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Number Eights and Nebulous Centres: Locating Gender and Space in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*

SUSHMA V. MURTHY

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to locate the politics of gender in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* in her discursive negotiations with space. Not only is space a social means of gentrification, but also a discursive means of gender allocation and classification. Through the gendered space of the ladies coupé of a railway carriage, Anita Nair engenders a feminist collective of women's voices articulating from different identities, negotiating with gender, caste, class and sexuality. The collective journey on the train is more significantly an inward journey for the women in the ladies 'coupé – a fragmented collective consciousness with different stops, at different stations of life. As the women's narratives unravel, sometimes from the past, sometimes from the imaginary of a future destination, the discursive classification between public and private space becomes fluid. Anita Nair's treatment of spatiality reveals hegemonic notions of power and gender which are eventually deconstructed to constitute specificities of experience and question existing epistemologies of space and identity.

Keywords: space & spatiality, gender, gentrification, identity, feminist collective, epistemology

The scream
of an illegitimate voice
It has ceased to hear itself, therefore
it asks itself
How do I exist?
This was the silence I wanted to break in you... (54-59)

Adrienne Rich, *Cartographies of Silence*

In their phenomenal work *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari locate the politics of a minor literature in the collective (Deleuze and Guattari 8). Written from the margins, minor writing interestingly subverts the notion of marginality by deterritorialising notions of centre and spatiality, thereby the fixed essence of subject hood.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* foregrounds such a collective, an assemblage of disparate women's voices that occupy the recesses of abject hood even as they reinforce subjects of patriarchy – fathers, husbands, sons, male colleagues and the general male populace who often repudiate their existence. Coming from different backgrounds and inextricably enmeshed within the gender politics of caste, class and larger patriarchal hegemonic structures, six women are thrown in together into a ladies compartment by Anita Nair. There is no Homeric epic journey here, no romance of the travelogue, no sisterhood or collective consciousness to glorify, just a few snatches of conversations exchanged mostly in the darkness of a compartment hurtling through the night, under the guise of anonymity. Both the structure and the fragmented narratives of the six different women defy the notion of a cohesive, linear text. The more dominant narrative voice is of course that of Akhilandeswari, but her presence only serves to heighten the differences between the lives and experiences of these women, not integrate them. The collective space of women in this text thereby disrupts the essentialist notion of a constituted subject called 'woman' while at the same time integrating the specificities of their identities in a process of negotiation, therefore flux. The ladies coupe is thus Anita Nair's attempt at deconstructing the rigidified and gentrified construction of gender through space...a seemingly public box for traveling attached at the tail end of a long chain of bogies does constitute a recovery of personal space for women albeit ironically, for the ladies compartment, primarily designed for the safety of women traveling alone (implying without the protection of men) operates at two levels: fear and isolation.

While attempting to erase perpetuation of violence against women, the ladies' compartment clearly marks out women from the rest of the 'normal' crowd. Notions of normative behaviour and accepted modes of travel and leisure are thereby underlined.

A chance encounter with women from other walks and stations of life, from other points of departure from supposed subject hood is a rare treat for most women in the novel although a railway carriage is more often than not the most likely space for a public encounter with strangers. To Akhilandeswari, alias Akhila, the coupe signifies a flight, a flutter that releases wisps of memory etched on the body but trapped like butterfly wings on a fossil. The giddiness of motion never fails to jog the otherwise prosaic life of Akhila rigidly stratified among the undesirable spinsters at forty-five. It's not a surprise therefore that Akhila's narrative is so intensely punctuated by travel. The staccato rhythm of the railway carriage and the gentle rhythmic rocking of her body is not unlike the heightened ecstasy of a once familiar caress of a stranger in the bus or the first slithering into her throat, of a yolk of egg that her Brahmin upbringing forbade her to revel in.

Both Janaki and Margaret Shanti articulate the confines of marriage and maternity. The seemingly happy, well-rounded life of the elderly Janaki as wife and mother is not essentially different from that of Margaret Shanti who is denied even the conventional underpinnings of marriage and motherhood under a vainglorious, insensitive husband. In a radical dialectical process, Anita Nair co-relates women's experiences without conflating them. Fourteen year Sheela's intuitive self is not qualified as the anti-thesis of the innocence of Marikolanthu, rather, both characters are constituted in a process of doing, not being. Prabha Devi's experiential realities similarly decry archetypal realities that are often subscribed to women.

Anita Nair's negotiation with space to underline the constitution of gender does begin within the confines of the

ladies' coupe. However her interventions into the spatial politics of gender are largely in terms of a discourse of sexuality that (dis)locates normative boundaries of sex and gender. Missy K, Missy V and Sujata Akka for instance are the traditionally defined minor characters in Marikolanthu's narrative. However, the narrative ceases to exist without these characters. Marikolanthu's narrative underlines the absence of the subject in an interpellative spatiality that originally constitutes the question of subjecthood, for the fluid sexuality that constitutes her is an assemblage of various bodies she interacts and negotiates with.

Anita Nair's spatial politics in *Ladies' Coupé* de-segments, de-stratifies and dislocates normative constructions of Gender, especially in terms of a multiplicity of narratives of women she con/texturises in opposition to the centrality of an assumed patriarchal text.

Ladies Coupé underlines in many ways, the machinations of an assemblage, thereby underlining the absence of ideology and the intensity of literature in the process of a signification underlined by Deleuze and Guattari:

"There isn't a subject, there are only collective assemblages of enunciation".

(Deleuze and Guattari¹⁸)

Gender is both constituted by and definitive of the workings of space. By problematising both the space of the body and the text, Anita Nair inhabits the discourse that Marion Young recognises as spatial gender politics differently. For although girls are taught to throw differently from boys, both the inner courtyard and the ladies coupe can (dis)locate the centre through a multiplicity of individual women's voices that chart the geography of silence through speech.

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