

“Into a Horizon I Will Not Recognize”: Female Identity and Transitional Space Aboard Nair’s *Ladies Coupé*

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The experience of railway travel “is necessary for the birth... of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories.”

—Michel de Certeau

Beginning with its epigraph, Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé* is a novel about female identity and female space: “Were it possible for us to wait for ourselves to come into the room, not many of us would find our hearts breaking into flower as we heard the door handle turn. But we fight for our rights, we will not let anybody take our breath away from us, and we resist all attempts to prevent us from using our wills.” This invocation from Rebecca West, in a passage which also recalls Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, evokes the demand for an opening, for the creation of both literal and figural spaces for women within a patriarchal system that has long confined them. It recalls those women persecuted for existing outside of marriage and rejecting motherhood, embraces those women who exist in marginal or potentially dangerous spaces, and exhorts all women to set and pursue their own agendas and to seize the right to live a life of their own choosing. The novel that follows under this banner is similarly about awakenings, about navigating the spaces of and between “in” and “out,”

about transformative change and self-discovery, and, also, about existing limitations.

Space, far from natural or neutral, is deeply ideological, and the division of space into public and private realms is a gendered phenomenon. Since the 1960s, historians have used the concept of separate spheres to interpret the lives of women (Richter 6). Some scholars have defined the public/private divide as an oppressive set of cultural norms that confine women to the home and limit their destinies (Malcolm 255). While men are afforded the freedom of public affairs, women are marginalized, confined to domesticity, to an ideology of oppression that is experienced both as a spatial limitation and, in limiting the roles open to women, a way of denying them autonomy and self-fulfillment. Other scholars have interpreted the private sphere in a more positive light, viewing it as a woman's domain, a nurturing alternative to the public world of men, and a catalyst for gender consciousness and the emergence of feminism (Richter 6). And yet, public spaces remain spaces of power governed largely by patriarchal structures and institutions, in which women have very little visibility and influence (Malcolm 256).

However, this public/private binary overlooks, as Doreen Massey has argued, a third important area of space: the transitional space. As obscured zones, transitional spaces deserve more attention: neither fully public nor fully private, they break a binary structure which, much like patriarchy, can be experienced as overly confining and determining. If, within this tenuous, as-yet-unformed model of space, "dwellers produce their own mutable spaces" (Malcolm 256), it may well be within these transitional spaces that women can enact change, transformation, and transgression.

The railway, the industrial force which proves largely significant in Nair's novel, is just such a transitional space, as the cars within its closed system work as obscured and progressive zones that disrupt binaristic considerations of gender and femininity. In *Ladies Coupé*, the train functions in a number of paradoxical and opposing ways, just as the narratives comprising it bespeak not only liberation and change but the limitations circumscribing those hopes. While Nair's novel delves into the expectations for Indian women and relates their search for strength and independence, it details complex characters who are caught in a net of relationships partly of their own making and partly made by the precepts of society. While some critics have asserted that these women become "filled with the incantatory power to see a new destination and to burn up the tracks" (Sinha 151), the reality seems to suggest that while the train journey and space of the coupé afford the women passengers with the opportunity to be critical of patriarchal structures, they remain very much embedded within that same system. Indeed, the train is the perfect setting and symbol for this overlapping tension, as the coupé is at once a utopian, feminist space and the vehicle whose walls highlight its limits and whose removal occasions the compromises that emerge in the social context of a wider Indian patriarchy. As Nair adeptly manipulates the device of the train journey, the coupé is revealed as a transitional and transitory space of opportunity which both critiques limits and

gendered inequities and demonstrates the limitations of this same compromised utopic space.

While Nair's *Ladies Coupé* is set in an Indian railway compartment reserved exclusively for women, it is not a story of female containment or, conversely, of feminist separatism. Though the women may be kept separate from the public sphere, and segregated from the imagined utopic equality of the train-car proper, the coupé itself is neither fully public nor private. As a liminal space, the coupé engenders negotiations of a woman's place in society, and, as cultural scripts are both revised and upheld, the women in the coupé move beyond circumscribed roles associated with female domesticity by making a narrative space for themselves that enables them to reclaim the process of identity construction. Considering what the space of the coupé allows its female passengers as well as attending to the symbol of the railway and the language of train travel which dominate this text, is central to an understanding of this novel, as the transitional space of the coupé, contained within the transient space of the train, is central to its protagonist's figurative journey into selfhood.

In uniting these oppositional elements, the coupé is complexly figured as a space which brings together the interior or private transformation of the individual with the work of public or social transformation. And, as these paradoxical impulses collide, as liberation is balanced against containment and adjustment realistically rises to the fore, Nair and her heroines may ultimately seek an alternative path along a track not yet laid, an option or 'middle path' which allows for both private and public happiness and a collaborative adjustment between the sexes as a necessary negotiation within patriarchy. In offering no easy or singular solutions, *Ladies Coupé* is, to its core, about the ongoing journey, about the transitional moment and conditions of change, about process rather than destination. In this, we have a world rendered that is no finished, feminist utopia, but still nonetheless hopeful in its articulation of a continued quest for female space and identity.

Akhila Aboard: Positioning Trains as Transitional and Transformative Spaces

Traditionally, values of "respectable" womanhood have been said to stand in opposition to those symbolized by the railway—rationalization, industrialization, urbanization, technological and national progress, etc. As such, railroads have long been understood as places of masculine power (Richter 1). And yet, as Amy Richter has suggested, if trains were figured historically as "masculine" because of the power of their engines and the courage of their engineers, they were also "feminine" because of the domesticity of their parlor cars and the refinement of their female passengers" (Richter 1). Furthermore, as a mobile and intimate space, the train challenged notions of what could be termed 'private' and what 'public' as notions of what constituted respectable contact among strangers was reconfigured. The train has also been characterized as "a socially diverse and fluid space capable of blurring the lines of class and caste" (Richter 5); Wolfgang Schivelbush has idealistically described the space of the railway compartment as "the chariots of equality

[and] freedom,” for travelers in a train find themselves equalized by their shared situation of technological equality (71-2). Thus, the space of the train is, in a sense, a “hybrid sphere” (Richter 8), a shared social and cultural realm and, perhaps, a transitional space with the potential to re-make and revise social identity. When women board railway cars, they enter a cultural conversation about social difference and order. Within the space of the train, women and men renegotiate the boundary between private and public, and, in the space of the train car, as that artificial boundary itself becomes permeable, women’s options unfold and multiply.

