

Book Review



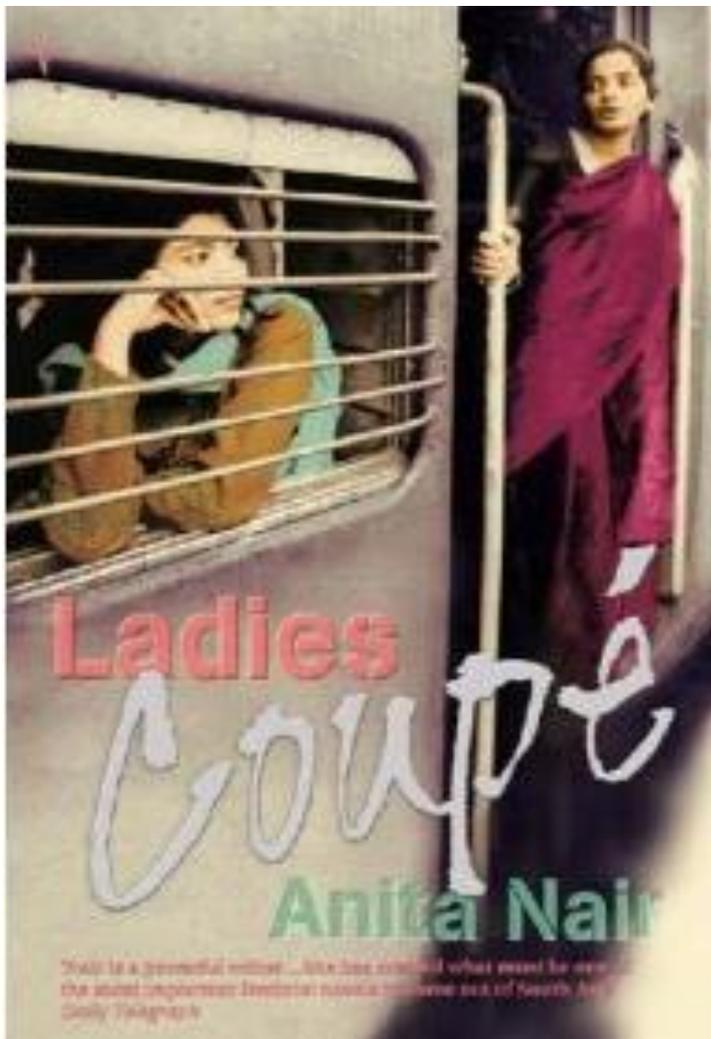
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Ladies Coupe

By Anita Nair

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"It was a combination of the confined space and assurance of anonymity as they were stranger's to each other that turned the coupe into a confessional box. Their candor, their subversiveness, their subtle strength and courage inspired Ladies Coupe."
(Anita Nair, 2004)

The title 'Ladies Coupe' in itself is very fascinating to begin with; Ladies coupe is a compartment on a train that is reserved exclusively for women, this compartment is safe, quiet and preferred by women who travel alone. Akhila, the protagonist wants a ticket to AC- sleeper but due to the unavailability of ticket she chooses to travel in a ladies coupe which is the second best option. It is in this coupe that Akhila begins her journey of self-discovery. In literature, the Journey is often taken as a metaphor for discovery.

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The protagonist goes through a process of development through which he/ she gains a greater insight into things. "In a piece of literature, the journey motif is a distinctive idea or theme that is elaborated" (Irving, 2002) as the story proceeds. The characters may encounter a journey through the "mental, physical, and emotional events in their lives. The main characters recall their memories from the past and tell a story based on the events in their history" (ibid).

In her ladies coupe, Akila has to face "Five women, incessant chatter" (Nair, 2004:18). And the question is whether she can "handle that?" (ibid). In the beginning, though excited, Akila is a bit reserved but it does not take her long to realize that "it didn't matter...she could tell these women whatever she chooses to; her secrets, desires, and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted. They would never see each other again" (ibid:21). It is from this 'space', the ladies coupe that these six women whom Nair welds together, start unveiling the secrets of their lives. Akhila, the protagonist, no doubt, serves "as a magnet in the centre". The coupe serves as a "perfect setting for the unburdening of memories and experiences" that have "signed, shaped, destroyed, and helped release these women" (Mathai, 2001).

Each chapter of the novel is devoted to one of the women's stories. Akila's chapters alternate between the chapters of other five women. Stylistically this structure helps Akila to think and reflect upon what she has heard. All the chapters given to other women have titles. It is only Akhila's chapters which are without name. However, towards the end, Nair gives Akila's last chapter a name: Akhila Speaks. This highlights the fact that through her development, Akhila has gained a voice.

Moreover, the ladies coupe is like a private 'space' for these women. It is like the womb or the mother who "cradled and rocked" (Nair, 2004:97) these women and "stroked" their "brow and said: Child, think on, Child, dream on..." Therefore it is quite clear that rather than being a place, the 'ladies coupe' becomes a space; a private space for these six women. Place deals with physicality whereas space has to do with mind. The coupe compels them to think on, to ponder over their past experiences, their lives and to search for the answers which have been boggling their minds. The coupe, therefore, acts as a stimulus which triggers off a reaction of self-discovery in these women. Through their respective journeys or 'quest for self', these six women go through a process of development and towards the end of their stories emerge as strong individuals who possess a greater and deeper understanding of life. Their tales are "drawn from everyday life and across the social strata" (The Times of India) and unfold quietly as if we were embarking on a journey into their minds. In this treatment lies the triumph of the book, an approach that will remind us of the characters every time we spot an Akhila or a Margaret in a bazaar or perhaps in a railway compartment.

