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Claiming Selfhood in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

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Abstract

Ladies Coupé (2001) puts six strangers in a train compartment and lets each one tell her own story. This paper looks closely at four of them: Akhila, Marikolanthu, Prabha Devi, and Margaret. Using Beauvoir's idea of woman as "Other" and Woolf's argument about money and a room of one's own, it traces how each woman moves, slowly and at real cost, out of a life built around other people's needs. Akhila earns a wage and a degree, but fear and family duty keep hold of her long after money should have freed her. Marikolanthu loses her schooling, her consent, and her own child, before finally acting on her own account. Prabha Devi never leaves her marriage, but finds in a swimming pool a piece of life that answers to no one but her. Margaret has education and a career, exactly what Woolf says a woman needs, and still finds her body and choices controlled by her husband, until she turns her scientific training into a quiet act of revenge. None of these four stories fits a single pattern; Nair gives four separate, sometimes uncomfortable ways a woman can start being a person in her own right.

Keywords: Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé*, Female Assertion, Beauvoir, Woolf.

INTRODUCTION

Ladies Coupé (2001) tells the story of six women, strangers to each other, who share a train compartment and, over the course of one journey, tell each other the stories of their lives. Akhila, at the centre of it, is forty-five, unmarried, and has spent close to three decades supporting her family. She is travelling alone, possibly for the first time, thinking about a question she has never let herself ask out loud:

can a woman actually manage on her own? The five women she meets, Janaki, Prabha Devi, Margaret, Sheela, and Marikolanthu, each answer that question differently, out of very different lives.

The novel comes at a particular point in Indian English women's writing. Earlier novelists such as Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya had already made the inner lives of Indian women serious literary material, usually

inside one marriage or one household. Nair does something different here: rather than a single woman's confinement traced in depth, she spreads the narrative across six women of different classes, ages, and marital situations, all thrown together for one journey. This paper picks up that comparative method and pushes it further, applying a sustained theoretical reading to four of the six.

Akhila, Marikolanthu, Prabha Devi, and Margaret were chosen because they cover the widest ground in the novel, from servitude to wealth, from a woman who never marries to two very different wives, each reaching whatever selfhood she manages by a different route: paid work, survival and revenge, a private physical achievement, and professional skill turned inward. The approach here is close reading: following each woman's story in her own words, as the novel gives them to us, and setting the pattern of her choices and silences against the two theoretical frameworks below. What follows takes the four routes one at a time, first placing the discussion against existing work on the novel, and then asking what the four add up to when read side by side.

Ambreen reads the novel through class. She splits Nair's women into two groups, educated working women like Akhila and Margaret against women largely kept at home like Prabha Devi, Janaki, and Marikolanthu, and argues that the real instrument of women's marginalisation in the novel is not any one villain but human relationships themselves (Ambreen, 2021, p. 144). For Ambreen, travel is what drives the women toward self-realisation, and she reads Akhila's journey at the end through Beauvoir's language of Self and Other (Ambreen, 2021, p. 149). This is a useful account of the novel's overall feminist shape, but it doesn't apply Beauvoir in detail to each woman individually.

Closer to this paper's concerns is Mitra's work on care and affect in the novel. Mitra argues that several of Nair's women, Akhila and

Marikolanthu among them, resist patriarchal and caste-based oppression through what she calls "malignant care": ordinary domestic or maternal labour turned deliberately into weapons against the people who have wronged them (Mitra, 2023). She reads Akhila's egg-cooking as an upper-caste woman weaponising caste disgust against her sister, and Marikolanthu's decision to place her son at Murugesan's loom as an act that exploits their mutual ignorance of who he really is.

This paper doesn't disagree with Mitra so much as read the same two scenes from a different angle. Where she foregrounds caste and the ethics of care, this paper reads both moments as assertions of selfhood against lives built entirely around duty. What this paper adds is a Woolf-and-Beauvoir reading that runs across four women instead of two, and, through Prabha Devi and Margaret especially, a look at forms of selfhood that have nothing to do with caste-marked domestic labour at all, a private physical achievement in one case, a professional skill turned toward the home in the other.

Two texts anchor the reading that follows: Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Beauvoir's basic claim is that patriarchal society treats man as the default human being and reduces woman to his "Other," understood only in relation to him, as wife, mother, or daughter, and rarely granted any standing of her own (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 26). Her more famous line, that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 330), argues that femininity as society defines it is built through upbringing and enforcement, not given by biology. Applied to these four women, the question becomes fairly constant: does she exist for herself, or only through the men and family around her? Beauvoir's pairing of immanence and transcendence sharpens this: immanence is a life folded in on itself, repeating domestic duty without end; transcendence is movement past that, through work and decision.

