

Confronting the Self: The Role of Polyphony and the Power of Coupe in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract

As it passes through various Indian states, assimilating people from various cultural backgrounds constantly, an Indian train is a place that truly embodies a transient cultural pattern. A passenger moves from the familiar to the strange in this liminal space in terms of geography, culture, language, cuisine, and psychological makeup. Indian Railways provides an insightful interpretation of cohabitation. Anita Nair, one of the finest authors in India, frequently uses "travel" as a significant theme in her novels to symbolize the characters' mental and physical journeys. In *Ladies Coupe*, the act of traveling is viewed as a confrontation with oneself and focuses on the lives of the five women in the transient space. By poetically narrating their journeys, Nair gives her female characters a life of their own, invoking a polyphonic framework within the transient space of the coupe. The Indian train, specifically the ladies coupe, is an example of Bakhtinian polyphony, where the conversations between passengers comprise multiple consciousness, including people of all ages and regions. As a result, this train travelogue includes five distinct voices, each with its own conscious design. The paper aims to examine the trope of the coupe using the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony, the impact of the "dead time" experienced during train travel and how the transitional space of the coupe helps Akhila attain self-discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*.

Keywords: Polyphony, Transitional Space, Self-discovery, Mikhail Bakhtin, Anita Nair, Ladies Coupe

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this research is to examine Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* following Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of voice, specifically the theory of polyphony, which he introduced in his text *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. This research investigates how the "dead time" of train travel and the "coupe" as a transitional place contributes to the protagonist's transformative journey in *Ladies Coupe*. *Polyphony* is the term used to describe "the construction of the voices of characters and the narrator in the novel" (Bakhtin, 1984). Nair's poetic narration invokes a polyphonic framework within the transient space of the train. The purpose of this essay is to apply these ideas to Nair's novel to explore the significance of the narrative voice, the voices of the other characters in the train's transitional space, and how the variety of distinct voices and consciousnesses could help Akhila find answers to the questions that have troubled her entire life, "Can a woman cope alone?" (Nair, 2001, p.22)

The writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky had a significant impact on Bakhtin's understanding of voice. He appreciates the uniqueness of Dostoevsky's characters and their voices within the work. According to Bakhtin, these figures are morally influential and autonomous; the author's doctrine does not influence them. (Bakhtin, 1984). According to Simon Dentith (2005), their voices are given the same weight as the narrator's because the narrator certainly engages in engaged conversations with the voices of the characters. Bakhtin (1984) emphasizes the significance of linguistic variation and speech distinction in polyphonic work. However, not every novel with multiple voices is necessarily a polyphonic text. The novel may be considered polyphonic because it contains a variety of voices throughout its entirety. This means that the novel contains several different voices and perspectives on the same topic. This distinguishes the work from others. The stories of Dostoevsky and Nair, the focus of this analysis, contain this trait, though to different degrees.

Nair's *Ladies Coupe* has a remarkable narrative framework where train travel is the backbone of the plot; it focuses on the metaphorical journey of self-discovery attained due to Akhila's literal journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. The coupe provides the privacy required for the six main characters to narrate their tales of experience without judgment or constraint. As the coupe encompasses the female voices as individualistic and collective consciousness, it allows them to exchange secrets and narrate life experiences while questioning concerns; these women might achieve a greater sense of understanding the self and the world. Its social words and views are diverse. As the stories are told in the transitional space of the coupe, the women talk about the decisions they had to make and the ones that were made for them, as well as the intricate web of relationships in which they are intertwined (Bausman, 2014). Throughout this

process, the protagonist, Akhila, rediscovers the possibilities that life has to offer. Akhila goes through an inward change due to the narratives she was a part of during their shared physical journey on the train. Thus, the "dead time" of the train journey has the potential to be transformative (Bausman, 2014). *Ladies Coupe* displays heteroglossia and polyphony, two of the hallmarks of the heteroglot novel genre. Nonetheless, this paper concentrates solely on polyphony's concealed and embedded characteristics, abandoning heteroglossia for a separate paper.

The use of literary polyphony in the novel allows the reader to see the world through multiple lenses and understand how different experiences and perspectives can shape a person's sense of self. By giving voice to a range of women's experiences, the novel invites the reader to engage with questions of identity, agency, and empowerment and to consider how these issues intersect with gender, class, and culture. Similar to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Nair employs the same narrative method in this novel, which depicts the lives of six distinct women traveling in a Ladies' Coupe, each of whom is a heroine in her tale while recounting her life experiences (Iqbal, 2015). Overall, the distinct voices in the novel help Akhila find herself by offering her new insights and perspectives and challenging her to think critically about her own life and choices. Through these encounters, she can embark on self-discovery and transformation and embrace a more authentic and fulfilling sense of self.

Ladies Coupe can be read as a feministic fiction novel. As Nair states, "Feminism, as I understand it, demands women are treated as equal to men" (Nair, 2008). "I prefer to take a stance where I believe 'about the right women have to be women without having to be inferior beings,' And this is what I wanted to explore with *Ladies Coupe*" (Nair, 2013). Nair claims that, the portrayal of women in literature has consistently exhibited ambivalence. Women who conformed to society conventions were often rewarded with a "happily ever after" ending. Over time, spirited female protagonists ultimately discover fulfilment and a sense of purpose via their relationships with virtuous male partners, as shown by characters like Elizabeth Bennett and Jane Eyre. In contrast, individuals find themselves compelled to confront their circumstances with a fabricated sense of bravery, like to the characters Scarlett O'Hara, Anna Karenina, Karuthamma, or Emma Bovary, ultimately leading to either a sense of regret or the tragic decision to end their lives (Shukla, 2016). Nair said in an interview about her inspiration to write the novel that she believes the confined space of a train compartment makes women want to pour out their souls to strangers, mainly because they will never meet them again. "It is like a confessional box; you are assured anonymity", she adds (Reddy, 2022). Indeed, Massey (1994) has stressed the importance of the third important space: "transitional space," which is the Ladies Coupe here. A transient space, neither entirely public nor fully private, allows the women of the coupe to interact, change, and transform.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies have discussed and analyzed Nair's *Ladies Coupe* from various perspectives; however, studies have yet to apply Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to analyze the varying voices of the novel's characters and how the coupe functions as a transitional space. Therefore, this paper attempts to bridge the gap in the relevant literature by analyzing the diverse voices of the six different characters on the coupe, whose experiences are diverse but whose collective life lessons are layered as unmerged voices within the narrative discourse, and whose influence aids Akhila in discovering the answer to her haunting question.

In his research article entitled "In Search of Certitude: A Study of Female Psyche in Ladies Coupe", Daniel Rubaraj explores women characters as the "tormented female psyche, which was subjected to the suppression of self-identity, intrusion of their private selves, exploitation, and abuse of the female body and mind by the patriarchal society" (R, 2020, p.8). The psychoanalysis of Freud's concept is applied as a base to examine the psyche and how the concepts of marriage and family life prove to be institutions of suppression and oppression. Hence, the researcher concludes that the female psyche longs to live a life of loneliness and solitude. On the other hand, Poonam Patil examines "The Female Protagonists in the Novels of Anita Nair". Her thesis focuses on the characters in light of feminism against the backdrop of a male-dominated society, as she views women as "victims of the strict patriarchal pattern" (Patil, 2017, p.102). Patil portrays how education and economic independence play a massive role in women's lives. A dissertation, titled "Patriarchal Dominance and Female Defiance in Ladies Coupe," delves into how the novel portrays women grappling with patriarchal constraints and ultimately defying them (S, 2017).

According to the research (Kasturi, 1995), achieving gender equality in India requires not only integrating women into development but also reevaluating and changing existing structures and strategies to ensure women's empowerment and protection. The research paper titled "Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture" highlights strategies that aim to change men's attitudes towards gender equity and underscores the ongoing transition in India, where women are increasingly entering public spaces, challenging cultural norms and traditional masculinity, with the potential to pave the way for a more gender-equitable society (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). A research project entitled "How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society" reveals that while Indians are increasingly accepting of women in political leadership roles, a significant portion of the population still holds traditional views on gender roles within the family. This suggests a complex and evolving attitude toward gender roles in Indian society, where traditional and progressive perspectives coexist (Pew Research Center, 2022). Despite the progress made, the paper titled "Indian Females in the Twenty-First Century: How They Have Fared? An Analysis Using Geospatial Techniques" suggests that the patriarchal mindset and gender bias still persist in both public and private spaces, highlighting the ongoing challenges in achieving full gender equality (Kumari & Siotra, 2023).

Another research article titled "The Portrayal of the Female Mind in Ladies Coupe" provides a distinct feminine perspectives and sensibility. The researcher claims that "Ladies Coupe is delineating feminine sensibility, despite the fact that this delineating is chiefly

expressed through the projection of the crisis of social norms and inner urge for freedom" (Rajaram, 2020). A minor research project of the University Grants Commission (UGC) titled "The Lapping Sound of Tender Coconut Water: Fluid Expressions of Emotions in Anita Nair's 'The Better Man', 'Ladies Coupe', and 'Mistress'" studies the works of Anita Nair, focusing on the "aesthetic context of emotions" in light of Rasa Theory (Das & Kumar, 2013). It analyses how the author generates images and metaphors that capture her characters' emotional, spiritual, and private lives.

The research article titled "Piecing the Puzzle of the 'Shameful Intercourse': How Polyphony Serves Healing in Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River" explores the narrative strategy of polyphony. It revolves around how polyphony serves as a means of reconciliation and healing in the narrative, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the legacy of slavery and its impact on contemporary racial identity dilemmas (Sarra & Hocine, 2018). Another research paper titled "Polyphony of Form and Ideas in the Works of Milan Kundera" explores the influence of music, specifically polyphonic thought. It delves into how Kundera employs the principles of fugue, where independent voices contribute to the whole, creating complex meanings, highlighting that no single truth or perspective exists, but rather a multitude of voices in counterpoint (Novák, 2023). It also discusses the intermedial aspect, positioning polyphony as a phenomenon bridging music and literature.

3. Methodology

This qualitative investigation employs both argumentative and analytical techniques to delve into the rich narrative discourse of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. The novel unfolds through the lenses of multiple perspectives and consciousnesses, resembling Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. The primary argument of this study asserts that embracing polyphony is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the characters' perspectives, particularly in the context of Akhila's transformative journey. Moreover, the 'coupe' itself emerges as a significant element within the narrative, offering anonymity and serving as a transitional space that facilitates inward journeys. However, the role of psychoanalytical concepts is equally pivotal in unraveling the intricate nuances of the characters' psyches, with a particular focus on gender studies.

In today's society, discussions surrounding gender stereotypes and the often-stark contrast between societal discourse and lived realities are of paramount importance. The characters in *Ladies Coupe* vividly embody these gender-related themes, shedding light on the complexities of female identity and the dynamics of servility and autonomy in relation to men. In the midst of these multifaceted character narratives, psychoanalytical concepts such as defense mechanisms- denial, sublimation, and the impact of societal norms on individual psyches emerge as essential tools for understanding the characters' thought processes and actions. These concepts allow us to delve deeper into the psychological dimensions of the narrative, uncovering the underlying tensions and conflicts within the characters.