These options are opened up by situations of negotiation and transformation that are inherent to train travel, which create spaces in which to both conform to and revise cultural prescriptions that define passengers’ identities (Richter 34). With train travel, as Michel de Certeau has written, comes a sense of “newness,” and, with it, an inspiration to seek meaning as passengers travel between one realm of experience and another. For Certeau, the experience of railway travel “is necessary for the birth...of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories” (14). Thus, as train travel occasions a shifting set of social relations and changing constructions of space and time, public and private, interior and exterior, the train seems an ideal site around which to retain, reject, or remake identity, as protagonist Akhila’s journey aboard the coupé and the potential that space opens for formations of female self-hood effectively demonstrates.

Indeed, it is as if Akhila is re-born through her journey in the ladies coupé. As Amy Richter has suggested, “separation from one’s community and the relative isolation and anonymity of train travel” presents women with “challenges and opportunities” through which they can “revise their identities” (Richter 55). In the act of boarding a train, in moving outside a sphere of strict domesticity, female identity is “temporarily shattered,” and while this shattering might prove confusing or threatening for some passengers, the resulting disruption of identity could also push a woman to imagine a new role for herself (Richter 55). Because the railroad stands as a symbol of progress, and for contemporary life in all its ambiguity, Richter has suggested that “many passengers boarded trains with the belief that they were entering a space with the power to remake them and all society” (Richter 35). Akhila, it seems, boards her train with these very hopes, and her journey does not disappoint, offering her a liminal freedom which carries her towards self-discovery.

From a point of potential exclusion and an indication of the second-class existence that an Indian woman is by birth condemned to assume in her life’s journey, Nair describes the impetus for writing the novel: “Some years ago, I was buying a ticket and I found this special ladies line clubbed with the handicapped and senior citizens. I was a little disturbed by the blatant inequality and wanted to write about it” (Nair, “The Journey to *Ladies Coupé*,” 2). The woman’s compartment—the so called ladies coupé—is a clear example of a gendered spatiality, where woman are sheltered from the outer male world (Nubile 60). As Akhila’s railway journey is the backbone of the plot, Nair’s novel works to reclaim the space of the coupé,

figuring it as a place of feminine power that emerges through the sharing of female narratives.

A transitional space within the larger transient space of the train, the coupé becomes a site of transformative power, serving as an intervention in women's traditional silence and submission and the multiple patriarchies which shape and determine their lives. Providing both an individual and collective space for women, the coupé embodies the female voice of the novel, affording the six main characters the privacy necessary to talk openly about their secrets and desires. In allowing for an exchange of experience and raising questions concerning how a compartment of diverse women might come to achieve a greater degree of autonomy and agency, *Ladies Coupé* frees its passengers from their traditional positions within the home, from the silence of the private sphere, and, in so doing, constructs a narrative journey that contests a confining ideology of domesticity and complacency. As the narratives unfold, delving into the choices they both make and have had made for them and the complex web of relations in which they are entangled, Akhila, the central character, rediscovers "the possibilities of life" (Sinha 150). Exposing their daily lives as a repressive space rife with routine forms of patriarchal oppression, the women of the coupé, over the course of their physical journey aboard the train, undergo a shared journey of inward transformation that is effected by the narratives they construct. Illustrating the women's ongoing battle with the restrictions still exerted by tradition, religion, and convention, the novel reveals their quest to find a space for negotiation in which they can make choices for themselves.

If the novel's front matter recalls debates over women's space, the first line of *Ladies Coupé* connects these concerns to the railway system in a context of women's liberation: "This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape" (1). The first chapter presents Akhila as a character whose dreams are inevitably caught up with the symbol of the train. As we are told, 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 the world, with her eyes looking ahead. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of a train that trundles, truckles, and troops into a station" (1). At the beginning of the novel, the railway is a symbol of progress and escape, of a hopeful future free of restraint, with undertones, as well, of a lack of division, of a free play with identity and association as she joins the masses thrown together by train travel.

In narrating the stories of six individual women, Nair moves her characters from a collective "state of passivity and absence into a state of active presence," taking them "from the kitchen and bedroom," from the private spaces of a constraining domesticity, "to the street and the world at large" (Sinha 150). Significantly, Nair's presentation of the coupé is constructed in a way that allows these women to subvert the very society which sets them aside within it. From within the paradoxically most circumscribed of spaces, they are able to reconsider their pasts, question the course of their present, and envision future change. Indeed, the ladies coupé itself becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from the constraints of patriarchy characterized by false binaries (Vasanthakumari 121; Sinha 150). Drawn together,

the stories of the women passengers form a single overarching story of women's search for strength, independence, and a way of determining the course of their own lives.

In the intimacy of the ladies coupé, Akhila gets to know her fellow travelers through their stories, hoping their experiences will help her answer the questions that have haunted her entire life: Can a woman live alone? Can a single woman be happy, or does a woman need a man to feel complete? (Nubile 60). For Akhila, the quest for an answer to these troublesome questions becomes the quest for her identity: "Who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (Nair 84). What Akhila desires is "to be her own person...in a place that was her own. To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure" (212). The quest to find her place, to determine her identity, assert her autonomy, and make her own choices in a space free of the repressive traditions of the patriarchal home is carried out during the railway journey, during an intense night of female voices, encounters, and exchanges (Nubile 61).

That the central concerns of the novel are thus posed as questions is significant, for the coupé is not simply a utopic feminist space any more than the narrative and physical journey is solely one of exultant, cathartic liberation. While the novel's central story of self-discovery is, at the outset, optimistic and even idealistic, as the narratives and experiences compound in the coupé it becomes clear that 'transformation' in this novel is neither one-note nor certain. Rather, narratively airing the desire for liberation and autonomy occasions a certain spirit of reflection concerning the adjustments necessary for a small-scale rethinking of patriarchal values in contemporary India. In this, the novel raises the space of the ladies coupé as a liberating space not as an end in itself but to question or complicate how the women transformed by it return to the world. Thus, the guiding question of the narrative journey is not merely "Can a woman live alone?" but also "On what aspects of her life should a woman compromise?" The characters most often conclude their narratives with ambivalence on this matter, suggesting the novel's resistance to providing any simple answers, and, in so doing, similarly shattering the easy metaphors and symbols that arise from train travel.

Physical and Metaphorical Journeys: Train Travel as Liberated Quest for Identity

In her own quest for identity, the central protagonist Akhila is symbolic of all those who are in a quest for female space. Akhila is a frustrated spinster who has spent all her younger years looking after parents, siblings, and their offspring. After her father's death, she assumes the role of family head, her own wishes and desires forgotten by everyone and suppressed by herself. Finally fed up with the multiple roles of daughter, sister, and aunt, she decides to go on a train journey, away from family and responsibilities, seeking an escape from them and hoping to discover her identity (Sinha 151). With her one-way ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, Akhila is gloriously alone for the first time in her life and determined to break free of

all that her conservative Tamil Brahmin upbringing has bound in her (Vasaanthakumari 117). As the transitory space of the train takes Akhila beyond the bounds of the prescriptive private sphere which has been her home, she is able to interrogate the ideologies regulating her life and the options available to her.