Woolf supplies the material half of the argument. A woman needs money and a room of her own to become anything beyond what circumstance hands her, meaning an income, and with it privacy, time, and freedom from constant interruption (Woolf, 1929, p. 4). This isn't only about comfort. Money is what makes the rest possible: space, silence, an hour that belongs to no one else.

None of the four women gets the same theoretical treatment here. Akhila is read through both money and space, since she has one without ever quite securing the other. Marikolanthu is read through material deprivation and the long, hard road to claiming her own voice. Prabha Devi is read through personal space and self-definition, though hers has nothing to do with money and everything to do with a swimming pool. Margaret is read through professional identity and its limits, since education and income turn out not to buy her any real authority in her marriage.

Akhila: A Wage Without a Life of Her Own

Akhila effectively becomes head of her household at nineteen, the moment her father dies: "When Akhila's father died, two things happened: Sundays became just another day of the week and Akhila became the man of the family" (Nair, 2001, p. 75). A compassionate appointment gets her a job in the Income Tax Department (Nair, 2001, p. 75), and from there her salary is what keeps her mother and younger siblings going.

There's a real contradiction in her situation. She has exactly what Woolf says a woman needs, an income earned by her own labour, and yet it doesn't buy her the freedom Woolf's argument would predict. She's too frightened to imagine living alone, so completely that she doesn't need anyone else to say it for her; she supplies the thought herself, watching an elderly couple at a railway platform and concluding, unprompted, "A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (Nair, 2001, p. 16). It's also Beauvoir's

argument playing out as interior monologue: something installed by others eventually becomes indistinguishable from a thought a woman believes she arrived at on her own.

When her sister Padma suggests they live together after their mother dies, Akhila agrees, even though something in her wants the opposite:

Akhila wished she had spoken then. Akhila wished she had admitted to herself this overwhelming desire and told Padma how much she preferred to be on her own. Instead, she retreated into silence. (Nair, 2001, p. 161)

She gives up a room of her own almost the moment she might have claimed one, choosing silence over a need she has already recognised in herself.

At thirty-five she makes a choice that fits Woolf's argument about intellectual freedom more directly, enrolling in an open university history programme: "There is probably no one more suited to study history than a spinster, she thought. To trace the rise and fall of civilizations" (Nair, 2001, p. 85). What matters here is that, maybe for the first time, she's building something that answers only to her own mind.

Life with Padma after their mother's death slowly wears down what little independence Akhila still has in her own home. A fight over an egg, an ordinary private pleasure she's kept since girlhood, turns into an unexpectedly loaded act of defiance against caste propriety: "What do I have to be ashamed of? It's just an egg after all" (Nair, 2001, p. 161). Things come to a head when Padma, who depends on Akhila's salary, accuses her of hiding a love affair, and Akhila slaps her, the one outburst of open anger in an otherwise carefully controlled life.

Her one romantic relationship, with a much younger man named Hari, shows the same fear at work. She insists at first, "I do not

want to be seen as a woman. To do so would be to open a Pandora's box within me" (Nair, 2001, p. 142), and later, anticipating a rejection Hari has never actually threatened, wonders whether he will "regret being bound to her when he could have been with someone younger and more suitable" (Nair, 2001, pp. 152-153). She ends the relationship first, on the strength of a judgment she supplied to herself, which is close to what Beauvoir means when she says a woman can internalise society's evaluation of her so completely that no one else needs to be in the room to enforce it.

It's the coupé itself, and what she hears there, that starts to loosen something in Akhila: "They could be her, Akhila thought. She could be them" (Nair, 2001, p. 90). By the end of the novel, alone in Kanyakumari, she calls Hari, the man she once walked away from, and gives him her full name: "This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari" (Nair, 2001, p. 276). This isn't a slide back into dependency. She calls him on her own terms, after an entire novel's worth of learning what that actually means.

Marikolanthu: From Bare Endurance to a Claimed Life

Marikolanthu starts in want. Her father dies after a long illness, her schooling ends two years later, and she goes to work beside her mother in the wealthy Chettiar household. It isn't a question of ability. It's money, exactly the thing Woolf treats as the root of women's powerlessness.

A fragile closeness grows between Marikolanthu and Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of the family, but even this comes hedged with warnings, not least from her own mother: "we shouldn't expect anything from anyone. That way there will be no disappointment" (Nair, 2001, p. 221). That single line is Beauvoir's argument in miniature.

Puberty brings a whole set of new rules imposed on her body without her say. She remembers it directly:

During the course of the next few days, I learnt that my life had changed forever. I was not to hug my brothers or cuddle up to them when we slept... I was to always cover my bosom with the davani... I was to avoid being in the company of men, young and old alike, as men couldn't be trusted. (Nair, 2001, p. 225)

None of this is chosen. This is exactly what Beauvoir means by a girl "becoming" a woman: not biology, but rules that appear the instant her body is read as adult and female by the people around her.

