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TRAIN AS A CHARACTER IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPÉ*

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ABSTRACT

Anita Nair is a living postmodern Indian woman writer in English. *Ladies Coupé* can be termed as Anita Nair's magnum opus because it has accredited her as a versatile writer. The novel tells the story of the heroin Akhila, who boarded a train for a long journey in order to take a crucial decision in her life. She comes back to the railway station with her return ticket as a changed woman who has attained what she desired. Train serves as an important setting in many novels. There are certain cases in which the setting of the writing takes up the role of a character on its own. In this paper I am trying to analyse how train acted as an ally to her in solving her problems. The train has taken up various roles in her life. In a sense the train is being personified in this novel. Hereby I am doing a character analysis of the train in the novel *Ladies Coupé*.

Key Words: Train, ladies coupe, journey, setting, personification, decision

Setting is the context in which a story unfolds. Setting grounds the writing in reality, without which the characters will be in vacuum. At times the setting may act as a character in their own right. Among the forms of transport as a setting for novels and stories, train seems to be the most popular. The train gives a sense of being in a separate universe, though not actually dislocated from the real world. This quality of the train contributes to its allure. And some famous authors — from Agatha Christie to Ian Fleming, Graham Greene to JK Rowling and Khushwant Singh to Satyajit Ray — used it to great effect. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* tells the story of women's search for freedom and her condition in a male dominated society. When Akhila's life reaches to an impasse, she decides to board a train for a journey and believes that she could take a decision about her life after that train journey. As the title suggests, *Ladies coupé* of Anita Nair tells the story in which the train poses an important role. A ladies coupe is a special room with second class reservation for overnight trains in India. When people think of trains and their functions they simply view them as modes of transportation. In literature this is not solely the case while it is true that trains are included in the setting, because the characters of the story are departing, arriving or currently riding in the train.

This novel is about six women who meet each other inside the coupe. Taking into consideration the importance of the train it can be counted as a character itself. It is the story of Akhila, a 45 year old Indian woman, her family's sole breadwinner, whom everyone takes for granted but without whom they would all be lost. One day she gets seized by a nameless desire to get on to a train and travel to the farthest point on the map of India, Kanyakumari. She gives in, and finds herself with five other women- Janaki, Margaret, Prabha

Devi, Sheela and Marikolunthu. The novel shows how she becomes her own person after a train ride in a ladies coupe with other women, who in the space of one night change Akhila's life by telling their stories, but reminding her that she must think for herself. The life of the protagonist of this novel is entirely dependent on a train. The train is presented as a life-like character in this novel. It is the only witness of the revelation that occurred to the protagonist.

The novel begins with the smell of a railway station. It brings a sense of escape to the protagonist. It seems that it is like a desire for her to board a train to escape from her present life which she hated: "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 her world, with her eyes walking ahead. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of escaping" (Nair 1). It is a new experience for her "she has never climbed into an overnight train to a place she never been before" (1). Her desire to board a train and escape from what being endured is fortified through her feelings: "A snarl of maggot-like notions swam through the redness of blood and thought till Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (3).

She boarded the train with lots of expectations. She expected that it will help her to take an important decision in her life. "She needn't have come into the station but she felt she had to see by daylight what was to be the beginning of her escape route. The platform was deserted. Yet, she felt a hollowness in the pit of her stomach as though any minute the train she was to board would pull into the station and it would be time for her to leave" (5). It foreshadows the anguish of her life, the earnest urge to escape. Here the train acts as a protector who protects her from the agonies of her life.

When we consider the train as a whole the railway station, ticket counter etc. are also implied in it. They can be termed as organs when we consider the train as a body. The author has given a life-like description of a railway station to ascertain this:

The long concrete corridor that stretches into the night segmented by signboards and the light and shadow of station lights. The moving hands of a clock beating an urgent rhythm to the din of mounted TV screens and the creak of trolleys laden with baskets and sacks. The crackling of the public address system as it hisses into life, announcing arrivals and departures. Jasmine wound in the hair sweat and hair-oil, talcum powder and stale food, moist gunny bags and the raw green-tinged reek of bamboo baskets. (1)

The reservation counter is also not spared. Her contempt towards the treatment of female community in the society is expressed here:

Akhila read the board above the line. Ladies, Senior Citizens and Handicapped Persons. She did not know if she could feel angry or venerated. There was a certain old-fashioned charm, a rare chivalry in this gesture by the Railway Board that pronounced a woman shouldn't be subject to the hustle and bustle, lecherous looks, groping hands, sweaty armpits and General Queue. But why spoil it all by clubbing women with senior citizens and handicapped persons? (6)

Here the train acquires the character of a catalyst. It aids in catalysing her thought process.

It is being the "peak season with everyone wanting to go to Kerala on holiday, and there are hordes of devotees on their way to Sabarimala" (6). What she got is a berth in a second class compartment in the ladies coupe. When her friend informed her that she "will be struck with five other women who will all want to know the story of your life" (7) the gold bells in her ears ringed. Her friend knew that she is not a person who likes to share about herself to others and didn't like incessant chatting. But here the protagonist is going to board the train only for that. Just to talk with others, to know their life, to share her problems to others, to gather opinions.

