

Transitional Space in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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Abstract

Spaces are not an inner and outer or public and private. There are also gender spaces. Spaces being gendered, the politics and allocation of space that is invariably an implicit and intricate social construct of patriarchy which allows men centrality and access almost universally. Women are allocated fit only for the confined and secured spaces of home and family. The space of the household is expressed as the sole and primary responsibilities of women. Edward Soja rightly says "Space itself may be primordially given, but the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience." Along with negotiations, race, community, caste, class and gender women have been aspiring for their independent and secure spaces at par with men. Their simmering unrest and dejection at the absence of freedom to access the outer public spaces started erupting in the form of various feminist movements, feminist writings and ideologies. They have started asserting their space even beyond the patriarchal limits that have kept them virtually captivated and incarnated for centuries. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupeis* similarly about awakenings, about navigating the spaces of and between "in" and "out," about transformative change and self-discovery, and, also, about existing limitations.

Keywords: spaces, transformation, self-discovery, destination

Introduction

"Anita Nair is a discovery: a born storyteller with a style of narration which compels reading, She is young. She will get to the top" said Kushwant Singh after reading *Ladies Coupe*. The Bangalore based writer Anita Nair is an internationally recognized name in contemporary literary world and Indian Writing in English. Besides her well acclaimed novels *The Better Man*(2000),*Ladies Coupe* (2001) , *Mistress* (2005) and *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Cut Like Wound and Idris* she has to credit a number of essays, travelogues, human, children's books, collections of short stories *Satyr of the Subway* and poetry "Malabar Mind" (1997). Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* is a novel about female identity and female space. Space, far from natural or neutral, is deeply ideological, and the division of space into public and private realms is a gendered phenomenon. Since the 1960s, historians have used the concept of separate spheres to interpret the lives of women (Richter 6). Some scholars have defined the public/private divide as

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an oppressive set of cultural norms that confine women to the home and limit their destinies (Malcolm 255). While men are afforded the freedom of public affairs, women are marginalized, confined to domesticity, to an ideology of oppression that is experienced both as a spatial limitation and, in limiting the roles open to women, a way of denying them autonomy and self-fulfillment. Other scholars have interpreted the private sphere in a more positive light, viewing it as a woman's domain, a nurturing alternative to the public world of men, and a catalyst for gender consciousness and the emergence of feminism (Richter 6). And yet, public spaces remain spaces of power governed largely by patriarchal structures and institutions, in which women have very little visibility and influence (Malcolm 256). *Ladies Coupe* is, to its core, about the ongoing journey, about the transitional moment and conditions of change, about process rather than destination.

Transitional spaces deserve more attention. It is neither fully public nor fully private. They break a binary structure which, much like patriarchy, can be experienced as overly confining and determining. If, within this tenuous, as-yet-unformed model of space, "dwellers produce their own mutable spaces" (Malcolm 256), it may well be within these transitional spaces that women can enact change, transformation, and transgression. In *Ladies Coupé*, the train functions in a number of paradoxical and opposing ways, just as the narratives comprising it bespeak not only liberation and change but the limitations circumscribing those hopes. The train is the perfect setting and symbol for the overlapping tension, as the coupé is at once a utopian, feminist space and the vehicle whose walls highlight its limits and whose removal occasions the compromises that emerge in the social context of a wider Indian patriarchy. Anita Nair has skillfully manipulates the device of the train journey. The coupe is revealed as a transitional and transitory space of opportunity which both critiques limits and gendered inequities and demonstrates the limitations of this same compromised utopic space. Thus the space of the train is, in a sense, a "hybrid sphere" (Richter 8), a shared social and cultural realm and, perhaps, a transitional space with the potential to re-make and revise social identity. The train seems an ideal site around which to retain, reject, or remake identity, as protagonist Akhila's journey aboard the coupe and the potential that space opens for formations of female self-hood.

Akhila is re-born through her journey in the ladies' coupe. 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). The railroad stands as a symbol of progress, and for contemporary life in all its ambiguity. It seems that Akhila boards her train with these hopes, and her journey does not disappoint, offering her a liminal freedom which carries her towards self-discovery. The woman's compartment—the so called ladies coupe—is a clear example of a gendered spatiality, where woman are sheltered from the outer male world (Nubile 60). As Akhila's railway journey is the

backbone of the plot, Nair's novel works to reclaim the space of the coupe, figuring it as a place of feminine power that emerges through the sharing of female narratives. Illustrating the women's ongoing battle with the restrictions still exerted by tradition, religion, and convention, the novel reveals their quest to find a space for negotiation in which they can make choices for themselves.