Within the additional transitional space of the coupé, Akhila will become free to imagine new possibilities for the direction and expectations of her life. Previous to this momentous journey, Akhila has always done only “what is expected of her,” dreaming “about the rest” and collecting “epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs” (2). To her, “hope” has always been “enmeshed with unrequited desires” (2). As Nair sums up her protagonist: “This then is Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-colored spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect” (2). Her decision to acquire a full ticket rather than settle for stubs and dreams becomes the clear catalyst to move her closer to achieving her quest for space, for a life redefined. At the railway station, the doorway to her dreams, she feels “her lips stretch into a smile” and savors the imminence of change connected to the unfolding of a new space, asserting: “I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognize” (8).

However, the train is also the site of restriction. The trope of the train embodies not only Akhila’s hopes, for her description of what has constrained her—her mother’s ideal of a good woman as a “good wife”—similarly resonates with the language of train travel and the separatism of the coupé. As Akhila recalls her mother’s ingrained instruction, “There is no such thing as an equal marriage...it is best to accept that the wife is inferior to her husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one’s equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly” (14). As Clara Nubile has suggested, Indian women are “doomed to carry” an emotional heritage of fear, servility, and the attempted invisibility of their mothers as well as an inherited anemia which is “the social burden and cultural humiliation of generations” (30). “Most Indian women,” she suggests, do not have “clear choices in their life but the chains inherited by their mothers” (Nubile 33). Internalized notions of inferiority inherited from her mother clearly form the restrictions with which Akhila wrestles and give rise to the refrain inside her head which tells her, “A woman can’t live alone. A woman can’t cope alone” (16).

And yet, against this restrictive inheritance of stasis, of ‘stations’ as clearly defined points of terminus for the narrative paths of their lives, travel is figured in *Ladies Coupé* as an antidote to the ossified social and domestic roles that Akhila has received and that her society has codified. The coupé itself, in the way that it isolates, while protecting women in a way that patriarchal society desires and deems necessary, can also be used in ways that have subversive outcomes.

Especially interesting to note here is the irony in that in the ladies coupé, women *are*, necessarily, alone. While society would seem to insist that Akhila’s guiding question can have only one answer, it is that same society that has insisted on isolating women traveling by train. Here, the coupé requires women to live alone without

men, even if temporarily, and it is this bit of ironic isolation that affords this question of living alone its status *as* a question. The space of the coupé opens this issue of a woman existing and functioning on her own up for questioning, presenting it as an option that society has otherwise worked to foreclose.

Indeed, Akhila is clearly not content to passively receive her socially mandated role or accept her “station” in life; when it comes to considering her potential, she is able to consider what lies further down the track, beyond the limits of what has been prescribed for her, and to dare to privilege the disharmony within her own spirit rather than continue to devote herself to the needs of others. Thus, her decision to “board a train. To leave” (3). To escape the limits of her prescriptive life and “go somewhere that wasn’t landlocked like this city of Bangalore. To the end of the world, perhaps. Her world, at least. Kanyakumari” (3). The train journey, here, is explicitly figured as central to her journey of self-discovery and the answer it may provide to her initial interrogation of a woman’s ability to choose and command her own space.

Her metaphorical journey, then, takes place because of her physical journey on the train. And while her destination is not a holy place, and her journey not a genuine pilgrimage, the terminus is a place with special significance, as Nair is careful to point out:

At Kanyakumari the three seas met. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian ocean and the Arabian Sea. A quiet male ocean flanked by two restless female seas. Akhila had heard of how it was at Kanyakumari...that the headstrong and restless Narendra flung himself into the churning waters and the slats of the three seas and swam to a rock upon which he sat resolutely, waiting for answers that had eluded him all his life. So that when he left the rock, he became Vivkenkananada, the one who has found the joy of wisdom. The saint who taught the world to arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached. She had read that Kanyakumari got its name from the goddess who, like her, had put her life on hold, condemned to an eternal waiting. (4)

For Akhila, Kanyakumari is not just a generic escape, but a relevant place for her mental state and expectations, and, as she is able to identify with the legend of a personified male river and a female goddess, she seems determined to defy the expectations and limits of her gender, to find wisdom in her journey, to stubbornly pursue her goal, and, in so doing, put a stop to a life spent waiting, lived on the side-lines. In the coupé, which effects commingling and compromise, Akhila travels to a place that is highly symbolic of conjoined male and female identities. As a destination, Kanyakumari is significant, as it clearly charts Akhila’s literal train journey as a movement from subjugation and assignment by men to female empowerment and awakened possibility and multiplicity, and further beyond to a space of compromise, where men and women exist together. Her internal journey follows the

same pattern established by her physical journey.

For too long, Akhila has resented watching the horizons of others expand “while her life continued in its sedate, dull, spinsterish, constant way. No highs. No lows. Just seamless travel from day to day” (175). Against the dullness of this routine, where Akhila is moved through her life as a passive subject, the stops the Kanyakumari Express makes at different stations gives her a broader view of the world. Here, the bustle of life is vividly described, its color and zest expressing Akhila’s delight in her adventure. Sights, smells, noises—pleasant or unpleasant—all coalesce to make the train journey exciting and stimulating (Hanquart-Turner 311).

More than the routine novelties of train travel, these moments of sensuous expansion get heightened because they are experienced within a context of social oppression; Akhila cannot have these experiences without the escape and freedom travel affords her. In one such instance, the simple act of buying breakfast at a station-stop becomes a moment of revelation and transformation for Akhila. Encouraged by Prabha Devi, who demands “what is the point in coming to a new place if we do everything the way we do it at home?” (176), Akhila tries cuisine strange to her, “gingerly placing a piece of appam in her mouth.” Finding she enjoys the experience, Akhila wonders that she never knew she liked “the aroma of food wrapped in banana leaf” and remarks “how strange it is that someone has to tell us what we like and what we don’t” (177). In depicting Akhila’s enjoyment of something outside her narrowly prescribed world, Nair employs a momentary travel trope to do something more for her character than describe the expected provincial’s widening of experience that comes with travel. Here, she moves Akhila away from her socially-enforced identity as a quiet, timid person afraid to try anything new and begins to articulate her emerging autonomy. In an act so seemingly insignificant, Akhila, in taking this step towards discovering her own likes and dislikes, has begun to move beyond the regulatory cage of societal expectation or familial dependency and begun, also, to assert her own identity rather than act in accordance with one assumed at the behest of a patriarchal society. Though a seasoned traveler by commuter train, Akhila clearly sees her expedition in the Kanyakumari night express as the most exciting and liberating experience of her life (Hanquart-Turner 314).¹

