

Assortment of Hues: Tales of Transmutation as Echoed in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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| Article Detail: | Abstract |
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| <p>Received: 08 Dec 2023; Received in revised form: 16 Jan 2024; Accepted: 25 Jan 2024; Available online: 03 Feb 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)</p> <p>Keywords— Transmutation, Sorority, Coupé, Self-identity, Patriarchy, Women Empowerment.</p> | <p><i>Anita Nair, the famous Indian English writer is popular for her novel Ladies Coupé, which broods on the empowerment of women through the female bonding that occurs within the ladies compartment of a train. This study is an attempt to focus upon the self-identity of women folk, and to detect the complications they face in a male dominated patriarchal society. Through a skilful storytelling mode, Nair explicitly lays open the tales of transmutation echoing in the ladies coupé, and its influence upon the life of the protagonist. The novel is also a brilliant evocation of sisterhood, and a tale of mutual care and understanding. The tales of transmutation of the narrators lay entangled with each other, unveiling the various shades of life of which they are representative. The role of journey in creating a shift in the real life statuses of these women, from a claustrophobic state to a wider state of openness, sets off the entire tone of transmutation in the novel. The six narrators forming the assorted hues of the coupé, reverberates the extent of transmutation that sorority brings upon the life of a woman in dire need of assistance.</i></p> |

Ladies Coupé (2001) is a fictional novel written by the famous postmodern Indian English writer, Anita Nair. She is the recipient of various literary Awards like the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award of 2012, FLO FICCI Women Achievers Award of 2008, Longlisted for Orange Prize for Fiction 2012, *The Hindu* Literary Prize for

Idris Keeper of the Light in 2014, and Central Sahitya Akademi Award for her contribution to children's literature in 2013. Nair's other bestselling fictional works include: *The Better Man* (2002), *Mistress* (2003), *Cut Like Wound* (2012), *Chain of Custody* (2012), *The Lilac House* (2012), *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* (2016), and so on.

The novel *Ladies Coupé* (2001) is about women's conditions in the patriarchal society of the 90s, told with great insight, solidarity and, humour. The concept of writing such a book arose during one of Nair's train journeys itself: "When fifteen years ago, I was travelling in a ladies coupé, the women around me began talking . . . people talk more openly to strangers", responded Nair to *The Hindu*. (Anita Nair, An Interview with Behal Suchitra, *The Hindu*, 2 Dec. 2002). This is the reason why she keeps the title *Ladies Coupé*. She compared her novel to Geoffrey Chaucer's magnum opus, *The Canterbury Tales*, told by a band of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett at Canterbury. It was published in the year 2001 in India, and was later translated to more than 21 languages worldwide.

Ladies Coupé portrays the question for self-discovery and independence of a woman in a patriarchal society. For this, Nair uses journey as a metaphor in order to explain life as a series of meetings and departures, friendships and sweet memories, betrayals and loss. Akhilandeswari, a forty-five-year old, Brahmin, single woman, and an income tax clerk by profession, is the protagonist of the novel. She broke apart from the caste boundary by feeding on boiled eggs, and even broke away from her familial ties in order to rediscover herself. In the course of her journey in a ladies coupé, she meets five women passengers, unique in their own ways, and got a chance to discover their life in return for her own. The five lady co-passengers are, Janaki Prabhakar,

Prabha Devi, Margaret Shanti, Sheela Vasudevan, and Marikolanthu. All these women, though different from each other on the basis of their age, class, caste, experience, social and economic status, narrate tales that are interrelated and interwoven with each other. Through such an introspective journey, Akhila seeks the answer to her ultimate question that has been haunting her all her life: "Can a woman stay single and be happy, or does

she need a man to feel complete?" (Anita Nair in *Ladies Coupé*, 21). Ultimately, her problematic question got answered, she realizes that she needs a man, as a companion or as a partner to share her life with.

Nair's poignant novel, *Ladies Coupé*, traces the entwined life sketches of six women narrators journeying their lives in order to encounter with the various trysts and transmutations in their lives. Akhila, the protagonist of the novel, rediscovers herself at the end of her journey as a result of her tryst with the fellow travellers in the coupé. For the past forty five years of her life, she groped in darkness unfocused about her destination in life. The journey she decided to undertake is in turn the fruit of such a reconciliation: "Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rosecoloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space.

Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (Nair 2). Her unrequited desire to escape from the pangs of societal and familial ties is evident in the following lines: "She would go. She had to go, or she would go mad confined within the walls of the house and the life she was expected to live" (Nair 4).

Akhila's first transmutation in life came soon after her tryst with Katherine Webber, her only close female friend: "Here was a companion who knew what it was like to be her single and lonely" (Nair 87). Katherine boldly questioned the strict caste norms and superstition of the society: "I can't understand what your religion is all about. You consider eating an egg a sin. But it is perfectly acceptable to marry your uncle!" (Nair 15). Her friendship with Katherine brought with it certain hidden pleasures, and golden chance to explore the unexplored territories in life: "It was Katherine who brought an egg into Akhila's life" (Nair 85). She thus, broke away happily from the taboo of sticking on to a vegetarian diet: "From the Gurukula stage of life, she had moved directly to the Vanaprastha.

And she wanted no part of someone else's karmic flow" (Nair 86).

The unanticipated death of her father, had almost completely transformed Akhila to a stiff, precise, and an orderly woman: "It was perhaps in those years that a starch entered Akhila's soul. Imbuing her every action and word with a delicate film of stiffness that soon became her natural way to talk and be" (Nair 76). She became the "benjamin" of her family, and took care of their needs appropriately. Even to her family, she ceased to be a woman and turned just the breadwinner of it. Akhila being encumbered under the heavy responsibilities towards her family and the society, ended up in losing her own self-identity: "What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brothers and sisters had always called her

Akka. Elder Sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam" (Nair 84). Thus, Akhila's self-identity and individuality also transformed since then: "So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? . . . Did she sing? Did she dream? Did she weep for no reason?" (Nair 84).

One among the main instances that lead to Akhila's sudden transformation, was when she met Hari, her lover turned boyfriend. Although he was much younger than her, his face had a sort of captivating charm and innocence, which her Narsi lacked. He taught her the value of love – how to love and be loved: "Akhila's day suddenly had a bright spot. Hari . . . Slowly he began to fill Akhila's every thought and walking moment" (Nair 143). She felt her transformation to a real woman whenever he was around: "She had seen in his eyes everything a woman dared hope for from a man" (Nair 147).

Her mother's death marked yet another turning point in Akhila's life. Her sense of alienation and isolation shot up with this incident: "Five years ago when Amma died, the rhythm of Akhila's life

slipped again. What was she to do? How was she to live alone?" (Nair 155). Her life along with her sister Padma felt more uneasy as days passed by; her heart urged to break away from the shackles of familial ties: "What us'? Akhila wanted to demand. Isn't it time you left me alone to live my life? Akhila wished she had admitted to herself this overwhelming desire and told Padma how much she preferred to be on her own" (Nair 159). Hence, all such adverse circumstances spurred Akhila's psyche to embark on a journey towards rediscovering her misplaced self.

Akhila's tryst with the five lady co-passengers in the coupé ushered in a drastic transmutation within her. Her casual interaction with these women got her problematic questions solved at the end of her journey. Their life stories taught Akhila to cope with any hardships in life. She attained self-identity through her newly gained companionship. The first woman passenger in the coupé was Janaki Prabhakar, the eldest, and most experienced among all. She is a pampered wife, daughter, mother, and a typical traditional wife, who regarded marriage as the pride of a woman. She insists upon the fact that a woman needs a man to feel complete in life: "I believed that a women's duty was to get married. To be a good wife and mother" (Nair 23). Her marriage turned her to a fragile person, who completely depended on her husband to fulfill her needs: "I thought if I was tired of being this fragile creature Now I know that if I can cope, it wouldn't be the same if he wasn't there with me" (Nair 23). She dared to raise voice against her husband only on matters related to her son: "You just want to control him. You want everyone to do your bidding', she said, not caring who overhead" (Nair 30). Her emotional outburst is suggestive of her loss of individuality, submissiveness, and frustrations that lay underneath her long marital relationship. Despite all such dominance, Prabhakar was a very understanding, caring, and loving husband: "The beating of his heart slowed him down, sometimes it crashed in his

ears, but he didn't forget his place as a husband, father and provider" (Nair 31). Her breach with her son indeed moved her closer towards him: "I am tired of sharing you with everyone. I want you to myself" (Nair 38). Thus, Janaki's narration of her own story made Akhila feel more conscious of her desire for protection: "If I were to make up my mind based on what Janaki had to say of her life, then I should continue to live with my family. I might not love them, but at least they are there" (Nair 40). She also arrived at a conclusion that, a woman really needs a man to feel complete.