Ladies Coupe provides a rich tapestry of voices and perspectives, echoing Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. This qualitative investigation not only delves into the characters' journeys and transformations but also harnesses psychoanalytical concepts to illuminate the intricate interplay between societal discourse, gender identities, and individual psyches within the novel's narrative landscape.

Bakhtin's concept of polyphony emphasizes the coexistence of multiple voices, perspectives, and consciousnesses within a narrative. While the minor argument is that the 'coupe' gives anonymity and serves as a transitory zone for the inward journey to commence. By incorporating psychoanalytical concepts, deeper insights into the characters' inner worlds and thought processes can be gained. This psychological dimension adds depth to the characters, making their voices in the polyphony more nuanced and relatable.

3.1 Karpagam

Chapter nine marks a pivotal moment in the novel where we discover that Akhila's transformation and change of perspective were influenced by her chance encounter with Karpagam, her childhood friend, at a supermarket after a gap of twenty-five years. It served as her wake-up call, accelerating her solo train travel to Kanyakumari. At forty-five, she realized she was still living on the sidelines, defined by her roles with others as "She was always an extension of someone else's identity" (Nair, 2001, p.200,201). This realization made her acutely aware of her lack of personal identity and agency. She longed for someone to see her as a whole being, independent of her familial roles. This search for her own identity became a driving force for her transformation.

Karpagam comments on how her mother praised Akhila for becoming the head of the family, "All of us admired the way you took charge of your family when your father died" (Nair, 2001, p.199). The fact that other women of their generation admired Akhila for taking charge of her family after her father's death reflects the deeply ingrained societal norm that expects women to make sacrifices for the sake of their families. This admiration underscores the oppressive expectations placed on women like Akhila.

Karpagam's presence acts as a catalyst, providing the support and strength Akhila needs to make her life-altering decision. Through Karpagam's influence and the stories of the five co-passengers, Akhila's decision to break free from societal constraints is solidified. She becomes a source of strength and inspiration for Akhila, leading her out of the confines of her limited world.

3.1.1 Widowhood

The portrayal of widowhood in Indian society is explicitly elucidated in *Gendering Caste*;

"Once the woman ceased to be a wife, especially a childless wife, she ceased to be a person; she was neither a daughter nor a daughter-in-law. The problem of the widow in the Brahmanical structure of patriarchy was that since the wife had no social

existence outside of her husband, and her relationship with him was underlined by her role in reproduction, then as a widow, who or what was she?" (Chakravarti, 2018).

Karpagam challenges the notion that femininity is tied to marital status or widowhood by defying the Brahmanical widowhood system. She embodies womanhood, unburdened by the expectations and judgments of others, claiming that "it is natural for a woman to be want to be feminine" (Nair, 2001, p.202). Her unwavering self-expression and refusal to conform is shown when she says, "I am who I am. And I have as much right as anyone else to live as I choose" (Nair, 2001, p.202), encouraging Akhila to find her voice and assert her autonomy. She wears "Kumkum tilak" on her forehead and enjoys life's pleasures, defying the notion that a widow's existence should be devoid of color and pleasure. Her defiance of the widowhood system and her unwavering belief in living life on her terms inspire Akhila to embrace her agency and challenge the oppressive structures that seek to confine her.

Karpagam, through her fearless attitude and independent life, provided Akhila with a different perspective. The words cascaded out of her mouth with the ease of one who had mouthed them several times before, "Who made all these laws anyway? Some man who could not bear the thought that despite his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men" (Nair, 2001, p.202). This further underscores her defiance of societal expectations.

Another widow in the novel is Rukmini, who works in the Chettiar household with Marikolanthu as a maid and faces the same issue of oppression and marginalization due to widowhood. As a lower-caste widow, Rukmini is doubly marginalized in a society that already marginalizes lower-caste individuals. Her widowhood compounds her social exclusion, rendering her even more vulnerable. Her anger and agony are evident when she states,

"They think because we are widows, we know well enough not to pander to our taste buds. No chilies, tamarind, or spices... our nerve ends, they think, are as dead as our husbands. So, we won't taste their food or hunger for it, and will be content with a bowl of gruel and a pinch of salt" (Nair, 2001, p.214)

Rukmini's comment sheds light on the shared oppression faced by widows, regardless of their caste background. She, as a lower-caste widow, highlights the stereotype that widows are expected to have their desires and tastes suppressed. The denial of spices and flavor in her food symbolizes the societal perception that widows should lead bland lives, symbolizing that while "she was physically alive, she was socially dead" (Chakravarti, 2018). Rukmini's experience mirrors Karpagam's in that both are marginalized due to their widowhood. They are expected to conform to a narrow, dull existence dictated by societal norms. Discrimination and limited access to resources may prevent her from defying norms as boldly as Karpagam.

Karpagam's character serves as a powerful symbol of resistance against the traditional widowhood system. Her unapologetic celebration of her freedom and her rejection of societal taboos inspire Akhila to question the burdens placed upon her by her family and society. While Rukmini and Karpagam face the oppressive norms of widowhood, their differing financial situations, social networks, and personal attitudes contribute to their distinct responses. Both of their experiences, however, serve as a commentary on the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that affect women's lives, irrespective of their caste.

3.2 *Janaki Prabhakar*

Janaki's life exemplifies the enduring impact of a deeply rooted system that expects men to protect and care for women, resulting in complex dynamics between tradition and individual agency. This age-old belief system, which persists in contemporary society, places women in roles defined by strict dependence on men for protection and support. It is clear when Janaki says, "Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses" (Nair, 2001p.22). The interplay between tradition and agency in Janaki's life underscores the complex realities women face in navigating a society deeply rooted in age-old beliefs and expectations.

Manu's statement, "Women must be under the protection and care of male family members day and night," (Manu, 2005, IX.2-5) strongly advocates for strict oversight of women to shield them from perceived temptations and sensual pleasures. He goes on to assert that without such guardianship, women could potentially distress both their natal families and their marital households (Chakravarti, 1993). This conduct persists in contemporary society and coexists with our traditional concept of women's roles. This traditional role involves being a heterosexual wife and mother who primarily focuses on domestic responsibilities, such as caring for her husband and children, without engaging in work outside the home. However, there has yet to be a philosophical consensus on how best to evaluate the characteristic behavior of this role. (Friedman, 1985).

"Father should protect in childhood, husband should protect in youth, sons should protect in old age, and thus, the women do not deserve independence" (Manu, 2005, IX.3)

The verse aligns with the traditional Indian belief that women should rely on male figures for protection and support. Janaki's life reflects this profoundly ingrained idea as she has always been under the protection of male family members. This continuous dependence on men has led to her fragility and insecurity, as she claims,

"I am a woman who has always been looked after. First, there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son. Waiting to take off from where his father left off" (Nair, 2001, p.22)

Janaki's characterization as a pampered but insecure individual directly results from the deep-rooted system that expects women to be protected and cared for by men. Her fear of being alone and her reliance on others for validation are manifestations of this system's impact

on her psyche. The verse suggests that their sons should protect women in old age. Janaki does mention her son Siddharth as her future protector after her husband. However, it is essential to note that Janaki's decision to live with her husband shows a level of agency and independence instead of enduring the taunts and insults at her son's house.

3.2.1 Denial

In Janaki's life, her insecurity and dependency on male figures might make her particularly sensitive to external threats or uncertainties. Marriage to Prabhakaran at a young age may have provided her with a sense of security, and acknowledging the risks and uncertainties of life may be too distressing for her. Hence, she resorts to denial to protect herself from these unsettling thoughts.

"The defensive measure to which the ego has recourse is aimed not against the instinctual life but directly at the external world which inflicts the frustration. Just as, in the neurotic conflict, perception of a prohibited instinctual stimulus is warded off by means of repression, so the infantile ego resorts to denial in order not to become aware of some painful impression from without" (Freud, 1936, p.89).

According to Anna Freud, denial means avoiding painful impressions from the external world. In Janaki's case, denial can be seen as a defense mechanism she employs to shield herself from the painful realities or impressions of the external world. Her habit of switching channels when life insurance commercials appear on television can be interpreted as denial. These commercials often remind viewers of life's uncertainties, risks, and potential dangers, which may trigger anxiety and discomfort. It is evident when Janaki comments, "Why do they make these years seem like a waiting period for death?" (Nair, 2001, p.27) She switched channels each time a life insurance commercial appeared, avoiding the confrontation of these uncomfortable truths and maintaining a state of denial.

In this case, the painful impression is the thought of her husband's absence and the loneliness that might accompany it. "What would it be like when he was no more? Janaki refused to think of it" (Nair, 2001, p.35). Janaki's mind actively resists the idea of her husband's passing and its consequences. She deliberately changes the subject whenever her son brings up the topic of her husband's eventual absence. This avoidance is a protective measure to shield herself from the emotional distress and anxiety associated with contemplating life without her partner.

"What would it be like to sleep alone in a bed and to wake up in a room all by herself? Early mornings, nights. Alone, alone. Please God, Janaki prayed, let me fall asleep so that I don't have to think" (Nair, 2001, p.35)

Anna Freud's concept of the 'infantile ego' is relevant here as Janaki's strong dependence on her husband and reluctance to consider a future without him suggests a level of dependency characteristic of a less mature or developed ego. She may use denial to maintain a childlike perception of the world where she is shielded from its harsher realities. Her prayer to fall asleep and avoid thinking about it further underscores her emotional vulnerability and her desire to maintain the sense of security that her husband provides. Janaki's fear of sleeping alone and waking up in an empty room highlights her apprehension about loneliness. She may associate her husband's presence with comfort and security, and the prospect of being alone is emotionally distressing for her.

3.3 Sheela Vasudevan

Sheela, a fourteen-year-old girl, emerges as a significant lens through which the themes of femininity and the impact of societal norms on women's lives are explored. Sheela's upbringing by her grandmother, Ammumma, profoundly influences her perception of womanhood, self-worth, and her place in the world. Ammumma's embodiment of traditional femininity and her wisdom and insights shape Sheela's journey toward liberation and self-understanding.

3.3.1 The Power of Self-Fulfilment

Ammumma is portrayed as a woman who epitomizes traditional notions of femininity; in Sheela's words, "Ammumma was a great one for manifestations of femininity" (Nair, 2001, p.67). She meticulously grooms herself, applying lotions and powders and adorning herself with jewels before sleep. Ammumma's emphasis on appearance and her aversion to imperfections illustrate the societal pressures and expectations placed upon women to conform to specific beauty standards. This portrayal reflects the broader theme of how women often navigate a world that prioritizes external appearances over their true selves.

Despite adhering to conventional beauty standards, Ammumma imparts valuable lessons to Sheela about self-respect and authenticity. She encourages Sheela not to groom herself to please others but to prioritize her happiness and self-esteem. Ammumma's advice to Sheela becomes a guiding principle. The sentiment that "The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy" (Nair, 2001, p.67) is both empowering and subversive. It challenges the societal expectation that women's appearances are solely for the pleasure of others and underscores the importance of self-fulfillment. This advice marks a subtle but significant shift from the traditional norms of femininity that Ammumma outwardly portrays. This advice challenges the prevalent narrative that women should solely seek external validation. Ammumma's teachings catalyze Sheela's personal growth and independence.

