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Seeking Comfort in the Same Sex: An Analysis of Female Characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Anita Nair, a popular English writer was born in Kerala. She is a living postmodern Indian writer. Unlike the novelists of the thirties Anita Nair exhibits confidence in tackling new themes and experiments with new techniques and approaches to handle those themes. *Ladies Coupe* (2001) is her second novel and it has been translated to 27 languages. In 2002, it was selected as one of the five best novels in India. This paper is an attempt to study “Seeking Comfort in the same sex – an analysis of female characters in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*” shifts its valence from homoeroticism to homosociality, at least in the larger scheme of the novel. Nair uses the familiar narrative format of a shared journey intersecting with shared confessions: she the humdrum space of a woman-only coupe in a railway compartment into a space of intimate exchanges. The common thread running through these autobiographical fragments is the story of Akhilandeswari. “spinster, government employee, eater of eggs,” the turning point of whose life is a decisive break from her parasitical family that she has supported since her father’s death” (Nair 90). This break takes the form of an impulsive, unplanned train journey to Kanyakumari, the southernmost point of the Indian Peninsula, the “Lands end” of Akila’s imagination, the spatial point farthest from the boundaries of unwelcome domestic responsibilities. Throughout the length of the journey— in which Akhila finds herself in an all-woman railway compartment— the narration alternates between Akhila’s reminiscences of her gradual, unwilling cooptation into the role of the family breadwinner and personal narratives by her co-passengers, who represent a cross-section of society. These subsidiary narratives, which typically map a moment of transformation in which the narrator either has an epiphany revelation about the real nature of her life or takes control of it for herself, serve to mirror and reinforce Akhila’s master-narrative of desired transformation.

Most of the narratives are in the form of confessionals, in which women reveal conscious or subconscious strategies they have adopted to subvert forms of patriarchal oppression abusive or overprotective relationships, being limited within well-defined gendered roles in marriage or motherhood, sexual exploitation in its different forms, erasure of sexual subjectivity. The public space of the train coupe is appropriated and refashioned as a homosocial/ homoerotic “safe” space where women across different classes and regions achieve a degree of emotional intimacy through shared memories and intensely private confessions. In that sense, the coupe is positioned as what Malcolm Miles defines as “transitional space,” the intermediate space between the public and the private that challenges a binary spatial model. The conceptual basis of the “ladies coupe”—the imagined vulnerability and sexual purity of women needing to be kept in safekeeping—is subverted not only through these narratives of feminine empowerment, but through the trope of feminine solidarity and connection established through the shared confessions and reinforced through mutual concern. This subversion, in my reading, becomes a queer move: it evokes Adrienne Rich’s definition of the lesbian continuum:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman had had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of lesbianism (Rich648).

Rich’s emphasis on non-erotic connection and political/emotional support between and among women is replicated in the ideological basis of the novel, an ideology that is actualized in the narrative device of the women-only railway coupe. In that sense, this imagined space is also a subversion of the heterosexual domestic space, not only because of its gendered composition but also because of its potential to empower women through shared narrative. Although each narrator succeeds in challenging the limits of societal expectations of gendered behavior on her own, the act of sharing the experiences reinforces the significance of the subversion, especially because the confessions function exhortations Akhila to live her life to the fullest. This empowerment takes the form of the affirmation of the desires and corporeal selves of the women, an expression that is often denied them within the hetero-patriarchal structure of the society. The intimacy of the confessions, in most cases, cuts across class divide and produces a connection

that on some level remains dubious. I say “dubious” According to a note by Nair, the ladies coupe, a separate enclosure for women passengers in a railway compartment, existed only till 1998. The novel, written in 2001, takes a retrospective look at it, because even within this seemingly classless utopia, Marikolanthu is ignored and ostracized by the upper-middle-class women.

