been fighting for: it was for me, a scared child, a girl who had listened to her mother, and lived with her shame.*" This turning point signifies the beginning of Rose's reclamation of identity, moving beyond inherited shame to self-realization.

Meanwhile, Ying-ying St. Clair embodies the psychological toll of internalized passivity. Having grown up in a culture that demanded female docility, she loses her sense of self, later saying, "*I was lost, I had no words for what I had become.*" Her narrative shows that silence, bred by cultural restraint, becomes a form of erasure. Her daughter, Lena, inherits this quiet submission until she begins to recognize its damaging effects, symbolizing the slow unraveling of generational patterns.

The symbolic object of the swan feather—introduced in the opening parable—encapsulates the mothers' hopes for their daughters. Suyuan Woo brings a feather to America, saying, "*This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.*" The feather represents cultural inheritance and maternal love, carrying both the weight and warmth of tradition. Though the daughters often feel burdened by their mothers' expectations, they eventually come to see the intention behind the expectations—the desire to empower them with strength forged through hardship.

Ultimately, *The Joy Luck Club* moves toward a vision of reconciliation and understanding. The daughters begin to understand their mothers not as enforcers of tradition, but as survivors who made difficult choices. The novel suggests that identity is not fixed—not something passively received from culture—but rather something negotiated between the past and present, between inherited values and personal freedom. As Jing-mei (June) realizes, "*I wanted my life to be what I made it. So I decided to change, to make my own luck.*" This quote captures the essence of the novel's resolution: that true identity lies in crafting one's own path while honoring the truths of the past.

Conclusion

The search for cultural expectations and women's identity in *Ladies Coupe*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Joy Luck Club* demonstrates how deeply rooted societal norms influence women's roles and form their sense of self. Through various cultures and time periods, these novels demonstrate the challenges faced by women as they struggle through the pressures of tradition, family expectations, and societal norms. Whether it is the Indian societal hierarchy that entraps women within dutiful daughter, wife, and mother roles, the patriarchal and racially oppressive American South that restricts Black women's agency, or the conflict between Chinese immigrant mothers and their native-born daughters, each novel tells distinct yet connected stories about the ways in which cultural expectations affect women's lives.

At the center of these stories is the question of whether or not women are able to regain their identities from the cultural ideals that attempt to define them. The female heroes in each book first internalize the social messages that tell them how they ought to act, what they should strive for, and where they are valuable. Akhila in *Ladies Coupe* comes to assume that a woman's life should be spent doing everything for her family, to the detriment of her own happiness. Celie in *The Color Purple* is taught to accept abuse and submission as part of the natural order of being a woman. The daughters of *The Joy Luck Club* grapple with the pressures put upon them by their foreign-born mothers, who desire to have them embody traditional Chinese culture while thriving in an American environment that values individualism. These characters are defined by cultural pressures that restrict their options and squelch their self-expression.

But though cultural expectations act as obstacles to self-discovery, these novels also demonstrate that women are not helpless against them. The quest of each of the protagonists is one of self-realization, resistance, and eventually, self-emancipation. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila's interactions with other women make her aware that she has the capability to

shape her own life, which makes her break free from the expectations that have held her back. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's relationship with Shug Avery makes her learn that she is worthy of being loved, respected, and acting as an independent self, hence, regaining her sense of self and becoming independent. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters slowly realize their mothers' sacrifices and merge their cultural identity with their personal goals, describing the intricate process of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The cultural expectations theme and women's identity are extremely important as it highlights the methods through which tradition can both free and oppress. On the one hand, the cultural values provide continuity and sense of belonging along with transmitting information and traditions to the next generations. Conversely, the same values become fixed structures that limit women's freedom, pushing them into preordained roles that do not necessarily coincide with their own desires. The conflict over identity thus becomes a conflict between preserving cultural heritage and creating an independent existence.

These novels also point to how resistance to cultural expectations is not always overt rebellion. At other times, it is openly defiant, such as in the manner in which Akhila decides to set out on her own, Celie discovers her voice via letter-writing and business-building, and the daughters of *The Joy Luck Club* attempt to reinterpret their mothers' teachings in a manner that is congruent with their own lives. Resistance also occurs through narrativity, as telling tales about personal lives enables women to identify their troubles as an overall trend of oppression and connect with other women. Through narration, these women regain control over their stories, defying cultural norms that try to eliminate their uniqueness.

Lastly, the cross-generational nature of cultural expectations is also an important factor in these novels. While older generations tend to impose traditional values on younger women, it is not necessarily out of ill will but because they feel these values are required for survival and success. The mothers of *The Joy Luck Club*, for instance, impose stern requirements on their daughters not so much to control them, but because they sincerely feel that obedience to cultural heritage will safeguard them against the misfortunes which befell them. Yet, as society continues to change, younger women increasingly question such stringent parameters, hoping to redefine cultural identity on their own terms. This intergenerational tension illustrates the permeability of culture—traditions might appear fixed, but they are always redefined by those who live them.

The lesson taken from these stories is that identity is not inherited passively but is constructed actively through experience, decision, and acts of resistance. Women in such novels discover that they do not need to abandon their cultures altogether to assert independence, nor must they entirely conform. Rather, they find a balance that is gingerly achieved, determining which traditions to accept and which to reject. In this manner, they inscribe spaces for themselves within their cultural systems rather than being completely determined by them.

Finally, *Ladies Coupe*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Joy Luck Club* demonstrate that although cultural expectations contribute significantly to the formation of women's identity, they are not chains that cannot be broken. Women can redefine their own lives, resist oppressive norms, and locate meaning in life beyond what society prescribes for them. Their quests for self-making are great affirmations of women's resilience and strength of will across cultures. The books remind us that identity is not fixed but constantly in process, constructed through an ongoing mode of questioning, resisting, and redefining the self against culture. Through their trials and victories, these women reassert their right to self-making, insisting that their identities are theirs alone.