Moreover, the passing down of knowledge from Ammumma to Sheela signifies the "intergenerational transmission of cultural values and beliefs" (Tam, 2015). Her experiences shape Ammumma's perspectives, and she imparts them to Sheela to guide her through the complexities of womanhood. However, Sheela's understanding of Ammumma's insecurities and the desire to appear pleasing even in old age also shows how societal pressures can linger across generations, influencing perceptions of identity as she comments, "You call that a woman! A proper woman has a good head of hair and chest full of breasts" (Nair, 2001, p.67).

As Sheela navigates the world around her, her sensitivity and insight lead her to observe and understand nuances others might miss. This insight is exemplified in her observations of her family dynamics and her intuitive comprehension of her grandmother's impending death. Sheela knew "Ammamma wanted to feel perfect this one last night" (Nair, 2001, p.68) before getting admitted to the hospital. However, "Her children, of course, dismissed it as a sign of age and its concurrent eccentricity" (Nair, 2001, p.68). Sheela's awareness of the discrepancies between the external appearances and internal realities of people around her shapes her evolving perception of femininity. Sheela is not content with surface-level expressions of femininity; instead, she seeks depth and authenticity. In essence, Ammamma's embodiment of conventional femininity serves as a contrasting backdrop against which Sheela's growth and evolution can be understood.

3.3.2 The Shadow of Abuse and Haunted Childhoods in India

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is "the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society." It is a cruel and tragic occurrence and seriously infringes on a child's right to health and protection. (WHO, 1999).

The story of Celine highlights the ongoing issue of sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls in India. The story unravels how adolescent girls are often subjected to sexual abuse or harassment at home or in their community, and the perpetrators of such acts go scot-free. Celine becomes pregnant due to the actions of her friend's father, which leads to her family moving to a new place to avoid social stigma. According to a recent study conducted by Panwar (2019), it was discovered that instances of female sexual abuse commonly transpired at far younger ages than previously believed. The study revealed that a substantial 81 percent of such cases occurred before to the onset of puberty, while an incredible 42 percent took place before the age of 7. Evidently, this narrative underscores the prevalence of predatory behavior and the manipulation of power dynamics in society, where influential men exploit vulnerable girls for their gratification. Celine's story serves as a stark reminder that young girls continue to be victims of sexual abuse. Their voices are often silenced due to societal pressures, victim-blaming, and the fear of tarnished reputations, as evident in the novel since "both the families left the colony and the town in disgrace. Celine and her parents moved to a place where no one would know about her abortion" (Nair, 2001, p.65).

The concept of the "male gaze" was first developed by Berger in his study of European post-Renaissance art and was explored further by Mulvey and others (Berger, 1972/2008; Mulvey, 1999). Its premise is that the act of looking at the male and female body is imbalanced: women refuse to make eye contact with the viewer, while male figures cast an aggressive and objectifying gaze (James & Dillon, 2012). The term "male gaze" refers to how men objectify and sexualize women through their gaze, reducing them to objects of desire rather than recognizing their autonomy and humanity. This concept is evident in Sheela's encounters with her friend's father, Naazar.

When Sheela visits her friend Hasina's house, she becomes a target of Naazar's inappropriate behavior. He touches her in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable and humiliated. Naazar's actions reflect the objectification of Sheela, reducing her to an object of his desire rather than treating her as a young girl with autonomy and boundaries. Sheela knew "how easy it would be to be another Celine. To succumb to an older man's attentions" (Nair, 2001, p.66). However, her decision to distance herself from Hasina's home showcases her recognition of the inappropriate nature of Naazar's actions and her determination to protect herself from the male gaze. Through her interactions with Ammamma, Sheela learns the complexities of gender roles, societal expectations, and personal agency. The influence of Ammamma is not limited to perpetuating traditional norms; instead, it sparks a process of introspection and critical questioning within Sheela, which is evident when she says, "Mummy she thought was too trusting, too naïve. But Ammamma knew better and Sheela decided that she would never go to Hasina's house again" (Nair, 2001, p.66).

The relationship between Sheela and Ammamma serves as a microcosm of the broader societal shifts and conflicts between traditional expectations and modern empowerment. It demonstrates how individuals navigate the influence of their elders while also challenging or redefining those teachings to suit their evolving perspectives. This interplay highlights the dynamic nature of cultural transmission and how it can impact individual agency.

3.4 Margaret Shanthi

Margaret Shanti's story showcases the struggles of a woman within a patriarchal society, highlighting the limited agency women often have in making choices that affect their lives. Margaret's narrative stands as a poignant exploration of the complexities surrounding the role of a deferential wife and the nuanced dynamics of consent and agency. Margaret's transformative journey from subservience to empowerment is aptly symbolized by two distinct analogies: the plight of the goldfishes James and Joyce and the chemical interplay between water (H₂O) and sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄). Through the lens of these powerful metaphors and insightful analysis, it delves into Margaret's evolution as she navigates a tumultuous marriage and emerges as a beacon of self-discovery and resilience.

The opening lines spoken by Margaret to Akhila before sharing her life story encapsulate the central theme and moral of Margaret's narrative concisely. These lines serve as a foreshadowing of the insights and revelations that will unfold through her story.

"Which is why I am going to have to tell you about Ebe and me. And when I have, you'll understand why I say that a woman doesn't really need a man. That is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality." (Nair, 2001, p.95)

The declaration that "a woman doesn't really need a man" challenges the societal norm and patriarchy that often promotes the notion of women's dependency on men. By stating that this belief is a "myth that men have tried to twist into reality," Margaret suggests that such misconceptions have been propagated to maintain male dominance and control over women's lives. Her story will illustrate how women

can assert agency, subvert dominance, and find fulfillment beyond traditional gender roles and relationships and how her experiences with Ebe will serve as a counterargument.

3.4.1 Deferential Wife

Margaret's life is initially defined by her unyielding devotion to her husband, Ebenezer (Ebe). She exemplifies Hill's concept of a deferential wife through her unwavering commitment to his desires. She adapts her wardrobe, social circles, and career choices to align with Ebe's preferences, showcasing how much she subordinates her identity. Thomas Hill's description of a Deferential Wife, as stated below, aptly fits the life of Margaret.

"This is a woman who is utterly devoted to serving her husband. She buys the clothes **he** prefers, invites the guests **he** wants to entertain, and makes love whenever he is in the mood. She willingly moves to a new city for him to have a more attractive job, counting her own friendships and geographical preferences insignificant by comparison." (Hill Jr., 1973, p.89)

In her pursuit of Ebe's happiness, Margaret forsakes her ambitions. The example of Margaret forgoing her aspiration of pursuing a Ph.D. and settling for a career as a school teacher resonates with Hill's description of women relinquishing their potential for the sake of their husbands. She understands the situation she is being put in as she says, "I should have known then. But I was so much in love that I wanted only what he wanted" (Nair, 2001, p.105). This submission extends to the sexual realm, where she complies with Ebe's desires whenever he pleases, highlighting her role as a deferential wife catering to his whims. The line "As always, I let his voice smoothen away my fears. He was Ebe. My Ebe. He was always right" (Nair, 2001, p.109) further underscores Margaret's deferential attitude toward her husband. She has been conditioned to trust him implicitly and to seek his guidance in all matters. This level of trust and devotion has led her to accept his opinions and decisions without question, contributing to her role as a "deferential wife."

Margaret's transformation begins when she realizes the insidious nature of Ebe's behavior. The instances of Ebe entertaining his coterie and belittling Margaret in their presence illustrate her growing disenchantment with her submissive role as she says,

"And I. Perhaps that was the first time I began to question my feelings for Ebenezer Paulraj. Suddenly Ebe was a stranger and a despicable one at that. A bully and a tyrant." (Nair, 2001, p.129)

Margaret's transformation from a deferential wife to a woman seeking revenge becomes evident. The intense agony she faces due to her subservient role pushes her to a breaking point. His actions prompt her to question whether her sacrifices were worth it, marking the emergence of self-reflection and resistance. She realizes that her deference has led to her suppression and suffering. Margaret's transformation is a response to the realization that her relationship with Ebe has caused her immense pain, and she decides to take matters into her own hands.

3.4.2 Reclaiming Control: Exploration of Consent and Situational Power

In "Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement" by Kumkum Sangari, the author discusses the complex interplay between consent, agency, and societal pressures, particularly in the context of women's lives. Applying the concepts from this essay to Margaret Shanti's story reveals how she executes her strategies in alignment with these ideas. The inciting woman is described as someone who, through strategic actions and rhetoric, can temporarily influence male behavior and social status by invoking the values associated with male honor, sexual potency, and protection of women from sexual violation.

"At another level, the inciting woman may represent a temporary control over male sexuality: she is putting male honor-ineluctably tied to male sexual potency and protecting women from the sexual violation at stake. Though she relies on a consensual value structure- at that moment, she may stake male sexuality in a way calculated to wrest consent.

At this level, incitement may be poised at moments of the perceived breakdown of patriarchies' reciprocal, consensual element. It gesturally ties men down by invoking the potential humiliation of publicity, temporarily denaturalizes patriarchal arrangements by displaying them as social and contractual, and points at the precariousness of the guarantees offered to women by contractual and consensual patriarchal elements" (Sangari, 1993).

At its core, this idea suggests that the inciting woman can wield a certain level of control over male sexuality and societal perceptions. The inciting woman's actions capitalize on existing norms and values, using them to create situations where men's actions are evaluated against these norms. By doing so, she leverages societal judgments of masculinity to push the man towards complying with her desires. This process involves a complex interplay of consent and manipulation. While the inciting woman might seem to be operating within the framework of consensual values and expectations, she strategically uses these values to incite men's actions that align with her intentions.

In Margaret's case, she erodes Ebenezer's self-esteem to exert control over him, making him more pliable to her desires. By manipulating his ego and self-perception, she challenges his dominance and effectively diminishes his authority over her decisions, creating a power shift within their relationship. Her strategies reflect that women can strategically use existing values and norms to create situations where men's actions are evaluated against these norms, thereby influencing their behavior. This aligns with the incitement concept, where women utilize patriarchal norms to their advantage and temporarily disrupt the established power dynamics. These concepts can be further better understood through the following analogies.

3.4.3 The Goldfish – James and Joyce

A seemingly innocent and mundane event involving two goldfish, James and Joyce, takes on a symbolic significance in Margaret's story. Ebenezer believes that watching goldfish for few minutes relieves stress, a practice he uses to cope with the pressures of life. Recent research (Gee et al., (2019) provides supporting evidence for Ebenezer's belief, indicating that the act of observing live fish has a positive impact on mood perception, induces feelings of calm, and helps reduce anxiety. The names "James" and "Joyce" could be metaphorical, representing two aspects of their marriage – one being James, the dominant and oppressive side represented by Ebenezer, and the other being Joyce, the potential for joy, freedom, and agency represented by Margaret.

