

Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe: Navigating Journeys, Physical and Beyond

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Indian women novelists have added a new dimension to the Indian literature. Women novelists have created their own canon. They have incorporated very authentic picture of female experiences which male writers either failed to portray or they depicted the distorted, inadequate and incomplete picture of female anxiety and anguish. Helen Cixous, thinks that the writing gives women access to their native strength. That means through writing they discover the hidden and unexplored territories of their being. Cixous says "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then the immense resources of unconscious spring forth"(875).

Anita Nair is a fine post-modern Indian English novelist and successful author of short stories and poetry also. Her stories are intense and replete with cultural detail, giving a local habitation and a name to passing thoughts. Anita Nair was able to demarcate her typical regional ambience of Kerala with its wide variety of people of all classes. Most of her novels have a typical regional flavor .Nair's imagination seems with stories that leap out like tiny silver fish, struggling to escape a fisherman's basket.

Evoking experiences from everyday life and endowing it with epic dimensions, Ladies Coupe related the saga of a woman's search for strength and independence. Nair beautifully fleshes out the minute details of her women characters, bring alive their everyday dilemmas, desires and thoughts. Ladies Coupe, as the title indicates, offers a narrative, concerning the 'chance encounter of six women in that greatest of all levelers, the Indian train journey. Nair has resorted the technique of Chaucer, i.e, mixed crowd of pilgrims travelling to Canterbury telling tales to each other. The use of the 'chance encounter' device is seen first in Boccaccio's Decameron, then in Chaucer's Canterbury Tale. It gives her an opportunity to bring together women of different ages, experience and social strata. Ladies Coupe depicts a very different kind of train travel experience. Akhila or Akhilandeswari, as she becomes towards the end, assuming her full potential as a woman. Through this novel Nair is figuring the ladies compartment in a train as a place of feminine power that emerges through the sharing of female narratives. The novel comprises their narratives and an account of Akhila's life until she embarks upon the journey, and afterwards. The narratives flash back and forth in time and place, encapsulating each passenger's essential experience as a woman in contemporary Indian society.

The train journey in Ladies Coupe infact symbolizes a journey away from family and responsibilities, a journey that will ultimately make them conscious of their self-esteem and dignity. It is a journey towards self-discovery. In other words, it deals with the journey of 'self discovery' and 'resurrection of self'. Akhila travels with the question that has been haunting all her adult life. She meets 5 women characters in the novel and travels with the same question. This wonderful atmosphere, delicious, warm novel takes the reader into the heart of women's life in contemporary India, revealing how the dilemmas that women face in their relationships with husbands, mothers, friends, employees and children.

In a chat with Suchitra Behal for The Hindu, Nair talks

“Until 1998, in Bangalore station there was always a separate line for ladies, senior citizens and the handicapped. I often used to wonder why they are being clubbed together, why women have to be treated like this. The book is about why women insist on using this line. When 15 years ago I was travelling in a ladies' coupe the women around me began talking . I was on the top berth .There is an atmosphere of intimacy that comes in. People talk more openly to strangers — there is no judgment”.

Though they do not confess their life stories publicly to each other while sitting in what used to be a regular feature of rail journeys, the "ladies compartment" or coupe of the title, the manner in which she has them sharing their experiences with the protagonist. Akhila herself is the magnet for their stories. She has suddenly decided to take her life in her hands. At the age of 45, having achieved near anonymity working as a clerk in the Income Tax Department, she is suddenly filled with the idea of revolt. She decides to bolt, to take a long train. There's a hilarious description of her singular form of revolt when she wants to taste a boiled egg brought by an Anglo-Indian colleague to work and, much later, a tense moment when she discovers herself responding to the anonymous groping of a man's hand in a crowded bus. Nair's evocation of the ordinariness of a middle-class Brahmin family struggling to keep itself afloat in Chennai, hanging on to the rigid pattern of their lives, as exemplified in the patterns of kolam traced in front of their houses and expecting an unquestioning sacrifice from the women in the family to underwrite this myth, is what powers her narrative. The novel starts:

Akhila dreams: a train that trundles, truckles and troops into a station. Akhila is seated by a window. Everything but the train is still. The moon hangs at her shoulder and rides with her. She travels through a gallery of nightscapes, each framed by the window. A light in a house. A family huddled around a fire. A howling dog. A distant town. Black oily waters of a river. A menacing hill. A curling road. A railway-crossing with the streetlight glinting on the glasses of a man on a static scooter, hands dangling at his side, heel on the ground, head cocked, watching, waiting for the train to hurtle past.

At the station, portraits replace impressions. Reunions. Farewells. A smile. Tears. Anger. Irritation. Anxiety. Boredom. Stillness. Akhila sees them all. The train begins to move. Akhila dreams of being there. And not there. (*Ladies Coupe*, 1-2)

Amy Richter opines that in the act of boarding a train, in moving outside a sphere of strict domesticity, female identity is “temporarily shattered,” and while this shattering might prove confusing or threatening for some passengers, the resulting disruption of identity could also push a woman to imagine a new role for herself (55). These women become “filled with the incantatory power to see a new destination and to burn up the tracks” (Sinha 151). While Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* is set in an Indian railway compartment reserved exclusively for women, it is not a story of female containment or, conversely, of feminist separatism. Considering what the space of the coupé allows its female passengers as well as attending to the symbol of the railway and the language of train travel which dominate this text, is central to an understanding of this novel, as the transitional space of the coupé, contained within the transient space of the train, is central to its protagonist’s figurative journey into selfhood.