If the train displaces the travelers from their usual environments and their normal habits, allowing them to expand their storehouse of experience, the ladies coupé, in shielding them from masculine interference, makes it possible for them to tell their stories—which are mostly concerned with male-female relationships—in all their honesty and intimacy and nurture the development of their identities. The space of the coupé is both intimate and anonymous, making the female travelers feel comfortable sharing what would otherwise be kept strictly private. As Akhila realizes, “Suddenly it didn’t matter...she could tell these women whatever she chose to. Her secrets, desires, and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted. They would never see each other again” (21). And yet, the encounter is far from meaningless or hollow: as the women begin to speak and share their experiences, they make meaningful connections and ponder transformative decisions as they forge a sort of sisterhood within the womb-like space of the coupé: “There was

silence in the coupé...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 heard within the walls wouldn't go beyond this or the contained space" (23). There is a clear social component to Akhila's transformation; in getting to know her traveling companions, in hearing the stories of their life struggles with patriarchal oppression, she becomes more clear in her own mind about who she is, and how she feels about the struggle to live as a woman within the constraints of a deeply patriarchal society. In presenting a cast of women who establish a connection by sharing their stories and, in so doing, locate their inner strength in interrogating the patriarchal ideologies that have overly determined their identities and destinies, Nair's novel seems to narratively echo the work of Hannah Arendt, who has posited a public realm in which people know themselves by knowing and being known by others (Malcolm 258). In Arendt's conception of spaces of transformation, people can make themselves over, can be born again as adults through action amongst others (Malcolm 254). Indeed, Akhila's transformation is largely contingent upon her interaction with a community of diverse women.² While she herself is transformed individually by the experience of her train journey, her interactions with her fellow passengers and the lessons their collective lives offer her is the influence that helps shape her reformation. Indeed, as Rita Felski has said of the feminist Bildungsroman and its emancipation narrative, "knowledge...is emphasized as the key to relationships between women; the other woman," or, in Akhila's case, a full compartment of women, "provides a mirror in which the protagonist discovers herself, finding her own female identity reflected" for "we are doubles; when I encounter her, at the same time I encounter part of myself" (Felski 132). As this concept appears in the text of *Ladies Coupé*,

They could be her, Akhila thought. She could be them. Each confronting life and trying to make some sense of its uncertain lines. If they could somehow do that...why can't I? 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... (92)

It seems especially significant that Arendt has termed this process of understanding and transformative re-birth 'natality.' As the space of the coupé is described at moments like a womb and a mother, making a sisterhood of the assembled passengers, the concept of natality and its possibility for freedom clearly speaks to Akhila's journey aboard the coupé, for she, in a sense, "becomes by being with others" as she learns from the stories shared in the safe space of the coupé and disembarks from the train and its community with her identity reformed (Malcolm 259).

While the train itself is in motion, a mobile space carrying people beyond local controls and knowledge (Richter 5), the coupé functions as a private female-designated space on the borders of the train's busy public space. Liminal and

transitory, it invites and inspires the women within it to re-think and challenge established norms. Akhila comments on the ease with which she finds herself questioning the direction of her life and gaining a new perspective on her experiences: “Akhila—spinster, government employee, historian, eater of eggs, reminisced about the years that had gone past. How easily the memories tumbled tonight. How effortless it was to remember when the coupé cradled and rocked; a mother that stroked the brow and said: Child, think on. Child, dream on...” (97). This mechanical mother, this cradling coupé, unlike the internalized submission and self-sacrifice Akhila has learned from her mother, advocates a rethinking and revisioning of the cultural prescriptions limiting a woman to and defining her as a passive creature of the private sphere.

Of Journeys and Destinations: Reclaiming “Dead Time” in Generative Space

In remembering and recalling, Akhila is also invited by the space to think and dream, and to project a future self. The coupé, nor the women within it, do not suggest what to think or dream, just to do it, advocating and instilling not a solution, but a type of thinking. In this, the ‘dream of the coupé’ is about creating an alternative space within the seemingly closed and restrictive system of patriarchy in which its women travelers can imagine and enact change. As Michel de Certeau has said of the space of the railway car, “Inside, there is the immobility of an order. Here, rest and dreams reign supreme” (Certeau 111). As patriarchy is suspended, held at bay and made exterior to the coupé, the women of the coupé are afforded an opportunity to examine the system from a position that is less enmeshed and more critical than anything they typically experience. As Certeau has said, from a train car, one can see what one is separated from (114). As the transient space of the train allows for an opening of perspective, dream and desire are rendered physical, and situated very much as the ‘dream of a room.’

In the utopic dream space of the coupé, Akhila is left alone to confront her identity crisis, think, and shape her own future. In this, what the coupé affords its passengers seems a markedly different experience from the way in which train travel has been traditionally theorized. As outside structures become immobile, Akhila recuperates the past not only to critique contemporary structures and her current situation, but to consider, as well, the romantic pursuit of desire; these acts of recapitulation and reformation complicate the coupé’s association with possibility that are evoked by the maternal metaphors used to describe it. In other words, despite the “immobility” and static “rest” that are associated with travel, Akhila’s journey is not “dead time.” As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued about conceptions of space and time during railway travel, it is only the points of departure and destination that matter, such that the experience of the journey is valueless, experienced only as “dead time” (37, 55). And while any train journey ostensibly has a pre-appointed end, a physical and inevitable terminus, it is interesting to consider the way in which *Ladies Coupé* depicts a very different kind of train travel experience.

While Kanyakumari is the clear destination, it is very much the journey that matters and the time spent in transit which affords the passengers an opportunity to speak and to share, to question their identities as Indian women and claim an enhanced sense of autonomy and agency. For the women of the coupé, the railway journey is not time lost, nor is the train journey figured as an insignificant, forgettable means to a pre-determined end. As Akhila's mediation reveals, she is able to recover this 'dead' time and make it generative and recuperative. While this time is not necessarily spent actively, in this liminal space, she is being changed by and through it.

As the literal journey grounds Akhila's metaphorical journey of self-discovery, the supposed "dead time" is given new life and a transformative potential that is both deeply meaningful and memorable. As a separate, enclosed space within the train, the ladies coupé contradicts Schivelbusch's conception of the train journey, for Akhila's journey to Kanyakumari is not only co-opted for a purpose which grounds the novel, but the compartment in which the journey is experienced is positioned beyond the boundaries of public and private, and, similarly, of departure and destination. The coupé, then, seems to be a space that intervenes not only in patriarchy and the silence and submission surrounding the everyday forms of gendered oppression, but in the way in which train travel is traditionally conceptualized. As train theory holds that the middle, the journey itself, is insignificant, *Ladies Coupé* reclaims that "dead space" in a way which is very in-keeping with the feminist project of recovery, of shedding light upon that which has been neglected or thought valueless by a society whose judgments are those of a patriarchal perspective. Thus, Nair's depiction of the train journey from the perspective of a female, in the context of her quest for identity and a space in which to embrace her own desires, opens a potential for the transformative train journey that Schivelbusch never considers possible, as the coupé seems to represent not only a middle space, but also a location where the overlooked 'middle' is foreground.