A brief window opens when Marikolanthu is sent to help two foreign doctors in Vellore, who teach her to read and write in English: "Instead of glass bangles, I began to collect words and these would always be with me" (Nair, 2001, p. 232). It's almost exactly Woolf's logic. Bangles are gifts, and gifts can be taken back; words, once learned, are hers alone. A small, fragile room of her own, made out of vocabulary.

That window closes when Murugesan, a relative of the Chettiar family, rapes her during a visit home. She goes home and bathes rather than seek help, as if the act could be washed off instead of reported. Looking back later, she judges herself without mercy:

What should I have done? What would you have done? Now I know... I should have rushed to the Chettiar's courtyard the way I was, with torn clothes, mussed up hair, his fluids and mine trickling down my legs, and terror in my eyes... I should have wept and stormed and let the world and the Chettiar see me as a victim. (Nair, 2001, p. 241)

When she becomes pregnant and finally tells her mother, she gets blame instead of sympathy: "You were raped and you kept quiet about it. A man steals your virginity and you think nothing is going to change... You expect me to believe that?" (Nair, 2001, p. 243). Sujata

Akka's husband won't even accept that the rape happened, insisting "the girl must have led him on" (Nair, 2001, p. 245). Her own account of what happened carries less weight than the family's reputation and the men's convenience, more or less exactly what Beauvoir means when she says a woman's word about her own body is routinely set aside.

Sent away to give birth in secret, Marikolanthu refuses to nurse or hold the baby and leaves him with relatives. Years later, without either Murugesan or the boy knowing who the boy really is, she quietly arranges for her own abandoned son to work under brutal conditions at Murugesan's loom, and takes a private profit from it: "A perverse satisfaction flared within me. Murugesan might not know it but I had sold him his own son" (Nair, 2001, p. 265). Watching from hiding as her son lights Murugesan's funeral pyre without knowing whose son he is, she feels not satisfaction but an unexpected shame, for treating her own child exactly the way she was once treated, as something to use and set aside.

By the end, she rejects the name she was given years earlier, "sister to the real thing," always standing in for somebody else's life. Instead she wants "to be the real thing" (Nair, 2001, p. 268): to actually be her son's mother, with a life that belongs to her instead of one borrowed from someone else's. This is close to Beauvoir's transcendence, though nothing about it feels triumphant. Marikolanthu's story doesn't end happily. It ends with her choosing, for once, to act for herself instead of simply enduring whatever is done to her.

Prabha Devi: A Freedom Found Without Leaving

Prabha Devi is raised, from adolescence, into exactly the wife her mother had once been trained to become: skilled at embroidery and cooking, moving "with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant, womanly" (Nair, 2001, p. 170). None of this deference is

natural. It's built, deliberately, over years, until it looks like nature.

Marriage to Jagdeesh turns her life into one long act of waiting:

For the next many years that was all Prabha Devi did. Wait. For Jagdeesh to come home. For the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph... Waiting for something to happen while her life swished past in a blur of insignificant days. (Nair, 2001, p. 172)

It's about as pure a picture of immanence as the novel offers: a life with no momentum of its own, moving only when someone else's milestones require it.

A brief spell of confidence, after a trip abroad, turns dangerous when Pramod, a friend of her husband's, assaults her in her own home:

Prabha Devi wanted to scream, shriek, rake her fingernails down his face... But the shock of what was happening to her froze her into saying nothing, doing nothing... This is not happening to me. This violation of my body is not happening to me. This is just a nightmare. (Nair, 2001, p. 182)

What follows isn't anger but dread: dread of being branded a "brazen woman" (Nair, 2001, p. 183) instead of recognised as someone who was wronged. It's a strikingly clear case of Beauvoir's Other: even after being assaulted, it's Prabha Devi who braces for blame, not the man responsible. She answers by undoing whatever confidence had briefly surfaced, retreating back into embroidery, pickling, and the routines of the house.

Years later, shortly past her fortieth birthday, she realises she no longer knows what her own voice sounds like, and asks herself, with rising anger, "Where have I been all this while? ... What was I doing all this while?" (Nair, 2001, p. 168). This, not anything external, is what eventually pushes her toward the swimming

pool, against her husband's baffled indifference. Learning is slow and frightening, but by the sixth day she floats across the pool unaided three times, and something reorganises itself completely: "I am afloat. I am afloat. My body no longer matters. I have this. I have conquered fear" (Nair, 2001, p. 195).

The pool becomes her room of her own, a space that belongs to no one but her, untouched by husband, children, or household duty. What she finds is quieter, and stays inside the marriage. But it's the same question the novel keeps asking through every woman in it: can a woman exist fully as herself, or only in relation to the people who depend on her?