Moreover, the 'journey', Nair presents is an exploitation of the Picaresque Tale. "Picaresque-novel is early form of novel, usually a first-person narrative, relating the adventures of a rogue or low-born adventurer (Spanish *pícaro*) as he drifts from place to place and from one social milieu to another in his effort to survive" (Encyclopedia of

Britannia, 2010). But Nair exploits this form and changes the action from physical to intellectual. She replaces the physical action through her dialogues. Although these women are confined in a small coupe, their action is minimal but their minds have no bounds, their thoughts can wander anywhere and everywhere. They are thus able to interact with each other and explore vital human relations. This particular experience serves as a guide for Akhila who gains a better understanding of life.

Further, this interaction with other women gives Akhila an individuation from personal to historical. She realizes that other women have also experienced similar things. These women add to her sense of being as an individual and also as an Indian woman. The concept of 'Indianness' helps Akhila understand how she shares communal pressures with these women and also how she can make a place for herself in the existing hostile community. This can both be a source of strength as well as discouragement. But in Akhila's case this literal and metaphorical journey serves as an educating experience which definitely gives her strength by broadening her horizon.

Akhila decides to go on this journey because she realizes that she has reached her saturation point where her life has been taken out of her control. She wants to run away from her family and responsibilities therefore, she plans to go on a journey that ultimately makes her a different woman. The novel, then, can be taken as one which is about the self-discovery of a woman by herself. Further, the place, Kanyakumari, where Akhila is going, has mythical significance attached to it. Kanyakumari is named after 'Kanyakumari'- the virgin goddess who "like Akhila, had put her life on hold, condemned to an eternal waiting." (Nair, 2004:3-4). But it is interesting how Nair presents 'Narendra's myth' parallel to Knayakumari's. Narendra who was a "headstrong and restless" (ibid:3) man "flung himself into the churning waters...and swam to a rock upon which he sat resolutely, waiting for answers that had eluded him all his life. So that he became Vivekananda, the one who had found the joy of wisdom." (ibid). So by coupling Kanyakumari's myth with Vivekananda's myth, Nair is trying to change the convention. Her protagonist, Akhila would not be a virgin in eternal waiting but rather a rebellious figure who refuses the goddess like role. Akhila is more like Narendra who is in search of answers and who finally achieves "joy of wisdom" and turns into Vivekananda- "the saint who taught the world to arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached." (ibid). Akhila towards the ends gains a voice, gains wisdom, she has gone through the process of individuation and as a result, as Jung says, is ready to make future individuations possible. She now possesses the seeds which can inspire others to search their souls, their inner self's and look for answers which lie within them.

Further, the stories of other women show other "faces of female predicament" (Mathai, 2001). All these women are "bound by their common human experience. They are the other faces, other possibilities of Akhila" (ibid) Margaret, for instance, is the strongest women in the novel. Stylistically Nair proves this by giving Margaret her own voice. Margaret's story is not narrated by the omniscient narrator but by her own self. Her story starts with a strong statement by her; "God didn't make Elbenezer Paulraj a fat man. I did. I, Margaret Shanthi did it with the sole desire for revenge" (Nair, 2004: 103). She is a chemistry teacher

and Ebenar is the principal of the school she works in. He is a patriarch who knows many ways to repress, debase and humiliate his subordinates.

But Margaret instead of “succumbing to patriarchy takes a subtle revenge in which there is no bloodshed but peace. She takes revenge to erode her husband’s self esteem and shake the very foundations of his being” (Kalamani, 2008: 144) “to rid this world of a creature who if allowed to remain the way he was slim, lithe and arrogant, would contrive to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy” (Nair, 2004: 139). These words clearly reveal the strength of her character and determination in not yielding but outwitting him with her own tactics.

Margaret’s case can also be studied using the theory of performatives in literature, more precisely “Butler’s performatives” (Culler, 1997: 103)

“In Gender Trouble Butler proposes that we consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not what one is but what one does. A man is not what one is but something one does, a condition one enacts. Your gender is created by your acts, in the way that a promise is created by the act of promising. You become a man or a woman by repeated acts, which, like Austin’s performatives, depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing something in a culture. Just as there are regular, socially established ways of promising, making a bet, giving orders, and getting married, so there are socially established ways of being a man or being a woman.” (ibid)

So Margaret is clearly going against the social conventions and norms. She has taken complete control of the situation. In the power politics of her married life she has managed to become the master who is able to manipulate his subordinates. The theory also states that “the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject...are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, and displacement are forged” (ibid). It is from repetition of gender norms i.e. the repetition of Ebenezer’s strict patriarchal behavior that Margaret’s subversion occurs. Margaret becomes the male, the ‘self’ who is able to dominate and manipulate Ebenezer. Margaret reveals this particular trait of her character when she states that: “I classify myself as water. Water that moistens. Water that heals...forgets...accepts...flows tirelessly. Water that also destroys.” (Nair, 2004: 103). In this self revelation, Margaret is clearly talking in terms of binaries. This illustrates that if once she was the subjugated woman, she is now the powerful patriarch. Her actions are what decide her gender. She is clearly acting as the patriarch and her story therefore reveals the reversal of roles.

Margaret, in her story, comes out to be the winner. Akhila to, towards the end of the story is at the winning end though her situation is totally different from Margaret’s. Like Jean Rhys’, Sasha Jenson, from Good Morning Midnight, who sleeps with the “man in white coat”, Akhila to sleeps with a man-“the man who offers sex, also offers death”. In this there is a strong suggestion of “rebirth through transcendence of self in union with another human being”. Akhila through her symbolic rebirth and transcendence is able to acquire a new self- a self which has suffered, experienced and finally learned the true essence of life.

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