In its privileging of liminal spaces and its concern with reclaiming the narrative possibilities of "dead time" that are obscured, *Ladies Coupé* participates in the feminist Bildungsroman tradition, which similarly attends to the work of "middles." Focusing on the metaphorical journeys of inward transformation enabled by the literal train journey, the novel is very much a female coming-of-age story, a feminist Bildungsroman in a tradition which has been described by Rita Felski. Demarcated by a trajectory of inward discovery, these novels trace a movement outward from the domestic sphere into a world outside of the home and family (Felski 129). As a heroine comes to question the constraints of domesticity, she comes to resist the performed destiny which her social status as a woman in a patriarchal culture determines and which she formerly felt helpless to alter (Felski 130). According to Felski, the possibility of such a new women's plot depends upon the psychological transformation of the heroine, a shift in perspective which can either come through an abrupt moment of sudden illumination or, as is the case with Akhila, "gradually, through a steady accumulation of insights into the structures of power governing relationships between men and women" (131). As Felski has suggested, "some-

times, the shift in physical space is...symbolically important... In all cases, some form of at least temporary separation from traditional hetero-sexual relations deeply ingrained with patterns of subordination and domination is a necessary precondition for any gains in self-knowledge" (131). Here, the space of the coupé, as a distinctly female space, affords Akhila with the necessary separation to carry out her journey of self-discovery and her quest for an identity beyond the assignments and normative mandates of patriarchy.

And yet, Nair does not follow this feminist form exactly. A traditional narrative journey, one might expect, charts a character's adventures as she amasses experiences and ultimately returns home to re-assume her place in society. But in *Ladies Coupé*, that story of departure and return is reformed: inside the coupé, the women do not have actual experiences or adventures, after all; rather, they talk about the past, narrating their lives up until the point of contact. Nair thus further underscores and privileges the journey rather than any destination, just as her novel presumes change, but may not actually depict it. This, it seems, is an important omission, and in this re-working of a travel narrative, she participates in the wider narrative tradition of the Bildungsroman while also pushing back against its expectations.

In particular, while not only recuperating the 'dead time' of train travel, Nair especially reconceptualizes and frustrates the narrative telos of 'the destination.' As the terminus of the journey, the place where one has been destined or pre-figured to arrive, Nair takes the looming inevitability of an 'ending' to further complicate the way in which her novel deals with pre-determined outcomes for women.

For example, at the end of her transformative journey, Akhila faces the wide ocean and the sea breeze of Kanyakumari, a highly symbolic place of enlightenment, determination, and self-knowledge. After the enclosed space of the coupé and the transformation it engendered, the open world is there for the taking, and Akhila departs from the train as a new woman, ready to enjoy life freely as she wishes. It is a turning point in Akhila's life, with no chance of a return to the status quo:

45-year old spinsters have a reputation...and so it was with Akhila. Elderly spinster. Older sister. Once the breadwinner of the family. Still the cash cow. But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her any more. Look at me, she would tell them. 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. (284)

Akhila is done caring only for her family, ignoring her own dreams. Affirming her individual identity by rejecting her old derived and imposed identity, she has learned that she can be herself, not an addendum to someone else's life. Akhila now wants to be: "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother" (207). Indeed, she makes it quite clear that her journey has been a hugely transformative one, saying "I am not the Akhila who boarded this train last night" (220). This Akhila has learned to "triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions," to

live outside a confining patriarchal structure and beyond the framework of marriage and motherhood (220).

However, Akhila's transformation is not a simple one, which complicates an understanding of Kanyakumari as a liberating final destination. Her revised sense of self may be somewhat clearly defined, but her identity is not fully fixed by the novel's conclusion. While Akhila discovers much about herself and becomes increasingly aware of her own autonomy and agency, the many contradictions and constraints of Indian society continue to surround her, still impacting her if no longer directing and controlling her destiny. Just as the train can be said to offer both freedom and seclusion, solidarity and individuality (Schivelbusch), so does *Ladies Coupé* bring together a series of oppositional forces that offer a rich if problematic set of opportunities for its passengers. In combining escape and enclosure, the space of the train speaks perfectly to Akhila's dilemma as a woman who is caught between her duty to the expectations of the society of which she remains a part and her dreams for an independent identity outside of the social constraints which have previously defined her. Thus, the novel is not simply about transformation and change in the feminist Bildungsroman tradition, but also one that points to the limits of such hopes for change through an articulation of choice and self-transformation.

A Journey Without End: Desire, Destiny, and Resistance to (Narrative) Closure

If *Ladies Coupé* emphasizes liminality and transition and maintains skepticism towards linearity and fixed destinations and subjectivities, it also highlights the limitations of the train as a symbol of unadulterated progress. As Marian Aguiar has uncovered in her investigation into South Asian literature and the trope of the train, the problematic symbolism of the train illustrates how Indian modernity is a discourse invested in both "thinking with and against" (68). Thus, in literature, she believes there is more than a simple one-to-one correspondence between progress and technology, and she advises readers to attend to the ways in which narratives of technology can reveal the complexity, contradiction, and fluidity of the modern condition rather than simply standing in as a self-evident signifier of progress or modernity (72).

In the novel, trains both awaken and foreclose Akhila's physical desire, which conflicts with social expectations for women of her station. For years, she had worked in a government job, commuting daily by bus, where the lecherous hands of some of her traveling companions made her aware, to her shame, of her young body and physical yearnings (148). Changing her habits to travel by train gives Akhila a stable if monotonous life, empty of desire, but, even as she has resolved to turn away from her "wanton senses" and to "remember who she is" socially (148), the intimacy of the train car also brings the first positive determining event of her adult life: her meeting with younger man Hari. The romance that springs up between them is made possible by the unspoken rules of the commuter train, and grows daily thanks

to the time that is afforded by their commuter status, as the car is the only public space in which they can be seen together without causing reprobation. However, even as the train allows for their relationship to develop, this space also figures prominently in the ending of their relationship. When Hari first expresses his interest in her as more than a friend, Akhila, despite the fact that she, too, loves Hari and has fantasized about just this escalation, cannot allow herself to be seen as a desirable woman, and, as the station approaches, signaling the end of their time together, she uses it to shut down her options with him:

She heard herself say... ‘Stop it, Hari. Don’t say anything more, you’ll ruin everything’ ...From the corner of her eye, she could see the station approaching. ‘Let us forget we had this conversation’....