"James floated on top with his belly split open. I stared at the dead James and the living Joyce, who seemed sleeker and friskier, frolicking happier than I had ever seen her. A tiny scale of suspicion tickled my throat. Had Joyce managed it so?" (Nair, 2001, p.132)

As they watch the goldfish, they discover that James is dead, and Ebenezer attributes it to his greediness and declining health. Margaret's perspective subtly reveals her thoughts—a suspicion that maybe Joyce had a role in James's demise. She observes the contrast between the dead James and the lively Joyce, and a realization dawns upon her. It portrays Margaret's internal shift from passivity to subversion and hints at her strategy for liberation. Analogously, the goldfish becomes a catalyst for Margaret's plan to slow down Ebenezer's dominance and control. Just as James's excessive greed led to his downfall, Margaret recognizes that by manipulating Ebenezer's desires and vulnerabilities, she can undermine his authority and slow down his influence. The feeding of fatty foods to Ebenezer becomes a means for Margaret to exert influence and shift the power dynamics in their marriage. She is successful in achieving what she expected when she claims,

"I tantalized his appetite for food and occasionally for sex, in every which way I knew. He needed me like he had never before. And Ebe became a man I could live with once again." (Nair, 2001, p.134)

She utilizes the moment of perceived vulnerability in Ebenezer to recalibrate their power dynamics. As Sangari (1993) suggests, Margaret's incitement challenges their marriage's conventional hierarchies and contractual elements. The war metaphor Ebenezer often uses becomes a reality in Margaret's battle for liberation – a battle fought with calculated subtlety, where each move is strategic, and the stakes are her autonomy and agency.

3.4.4 Physical and Chemical Interplay between Water and Sulfuric Acid

The analogy of adding water to sulfuric acid, as explained by Margaret, serves as a powerful metaphor for her strategy in her relationship with Ebenezer. Margaret compares the process of changing the properties of sulfuric acid with the introduction of water to her situation. She shares this insight with Akhila, highlighting the importance of timing and proportion in achieving the desired transformation.

"When you add water to sulfuric acid, it splutters at first. But soon it loses its strength, it loses its bite. The trick is when to add it and how much" (Nair, 2001, p.134)

Margaret can be seen as symbolizing water (H₂O) – adaptable, transformative, and fluid. Water is known for dissolving substances, altering their properties, and bringing about change. On the other hand, Ebenezer can be associated with sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄) – powerful, corrosive, and dominant. Sulfuric acid is highly reactive and can break down materials. Just as water added to sulfuric acid initiates a reaction that weakens the acid's strength, she strategically employs her actions and choices to weaken Ebenezer's control and dominance over her life. The analogy emphasizes that Margaret's actions are not about overpowering or eradicating Ebenezer's influence; instead, they are about altering the dynamics of their relationship by introducing agency and control on her terms. When Margaret feeds Ebenezer rich meals and transforms him into a dependent figure, she essentially introduces her agency's "water" into the corrosive "sulfuric acid" of their relationship. By controlling the timing and proportion of her actions, she transforms her husband's behavior – he becomes less dominating, less forceful, and more dependent on her. This strategic approach allows Margaret to regain her autonomy and reshape the power dynamics previously dominated by Ebenezer's corrosive influence.

Through strategic manipulation, introspection, and the courage to break free from societal norms, Margaret dismantles the "deferential wife" facade and emerges as a symbol of resilience. Her transformation underscores the importance of agency, self-respect, and pursuing one's aspirations in the face of oppressive relationships. Anita Nair's portrayal of Margaret's evolution highlights the inherent strength that lies within individuals to rewrite their narratives and redefine their roles in relationships.

3.5 Prabha Devi

Confined in the 'pativrata' ideal of Indian wifehood set by the images of Sita, Damayanti, Gandhari, Savitri, and many others, the Indian woman finds herself silenced. Nevertheless, many Indian women have shown resilience and revolted against their positioning on the periphery (P, 2014). The narrative encapsulates the experience of countless Indian homemakers who, like Prabha Devi's mother, have learned to suppress their opinions and desires to conform to societal expectations. This self-silencing has several significant impacts on the women who endure it and their daughters, who observe and internalize these behaviors. Prabha Devi's mother represents a generation of women who have had to stifle their voices and opinions.

"A long time ago, she had discovered that a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell. To be shunned. And so, Prabha Devi's mother swallowed the thought as she had done all her life" (Nair, 2001, p.170)

They endure this suppression to maintain harmony within their families and uphold the traditional values of obedience and subservience. This personal suppression can lead to frustration, unfulfilled potential, and a sense of powerlessness. Daughters like Prabha Devi grow up observing their mothers' self-silencing behaviors. They learn that expressing opinions and desires is discouraged and even stigmatized. This modeling reinforces the societal expectation that women should prioritize the needs and opinions of others over their own. It reinforces the idea that women should prioritize their roles as caretakers, homemakers, and peacekeepers within the family, often at the expense of their aspirations and needs.

To be the first-born and a girl is to displease all members of a family who would have preferred a boy (De Sousa & De Sousa, 2015). This is evident in the life of Prabha Devi as his father laments, "Has this baby, apart from ruining my business plans, addled your brains as well? If you ask me, a daughter is a bloody nuisance" (Nair, 2001, p.169). Many families in India traditionally place a high value on having male heirs to carry on family names, businesses, and legacies. Sons are seen as providers and continuers of family traditions. This initial bias against female children sets the tone for Prabhadevi's upbringing, where her worth is undervalued from the outset. Prabha Devi's mother attempts to justify her daughter's birth by assuring her husband that when Prabha Devi reaches a marriageable age, a suitable groom will be found to run the business. This highlights the societal role traditionally assigned to daughters as marriage prospects and how, as soon as a girl child is born, as Simone De Beauvoir (1949) says, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to a woman by society."

The ideal Indian housewife is the perfect example of Indian womanhood. She is someone who works toward the satisfaction of multiple individual souls as well as of the family as a unit. She works tirelessly and basks in the glory of the success of those she works for. She identifies herself with her family and, even though reciprocation may not occur, is not deterred in her spirit to serve them (De Sousa & De Sousa, 2015). Prabha Devi's upbringing, what society perceives as an "ideal wife," is a vivid reflection of the societal expectations and gender roles prevalent in her culture. From a young age, her life is meticulously shaped to fit the mold of an ideal wife, emphasizing traditional virtues and conforming to patriarchal norms. Prabha Devi had a "near perfect childhood" where "A kitchen was set up for her to play house and mother games" (Nair, 2001, p.169).

Prabha Devi is sent to a convent school at age 15, not primarily for academic or personal development, but to groom her for a suitable marriage alliance. This educational choice highlights the societal focus on grooming girls for marriage and family life rather than encouraging their aspirations. Her limited outing hours, granted primarily to make her more appealing to potential suitors, restrict her social interactions and opportunities for personal growth. It reinforces the notion that a girl's primary role is to be attractive and accommodating to men. And that is how Prabha Devi grew up to be,

"Prabha Devi became the woman her mother had hoped she would be. With eyes forever downcast and busy hands; embroidering, pickling, dusting, birthing babies, preserving order and bliss in the confines of her home, and all the while chanting to herself: this is who I ought to be, this is the way to be happy." (Nair, 2001, p. 183–184)

Prabhadevi's transformation is motivated by her desire to break free from the confines of her timid and submissive persona. Her visit to New York serves as a catalyst, exposing her to a world where women enjoy freedom, confidence, and self-expression. In the words of Prabha Devi, "Their lives were ruled by themselves and no one else. Prabha Devi wanted that for herself" (Nair, 2001, p.177). She realizes that she wants more from life than just fulfilling traditional roles.

3.5.1 To Stay Afloat

In Anita Nair's poignant narrative *Ladies Coupe*, the story of Prabha Devi learning swimming unfolds as a profound allegory, echoing the biblical creation of the universe in seven days. Each day of her endeavor parallels the creation story from Genesis, drawing parallels between her personal growth and the emergence of order and life in the biblical narrative. Prabha Devi's seven-day journey to learn how to swim not only represents her physical transformation but also serves as a symbolic journey of self-discovery and empowerment. This interpretation explores the profound symbolism woven into Prabha Devi's journey and its resonance with the biblical creation narrative.

On the first day of creation, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. He separated the light from darkness (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:3-5). The first three days of Prabha Devi's swimming journey symbolize the initial struggle and darkness. She kicks water into the pool, akin to the chaos before creation when there was no form or order. Her journey begins with uncertainty and the need to separate herself from fear and hesitation.

On the second day, God separated the waters above from those below, creating the sky (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:6-8). Prabha Devi separates herself from the metaphorical "waters" of fear and hesitation in her journey. She moves towards the surface, akin to the separation of the waters in creation, signifying progress and order emerging from chaos.

God created dry land on the third day and brought forth vegetation (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:9-13). These initial days of her swimming journey can be seen as laying the foundation for her transformation, much like the creation of land and the growth of vegetation laid the groundwork for life to flourish. Prabha Devi is preparing herself for what is to come.

On the fourth day, God created the sun, moon, and stars to govern day and night (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:14-19). This day in Prabha Devi's journey marks a turning point. She gains confidence, much like the emergence of heavenly bodies that bring light and order to the world. Her inner light begins to shine, and she moves with purpose.

God created birds and sea creatures on the fifth day, filling the waters and skies with life (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:20-23). Prabha Devi's progress represents the emergence of life and vitality in her endeavor, similar to the creation of sea creatures and birds. She explores the pool, symbolizing her growth and ability to move freely.

On the sixth day, God created land animals and, ultimately, humans in His image (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 1:24-31). The sixth day of Prabha Devi's swimming journey marks a transformational phase. Similar to the biblical story, this day represents the culmination of her efforts. She has diligently practiced swimming, gaining confidence, and shedding her earlier inhibitions. She has evolved significantly from the hesitant and fearful individual she once was by this point. She has become more self-assured, resembling the confident person she aspires to be, akin to the creation of humans in God's image. Her boldness emerges, and she becomes more self-assured.

On the seventh day, God rested from His work, signifying completion and perfection (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 2:2-3). Prabha Devi's seventh day of rest and reflection symbolizes her contemplation of the journey's completion and her realization of transformation and contentment. She looks back on her progress and achievements, much like God's rest after the creation, signifying completeness.

Through this parallel, Prabha Devi's journey mirrors the process of creation, with each day representing a stage of growth, transformation, and order emerging from chaos. Just as God rested on the seventh day, Prabha Devi's rest represents her sense of completion and contentment, having conquered her fears and achieved her transformation.

"And Prabha Devi knew that life would never be the same again. That nothing else that happened would ever measure up to that moment of supreme content when she realized that she had stayed afloat" (Nair, 2001, p.195)

'Staying afloat' represents her triumph over her innate timidity and willingness to embrace new experiences. It symbolizes her emergence from a life of monotony and repression into a life where she can explore her desires and assert her needs. Ultimately, 'Afloat,' the title of Prabha Devi's narrative, becomes a powerful symbol of her journey toward self-actualization and contentment. It reflects her newfound ability to confront her fears, embrace her desires, and find her identity and happiness in the swimming pool and her life beyond it.

3.6 Marikolanthu

Despite the apparent absence of social hierarchy in this purportedly egalitarian society, Marikolanthu experiences marginalization and exclusion from the upper-middle-class women in the ladies coupe. Marikolanthu, the woman positioned at the farthest distance, finds herself sidelined inside the confines of the female enclave, "They stared at her. She wasn't one of them. She didn't look like one of them." (Nair, 2001, p.18). According to Uma Chakravathi (2003), "Caste is extraordinarily successful in dividing women, in erasing a possibility of sisterhood." The emergence of such sisterhood is contingent upon the eradication of caste. Marikolanthu's subaltern position within her gender, characterized by a dual sense of otherness, may be attributed to the significant role of the English language, which serves as the dominant language of the colonizer and a tool of power. Moreover, it was widely believed that she did not possess the same proficiency in English as her counterparts, "Besides, they were sure that she didn't speak English as they all did. That was enough to put a distance between them and her" (Nair, 2001, p.18).