The visible markers of her class and social status encourage her co-passengers to overlook her within the space of compartment; she, too, holds back till the other others leave and only Akhila remains as her listener. Her narrative comes at the very end of the novel, and she is aware that the disruptive element of her narrative would shock her listeners out of their middle-class complacency, primarily because it has elements that stray farthest from the ideal of womanhood: violence, rejection of motherhood and inadmissible (same-sex) desire. Raped and exploited in the household of chettiyars in her village in Tamil Nadu, Marikolanthu eventually finds solace in an intimate relationship with Sujata, the daughter-in-law of the aristocratic household. Her notions of lesbianism—she remains ignorant, of course, of the actual word—is formed by her experience in the household of two English doctors in Vellore that she works for; she understands, in retrospect, the nature of their relationship in the light of her own erotic involvement with Sujata. But her relationship with Sujata is doomed to fail: never verbally acknowledged from the very beginning, it finally falls apart as Marikolanthu attempts to keep her object of desire sacrosanct by seducing Sujata’s husband Sridhar. Marikolanthu’s girlhood is comparable to that of the other women in the novel in being riddled with her mother’s anxieties around her sexual vulnerability; however, unlike the longer time, Marikolanthu has to help her mother earn a living after her father’s death. other narrators who are sheltered and protected by their families for a comparatively. Akhila talks with Marikolanthu, the last traveller in the coupe. Marikolanthu says that she is going to Nagercoil to meet her thirteen-year-old son. She says that the world is cruel to women but those women are very strong(209)”. She belonged to a poor family in a village called Paler near Kancheepuram. On her ninth birthday, her father died of a disease. Her mother worked as a cook in Chettiar Kottai. The chettiar grows silkworms and, killing them heartlessly, as Marikolanthu’s father shanmugam says, grows very rich. But he is not happy. The chettiar has three sons. Rajendran, the eldest son, looks after the silk looms. His wife Rani is a timid woman. She is the chettiar’s niece and comes from an impoverished family. His second son Sridhar is his favourite. He steps up his business by securing orders from far and near. The chettiar looked for a charming wife for Sridhar. His choice of sujata is right as she is not only beautiful like an actress but also begets a son. The third son Ranganathan is studying to become a doctor in vellor. Though legendary rich, the chettiar’s private life is riddle with problems. His wife is mad and is kept chained in a room that always remains shut. He has a concubine by name seethalakshmi. It is rumoured that the chettiar’s liaison with his mistress was scented by his wife and has driven her mad. The chettiar’s misdeed has misled his son Sridhar also who has developed many extra-marital relationship one of which is his secret connation with the maid-servant Marikollanthu. Sujata, though glamorous and mother of a son, becomes a lesbian and dallies with Marikolanthu in secret. RukmaniAkka is a widow. She is helping

Marikolandu's mother Kanagambaram who is working as a cook in the chettiarkottai. Rukmani tells Marikolandu about the misdeeds of the chettiar. The sudden death of the chettair and the discontinuance of vadivu, the maid who has all along taken care of his mad wife, creates a dislocation. Sujata asks Mari to take care of the demented Mrs.Chettiar. She is kept chained in a closeted room so that that she cannot run away. On some nights her frenzy mounts and, stripping herself naked, she scratches the walls of the room and shouts aloud. The mad woman dies suddenly. Her death puts an end to her misery. As a kid she too worked and helped her mother to raise her brother Eswaran and Sivakumar can study in the town school. She works sincerely, petting Sujatha Akka's little son.. She is the realistic picture of the humble and miserable peasantry women on whom male oppression is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. She represents poor and miserable peasantry class women on whom male brutality is forced on heavily and left unquestioned. Even as a girl she is denied to be sent to the town school as her mother says, "It's not just the money but how can I send a young girl herself, there is too much at risk" (215).

Marikolanthu attains puberty and becomes very charming. Even though she attained physical maturity, she was innocent. The result is that all the men in the Chettiar kottai, including Sujata's husband Sridhar, decor her with their eyes. Sujata is afraid that the unprotected Marikolanthu might be molested by the men folk. So she gives the girl hundred rupees and asks her to go to Vellore to work as a maid-servant to the two lady doctors Viv and Kate, where Mari joins to be their maid-servant. They tell her encouragingly that she can pass the SSLC examination and then undergo training to become a professional nurse. Mari is disgusted with the lesbian relationship between the two doctors. At night Mari sleeps on the corridor. She sees Kate entering the follow doctor Viv's room every night and sneak out noiselessly in the early hours of the morning. This much-needed clear-sightedness is one of the attributes that Marikolanthu acquires in her time with Kate and Vivien (Missy K and Missy V to her), the English doctors that she finds a position within Vellore. She sheds embellishments that are looked on as markers of womanhood, much to the disappointment of her mother. Her partial comprehension of same-sex desire also begins in this household: "Missy K talked to Missy V as if she were the husband and Missy V the wife. Sometimes I caught Missy K caressing Missy V's face with her eyes. It sent a line of goose bumps down my back" (Nair 233).

Lacking an adequate frame of reference, Marikolathu tries to interpret what she sees by connecting it to her understanding of heterosexual desire. Used as she is to understanding female companionship within a framework of homosociality, Marikolanthu is baffled by the Missies' furtive manner of seeking each other out: Every night,

I watched Missy K leave her room and walk past me...and go into

Missy V's room. In the early hours, he crept back to bed.