‘Just think about it. That is all I ask.’ His voice ran through the platform, startling everyone. Akhila pretended not to hear him and walked away as fast as she could. (153)

In this instance, Akhila uses their arrival at the station to preserve the prescriptions society has placed upon her options as a single woman. In turning from Hari, she returns to her ‘station’ in life, grounding herself in the social role of the dutiful spinster sister. Whatever her desires, she cannot overcome what others might think of her potentially scandalous relationship, and her conformity ultimately destroys their relationship. Returning by train after a lovers’ weekend, Akhila makes the heart-breaking decision to part with Hari forever and return to the prescriptive limits of her life within the constraints of her patriarchal family home.

This negative experience, however, only puts special emphasis on the dramatic significance of Akhila’s journey to Kanyakumari and underscores the conflictedness of her evolution from her past self. The Akhila who boards the night train steps outside of her private sphere, and, explicitly wishing for escape and change, emerges from the transitional journey secure in the self-knowledge of her ability to act for an autonomous identity that exceeds any pre-determined station.

However, the tension between her desire to be the proper, passive woman society wants her to be and her desire to become an active agent, a woman who can make decisions for herself and live as she chooses very much remains as she looks back on her life from the present space of the coupé. While recounting her brief affair with Hari, wondering if she made a mistake or did the right thing, she says:

Perhaps if I let myself, I too will arrive at happiness. A wild warning, a magic content, an inner peace, all from knowing that the past years haven’t been in vain and what lies ahead will bring forth more than what I resigned myself to accepting as my lot. Perhaps it is not too late....while what she had lost might be irretrievable, life would toss forth a second chance. (163-4)

While this passage makes it clear that she still hopes for more than a patriarchal society would allow her, indicating that she has, not, in fact, resigned herself to the lot of a spinster, it also illustrates that Akhila is unable to speak of herself and her possibilities as someone who is in control of her own destiny, someone capable of making her own choices and directing her own life. Here, Akhila wishes to “arrive” at happiness. She does not yet know how to act for happiness, or, perhaps, that she even can. Thus, even in figuring Kanyakumari as a space in which the confluence of women and wisdom reign supreme, Nair seems to maintain the presence of clear binaries: Akhila can remain trapped by patriarchal systems or be free to live in this beach-front community alone.

She seems to desire, simultaneously, to exert some control over her overly-determined life and, also, to find comfort in passivity. As she lies in the coupé, reflecting upon the stories she has heard from the other women, we find another moment in which the train journey symbolizes passivity and acquiescence to more powerful external forces more than any attained independence and self-determination:

Akhila settled back on the berth.... 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. Akhila, cherished, safeguarded, secure, felt sleep slither over her... It was a respite from being Akhila. (97)

While this passage chronicles her gradual awakening to the fact that she might be able to come to peace with the suppression of her life, in this section, the train, not Akhila, has the greatest agency. Indeed, such a passive response to train travel would not be unexpected: as Schivelbusch has suggested, in boarding a train a passenger largely gives up his or her autonomy, becoming akin to a parcel, all action directed and oriented by someone else (55). A common experience of the train journey is a predominant sense of the hetero-directive, a feeling of helplessness in the face of the powerful machine carrying travelers along passively, the ability to control and direct their actions and movements invalidated.

However, as this novel serves as a reversal of Schivelbusch's discounting of the supposed “dead space” of the train journey, this moment of passive surrender may also function differently for Akhila. Read in a more transformative light, it may be that this passage concerns Akhila's release of the *old* Akhila, the stiff, rigid, spinster who has long been denying herself and presenting a social identity that has little to do with her inner desires. For indeed, in the context of another scene in which Akhila wishes to surrender her control of events, what she most wants to surrender, is not control of her own destiny, but her burden to “plot and plan,” to privilege the care of her family at the expense of her own needs:

...She felt as though she could close her eyes and life would take care of itself without her having to plot and plan....her siblings grow up, graduate, marry. Akhila felt the iron bands around her chest begin to loosen: dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, can I start feeling like a woman again? (83)

Here her familial responsibilities are clearly articulated as deeply confining, and her decision to board a train, to “leave...run away...pull out” (1) is the catalyst that allows her to break from the constrictive iron bands of her social identity, just as her experience in the coupé leads her to question social scripts and ultimately reject the role patriarchy has assigned her. In this sense, the space of the train, rather than rendering her helpless, affords her with a clear opportunity for release. What she gives up as a passenger, then, is not her own agency or sense of self-control, but the mantle of her patriarchal burden which has driven her to embody an identity which is not reflective of her true self. If she is rendered passively child-like in the berth of the coupé, it is not, perhaps, in weakness and surrender, but more along the lines of transformative rebirth and Arendt’s natality.

However, while these potentially inconsistent passages concerning Akhila’s journey of transformation aboard the train can still be reconciled to read as in alignment with her progressive self-awakening, it seems that, whether willfully accepted or not, family and patriarchal demands are always there to condition women’s freedom of movement or independence. For if the character of Akhila is symbolic of all those who are in a quest for female space and a libratory selfhood, her experience—while suggesting a strong message of hope that through change anything is possible—also seems to teach that a woman can survive and find her identity and space not by keeping herself isolated from or placing herself in opposition to male-dominated society and its values, but by co-operating with them (Vasanthakumari 121). In this, the novel is not solely about female transformation and transgression, but about the limits regulating their options. And, fittingly, the paradoxical symbolism of the train and the complex rendering of the coupé as both a space of liberation and adjustment or compromise beautifully echo this difficult, enmeshed bothness.

Indeed, while the women of the coupé each narrate a transformative moment or decision, the fact remains that their tales are largely examples of adjustment rather than liberation (Karmarkar 212), revealing an intentioned ambiguity about the ease of enacting the liberation they conceive of and articulate within the coupé. For example, Janaki realizes that while she does not love her husband, she needs him for his companionship; Prabha Devi tries to obtain sexual autonomy, which misfires and results in a near-rape and a reversion to normative expectations of a wife and mother which she can set aside only in a swimming pool; and Margaret, perhaps the most tragic heroine of all, is an educated, empowered, and financially autonomous woman who remains chained to and crippled by her dysfunctional relationship, for no one wishes to hear or believe her desperate unhappiness or the true character of her husband, and, as leaving him would mean leaving her child, losing the support of her

family, and bearing the stigma of divorce, the change she is able to enact in her life is to take control of her husband's body, softening him and turning him into a man she can more easily tolerate. Thus, while many of these stories show a woman taking action to overcome the oppressions that are characteristic of the traditional, patriarchal world, the conclusion of the narratives also suggest the limits which continue to restrict and confine their development of autonomy and self-fulfillment.