Margaret: What Education and Income Fail to Secure

Margaret Shanthi teaches chemistry and is married to Ebenezer Paulraj, the headmaster of a well-regarded school. She opens her own account with calculated bluntness: "God didn't make Ebenezer Paulraj a fat man. I did" (Nair, 2001, p. 96). Unlike the other three women here, Margaret goes into her marriage already educated and employed, a useful test of whether qualifications and a salary are enough, by themselves, to secure independence.

Eighteen months in, her pregnancy is met not with joy but with her husband's insistence on abortion, argued through a mix of theology and cold logic:

First of all, the Bible never mentions the word abortion... After 'ensoulment'... Right now that cell in you is just that: a cell with no soul or feelings... Just think of this as a tumour that has to be removed. (Nair, 2001, p. 106)

Frightened and unsure, Margaret goes along with it, and is left alone with her guilt while Ebenezer, waiting outside, offers only "All the best!" (Nair, 2001, p. 109) as she's taken in for the procedure. Beauvoir's point about a woman's body being governed by someone

else's decisions could hardly be clearer. What's worth noticing is the method as much as the outcome: Ebenezer doesn't just overrule her, he builds an entire argument, theological and medical at once, so his decision looks reasoned rather than coercive, until Margaret's own grief has nowhere legitimate to land.

When she raises her unhappiness with her own mother, she's told flatly that keeping a marriage happy is "a woman's responsibility" (Nair, 2001, p. 112), since men can't be expected to manage it themselves. The question she wants to ask, "What about me? ... Don't I have a right to have any expectations of him?" (Nair, 2001, p. 112), goes unspoken, because she already knows it won't be answered.

With no direct way to fight back, Margaret turns her professional training into a slow, deliberate campaign, naming her plan Aqua Regia after the acid that can dissolve even gold: it would be, she says, "capable of dissolving shame and remorse and keeping my hate for him intact" (Nair, 2001, p. 125). She starts cooking heavier meals for Ebenezer, feeding his vanity while planning his physical decline. Over months he grows fat and dependent, exactly as she intends: "Fat found its home. What was mine became his" (Nair, 2001, p. 133).

This long, patient revenge connects to Beauvoir's account of the Other in a way none of the other three women quite match. Margaret is educated, employed, equipped for independence by every external measure, and still has no real power inside her marriage: she can't keep the child she wanted, can't be heard about her own body, can't shape her own future. Denied any open form of resistance, she settles for the one channel still open to her, quiet, invisible control over her husband's body, carried out with the same precision her training gave her. What she does end up with is a form of power over her own circumstances, however troubling and roundabout its shape.

DISCUSSION

What holds these four together isn't a shared outcome but a shared refusal, in very different degrees and registers, to stay only what Beauvoir calls the Other, a woman legible only through the men and family around her. Each becomes, in her own partial way, someone who acts, even where the action is small, quiet, or morally uncertain.

Grouping the four by what enables their movement, rather than by where they end up, sharpens the pattern further. Akhila and Margaret both have exactly what Woolf names as prerequisite, income, and in Margaret's case professional training as well, yet neither woman's material security turns easily into personal freedom: Akhila's wages support her family for decades before she risks anything like a room of her own, and Margaret's chemistry degree gets turned inward, into a weapon used within the marriage rather than a way out of it. Marikolanthu and Prabha Devi, by contrast, arrive at their own versions of selfhood with little or no economic advantage behind them, Marikolanthu through endurance and a troubling act of revenge, Prabha Devi through a physical skill she teaches herself almost in secret, in a marriage where money was never the obstacle. Between the four of them, Woolf's economic argument clearly doesn't cover every route to selfhood in this novel; sometimes a room of one's own is built out of three unaided lengths of a swimming pool rather than out of a salary.

CONCLUSION

No single template explains how these four women move from duty to selfhood: economic independence, survival and reprisal, a private physical achievement, professional skill turned toward domestic control, in each case a means that, on its own, falls short of the freedom it seems to promise. Read through Beauvoir and Woolf, the move from duty to selfhood in *Ladies Coupé* is always partial, always shaped by the pressures of one particular life.

This reading also shows where a Woolf-and-Beauvoir framework agrees with, and departs from, existing work on the novel. Ambreen reads the novel's feminism at the level of class and the whole cast; Mitra reads Akhila and Marikolanthu specifically through caste and care labour. Applying Woolf and Beauvoir to each woman in turn shows that Nair hands out the resources for selfhood, money, education, physical space, professional skill, unevenly across her six women, and that extending the framework to Prabha Devi and Margaret proves this interest in autonomy isn't limited to the novel's caste-marked or economically disadvantaged characters alone.

That refusal to settle on one template is what gives the novel its staying power within Indian women's fiction. Rather than answering the question of what a woman's freedom looks like, it offers four different, equally honest answers, and leaves the reader to hold them together.

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