The conspicuous indicators of her socioeconomic standing prompt the fellow passengers to disregard her presence inside the compartment. Similarly, she refrains from engaging until the co-passengers go, leaving just Akhila as her companion. The protagonist's narrative is situated towards the conclusion of the novel, and she possesses an understanding that the disruptive nature of her story would jolt her audience out of their state of contentment associated with the middle-class. This is primarily due to the presence of elements within her narrative that deviate significantly from the societal ideal of femininity, such as acts of violence, a rejection of motherhood, and the expression of forbidden (same-sex) desire. Subjected to sexual assault and victimized inside the domestic setting of the Chettiars, she uses her vocal expression as a means to establish her presence and construct a distinct persona, including her personal history, and an overall sense of self. She engages in a process of identity reconstruction via the re-examination and reinterpretation of her past.

3.6.1 Chettiar and the Silkworms

The Chettiar household emerges as a pivotal influence in Marikolanthu's life, leaving an indelible mark on her psyche. The initial depiction of the Chettiar household resonates with a powerful analogy, illustrating the Chettiar's fortune derived from silkworms.

"Chettiar made his fortune from silkworms. He bred them, stuffing them with mulberry leaves till they grew so fat they burst out of their skins. To hide their shame the poor naked worms spun silk and wrapped it around themselves. But the Chettiar wouldn't let them be even then. He boiled them and stripped their silk of them. Skeins of silk, ounces of silk." (Nair, 2001, p.211-212)

The symbolism of the Chettiar and the silk worm offers a compelling lens through which to understand Marikolanthu's journey. She too undergoes a process of transformation akin to the silkworms, albeit in the context of her personal experiences. Sent away to Vellore, Marikolanthu is akin to a silkworm spinning her own path. Initially nurtured by the aspirations of securing her future, she envisions a trajectory involving the completion of her SSLC exam and a promising nursing career, indicative of her pursuit of stability and independence. However, the narrative takes a darker turn with the intrusion of Murugesan, a relative of the Chettiar, who wields his power over Marikolanthu. In a state of denial, she clings to the belief that by denying the sexual assault forced upon her, she can maintain a semblance of normalcy. She kept muttering to herself, "If I pretended nothing had happened, nothing had changed" (Nair, 2001, p.241).

This coping mechanism reflects the silkworm's attempt to shield its vulnerability. Yet, Marikolanthu's trauma eventually manifests itself in the form of an unwanted pregnancy, a living embodiment of her haunting past that she cannot escape.

Rukmini, helper, widow and a perceptive figure, criticized Marikolanthu's mother when she advised her not to expect anything from anyone, in order to avoid disappointment and heartache. Rukmini's poignant question, "What do you want her to become? A silkworm? To be made use of through life and death?" (Nair, 2001, p.228) holds great significance. This comment from Rukmini was made before the harrowing incident of rape, and it seems that her words foreshadowed the harsh realities that Marikolanthu would face. Rukmini possessed a certain foresight or understanding of life's bitter truths. It is a testament to the power of her words that they resonate so deeply with Marikolanthu's experiences. Another foreshadowing might indicate as her parting words to Marikolanthu right before the sexual abuse were,

"You are a grown-up girl and not a young child any more. Don't you know that there are dangers lurking in every corner, hiding behind every tree and bush?" (Nair, 2001, p.238)

The response of the patriarchal culture to female sexuality reveals its conflicting attitudes about sexual assault. One perspective is that individuals want to safeguard their dominion over women, leading to the implementation of stringent legal measures to address the crime of rape. Conversely, it seems that individuals exhibit a certain degree of enthusiasm for engaging in coercive sexual acts, much like their inclination towards other forms of aggressive dominance. At a superficial level, the existing legal system imposes significant penalties for the crime of rape, while highlighting the perpetuation of patriarchal norms that reinforce male dominance and control over women. Nevertheless, upon closer scrutiny, one may see an intrinsic contradiction within the community, as the condemnation of male dominance and aggression coexists with a subtle glorification of these same traits. According to Brownmiller (1975),

"Basic truth that rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear."

Murugesan's heinous act of raping Marikolanthu exemplifies this duality. He rationalizes his assault by asserting his relative status to the Chettiar household and justifying that 'he deserves a taste of the privileges that Chettiar household enjoy'. His verbal and physical abuse over Marikolanthu exemplifies his exertion of dominance, further highlighting the twisted interplay between violence and power in this patriarchal landscape.

Throughout history, there has been a notable discrepancy in the perception of male and female sexuality. While male sexuality has often been seen as a means of personal gratification and overall wellbeing, female sexuality has often been viewed as a possession of society, exploited to further societal objectives, without any consideration for the well-being of women (Fortier, 1975). So, when a woman accuses a man of rape, she is herself put on trial and must prove her previous virginity and her lack of sexual interest in her attacker or, indeed, in any other man, perpetuating a harmful narrative that denies women autonomy over their bodies and desires. Marikolanthu's experience reflects the deeply entrenched societal biases against women. When she confides in her mother about the rape, her mother's disbelief mirrors Murugesan's assertion, "No one would believe me, he had said, and he was right" (Nair, 2001, p.243). This demonstrates how class dynamics compound the victim's vulnerability, making it easier for perpetrators to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

Furthermore, the commentary on Sujata akka's statement, "If she has a job, that will replace a husband's protection," (Nair, 2001, p.246) encapsulates the societal norms of the time. The paradoxical expectation for women to seek both independence and societal approval through marriage underscores the rigid gender roles that relegate women to secondary status despite the reality that male protection may not always be safeguarding.

The analogy between Marikolanthu and the silkworms highlights her complex struggle to reconcile the external pressures exerted upon her with her internal desire for agency and autonomy. Like the silkworm's silk, which is stripped away despite its protective function, Marikolanthu's defense is dismantled, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. Her experience within the Chettiar household encapsulates the harsh realities of power dynamics, exploitation, and the lasting impact of trauma, ultimately shaping the trajectory of her life and her interactions with others.

3.6.2 The Glass Bangles

The cast-off glass bangles from Sujata akka hold immense value and significance for Marikolanthu. They become her prized possessions, cherished despite their fragility. However, Marikolanthu's mother, understanding the vulnerability of wearing one's heart on the sleeve, occasionally scolds her for this attachment. It is through the voice of the grown-up Marikolanthu, at the age of 31, that we hear her reflection on the nature of the heart and its resemblance to a glass bangle. She muses,

"But you know what, the heart is a glass bangle. One careless moment and it's shattered... we know that, don't we? And yet we continue to wear glass bangles. Each time they break, we buy new ones hoping that these will last longer than the others did. We should wear bangles made of granite and turn our hearts into the same." (Nair, 2001, p.216-217)

When Marikolanthu asks Sujata akka if she feels remorse for breaking the bangles, Sujata akka, already possessing a new pair to wear, dismisses their significance, stating, "Of course not. It's only a glass bangle. I can always buy more." (Nair, 2001, p.217) On the other hand, Sujata akka gifts Marikolanthu cast-off old anklets, even though they are missing a few beads. To Marikolanthu, they are the most beautiful anklets she has ever seen, and their imperfections do not diminish their worth in her eyes. This contrast highlights the differing perspectives on the value of material possessions. As Marikolanthu's journey takes her to Vellore, where she serves the foreign doctors,

she finds solace in reading. Instead of collecting glass bangles, she begins to collect words, recognizing their lasting presence in her life. This shift signifies her growth and transformation, as she moves away from attaching importance to replaceable objects and embraces the enduring power of knowledge and intellectual pursuits.

The analogy of the glass bangles and the anklets reflects the dynamics of Marikolanthu's relationship with Sujata as well. Sujata, with her nonchalant attitude towards the bangles, represents a perspective that values material possessions as replaceable and insignificant. In contrast, Marikolanthu, with her deep emotional attachment to the bangles and appreciation for the imperfect anklets, demonstrates a more sentimental and appreciative approach. This divergence in their outlooks mirrors the complexities and differences that exist within relationships, where individuals may assign varying degrees of importance to the same objects or experiences.

3.6.3 Sister to the Real Thing

The recurring theme of Marikolanthu being relegated to a role of substitute is a pervasive motif that significantly shapes her experiences and perceptions. This concept of being an alternate or stand-in figure leaves an indelible impact on Marikolanthu's identity and psyche. Instances of this motif manifest at different junctures of her life, signifying her recurrent positioning as a mere replacement in various contexts. The implications of this phenomenon are observable in the trajectory of her life and the roles she assumes.

In the instance of the plant that Marikolanthu shows to Missy V, she is likened to a lavender but not the real lavender. This comparison leaves a bitter taste for Marikolanthu, as it implies that she is merely a sister to the real thing, not the genuine thing. This notion is reinforced when Sujata akka gifts her a Dharmavaram silk sari, which is considered inferior to the renowned Kancheepuram silk. Marikolanthu rejects the idea of being a sister to the real thing, as she desires authenticity and does not want to be seen as a substitute which is evident when she states, "Everyone knows what a Dharmavaram silk sari is compared to the Kancheepuram – a sister to the real thing, and I wanted none of that." (Nair, 2001, p.236)

From her childhood, Marikolanthu is exposed to the notion of being a surrogate. When her mother falls ill, she is seamlessly designated to take over her mother's duties in the Chettiar household without any regard for her own aspirations or inclinations. The absence of consultation or choice underscores her identity as an interchangeable figure, a notion echoed by her observation, "I was to take Amma's place. I may not be Amma. But I was Marikolanthu. Sister to the real thing." (Nair, 2001, p.234) This recurring refrain crystallizes her status as a substitute, a persistent identity she grapples with as she navigates her circumstances.

A poignant example from her childhood further illuminates this motif. Marikolanthu's query to her father about her name being less adorned than the names of flowers like rose or chempakam evokes an insightful response: "Without the fragrance of the Marikolanthu, the Kanakambaram is a dead flower" (Nair, 2001, p.214). This retort encapsulates the intricate interplay between her role as a "sister to the real thing" and the integral contribution she makes to her family's functionality. The irony lies in the fact that while her father's statement ostensibly conveys her significance, it simultaneously underscores the paradox of her indispensability despite her status as a substitute. This persistent theme of being a substitute not only underscores the socio-cultural dynamics that confine her but also shapes her self-perception. Marikolanthu's journey can be viewed as a constant negotiation between her desire for agency and fulfilment, and her ingrained role as a substitute within familial, social, and intimate contexts. The repetition of this motif serves as a lens through which to analyze her character's evolution and the intricacies of her relationships, underscoring the ways in which societal roles and expectations influence individual identity and experiences.

Throughout her life, Marikolanthu's agency and desires are often subsumed by her role as a surrogate, whether it's taking on her mother's responsibilities, working in lieu of pursuing education, or serving as Sujata's proxy. This motif reverberates in her relationships as well, particularly her liaison with Sujata. Even in her intimate moments with Sujata, the sublimation of her desires becomes apparent when she acknowledges contentment in fulfilling Sujata's pleasure rather than seeking mutual gratification. This dynamic of giving without receiving underscores her recurrent role as a substitute for others' needs and desires. The relationship between Marikolanthu and Sujata further explores this analogy. After the death of Chettiar amma, Sujata becomes the only tie Marikolanthu has to her past. Sujata relies on Marikolanthu to be her assistant, her proxy, her eyes, ears, hands, and feet. Marikolanthu accepts this role, content with being a sister to the real thing, fulfilling the needs and desires of Sujata.