In the first chapter Akhilais presented as a character whose dreams are inevitably caught up with the symbol of the train. Akhila "has often dreamt of this. Of being part of such a wave that pours into compartments and settles on seats, stowing baggage and clutching tickets. Of sitting with her back to the world, with her eyes looking ahead. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of a train that trundles, truckles, and troops into a station" (1). At the beginning of the novel, the railway is a symbol of progress and escape, of a hopeful future free of restraint, with undertones, as well, of a lack of division, of a free play with identity and association as she joins the masses thrown together by train travel. In narrating the stories of six individual women, Nair moves her characters from a collective "state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence," taking them "from the kitchen and bedroom," from the private spaces of a constraining domesticity, "to the street and the world at large" (Sinha 150). Nair's presentation of the coupe is constructed in a way that allows these women to subvert the very society which sets them aside within it. From within the paradoxically most circumscribed of spaces, they are able to reconsider their pasts, question the course of their present, and envision future change. Indeed, the ladies' coupé itself becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from the constraints of patriarchy characterized by false binaries (Vasanthakumari 121; Sinha 150). Drawn together, the stories of the women passengers form a single overarching story of women's search for strength, independence, and a way of determining the course of their own lives. Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers through their stories, hoping their experiences will help her answer the questions that have haunted her entire life: Can a woman live alone? Can a single woman be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete? (Nubile 60).

For Akhila, the quest for an answer to these troublesome questions becomes the quest for her identity: "Who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (Nair 84). What Akhila desires is "to be her own person...in a place that was her own. To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure" (212). The quest to find her place, to determine her identity, assert her autonomy, and make her own choices in a space free of the repressive traditions of the patriarchal home is carried out during the railway journey, during an intense night of female voices, encounters, and exchanges (Nubile 61). The novel's central story of self-discovery is, at the outset, optimistic and even idealistic, as the narratives and experiences compound in the coupe becomes clear that 'transformation' in this novel is neither one-note nor certain. The novel raises the space of the ladies' coupe as a

liberating space not as an end in itself but to question or complicate how the women transformed by it in return to the world. Thus, the guiding question of the narrative journey is not merely “Can a woman live alone?” but also “On what aspects of her life should a woman compromise?” The characters most often conclude their narratives with ambivalence on this matter, suggesting the novel’s resistance to providing any simple answers, and, in so doing, similarly shattering the easy metaphors and symbols that arise from train travel.

In her own quest for identity, the central protagonist Akhila is symbolic of all those who are in a quest for female space. Akhila is a frustrated spinster who has spent all her younger years looking after parents, siblings, and their offspring. After her father’s death, she assumes the role of family head, her own wishes and desires forgotten by everyone and suppressed by herself. Finally fed up with the multiple roles of daughter, sister, and aunt, she decides to go on a train journey, away from family and responsibilities, seeking an escape from them and hoping to discover her identity (Sinha 151). With her one-way ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, Akhila is gloriously alone for the first time in her life and determined to break free of all that her conservative Tamil Brahmin upbringing has bound in her (Vasaanthakumari 117). As the transitory space of the train takes Akhila beyond the bounds of the prescriptive private sphere which has been her home, she is able to interrogate the ideologies regulating her life and the options available to her. Anita Nair sums up her protagonist: “This then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-colored spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect” (2). Her decision to acquire a full ticket rather than settle for stubs and dreams becomes the clear catalyst to move her closer to achieving her quest for space, for a life redefined. At the railway station, the doorway to her dreams, she feels “her lips stretch into a smile” and savors the imminence of change connected to the unfolding of a new space, asserting: “I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognize” (8).

Akhila is clearly not content to passively receive her socially mandated role or accept her “station” in life; when it comes to considering her potential, she is able to consider what lies further down the track, beyond the limits of what has been prescribed for her, and to dare to privilege the disharmony within her own spirit rather than continue to devote herself to the needs of others. Thus, her decision to “board a train. To leave” (3). To escape the limits of her prescriptive life and “go somewhere that wasn’t landlocked like this city of Bangalore. To the end of the world, perhaps. Her world, at least. Kanyakumari” (3). The train journey, here, is explicitly figured as central to her journey of self-discovery and the answer it may provide to her initial interrogation of a woman’s ability to choose and command her own space.