For Certeau, the experience of railway travels “is necessary for the birth...of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories” (14). Thus, as train travel occasions a shifting set of social relations and changing constructions of space and time, public and private, interior and exterior, the train seems an ideal site around which to retain, reject, or remake identity, as protagonist Akhila’s journey aboard the coupé and the potential that space opens for formations of female self-hood effectively demonstrates. Indeed, it is as if Akhila is re-born through her journey in the ladies coupé. As Amy Richter has suggested, “separation from one’s community and the relative isolation and anonymity of train travel” presents women with “challenges and opportunities” through which they can “revise their identities” (55).

Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* is about the condition of women in the late 20th century. Whether a woman can live alone is the key question, which the tales will answer. Using a train coupé is advantageous as it brings together different age groups and classes which all help Akhila to determine her future life and answer the question. A general comment on the intimacy of train journeys would be added a further dimension to this. The decision to go on a journey is Akhila's celebration of her newly achieved freedom, when she moves into her own flat. Kanyakumari is the farthest destination she can think of, and therefore, the chosen one. She begins to realize the fact that women should groom for themselves, not for others. With the help of her co-passengers and Karpagam, Akhila comes to realize that she must take the reins in her own hands, take her own decisions and live life for herself. The journey implies both a physical and psychological escape from the patriarchal world she had inhabited and, also, the stereotypical metaphoric value invariably attached to the concept of the journey - that of experiential growth and an expansion of horizons. The combined experiences of her co passengers help Akhila to develop the new confidence that marks her behaviors after she disembarks.

Nair rightly says that people find easier to talk more openly to strangers since there is no judgment. She uses the coupe' as a private space to unravel the psychological crisis in the lives of six women and to make sense of their women, who fight with the circumstances of their life and try to make meaning out of it thus negotiating an identity. These characters, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, Marikolanthu, Karpagam along with Akhila, are not feminists but they are just normal women who fight tooth and nail to establish individuality in the whirlpool of predicaments they find themselves in. Doris Thomas says, “All the characters of this 'female enclave' without exception go through the grueling experiences of domestic oppression at the hands of

their families and everyone of them acquires an implacable resilience not only to stay alive, but even to discover their inner source of dynamism and creative wellspring”(46).

The existential predicament is depicted in an expression of their personality and not an escape from it. Akhila, the central figure's single identity is negotiated amidst these stories. With each of the women telling their stories, there is a world of wisdom and experiences awaiting Akhila. Each story takes her own step forward to the answer for the question she is seeking 'can a woman stay single and be happy?...or does she need a man to feel complete?' These questions themselves mark the beginning of her journey. It is, indeed, ironic that the woman who took on the responsibility of the entire family years ago is not considered capable of looking after herself even at the age of 45. 'Can a woman live alone? What will society say? Ask your brothers for their opinion before taking a decision'-is the advice given to her. The reactions of Narsi and Padma reveal the attitudes of society towards a single woman. Like the white man's burden during the colonial period, this is used in the post-colonial period to limit the freedom to think and act of the colonized or the marginalized.

Nair uses the opportunity to delineate the callousness and selfish nature of human beings while making clear statement about society's double standards here, man is the colonizer and the woman the colonized. Like the colonizer, earlier the male ensures that the female, like the colonized, becomes calcified in her opinion about her lack of self-sufficiency. She begins to depend on the male and accepts the fact that she cannot live alone. As Prapha Devi puts it, "show him we are incapable of doing anything beyond the periphery of our home and he will manage our life, from sending postal orders to balancing cheque books to booking railway tickets to managing household expenses" (*Ladies Coupe*, 188).

The stories that Akhila's co-passengers narrate are simple and straightforward. The rich story content in women's writing shows that the power struggle between the genders is not over. As Marina Warner points out in her *Study of Fairy-tales and Their Tellers*, "stories.... flow with the irrepressible energy of interdicted narrative and opinion amount groups of people who have been muffled in the dominant learned milieu" (11). The stories are about how these women coped with personal crises as such as loneliness, assuming one's body, ill-treatment, rape, abortion, madness and betrayal, at different stages of their lives. The six women characters relate their stories and one realizes that all have suffered at the hands of the repressive forces of society, revolted against these oppressions and resolved to discover themselves and try to establish themselves in society. The stirring of revolt in the women characters begin with a sense of dissatisfaction with their lot. The awareness of repression leads into a questioning of the validity of their imposition. The final outcome of this process of an awareness of repression and a sense of insurgency leads the characters on to certain resolutions that are bold and lead them to happiness.

A traditional narrative journey, one might expect, charts a character's adventures as she amasses experiences and ultimately returns home to re-assume her place in society. But in *Ladies Coupé*, that story of departure and return is reformed: inside the coupé, the women do not have actual experiences or adventures, after all; rather, they talk about the past, narrating their lives up until the point of contact. Nair thus further underscores and privileges the journey rather than any destination, just as her novel presumes change, but may not actually depict it. This, it seems, is an important omission, and in this re-working of a travel narrative, she participates in the wider narrative tradition of the Bildungsroman while also pushing back against its expectations.

Ladies Coupé is about the ongoing journey, about the transitional moment and conditions of change, about process rather than destination. In this, we have a world rendered that is not finished, feminist utopia, but still nonetheless hopeful in its articulation of a continued quest for female space and identity. Indeed, it is as if Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, is re-born through her journey in the ladies coupe. And while any train journey ostensibly has a pre-appointed end, a physical and inevitable terminus, it is interesting to consider the way in which *Ladies Coupé* depicts a very different kind of train travel experience.

Akhila and her friends are on the threshold of self-discovery. The manner in which Nair relates these transformations is in turn revelatory and redeeming. Her tale is light enough to relieve the tedium of a long journey and yet filled with the incantatory power to burn up the tracks, to seek a new destination. To change.

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