"Once again, just as when I had first come here seventeen years ago, my world was built around Sujata akka and that was all I needed." (Nair, 2001, p.258)

Marikolanthu's assertion that her world revolved around Sujata implies a level of emotional dependency. While she initially doesn't mind being needed due to the absence of alternatives, this dependence hints at the sacrifice of her own agency and independence for the sake of fulfilling others' needs.

The analogy of being a sister to the real thing serves as a powerful symbol of her journey towards self-discovery and the realization of her own worth, as she strives to transcend the limitations imposed upon her and become the true protagonist of her own life. It highlights the complexities of her relationships, the impact of societal expectations, and her ultimate quest for authenticity and personal fulfilment.

3.6.4 Sublimation

Sublimation, according to Freud (1936), refers to the process by which individuals redirect their socially unacceptable or potentially harmful impulses, desires, or emotions into socially acceptable outlets or activities. It involves channeling one's energies into productive or creative endeavors that serve as a healthier alternative to expressing those impulses directly. In Marikolanthu's case, her deep bond with

Sujata becomes a means of sublimating her emotions and navigating the complexities of her desires within the confines of societal norms and class hierarchies. Following her traumatic experience of rape and unwanted pregnancy, Marikolanthu develops a profound revulsion towards motherhood and life itself. These intense and negative emotions could have consumed her, leading to further despair and isolation. However, through her companionship with Sujata, she finds a way to channel her emotional energy and reframe her experiences.

The examination of social stratification and the lack of a well-defined discourse on desire are identified as key obstacles to the fulfilment of same-sex attraction. Marikolanthu exemplifies the intricate dynamics at play, situated within a socio-economic group that faces limitations in terms of linguistic resources and Westernized understandings of lesbianism. The disconnection experienced in this class setting is further intensified by the hesitation to explicitly acknowledge their relationship, as evidenced by Sujata's eventual decision to distance herself from Marikolanthu, denouncing her as an insincere friend and employing homosociality as a façade to conceal their underlying erotic bond (P, 2014).

The explicit manifestation of Marikolanthu's homosexual attraction towards Sujata is constrained by the prevailing cultural norms and hierarchical structures within their historical context. Marikolanthu employs a mechanism of sublimation to channel her wants into the realm of friendship, so establishing a place characterized by closeness and connection, all within the confines imposed by their social milieu. Marikolanthu employs the process of sublimation to channel her emotions into the context of her relationship, thereby enabling her to articulate her wants and navigate her intricate sentiments within the confines of societal expectations. The exchanges and shared experiences between the two individuals serve as means through which the protagonist is able to express her aspirations, ultimately leading to a sense of consolation and contentment in the company of Sujata. It serves as a coping technique for the purpose of surviving and facilitating emotional restoration. The individual is able to convert her profound and adverse feelings into a bond that furnishes her with the resilience to manage her traumatic experiences. Marikolanthu effectively manages the intricacies of her own identity and aspirations within the constraints of a conservative culture by channeling her desires and emotions into her relationship with Sujata through the process of sublimation.

The linguistic challenges faced by Sujata, as she endeavors to express Marikolanthu's perceived deviations from societal norms, serve as an illustration of heteronormative ventriloquism, which effectively restricts the potential for understanding their unique desires. The language hesitance described here represents a broader cultural reluctance to recognize and accept wants and relationships that deviate from established norms. It is worth mentioning that Sujata's utilization of the homosocial environment to discredit her feelings for Marikolanthu ironically reflects the same strategy adopted by Marikolanthu to establish a place for desire inside the restrictive boundaries of the Chettiar residence (Choudhuri, 2009).

When examining the broader framework of *Ladies Coupe*, it becomes apparent that the portrayal of same-sex relationships in the tale is ultimately constrained by the prevailing norms of decorum upheld by societal institutions. Nevertheless, Marikolanthu's attempt to navigate her nonconformist desires within the societal limitations imposed by the Chettiar household exhibits an intensified efficacy. This amplifies her rebellion against conventional norms and boundaries. In contrast to her companions who prioritize their own wishes and emphasize their distinct personalities, Marikolanthu diverges from the conventional path by embracing transgression. This choice allows her to challenge and surpass the boundaries set by cultural conventions, expanding the realm of what is considered acceptable (Saravanakumar, 2014).

She achieves a sense of empowerment upon witnessing Muthu's as a chandala at his father's funeral pyre, which leads to a resurgence of compassion and the recognition of motherhood. The protagonist's internalized animosity was suppressed, as depicted by the quote "as the flames leapt, my hate burnt with them" (Nair, 2001, p.268). She has a feeling of humiliation and afterwards finds solace in accepting her own identity by assuming responsibility for her kid and establishing a stable relationship with Missy K, who serves as a care taker. At the outset, she has a sense of satisfaction in assuming surrogate positions across different contexts. Nevertheless, as Marikolanthu's development progresses, she becomes cognizant of her desire for a role beyond that of a mere substitute. She expresses a desire for authenticity, self-actualization, and the pursuit of own objectives, as explicitly stated in her concluding statement;

"For so long now, I had been content to remain a sister to the real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother. Surrogate lover. But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing." (Nair, 2001, p.268)

4. Discussion and Analysis

Vice discusses Bakhtin in his work *Introducing Bakhtin*, claiming that the novel can only achieve "unity" if it is built from heteroglot, multivoiced, multistyled, and multilingual components. (Vice, 1997, p.11). Bakhtin's second idea, "Heteroglossia," which means "multilingualness," is mostly about how different types of social speech and different characters make it hard to understand. In addition, Nair's narration style in *Ladies Coupe* demonstrates the significance of polyphony for a deeper understanding of the novel. Moreover, Vice (1997) explains that Bakhtin defines *polyphony* as "Polyphony or 'freedom' of the character's voice from that of the narrator..." Moreover, he defines a polyphonic novel as one in which "characters are represented not as objects, who are manipulated and commented upon by an omniscient narrator, but as subjects, on an equal footing with the narrator, whose own words about themselves and each other are all we know about them" (Vice, 1997, p.114).

In *Ladies Coupe*, Nair used limited third-person narration or limited omniscience, emphasizing a third-person narrative through the eyes of many individuals, creating a changing or limited point of view. Like first-person narration, limited third-person narration gives the reader access to the character's inner thoughts and feelings. As a result, narrative empathy is created, making it more straightforward for

the reader to put themselves in the character's shoes. Even though it seems the narrator is speaking for the characters, their distinct voices can still be heard inside the convoluted narrative of the narrator's voice.

The exterior voices result from the novel's production, publication, marketing, advertising, prize, review, criticism, dissemination, and reader consumption concerning historically significant societal, cultural, and political contexts. The multitude of these peripheral voices' sheds light on how the novel transitions into a consumer good (Viswanathan, 2010). In conclusion, the polyphony in *Ladies Coupe* can be heard on multiple levels. The multiplicity of all the voices influences and affects the reader's expectations and comprehension of the novel.

Through the distinct voices of the women, Nair offers a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of womanhood and the issues that intersect with it. Polyphony allows the reader to see the world through multiple lenses and understand how different experiences and perspectives shape a person's sense of self. Furthermore, the transitional space of the train coupe plays a crucial role in Akhila's journey of self-discovery. The train journey offers her a break from her routine life and allows her to step out of her comfort zone. As she listens to the stories of the other women, she begins to reflect on her own life and choices.

The railway journey that Akhila gets on board is the spine of the novel because it converts the space of the coupe into a site of female power that arises from the exchange of experience, thereby initiating the narrative voyage that catalyzes the protagonist's inner transformation. Akhila rediscovers the possibilities of life as the narrative progresses, examining the choices other characters make and have made for them and the complex network of relationships in which they are entangled. In telling the lives of six distinct women, Nair moves her protagonists out of the safe confines of the home and onto the public streets. Nair's depiction of the coupé is significant because it allows these women to challenge the culture that traditionally keeps them apart from it. From the strangely constrained confines of their current situation, they can reflect on the past, question the present, and plan for the future. According to Sinha (2008), the Ladies Coupé becomes a paradigm for an ideal future devoid of patriarchy's illusory binary. The shared stories of the women on board reveal a more significant subject about women's search for strength, independence, and control.

Akhila becomes acquainted with all the other passengers through their narratives in the privacy of the ladies coupé believing that their insights will help her resolve the questions that have plagued her for her entire life, namely, whether a woman can exist alone or needs a man to feel complete. Finding answers to these perplexing questions becomes Akhila's search for her identity. "Who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (Nair, 2001, p.84). Akhila desires "To be her own person...in a place that was her own. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure" (Nair, 2001, p.212). During an intense night of female voices, conversations, and exchanges on the train, she searches for her position, identity, independence, and freedom from dominant family norms. (Nubile, 2003).

The characters often end their life stories with mixed feelings about answering Akhila's haunting question. As Janaki notes, "All I can do is tell you about myself, about my marriage, and what it means to me" (Nair, 2001, p.22) sets the tone of the unraveling of personal tales. It demonstrates that the author wishes to provide more complex answers and elicits train-related metaphors and symbols. Anita Nair herself justifies the statement in an interview by saying, "Again, I myself as the author didn't have answers to provide in the novel, so the journey is not just for the characters in the novel but a journey for the author and a journey for the reader" (NDTV, 2011).

The novel can be considered like the coupé—a secure venue to examine societal issues, a tool for unlocking closed systems. Each passenger's narrative opens and closes doors to possibilities, implying that the opportunity to gain insight through shared narratives and reflect on a common experience is essential to the act of articulating the types of questions, the continual quest for answers, and the chances for growth that characterize the protagonist's journey. The narrative voyage of the reader is as important as the train travel to Nair's investigation of this odd feminine space and the women's stories contained within it.

4.1 Manifestations of Polyphony

The Bakhtinian concept of polyphony is seen in the novel, as the conversations between the passengers in the ladies coupe comprise multiple consciousnesses, including people of different ages and regions. Through the use of literary polyphony, Nair gives each character a distinct voice that offers a unique perspective on womanhood and the challenges that come with it. The polyphonic novel indirectly shows the characters' voices' independence. The characters have distinct voices, creating a polyphonic tale. First, they layer their voices while discussing marriage and men. Layering adds viewpoints to the novel. The story begins when Akhila states, "I just want you to tell me if you think a woman can manage alone" (Nair, 2001, p. 22). With each story, each layer is added to the multiple perspectives on men and marriage.

Janaki discusses men and marriage first. "Why should a woman live by herself?" she asks Akhila. "There is always a man willing to be with her," begins the first voice layer (Nair, 2001, p.21). Due to their age and socioeconomic background, each character has individualistic viewpoints on life. The author, characters, and readers interact constantly. The characters participate as free individuals who can agree, disagree, or even rebel against their creator. They participate in their own directly signifying discourse. The reader is not submissive to the author, much like the characters (Robinson, 2011).

Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel unequivocally emphasizes that the novel's major conversation is left unfinished, with no finishing pause (Bakhtin, 1984, p.165). *Bakhtinian polyphony* is a literary concept that uses multiple voices and perspectives in a narrative to create a complex and dynamic text. In this regard, Ladies Coupe shines as the perfect example of polyphony. The Bakhtinian

polyphony significantly shapes narrative and character development. The ladies coupe, where the story takes place, is a transitional space where different women from various cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds come together, creating a unique cultural space. The conversations and interactions between these women create a Bakhtinian polyphonic structure, where multiple voices and perspectives are present, and the characters are defined by their interactions. For instance, in the novel, the character of Akhila, the protagonist, is on a journey of self-discovery, and the Bakhtinian polyphonic structure of the novel allows her to explore different perspectives, values, and beliefs, leading her to find her voice. As Bakhtin wrote, "The essence of the dialogic is the ability to view everything from several sides, to take part in the construction of meanings, to embody multiple consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.291). Through her interactions with other women in the coupe, Akhila gains a new perspective on life and begins to see the world through the eyes of others. This allows her to break free from the constraints of societal expectations and find her voice.

Even though the novel seems to be written from the third-person point of view (or in the voice of) a narrator, other characters become the focus of this voice, and these objects always become subjects with their own voices instead of just being voiceless objects. These new subjects will have other objects of attention who will also become subjects with their voices, and so on. The initial center voice disperses as a result. The initial viewpoint or voice shifts its attention to each object of attention, allowing us to hear the multitude of additional voices (Park-Fuller, 1986). Nair's deft use of shifting a limited third-person point of view provides access to the character's inner thoughts and feelings, fostering narrative empathy. Even the reader is asked to engage in this conversation between the many speakers. For instance, when Prabha Devi shares her experience, the point of view shifts: "But she knew that wherever she went, she attracted attention. And she reveled in it. I am young. I am beautiful. I am desirable. How lucky I am to be me" (Nair, 2001, p.179). There is diversity even within a single persona since each individual speaks and sees the world through unique experiences, perspectives, and environments. Moreover, a character might perceive himself or herself not just as "I" but also as "other" (as "he" or "she") who is the subject of his or her attention (Viswanathan, 2010). Throughout the narrative, Akhila demonstrates this capacity to be both "self" and "other," or subject and object. She frequently observes her former self from the perspective of the third person. She occasionally employs "I" and "She" in the same sentence. The polyphony of Akhila's various personas is audible.

As in the antecedent examples, the reader may observe the compounding of the characters and the narrator's voices. The story also contains various types of speaking, which constitutes the other type of heteroglossia, "languages of a profession, class, literary school, or newspaper" (Vice, 1997, p.19). The reader readily recognizes the novel's several tiers of social voices. Included among these voices are the voice of Akhila, a forty-five-year-old spinster working for the income tax department; the voice of Janaki, an almost sixty-year-old pampered wife and confused mother; Margaret's voice as the chemistry teacher in a school married to the poetry of elements; Prabha Devi's voice as the perfect daughter and wife in the public space and a swimmer in the private space; the voice of Sheela as the fourteen-year-old in the coupe with an ability to perceive what others cannot; her portrayal of the life of her grandma; Ammumma; and finally the voice of Marikozhundhu as the voice of rape victim, housemaid, and a helper at the mission hospital.

The variety of characters and voices thus enhances Nair's novel. The framework of this novel is unique due to the author's storytelling style, and it will pique the reader's attention right away. Since these personalities and perspectives are placed differently and, in some cases, in conflict, Ladies Coupe displays traits of a polyphonic story. Consequently, the reader is aware of the existence of several individuals with divergent views on marriage and men.

4.2 *Akhila Speaks*

4.2.1 Akhila's Dream: The Unconscious Unveiled

Akhila's dream during the train journey can be understood as a psychological phenomenon rooted in Sigmund Freud's concept of repression. Repression is a defense mechanism that the mind employs to push down or bury thoughts, desires, or memories that are considered socially unacceptable or emotionally distressing (Freud, 1936). Dreams that occur during sleep, typically represent the fulfilment of desires that are socially disapproved of, sometimes conveyed through symbolic imagery. According to Freud, sexual desire was regarded as the most disapproved want by society, which therefore led to its repression. (Dumitrescu, 2019). These repressed thoughts and desires remain hidden in the unconscious mind, and they often find their way to the surface through dreams or other forms of unconscious expression.

Akhila comes from a conservative society where discussions about sensuality and sexuality are discouraged and considered taboo. The societal norms and expectations that surround her have led her to repress her own desires and curiosity about these subjects. Her dream serves as a manifestation of this repression evidently when the man in her dream claims,

"You are Akhila the woman. Everyone else might have forgotten about the woman within you. But I see her. I see the desire in her eyes, the colors in her heart." (Nair, 2001, p.92)

In her dream, Akhila explores her sensuality and desires freely, symbolizing her unconscious yearning for sexual exploration and personal freedom. It signifies her internal struggle to reconcile her desires. However, the dream takes a dramatic turn when her family members intrude, representing the external influences of society and its judgments. Indian psyche, the glimpses of sex concepts and norms namely, "sex is sacred", "sex is secret," and "sex is sin and shame", reflects the complex and repressive nature of Indian societal norms regarding sexuality (Janetius, 2017, p.6-7). This intrusion triggers feelings of shame and guilt, which are common emotional responses when repressed desires attempt to surface. The shame and condemnation directed at Akhila by her family members, including her father and brothers, highlight the oppressive nature of these cultural norms. It also underscores the theme of patriarchal dominance and the strict

control imposed on women's sexuality. Despite the pervasive impact of mass media and external factors, it is evident that the contemporary mindset, spanning across many age groups, continues to exhibit a profound adherence to traditional values and conceptions. As Janetius (2017) says,

"The inherited traditional belief is the product of a continuous genetic informational flow in reproduction which is identified by Freud as 'archaic inheritance' and Carl Jung as 'collective unconscious'" (p.6-7).

Akhila initially grapples with the task of explaining herself but ultimately surrenders to her inner desires, reflecting an internal conflict. Eventually, she reaches a turning point where she lets go of all constraints and fully embraces her desires, "Akhila doesn't care about anyone any more. She simply leans back against his body and closes her eyes. Nothing has ever felt so good before." (Nair, 2001, p.93). Id gains prominence as she surrenders to her desires and experiences pleasure without concern for societal judgment. This shift in perspective and the courage to accept her wishes mark a significant transformation that she had not experienced prior to her train journey.

The dream serves as a powerful metaphor for the internal struggle faced by many women in conservative societies, like India, where societal expectations often clash with their own desires and aspirations. It highlights the need for a more open and accepting approach to female sexuality and the importance of challenging repressive norms and attitudes.

4.2.2 Akhila's Transition: Influence of Maternal Servility

She tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals; and, when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband's. She just believes that the proper role for a woman is to serve her family. As a matter of fact, much of her happiness derives from her belief that she fulfills this role very well. No one is trampling on her rights, she says; for she is quite glad, and proud, to serve her husband as she does. (Hill Jr.,1973, p.89)

Akhila's mother is portrayed as submissive and deferential to her husband. She defers to his decisions and values his judgment above her own, stating, "He knows best" (Nair, 2001, p.14). She adheres to traditional gender roles, believing that a woman's primary role is to serve her family, including her husband and children. Akhila's mother derives happiness from fulfilling her traditional role and doesn't perceive it as trampling on her rights. Instead, she sees it as a source of fulfilment and contentment.

"I want my wife to take care of my children and me. I don't want her so caught up with her job that she has no time for the house or for taking care of my needs." And that's all I wanted to be as well. A good wife." (Nair, 2001, p.13-14)

She prioritizes her husband's needs and preferences over her own desires or ambitions. This unquestioning loyalty extends to the point where she relinquishes control over important decisions, even those that affect her directly. Her faith in her husband's decisions, even when made on her behalf, underscores her deference. Furthermore, "Feast, feast, my husband, my lord and master. On my flesh, my soul, my kathrika-bhajis" (Nair, 2001, p.47) encapsulates the depth of Akhila's mother's servile mindset. It emphasizes her complete devotion to her husband, portraying him as not just the provider of food but as her lord and master shows her internalized subservience.

Growing up in an environment marked by her mother's servility and loyalty, Akhila begins to question these norms. She saw firsthand how her mother subordinated her own needs and desires to those of her husband, and this likely influenced Akhila's rejection of such subservience. Akhila's mother's role as a devoted wife who deferred to her husband served as a stark contrast to the independence and agency that Akhila desired. She develops a desire for personal freedom and independence, particularly in her romantic relationships. Her attraction to Hari, who represents a departure from the traditional roles she observed and to break free from the traditional power dynamics she observed in her parents' marriage. Younger men may not come with the same expectations of dominance and control that older men might have.

4.2.3 Akhila Metamorphosis: From Conformity to Courage

Akhila's relationship with Hari who is a twenty-eight-year-old North Indian, is characterized by genuine affection and connection. However, her introspection about their age-gap relationship unveils her fears and anxieties about societal judgment; "Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the question in their minds; what is he doing with an older woman? That bothers me very much, Hari" (Nair, 2001, p.153). Her realization that societal norms are placing constraints on her decisions prompts her to make the painful decision to end her relationship with Hari. It is rooted in the fear that he might eventually regret their relationship, resenting her for leading him away from societal expectations.

Akhila's journey on the train with a diverse group of women serves as a catalyst for her transformation. As Akhila listens to these narratives, she begins to question her own choices and desires. She realizes that societal expectations have limited her choices and kept her from exploring her true self. The women in the coupe become her mirror, reflecting the different facets of womanhood and the diverse paths women can take.

After her train journey, Akhila undergoes a profound shift in perspective. She no longer feels compelled to conform to societal norms and expectations. Her willingness to flirt with a younger boy and her indifference to the stares of onlookers demonstrate her newfound courage and self-liberation:

"She sees that the people on the road are watching them. She thinks of what they will see: a middle-aged woman and a young man. She thinks of the speculation that will cross their minds. She thinks that they what they see or will say is of no importance to me." (Nair, 2001, p.272)

Before the train journey, Akhila was bound by societal expectations and the fear of judgment. Her breakup with Hari was a consequence of these fears, as she believed that their age-gap relationship could not withstand societal scrutiny. After the train journey, Akhila emerges as a transformed woman. She no longer cares about societal judgment and stares from strangers. Her willingness to engage with a younger man showcases her growing self-assuredness and her newfound ability to pursue relationships on her own terms. She has shed the shackles of societal expectations and is now guided by her inner desires and newfound self-esteem.

Akhila's transformation demonstrates that one can break free from societal constraints and embrace self-liberation, regardless of age or societal expectations. In the end, what matters most to her is her own self-respect and authenticity, as she confidently faces society with newfound courage when Nair claims "That as much as she desired Hari, she desires life more" (Nair, 2001, p.275).

4.3 The 'Coupe' as Transient Yet Transformative Space

The train journey can be viewed as a search for identity not only for Akhila but also for others in a similar setting. Akhila, a 45-year-old unmarried woman, has spent her entire existence caring for her mother, siblings, and their children. Due to the unfortunate death of her father, the burden of responsibility lies on her shoulders to carry on, and she does it without expecting anything in return from her family. Finally, she chooses to leave her family and obligations on her own because she is tired of the parts she has to perform in other people's lives. Akhila aims to flee, to find herself, and to find answers. She decides to head south to the coastal city of Kanyakumari. Now that she is free and independent for the first time in her entire existence, she is eager to expand her horizons and experience new things. She asserts this by stating, "I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognize" (Nair, 2001, p.8).