Why this secrecy, I wondered. If Missy K was afraid to

sleep alone, the sensible thing to do would be for them to share a bed. I would have thought nothing of two women sharing a bed. It was the most obvious thing to when men weren't around. For the women to stick together (Nair 232).

One night Viv, nauseated with Kate's perverted practice, refuses to admit her into her room. She decides to go back to her country. Kate is embittered and destroying all her rose plants. She immediately leaves for Bangalore. Marikolanthu has seen Kate's lesbian relationship with Viv, but cannot do anything about it. Thus ends their lesbian relationship. Mari is bubbly influenced by Kate and, back in the Chettiar Kottai, has to provide lesbian pleasure to her employer Sujata. Later Viv undergoes a moral awakening and breaks with Kate. Viv goes back to her home town and Kate leaves for Bangalore.

Sujata akka's prediction that cotton, if kept close to a matchstick, will catch fire comes true. Coming to attend on her fractured mother, Mari returns from Vellore to her native place and agrees to work in her mother's place in the Chettiar kottai until she recovers. She does her work, heavy as it is, without any complaint. She is rooted in old values. When Mari comes of age, her mother warns her to avoid the company of men and conduct herself in a modest manner. Marikolanthu's first experience of desire is fraught with violence and coercion: her rape by a Chettiyar relative on a night of festivities transforms the Chettiyar kottai (palace) for her into a spatial symbol of oppression, where sexual exploitation of women is the order of the day. She has to face the strains of life herself. She is a virtual slave, the victim of men, of castes and of innumerable social injustices. It is evident that gender bias and oppression of women emerges as a powerful theme of the novel. She is being suppressed by Murugesan. The device he uses to control her is rape. She feels defiled and corrupt. She evokes our sympathy when In the distance. I heard the calls. Bogi Bogi. The sparks would fly As the bonfire was set alight and the night would crackle with the sound of dried logs and twigs waking up. With my past, my future too had been torched alive(241).

Nair deals with rape, violence, isolation and troubled relationship. It explores not only the effects of chauvinism but also the women's determination to overcome these barriers and emerge un-scathed and whole ultimately. she lives in a tamed and controlled environment. She lives in a noisy psycho-social group and she is stressed by it. Hans Seyle in Man under Stress says that Stress is the rate of wear and tear in the body. We all understanding that during life we use ourselves up, just as any inanimate machine, an automobile, will gradually use itself up by the stresses and strains to which the machinery is exposed.(89) The unwanted pregnancy following the rape only manages to reinforce her revulsion, the child a tangible embodiment of her exploitation. When she is found pregnant her mother and Sujata, regret it as they just feel it is too late to insist Murugesan to marry her. Her mother is least worried about her feelings but worries that no one will marry her. Even when the issue is taken to the Chettiar's son Sridhar, he with

little unwillingness says, “The girl must have led him on and now that she is pregnant she’s making up a story about rape”(245). For her mother and Sujata, a woman’s life and guard lies in her husband, as Sujata says, But if she has a job, that will replace a husband’s protection”(246). But Marikolanthu is able to raise the question within her about the so called “Husband’s protection. She is sure that neither her mother nor Sujata have their husbands’ look out for them, but for them, “a fulfilled woman was one who was married” (246). For Marikolanthu nothing is crueler than a man’s raping of a woman and so she finds little fault in the missy’s love for each other and experiences a kind of content and happiness to give her love for Sujata, more than her husband does. This unpleasant incident changed Marikolanthu’s entire life and destroyed her verve. Mari would like to abort then and there. But her wily Periamma sees to it that the child grows safe and sound in the womb. She gave birth to an illegitimate baby. The child, named Muthu, is brought back home and reared with love and care by Mari’s mother. . She hated the baby and left it to her mother to take care of him. After her mother’s death, Marikolanthu’s brothers neglected to look after her son Muthu. Marikolanthu never wants to attach up her life with a husband. Till she is thirty – one she lives alone and struggles with life, making a living of her own. She neither wants to depend upon her brothers nor wants money from Sujata or her husband but decides to make her living of her own, working as a servant maid in a house. Sujata spends most of her time, putting on make-up and beautifying herself. She has an inexhaustible variety of glass bangles. She gives bangles to Mari because the latter serves her faithfully. Mari befittingly celebrates Sujata’s little son turning on his back and taking his first step. Sujata is immensely pleased and gives her ten rupees. Marikolanthu eventually finds solace in an intimate relationship with Sujata, the daughter-in-law of the aristocratic household. To the prepubescent Marikolanthu, Sujata seems the apotheosis of womanhood— desirable, adored, beautiful, mother to a male heir, the cynosure of the Chettiya household,