Sheela Vasudevan was the youngest lady co-passenger in the coupé with the least level of experience among them all. Her grandmother was the ultimate pillar of strength, and the soul of her family. She adored feminine virtues and appraised them: "Ammuma was a great one for manifestations of femininity. She appraised carefully every new woman she saw and most of them were found wanting" (Nair 67). She always instructed Sheela to keep a distance from men in general, as the society is less secure for a woman to enjoy her liberty. Her grandmother's motivational words made her attain mental strength and maturity at a very young age itself: "You mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (Nair 67). Thus, Sheela's life motivated Akhila to think wisely and show more maturity in decision making.

Margaret Shanti, the strong-willed co-passenger in the coupé, and symbol of both conformity and rebellion, taught Akhila tough lessons of surviving alone in life. Her life is inflicted with serious marital issues of male dominance, egoism, submissiveness, loss of individuality, and so on. She rose from a self-effacing, powerless, suppressed character to a powerful, strong-hearted woman with deep vengeance towards her oppressor. Margaret classified herself as such: "I classify myself as water.

Water that moistens. Water that heals. Water that forgets. Water that accepts. Water that flows tirelessly. Water that destroys" (Nair 96). Ebenezer Paulraj, the domineering, commanding, and ruling husband, reduced Margaret Shanti to a mere puppet in his very skilful hands. Shanti introduced him as follows: "Authority in every fibre, priggish righteousness in every breadth. The quintessential school principal. And my husband. Ebenezer Paulraj" (Nair 98).

Shanti, a girl with a brilliant academic career and a warm and vibrant personality is reduced to a nondescript character by the manipulative streak of Ebenezer Paulraj. His subtle cruelties towards the children in his school got repeated with his wife too. Shanti's hatred towards him multiplied several folds with the unnatural abortion enforced upon her. Her transformation to a new being is evident thus: "For the first time, I felt angry. All the best! What did he mean by that? Was I going in to write an exam or recite a poem? . . . All the best for what? I had nothing to do but lie there while they scraped my baby off the inside of my womb. Zygote off the inner membrane of my uterus, if you please, Ebe" (Nair 109).

Her hatred towards him burned like fire: "I mouthed the words: I HATE HIM. I HATE MY HUSBAND. I HATE EBENEZER PAULRAJ. HATE HIM. HATE HIM" (Nair 98).

Through her tactical move of overfeeding him, she began to play her revenge upon, in the same coin itself. He slowly lost his haughtiness and started to depend more on Shanti to fulfill his needs. Her trickiness is revealed in the lines below: "When you add water to sulphuric acid, it splutters at first. But soon loses its strength; it loses its bite. The trick is to know when to add it, and how much" (Nair 134). Thus, Margaret Shanti's suggestion for Akhila is: "The truth as I know it and as I live it is that a woman needs a man but not to make her feel whole" (Nair 95).

Hence, Shanti's words imparted moral strength and support to Akhila to live independently, forever.

Prabha Devi, the middle-aged lady co-passenger in the coupé, fall a victim to parental prejudice and a dominating marital relationship. She was trained to be a model, caring and loving wife since her childhood. Devi's interest towards the Western culture gave her a breakthrough from the old Indian tradition. She received a new insight on life: "Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Such poise, such confidence, such celebration of life and beauty. Prabha Devi wanted that for herself" (Nair 17). At times, she felt a prick of conscious hovering around for compromising with her own self-identity: "Am I not a person by myself? Am I to be treated as a mere extension of someone else's personality? Jagdeesh's Mrs and not more" (Nair 180). She emerged both as a passionate lady, and as a stern decision maker. Her self-realization demanded that, one's freedom is in one's own hands and not in the hands of others. Her swimming lessons in fact helped her reclaim her lost self: "When Prabha Devi's fingers touched the other end of the pool wall, she straightened. And Prabha Devi knew that life would never be the same again. That nothing else that happened would ever measure up to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had stayed afloat" (Nair 195). Prabha Devi revitalized her strength by tracing her own passion. This aided her in attaining mental stability and a renewed, rich outlook about the immense possibilities of life: "Of course, it wasn't just like that. There was a cause and a effect like there always is. Except that in my case, I was both the cause and the effect" (Nair 167). Prabha Devi's life taught Akhila best lessons in attaining selfworth and individuality through one's own toil, as evident in the following lines: "Perhaps more than any of the other women, Prabha Devi was closest to her in age and manner, too. So if Prabha Devi could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float, she could do the same, Akhila

thought. I too must learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks" (Nair 208).