The coupe is isolated but protects women from the rest, similar to the way patriarchal society deems it necessary, but it can be used in other ways to have outcomes against them. Ironically, women are alone in the coupe. Even though patriarchal society has poisoned the minds of women, when Akhila says, "Here is the proof of everything that my family has told me, A woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone" (Nair, 2001, p.16). It is the same society that put up a separate carriage for women in the train to travel. Isolation of the coupe, ironically, acts as the space to ponder if a woman can live alone. Undoubtedly, Akhila is not content with her life or, as her mother said, accepts her "station" to make living easier.

Nevertheless, she can consider all the potential possibilities ahead of her and dare to take them for herself. Hence, her decision to "board a train. To leave" (Nair, 2001, p.3). She wants to escape her suffocating life that's been made for her by others and decides on traveling to the "Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (Nair, 2001, p.3). Her physical journey on the train is positioned as central to her metaphorical journey, as it provides her the female space to do so. Moreover, the destination she chose may not be a holy place or a type of pilgrimage. However, her terminus resonates with a special meaning for Akhila, as Nair points out in an elaborate explanation of the significance of the place, "She had read that at Kanyakumari, the goddess, like her, had put her life on hold" (Nair, 2001, p.3).

4.3.1 The Train

"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." (Nair, 2001, p.91)

Reminiscing about the past, the train made it easier to ponder about the past. Akhila's feeling of peace arises from the realization that, for once, she doesn't have to take charge and meticulously plan every aspect of her life. Throughout her life, Akhila has likely been burdened with responsibilities and decisions, which can be mentally exhausting. The train symbolizes a space where she can let go of her anxieties and relinquish control. It's akin to being in the care of a guardian or protector. This feeling of security allows her to relax and lower her guard, which can be difficult for someone accustomed to shouldering responsibilities. "Sheltered from her own self" suggests that Akhila often places immense pressure on herself, possibly due to societal expectations. The train knowing where it's headed implies that Akhila, want to relinquish control and trust in the journey of life itself. The train represents the path of life, and Akhila doesn't have to steer it. She can surrender to the flow of events and trust that things will unfold as they should. The train journey, provides her with a temporary respite from this burden. It's a rare moment of freedom from the need to control every detail of her life. It's a brief escape from her routine, allowing her to recharge mentally and emotionally. It's a testament to the transformative power of travel and the respite it can offer from the demands of daily life as Michael de Certeau says,

"Inside, there is the immobility of an order. Here rest and dreams reign supreme. There is nothing to do, one is in the state of reason. Everything is in its place, as in Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Every being is placed there like a piece of printer's type on a page arranged in military order. This order, an organizational system, the quietude of a certain reason, is the condition of both a railway car's and a text's movement from one place to another." (de Certeau, 1984, p.119)

4.3.2 The Coupe

The train setting challenged ideals of female privacy, leading to adaptations like "ladies cars." As luxurious accommodations like Pullman cars emerged, trains evolved into spaces where women could carve out a semblance of home away from home (Spivey, 2005). This transformation of the train as a public space with designated areas for women laid the foundation for reimagining the train journey as a unique experience.

"How effortless it was to remember when the coupe cradled and rocked; a mother that stroked the brow and said: Child, think on. Child, dream on..." (Nair, 2001, p.90-91)

The coupe can be likened to a cradle, gently rocking and nurturing the women as they reflect on their lives. The train's motion, which cradles them during their journey, mirrors the soothing motion of a cradle. This symbolism highlights that the coupe provides emotional support and comfort, allowing the women to confront their pasts and envision their futures.

"For a moment, Akhila had thought they had established a connection. Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other's lives, aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls wouldn't go beyond this night or the contained space." (Nair, 2001, p.24)

Similarly, the coupe is like a womb, providing shelter and protection to its occupants. In a womb, a developing fetus is nurtured and protected from the outside world. Similarly, within the coupe, these women find a safe and nurturing space where they can share their stories, fears, and desires without judgment or external interference. It emphasizes the close proximity and intimacy shared by the women in the coupe. It's as if they are interconnected, drawing sustenance from each other's experiences, much like how a fetus receives nourishment from its mother. In this confined space, they forge deep and meaningful connections that offer emotional sustenance. The darkness outside represents the secrecy and confidentiality of their conversations. What is shared within the coupe remains confined to that space, much like the privacy of a mother's womb. The symbolism of the womb also underscores the transient nature of their connections. Just as a fetus cannot stay within the womb forever, the women know that their time together in the coupe is limited. This transience adds poignancy to their interactions, making each moment more precious.

4.3.3 The Narrative Potency of the Coupe

The women in the coupe forge a connection by sharing their personal experiences on it and demonstrating how the realm of the public is a place where people learn about themselves through the knowledge of and exposure to others. Indeed, Akhila's transformation is highly dependent on the conversation among the women of the coupe; she finds herself transformed by the lessons from the lives of other women that help her shape her mind and thus begin her inward journey of self-discovery. Almost instantaneously after Janaki shares her personal experience with marriage and men, she finds a tinge of hope and a shimmer of change in Akhila when she asks Janaki why she is smiling: "I can already see a change in you. For the first time this evening, I can see life in your eyes. I can almost feel the excitement that is within you." (Nair, 2001, p.41)

As Rite Felski says, Akhila's scenario of a coupe shared by women "provides a mirror in which the protagonist discovers herself, finding her own female identity reflected" since "we are doubles; when I encounter her, at the same I encounter part of myself" (Felski, 1989, p.132). As the coupe can be described as a womb and mother, it comprises the sisterhood formed there. Akhila departs the train with her newly formed identity and perspectives, having gained knowledge from the stories shared in the liminal space. The concept given by Felski can be traced in *Ladies Coupe*,

"They could be her, Akhila thought. She could be them. Each confronts life and tries to make some sense of its uncertain lines. If they could somehow do that..., why can't I? Akhila felt a slow gathering of joy. A thin stream that let loose tributaries of trickling hope." (Nair, 2001, p.90)

While every other train journey has a destination, a physical terminus, it is intriguing to note how the novel provides a different kind of experience from the journey. Kanyakumari is her destination, yet the journey she spent with the passengers gave her the opportunity to speak, share, question, rethink, and reclaim her identity. The coupe does not provide adventures or actual physical experiences; instead, it talks about the past and envisions change for the future. Hence, for the women of the coupe, the "dead time" of travel is productive and life-changing for Akhila. Even though the travel time was not spent actively, she is being changed by the liminal space. Hence, the supposedly "dead time" gains transformative potential for the protagonist. For example, at the end, Akhila gets to her destination as a new woman, ready to have fun and live her life as she wants, and this can be proven when Akhila wants to be "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's mother" (Nair, 2001, p.206-207)

However, Akhila's transformation is evident. What lies ahead in life is unchanged, and the same people will still exist in her life. What changed were her perspectives on life and the courage she gained from assessing her past. Female conversations predominate the train's 'safe space' by providing enlightenment and support, but as they reach their respective destinations, the passengers have to enter back into a patriarchal society. Women cannot exist in the real world via separatism, as in the coupe. Ultimately, the author does not provide a clear choice to pick between patriarchy and freedom, but Akhila finds the "golden mean" Prabha Devi yearns for (Nair, 2001, p.188). She realistically acknowledges that she has to find a way to coexist with the system. She understands that while she may have gone through a potentially transformative journey on the train, society has not transformed with her. Indeed, she has discovered a new sense of self within herself and is determined to work within a society that has not changed.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic notion illuminates Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe. This reading shows that it is a polyphonic narrative with unique voices. The story is both polyphonic and heteroglot due to its unique narrative and multiplicity of characters. However, the focus of this work is only on the concealed and embedded properties of polyphony, disregarding heteroglossia for potential future research and broadening of expertise. The novel's characters represent a symphony of voices, each with its unique perspective on womanhood, societal norms, and individual desires. This polyphonic narrative allows readers to delve deep into the complexities of the characters' lives and the interplay of their voices. Through this literary technique, Nair gives life to her characters, transcending them from

mere objects to subjects with their own voices and viewpoints. The polyphonic structure also mirrors the complexity of societal norms, particularly those related to marriage, sexuality, and women's roles. It highlights the conflicts and contradictions inherent in these norms, giving readers a glimpse into the challenges faced by women in conservative societies like India (Agalya & Mahalakshmi, 2014).

An essential aspect to consider is the bonding of the females within the womb-like space of the coupe, thus creating a space that brings all these women together from various social and economic backgrounds and provides a safe opportunity to spill their stories to their hearts' content into the sacred space of Ladies Coupe. Nair demonstrates how this coupe for women continues to serve as an agent of transformation and optimism as Akhila and her co-passengers recount their experience under repressive patriarchy. The reader travels on the night train with the women who hope to emerge changed as the tales interweave across class and gender, opening minds and opportunities inside and outside the coupe. Akhila's journey on the train symbolizes her transition from conformity to courage, representing a larger narrative of women's struggles for autonomy and self-discovery. Her willingness to explore her sexuality or to reconnect with Hari, despite the raised eyebrows of society, demonstrates her determination to prioritize her own desires and happiness over societal judgment. This transformation is emblematic of the broader feminist discourse advocating for women's empowerment and autonomy over their bodies and desires (Hawkins et al., 2011). Her evolution from a woman who represses her desires due to societal pressures to one who confidently embraces her authentic self is a testament to the resilience and strength of women in the face of gendered expectations. Akhila's transformation serves as a powerful reminder that, despite the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, women have the agency and capacity to rewrite their narratives and reclaim their lives.

In essence, *Ladies Coupe* demonstrates the power of polyphony in literature to create a multi-layered, dynamic narrative that reflects the diversity of human experiences. It serves as a testament to the richness of storytelling when multiple voices come together to create a harmonious and thought-provoking symphony of words. The train and coupe, as narrative elements, highlight the transformative potential of travel and the importance of shared female experiences. Through their conversations, the women discover facets of themselves reflected in one another, and this collective introspection leads to personal growth and empowerment.

A limitation of the study is its primary focus on major women characters within the novel, it results in the omission of any detailed analysis of the male characters who are also present in the narratives. The novel features a diverse array of both minor and major male characters in the lives of ladies in the coupe, each with their own unique perspectives and contributions to the overall narrative. However, the rich potential for exploring the experiences, roles, and interactions of the male characters remains unexplored. This limitation underscores the need for future research to delve into the complexities of the male characters and their relationships within the context of the novel's themes and societal norms.

Furthermore, the future research can be done by embracing a Marxist framework in order to undertake a thorough examination of dominant themes such as class conflict, economic disparity, and exploitation shown in the novel. The examination of the complex manner in which economic considerations infiltrate and exert influence on the lives of the characters holds the potential to provide significant understandings regarding the socio-economic components present within the *Ladies Coupe*. In addition, there is potential for further study in applying Cultural Studies as a theoretical framework for assessing the novel's intricate involvement with cultural norms, established customs, and long-standing traditions within the Indian setting. A deeper examination can be done in which culture is both mirrored and contested within the narrative, as well as its significant impact on the characters' experiences, might offer a valuable and illuminating standpoint for future scholarly research.

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