“The Chettiya had said that Sujata Akka’s every whim and
desire had to be fulfilled. She was special. She was a city girl;
she’d come from Coimbatore and she had even gone to college
for two years. And Sujata Akka had given birth to a son.
Next to the Chettiya, Sujata Akka was the most important
person in that house” (Nair 217)

Sujata’s husband Sridhar, always on tour to promote business, is a womanizer. So Mari has to provide sexual pleasure to the lesbian Sujata also as the philandering Sridhar has not quite fulfilled her. As a result Sujata becomes a lesbian. She comes to know from Mari about the perverse behavior of the two doctors Viv and Kate in Vellore and decides to behave likewise herself. She draws Mari into her room and makes her provide to her, with her mouth and fingers. : “Her fingers slid through my palm. That is all she would do for me. It was I who had sought to

give her pleasure and in her pleasure lay my reward” (Nair 261). Marikolanthu’s rejection of motherhood— and of life as such— is coterminous with a void in Sujata’s life, and the two women are drawn to each other gradually, first as companions and then as lovers. However, Sujatha’s desire for Marikolanthu does not stray beyond the confines of Sujatha’s bedroom. Explicit in the erotic details, Marikolanthu’s reminiscences of her intimacies with Sujatha never actually construct their involvement as a reciprocal relationship. Marikolanthu admits to, and is content with this asymmetry: “Her fingers slid through my palm. That is all she would do for me. It was I who had sought to give her pleasure and in her pleasure lay my reward” (Nair 261). Sujata ends the liaison when she finds out that Marikolanthu had simultaneously seduced her husband Sridhar, whose sexual attentions she (Sujata) had claimed as being unwelcome and repulsive. But at the same time, Sujata wants to hold on to her heterosexual privilege, just as she is unwilling to relinquish the distinction conferred by a privileged class and caste position. The class hierarchies instituted by a heteropatriarchal social system positions the two women differentially. This particular narrative in *Ladies Coupe* explores class hierarchy and the absence of a language of desire as hindrances in realizing the potential of same-sex desire. Although written in English, Nair positions the narrator Marikolanthu within a class that has access neither to the language nor to any “Westernized” notion of lesbianism. This class-induced hiatus is widened by the inability and the lack of willingness to “name” the liaison: when Sujata finally spurns Marikolanthu, she indicts her as a false “friend,” using the façade of homosociality to cancel out the erotic desire. Sujatha’s language falters as she attempts to name Marikolanthu’s “unnatural” vices: “I know you used black magic to make me your slave...make me do things no woman would...but not only more, it won’t work any more” (Nair 264). Sujata speaks the language of heteronormative ventriloquism, sealing off any possibility of identifying their desire as distinct. The homosociality that Sujata cites to negate her desire is what Marikolanthu had used to establish hers and carve out a space of desire within the oppressive confines of the Chettiyar kottai. In *Ladies Coupe*, same-sex relationships cannot ultimately transcend the implied respectability of social institutions. However, Marikolanthu’s attempt to spatially situate transgressive desire within the hetero-patriarchal limits of the Chettiyar household not only aligns her narrative with those of the other fellow passengers, but actually makes it more potent. If the other women assert their corporeality by emphasizing their desiring selves, Marikolanthu pushes the very limits of admissible desire by moving into the territory of transgression.

The identity politics of lesbianism in India is a fraught question. The “lesbian” invisibility in India that I am analyzing in this project is predicated on, among other factors, the absence of a vernacular equivalent of the word “lesbian.” Ruth Vanita, in her introduction to a collection of essays on the expression of alternative sexualities in India, points out this inadequacy and connects it with a historical moment of colonial intervention. Vanita argues that although words describing same-sex desire between women were present in pre-colonial Indian texts, their absence is conspicuous in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Vanita identifies the nineteenth century as “the crucial period of transition when a minor strand of pre-colonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse”. Vanita identifies

the colonization of India as a definitive point of disruption as far as the visibility of alternative sexualities is concerned, and this seems reasonable when we take into account the Victorian condemnation of “unnatural” sexual practices implicit in the colonial discourse. The ant colonial nationalists, in their attempt to construct the notion of “tradition” purged of degeneracy, further suppressed same sex desire. In *Ladies Coupe* appears to be co-opted by the patriarchal discourse of marriage, motherhood and sexuality, but find indirect ways of subverting these discourses—ways which do not involve direct engagement with or resistance of hegemonic heteronormativity. However, it would be simplistic to look for a direct form of resistance in every situation: consent to patriarchal norms does not necessarily mean a lack of resistance. The kind of resistance that we encounter in these texts could be understood in terms of Kumkum Sangari’s theorization of ‘indirect agency’:

Indirect agency, as I see it, also comprises of agency as it is ascribed to, conferred upon, and delegated to women within patriarchal structures, characteristically functions through ‘feminized’ agential modes such as convolution, disguise, displacement, deflection, surrogacy, and signals some degree of consent to the patriarchies (Sangari 366).