For example, as Prhaba Devi's tale narrates an imaginary conversation she might wish to hold with a future daughter, we can see an articulation of the way in which the women of *Ladies Coupé* feel compelled to not only work both with and against patriarchy, but to understand it as a spectrum along which to negotiate an individual compromise:

'Daughter,' I'll have to say, 'show [your husband] you are incapable of doing anything beyond the periphery of your home and he will manage your life, from sending postal orders to balancing cheque books to booking railway tickets to managing household expenses. He will pet you and cosset you at first, for after all, you are appealing to the male in him to protect and safeguard. But it will be only a matter of days before he turns into a tyrant who will want to control your every thought. There is an alternative. You could choose to demonstrate how independent you are and show him how well you manage by yourself. Except that when you need a pair of arms around you, someone to hold you and cherish you, he might not be there because you have always let him know that you don't need him. Where is the middle path, the golden mean? Daughter, I wish I knew. I wish my mother had told me what was the right thing to do. Or perhaps the truth is, she didn't know either.' (199)

This imaginary interaction suggests the complex position of women within society, for as *Ladies Coupé* illustrates in the limitations it preserves, a woman needs to co-operate with male-dominated society, to find a way to live with the existing system. This conversation, then, reveals a woman engaged in an uncertain negotiation of the system in which she is caught, not one who is breaking away, boldly blazing a new path or articulating an identity removed from traditional society. As Prahba Devi voices this multi-generational question, "where is the middle path, the golden mean?", the novel underscores the lack of any fixity and its resistance to closure. Here, again, the experience of living with patriarchy is unhinged from the binaries of living oppressed and living alone and placed along a fluid spectrum. While there may be an answer to this poignant question, it cannot be located in a single final answer, a pure mean or golden rule.

Thus, the notion of a "middle path" here is especially key, for it does seem to suggest an additional alternative, if one that has not yet been achieved. Indeed, in a novel which seems to be very invested in breaking the binaries of public and private,

and finding value in more than a journey's beginning and end points, Akhila's lesson may lie in a space that is similarly undefined, in ongoing negotiation. In detailing a transformative journey in a transitional, "middle" space, *Ladies Coupé* may, ultimately, be advocating that women continue to search for a "middle path," one which affords them a degree of autonomy while still preserving the benefits of a protective patriarchal structure where they might find comfort in simultaneously living life for themselves and sharing it with a partner.

The very conclusion of the novel, as Akhila arrives at Kanyakumari and crosses the threshold of self-discovery, can be read as deeply problematic for her project of attaining autonomy and articulating an identity that is not contingent upon anyone else. Intent on proving she is in control and beyond caring what society may think of her, she seduces a younger man and, later, decides to call Hari, her former love. While this act affirms her own desire and is something ostensibly done for her own happiness, the fact remains that the closing chapter, written in a significant and dramatic present tense, is devoted to her attempt to re-establish contact with a man, despite the fact that her quest has been in the name of discovering whether or not she could live without a patriarchal presence.

Even if Akhila's decision will not ultimately interfere with her ability to continue her journey of self-discovery and hamper her articulation of an independent identity, it still stresses how very much Akhila remains a part of a society comprised of both men and women who must interact productively. Indeed, the novel's ending complicates a previous passage concerning Hari. As Akhila, in the coupé, muses that "what she had lost might be irretrievable," she hopes that life might "toss forth a second chance" (163-4). In the context of her journey of self-discovery, these thoughts seemed to circulate around the forces of gendered oppression that had restricted her life generally, stolen her youth, and only recently brought her to hope for a second chance at living her life, at finding happiness rather than suppressed dreams and desires. However, her hope for a reunion with Hari suggests that the second chance she ultimately desires it not simply happiness or to recuperate her compromised past, but the very specific and thus very circumscribed hope to rekindle her romance with Hari.

In this sense, Akhila does not "burn up" any tracks or forge a new path at all. She simply returns to a significant point in her past, if armed with revelatory self-knowledge and fresh hope to revise a significant chapter of her life. What lies ahead of her, it seems, has not changed much, for the same players revolve around her life. What has changed is her sense of identity and the strength she discovered in a journey of inward transformation. Her hope, her chance at happiness, then, may lie in her ability to begin to move through her relatively unchanging world differently.

Indeed, in the end, it seems Nair is not concerned with offering her character any kind of binary choice between restrictive patriarchy or freedom; rather, Akhila finds her own middle path between them, choosing certain constraints of society while abandoning others in order to pursue a love relationship. Indeed, as the penultimate paragraph illustrates, she must literally return as she came: "She will have to leave for the railway station. To wrest the reins of her life back, she thinks, looking at her

return train ticket” (290). Her decision to compromise could be read in a feminist context as a failure to transcend the constraints of society; however, it could also be read as realistic acknowledgement that she will need to find a way to work within an existing system which continues to delineate her life. As the train is bound to its tracks, she, too, is part of a controlled and regulated system. She may be a different woman, and her transformation may be significant, but the wider world has not reconfigured itself. As she has undoubtedly discovered the woman within, she is here shown to be equally determined to work with the society without.

Similarly, while the safe space of the coupé was dominated by female voices of strength and support, as the journey comes to a close, its passengers have to disembark into a society that regulates and passes judgment. As Michel de Certeau has said of the train journey, “as always, one has to get out,” and in this “there are only lost paradises” (114). Thus, while the coupé allows for great transformative potential, its nature as a transitional space makes it limiting as well as libatory. For the utopic space is not permanent, and the solution to women’s oppression cannot lie in separatism, nor can the coupé be the only space in which women can articulate their autonomy and agency or question those traditions which systemically oppress.

As Certeau asks, “Is the terminal the end of an illusion” (114)? Will the lessons of the coupé translate into the wider world? Will the transformative experiences prove as transitory as the space in which the change occurred? While the coupé brings Akhila to the threshold of self-discovery, there is another threshold to be crossed in the airlock constituted by the train station. As Certeau has described a passenger’s re-entry into the noise and mess and hubbub of the station, the train becomes a suddenly immobile machine and seems “a sort of god undone,” a mighty force reduced to impotence (114). As the train journey’s power is undone, he seems to suggest a coinciding undoing of the subject who dreamed within the space of the railway compartment. For Certeau, the end of the journey occasions the end of “the adventure of the traveling soul that could believe itself intact because it was surrounded by glass and iron” (114). Indeed, as Akhila makes the decision to contact Hari, she says “I must do it today, now, when I feel whole and strong” (114). She seems to feel she must act before returning to her daily life, before departing from her transformative journey, and, ostensibly, before risking the loss of her new-found strength when she rejoins traditional society (290). Clearly, there is much in the real world to threaten to the utopic space of the coupé and the journey of self-exploration and transformation it can engender. As Certeau describes disembarkment, “...the porter lifts the bags, the conductors move back and forth. Visored caps and uniforms restore the network of an order of work within the mass of people, while the wave of travelers/dreamers flows into the net...” (114). As a passenger leaves the space of the train, “history begins again, feverishly, enveloping” (114). Even as the women of the coupé make the isolation and anonymity of train travel work for them, they have to get out and get off, such that patriarchy begins again, surrounding and submerging.