Her metaphorical journey, then, takes place because of her physical journey on the train. And while her destination is not a holy place, and her journey not a genuine pilgrimage, the terminus is a place with special significance, as Nair is careful to point out:

At Kanyakumari the three seas met. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian ocean and the Arabian Sea. A quiet male ocean flanked by two restless female seas. Akhila had heard of how it was at Kanyakumari...that the headstrong and restless Narendra flung himself into the churning waters and the slats of the three seas and swam to a rock upon which he sat resolutely, waiting for answers that had eluded him all his life. So that when he left the rock, he became Vivekananda, the one who has found the joy of wisdom. The saint who taught the world to arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached. She had read that Kanyakumari got its name from the goddess who, like her, had put her life on hold, condemned to an eternal waiting. (4)

For Akhila, Kanyakumari is not just a generic escape, but a relevant place for her mental state and expectations, and, as she is able to identify with the legend of a personified male river and a female goddess, she seems determined to defy the expectations and limits of her gender, to find wisdom in her journey, to stubbornly pursue her goal, and, in so doing, put a stop to a life spent waiting, lived on the side-lines. In the coupe, which effects commingling and compromise, Akhila travels to a place that is highly symbolic of conjoined male and female identities. As a destination, Kanyakumari is significant, as it clearly charts Akhila's literal train journey as a movement from subjugation and assignment by men to female empowerment and awakened possibility and multiplicity, and further beyond to a space of compromise, where men and women exist together. Her internal journey follows the same pattern established by her physical journey.

Akhila's transformation is largely contingent upon her interaction with a community of diverse women. While she herself is transformed individually by the experience of her train journey, her interactions with her fellow passengers and the lessons their collective lives offer her is the influence that helps shape her reformation. While the train itself is in motion, a mobile space carrying people beyond local controls and knowledge (Richter 5), the coupe functions as a private female-designated space on the borders of the train's busy public space. In the utopic dream space of the coupe, Akhila is left alone to confront her identity crisis, think, and shape her own future. In this, what the coupé affords its passengers seems a markedly different experience from the way in which train travel has been traditionally theorized. While Kanyakumari is the clear destination, it is very much the journey that matters and the time spent in transit which affords the passengers an opportunity to speak and to share, to question their identities as Indian women and claim an enhanced sense of autonomy and agency. For the women of the coupe, the

railway journey is not time lost, nor is the train journey figured as an insignificant, forgettable means to a pre-determined end.

Anita Nair does not follow feminist form exactly. In 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 Coupe*, that story of departure and return is reformed: inside the coupe, the women do not have actual experiences or adventures, rather, they talk about the past, narrating their lives up until the point of contact. At the end of her transformative journey, Akhila faces the wide ocean and the sea breeze of Kanyakumari, a highly symbolic place of enlightenment, determination, and self-knowledge. After the enclosed space of the coupe and the transformation it engendered, the open world is there for the taking, and Akhila departs from the train as a new woman, ready to enjoy life freely as she wishes. It is a turning point in Akhila's life, with no chance of a return to the status quo:

45-year old spinsters have a reputation...and so it was with Akhila. Elderly spinster. Older sister. Once the breadwinner of the family. Still the cash cow. But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her any more. Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered. (284)

Affirming her individual identity by rejecting her old derived and imposed identity, she has learned that she can be herself, not an addendum to someone else's life. Akhila now wants to be: "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother" (207). Indeed, she makes it quite clear that her journey has been a hugely transformative one, saying "I am not the Akhila who boarded this train last night" (220). This Akhila has learned to "triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions," to live outside a confining patriarchal structure and beyond the framework of marriage and motherhood (220).

Akhila's transformation is not a simple one, which complicates an understanding of Kanyakumari as a liberating final destination. Her revised sense of self may be somewhat clearly defined, but her identity is not fully fixed by the novel's conclusion. While Akhila discovers much about herself and becomes increasingly aware of her own autonomy and agency, the many contradictions and constraints of Indian society continue to surround her, still impacting her if no longer directing and controlling her destiny. Just as the train can be said to offer both freedom and seclusion, solidarity and individuality (Schivelbusch), so does *Ladies Coupé* bring together a series of oppositional forces that offer a rich if problematic set of opportunities for its passengers. In combining escape and enclosure, the space of the train speaks perfectly to Akhila's dilemma as a woman who is caught between her duty to the expectations of the society of which she

remains a part and her dreams for an independent identity outside of the social constraints which have previously defined her. Thus, the novel is not simply about transformation and change in the feminist Bildungsroman tradition, but also one that points to the limits of such hopes for change through an articulation of choice and self-transformation.

Conclusion

Ladies Coupe seems to suggest, a woman can revise her own identity, can discover inner strength and assert her own autonomy and agency, but she cannot find her place in isolation from male-dominated society. A space that shatters binaries and brings together oppositional forces, the coupé is a space for change and self-discovery, and, also, a space that acknowledges existing limitations and enduring challenges. As the coupé is situated within the larger system of the train, so must the passengers of the coupé continue to operate within patriarchy, eliciting change, but perhaps never fully closing the quest for female space and an autonomous identity.

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