In her essay “Consent, Agency and the Rhetoric of Incitement,” Sangari cautions against understanding agency only in terms of direct, organized political resistance without a corresponding understanding of the contextual specificities : Marikolanthu’s submission to the Chettiyar’s sexual advances is her way of protecting and maintaining her relationship with Sujatha’s, seeming submission to the mandates of marriage is a way to minimize conflict that she anticipates, a strategy that she admits to:

“I shouldn’t seem to want justice, it will create endless arguments, I must seem to want his compassion, his magnanimity. He is doing me a favour, but I must also be firm, he is not going to be compassionate and magnanimous if he has a choice” (248).

But she cannot tolerate her husband Sridhar sleeping with Mari. She promptly dismisses the servant without caring to listen to her argument in self-defense. This is sheer narrow-mindedness. Periodically, she has to sleep with Sridhar also. Without Sujata’s knowledge. She plays these multiple roles with expertise. But Sujata comes to know about her liaison with

Sridhar only to ease Sujata's blunders. Marikolanthu's life shows the pain of life in rural Tamil Nadu. Poverty, exploitation and sexual harassment still prevail in rural Tamil Nadu. Through the pathetic tale of Marikolanthu, Nair gives us a touching portrayal of this sad reality. .Sujata Akka seeks her for physical fulfillment in the afternoon and her husband seeks her at nights. Poor Mari conceives for the second time, to sridhar's sexual ministrations. Mari decides to have her uterus to be operated and removed her uterus so that she can go to any man without the danger of conceiving. But the doctor demands five thousand rupees for the operation. She makes her son Muthu work in Murugesan's office to earn the required sum of money. . There, she is assigned with the work of taking care of a child of Sujata Akka, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. She showers love and affection upon the child. She takes care of him well, but hates her son Muthu, the one who escaped many attempts of abortion. He is the result of her seduction by Murugesan. She does not want the child which is the result of seduction but the circumstances do not help her. So she leaves her son at her mother's care and takes care of the household of Chettiar family. Mercilessly she mortgages him at one of Murugesan's looms for Rs.5000/-. The anger she has on Murugesan, the society which saves him from punishment, her inability and the hatred of her son, everything comes to an end only at the death of Murugesan. . Muthu burns Murugesan's body without knowing that it is his own father's body. So Mari ends up not knowing what to do with herself and her son. The turning point in her life comes when she sees the dead body of Murugesan burning at the pyre and she sees Muthu left to tend to the pyre. She is shocked at the realization that she had reduced her son to a candle for no fault of his. All the hatred she had felt all her life went up in the flames. She felt guilt and love for her child. She decided to look after him and make up to him for all she had lost. She would no longer be "content to become a sister to the real thing surrogate housewife, surrogate mother, surrogate lover". She would be the real thing he would be different from the "long line of people who had used her and discarded her"(268).

Marikolanthu's illegitimate son Muthu unknowingly participates in the funeral rites. Marikolanthu does not know what to do with her son. Marikolanthu suffers extreme repression both social, familial and financial. It is ultimately love that brings her on the right track where she will find happiness and fulfillment. Her struggle has been one of hate for herself and accommodating with humiliating relationships thereafter. Her resolve to bring up her child shows her forming in to a new character. Marikolanthu realized that she was the only soul to love her son Muthu. "I told you about the roles in my life having no Chronology; no sense of rightness. What happened then was that 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 Muthu's mother"" (268). But at the end she feels ashamed for having rejected him and even using him. As Indra Devi observes, "In the end she decided to "measure happiness" as Muthu's mother. Anita Nair, with a deep, psychological insight, skillfully utilizes the story of Marikolanthu to comment upon the sexual exploitation of Indian women from rural background. Marikolanthu's story recalls her encounter with men and concludes that most men take advantage of women's loneliness, illiteracy, dependence, ignorance and frustration. They

never hesitate to blame the woman at the end. The society dominated by patriarchal culture tends to lay down the rule that a woman's responsibility towards the family is total whereas any sort of other authority is conveniently denied to her. This society shuns thinking that the woman is strong willed to create disastrous consequences if she is completely ignored.

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