She climbed the first step on the ladder of her contrive by boarding the train. The train began to move and Akhila looked around her. There was a woman of her age and two younger women in the coupe"

(17). They introduced themselves to each other. "The woman next to Akhila opened a small basket and took out a few oranges" (18). She shared it with others. "The scent of oranges filled the coupe. And with it a qt camaraderie sprung between them (18)." They began to talk each other. The train serves as a place of bonding. Here they tell each other their stories of adventures. Had they been transported in a bus this bonding may not have occurred. Being in train allowed them face each other. In the due course Akhila unraveled the question which haunts her: "As far as I am concerned, marriage is unimportant. Companionship, yes, I would like that. The problem is, I wish to live by myself but everyone tells me that a woman can't live alone. What do you think? Can woman live by herself?" (21). She was very lucky enough to have a group of adjusting women in her coupe. They were all ready to share their lives with the protagonist.

In Indian culture there is no privacy in the trains. All are exposed to others. Though there is no privacy in the train it does not mean that everyone should open up to others. However, we cannot see the same situation in a bus. If the travellers in this train are placed in a bus they won't open up like this. It is the special atmosphere of the train which persuades them to do so. This adds up the catalytic nature of the train, as it catalyses to open up their lives in front of others. The prospect of the fact that they would never see each other again made them tell each other whatever they choose. "Akhila knew she could tell these women whatever she chose to. Her secrets, desires, and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted" (20).

The train has been used as a metaphor in this novel. The train becomes a metaphor of the womb which carries different lives in it, with all its pain and feelings:

There was silence in the coupe. For moment, Akhila had thought they had established a connection. Fetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other's lives, aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls wouldn't go beyond this night of the contained space. (22)

The train pitched and heaved through the night. In that cold night the train attains the characteristic of a mother whose rhythm of movement lull the passenger into sleep. "Akhila shut her eyes and tried to let the rhythm of the train to lull her to sleep. And into the past..." (42). The cradling and rocking of the train adds up to its motherly nature. "How easily the memories tumbled tonight. How effortless it was to remember when the coupe cradled and rocked; a mother that stroked the brow and said: child, think on Chills dream on" (90). It is this caring and soothing of train persuades people to opt train for night journey than any other means of transport. Train is considered to be the safest mode.

Though the train exhibits a motherly caring and protecting character, it has a bad side too, as if the dichotomy between the good and bad, which is a prominent feature of human beings: "Akhila heard the compartment door clang open. She peered through the window to catch the glimpse of who it was. The trains were not as safe as they used to be. All sorts of people got in and committed all kinds of crimes. This was a safe sector, but even then one had to be careful" (17).

Though she felt the train as insecure in the beginning, it soon acquired the quality of a protector who carried her to her final destination safely. The protagonist's attribution to the train as insecure in the beginning and protector later shows the conflict in her mind. She compares herself with the train; she feels that she is the moving train. In the beginning of her train journey there was uncertainty about her future. At that time she felt the train as insecure. When there befell a ray of hope "With that thought Akhila felt a slow gathering of joy. A thin stream that let loose tributaries of trickling hope. An anticipation that what she had set out to do might not all be in vain. That Akhila would triumph one way or the other (90-91)." She feels the train as a protector:

"Akhila settled back on the berth. The fiery, noisy mating of the wheel and track echoed through her head. She pulled the sheet to her chin and closed her eyes. For the first time, she felt protected. Sheltered from her own self. The train knew where it was headed. She didn't have to tell the train what to do. The train would stay awake while she slept" (91).

This is not the first train journey of the protagonist. She was a commuter in a train when she lived at Ambattur. "In those first years the train ride was the part of routine. Akhila knew every station, every landmark, every level crossing, every ditch that ran alongside" (138). The most important events of her life took place in the train. It was in the train that she fell in love with Hari who was much younger than her, which reached up to the level of lovemaking. The obscurity of a happy married life in future forced her to leave him, the pain of which haunted her life then. She bid farewell to him in a train. Thus the train is a witness of her tragic love story. Their paths never crossed again. The train journeys she had then were wearisome. She always longed for him. But no others came to know about this. Everything was safely hidden in the train. By this the train is attributed the quality of a shoulder to cry upon, a cover to shade off her secrets.

The scenes she saw outside while traveling like lush landscape, paddy fields with myriad colours etc. gives a positive energy to her:

Akhila gazed at the landscape that whizzed past her. The lushness made her eyes smart. She had never seen so many shades of green. The train ran alongside paddy fields fringed with coconut palms. It was harvest time. Yellow stacks of paddy lay supine on the brown thirsty earth. Yellow and brown, green and gold...how restful the landscape seemed even though change was so much a part of it. (196)

Thus the train acts as an energizer which supplies mental power to its travelers. It shows us the myriad colours of the nature. It gives us a feeling of a blessed life, and thus erases our sorrows in a soothing manner. It helped to bring blooms on her life. She felt a real change in herself. "I am not the one who boarded the train last night, she thought" (208). Thus that train journey changed the course of her life.

Akhila is drawn by the life of her co-passengers and finally evolves to lead her life on her terms instead of retrospectively her previous choices. She finds answer to her question through that train journey. Here the train acts as a good friend, one who helps us when we are needy. "She will wait one more hour and then she will have to leave for the railway station. To wrest the reins of her life back, she thinks, looking at her return ticket" (209). Thus to our surprise Akhila is ready to go back with lot of satisfaction. She could achieve what she desired when she boarded the train to Kanyakumari.

The train acts as an ally to Akhila, who helps her in myriad ways in various situations of her life. Thus this novel effectively employed the personification of the train. There is an allegation against Indian authors that, despite their popularity, the railways and trains are yet to get their due from Indian authors. But Anita Nair has brilliantly demolished this allegation against Indian authors. We can't leave unnoticed the importance of the train which becomes an important character in this novel.

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