In this sense, the train journey in *Ladies Coupé* affords passengers the opportunity to challenge the society that is left outside, its compartment offering a space in which to think both with and against larger governing structures, to both conform to, and, at the same time, revise, cultural prescriptions. As the transitional space of the coupé becomes the locus of and catalyst for the metaphorical journey of self-discovery experienced by its female passengers, it serves as a metaphor for a utopian world liberated from patriarchy and false binaries, affording its women with the opportunity to revise their identities in a space of transformative potential. However, as such a transitional space, the coupé is also not a stable solution or a space of finished identities. The women of the coupé must leave its confines and continue to re-make their futures, creating space for themselves within the complexity and contradictions of a society whose traditional ideologies may well conflict with their own individual desires. Patriarchy, in the end, proves to be a system the women of the coupé can escape only for a moment, for the space of a journey. As the combined voices of *Ladies Coupé* seem to suggest, a woman can revise her own identity, can discover inner strength and assert her own autonomy and agency, but she cannot find her place in isolation from male-dominated society. A space that shatters binaries and brings together oppositional forces, the coupé is a space for change and self-discovery, and, also, a space that acknowledges existing limitations and enduring challenges. As the coupé is situated within the larger system of the train, so must the passengers of the coupé continue to operate within patriarchy, eliciting change, but perhaps never fully closing the quest for female space and an autonomous identity.

And yet, while the novel seems, on the one hand, a chronicle of compromised feminist potential, we might also think of it as a tale detailing the potential for purposeful compromise: if it imposes realistic limits on what transitional spaces and transformative journeys can achieve, it also questions if such limits are meant to signal women's failure to transcend and overcome male oppression or if they instead suggest that righting the wrongs of India's patriarchal history involves adjustment on the parts of *both* men and women. As we consider the novel's ambivalent conclusions, it may be useful to return to Virginia Woolf, who, after all, wanted a room of her own not to shut out or remove herself from male society but so that she could contribute meaningfully to that society and, in effect, turn public masculine spaces into human spaces. As Woolf would say, and as Akhila may come to realize as well, the ability to live alone is not the real question here; it is living as a woman in a patriarchy. Thus, the narratives accordingly shift focus from separatism or individual liberatory change to occasion adjustment on a personal and local level as they reach towards an ability to create narratives that do not exist separately from male dominated society.

As the individual stories collected here reflect both possibilities and limitations, there is no clear or perfect conclusion, no quick fix to the conditions impinging upon the women's lives. And yet, there is the sense that this is how history moves. While it might be too late for the passengers in the novel to achieve the independence and agency to which they aspire, we must not forget the figuration of the coupé as womb or the time spent detailing the women's negative experiences with their mothers'

instructional inheritance, for it may not be too late for their daughters or the society in which they will move. As the coupé afforded these women a room in which to share an alternative narrative and challenge received notions, in the generative stories that will follow, there is nothing but possibility. Viewed in this light, the coupé is not a failed space, for the quest for 'space' in this novel is not about figuring more prominently in physical space but in social space, just as the need for 'space' has nothing to do with physical division but rather with attaining a site of labor for necessary cultural work—here, most prominently, the labor of narrative.

As Akhila and her companions narrativize experience within an oppressive patriarchy, however fraught and oppositional, Nair ultimately demonstrates the way in which this particular female space remains useful as a catalyst for change and hope in a claim which speaks more to implications for feminist discourse in the novel as a genre than to her particular tale. For here, within the coupé, the way to explore these enduring tensions is through narrative. As the stories weave together across class and caste, the power of narrative achieves significant cultural work as it awakens minds and possibilities within the space of the coupé but also beyond, as the journey aboard the night train is more than a physical plotted frame, but one the reader shares with the women who wish to emerge transformed. In this, the novel itself is like the coupé—a safe space in which to weigh social concerns, an invitation into an ever-complexifying conversation, a vehicle creating and constructing openings within a closed system. As each passenger's subsequent narrative raises and forecloses possibilities, the narrative form complements the symbolism of the novel's themes as if to declare that the opportunity to narrativize, to learn through shared stories and reflect upon a collective experience, is vital to the crucial process of voicing the kinds of questions and the continued search for answers and possibilities that constitute Akhila's journey. Ultimately, the power of the narrative journey—the one in which the reader participates—is as important as the train journey itself to Nair's investigation of the power of this peculiar female space and the stories of the women brought together within it.

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Notes

¹ The excitement and strangeness of the Kanyakumari train contrasts clearly with the description of the daily train ride which has become part of her routine: “Akhila knew every station, every landmark, every level crossing, every ditch they ran alongside. Even before the train sped through Korattur, she would take a deep breath and screw up her face to prevent the stench from the milk pasteurizing factory from riding up her nostrils” (147).

² Another important aspect to the sisterhood forged in the coupé is the way in which the space of the coupe brings together women from different social backgrounds, affording them the opportunity to talk, learn, and share as they confront daily life within a safe space. As Evelyne Hanquart-Turner has pointed out:

Not only does the ploy of the train as the setting of the narration allow for the social and age diversity of the characters (three married women of different conditions—a grand-mother, a rich housewife, and an educated working wife who are mothers—a single mother, a teenager and the working spinster protagonist), not only does it provide the neutral mutual ground that makes their telling of their tales possible, but also by the sheer fact of transporting them through the breadth and width of the Indian countryside and the cities dotting it, it expresses the universality of their experiences throughout India. (320)

Grouping representative characters allows Nair to denounce the injustices done to Indian women as a collective, revealing the intensity of the pressure exercised against them by patriarchal tradition. Thus, the train journey provides the opportunity to draw a broad picture of the condition of women in today’s India. The passengers’ diverse subject positions draw attention to individual differences and how they complicate and intersect with gender, but their combined narratives also speak to a common experience of patriarchal oppression. The narrative is tied together by a shared experience of systemic oppression and confining gender roles, a common theme which, in opening a dialogue, gestures towards subversion as the women’s critiques at least envision the possibility of moving beyond such subjugation.

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