Marikolanthu, the sixth passenger in the coupé is the most pathetic, and at the same time the most transgressive among all. She is ostracized by the upper middle class women in the coupé, as evident thus: "seated at the farthest end" (Nair 17), while the other five women occupy the centre and share a bond of sorority. Her view on life is completely different from the rest of the women in the coupé. Pain and agony mutilated her soul since her childhood, which in turn spirited her life with an extra vigour from nowhere. Her opinion on life is as such: "Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as a man. Women can do much more. But a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself. It does not show itself naturally" (Nair 209,210). She was raped, mutilated, exploited and at last blamed for no reason of her's: "With my past, my future too had been torched alive" (Nair 240,241).

Marikolanthu had undergone humiliation and debasement, which made her to negate her own son, Muthu, born out of Murugesan's lust. The turning point in her life came when she saw the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre, and Muthu tending to it. Her shocking selfrealization changed her attitude towards Muthu, and in turn towards her life itself:

Remember what I told you about the roles in my life having no chronology; no sense of tightness. What happened then was that I for the first time, I wrested control of my destiny. I wasn't going to wage wars or rule kingdoms. All I wanted was a measure of happiness. All I wanted to be was Muth's mother. . . . For so long now, I had been content to remain a sister to real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother. Surrogate lover.

But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing. (Nair 268)

Marikolanthu's intervention in Akhila's life made her transmutation complete. She is the ultimate epitome of self-effacing, illiterate, impoverished, and oppressed class of the society. Her palpable real life situations touched and healed Akhila of all her negativities and misconceptions about life. Akhila's ultimate transgression began from where Marikolanthu had stopped. At the end of her journey, Akhila's life stood completely transformed.

Akhila's transmutation attains completeness with her change of attitude and outlook towards the society, as resonant thus: "Sometimes people stare at her. They are not used to the sight of a single woman all by herself. A foreigner they can understand, but an Indian woman. She walks past them slowly, not increasing her pace or letting them know that she can read their looks. It doesn't matter. She doesn't care any more" (Nair 270). Her self-discovery is reflected in her words as such: "And so it was Akhila. Elderly spinster. Older sister. Once the breadwinner of the family. . . . But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her any more 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" (Nair 270). She gained the mental courage to lead her life alone:

Akhila discovers that she likes being alone. She has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone. It may not be what she dreamt it to be, but at least she would have made the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now. That she be allowed to try and experience it That she will have the courage to pick up from where she left off and begin again. That as much as she desired Hari, she desires life more. (Nair 271,275)

Her decision to regain her lost love, Hari, came through such a self-realization of hers.

The life story of Akhila ends on an optimistic note, echoing the auspicious reunion between Hari and Akhila: "The telephone on the table near the bed rings. Akhila walked towards it. Her heart races. She wonders: could it be him? Hari's voice is low and cautious; incredulous, too. 'Hello', he says. 'This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari'" (Nair 276).

In the novel, *Ladies Coupé*, Nair has turned the coupé to a meeting platform for her lady narrators. The coupé, thus became an utopian world of ultimate intimacy and security to the women folk. Hence, through her characters, the author emphasises the quality of good listening as a cure to all the maladies of mind. The five lady co-passengers in the coupé had already experienced transmutation at some point in their lives. Their timely involvement in the journey indeed metamorphosed Akhila's life. Thus, her sudden growth and empowerment is an attribute to these five women co-passengers. Their life experiences, comprising bitter and sweet ones, became the stimuli to Akhila's mental transformation. They did not enforce their ideologies upon Akhila, but justified their views on life.

Nair has thus, valiantly portrayed some characters who have come out of the shackles of bondage in their struggle to regain self-identity and self-esteem. All of them possess the strong urge to survive in different ways of inversion, perversion, and subversion. Her characters depict different verdures or shades of life – both bright and dull. Thus, Nair's characters are a convergence of different hues of life. The novel thus, acts as the chief custodian of social change, tracing the clear cut evolution of accredited women narrators, with a new freshness and charm.

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