

Interplay of Trauma and Healing in Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupe*

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Abstract- Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe" explores the intersection of trauma and healing through the stories of six women from different walks of life, traveling together in a train compartment. The novel highlights the struggles women face in a patriarchal society, including trauma, subjection, and societal expectations. The realistic picture of the humble and often miserable lives of the peasantry women, the destitution and injustice in villages is presented through Marikolanthu, whose innocence was destroyed by one night of lust. In Mari's life we find ample material for wonder, terror and transport. Some incidents every cause aversion and unbelief. In the sad, toilsome, exploited and erring life of Mari, Anita Nair exposes the practical motives which govern human actions bringing a touch of brutal honesty to the otherwise uncomplicated life story of comfortable women. In an era when it is alright to express oneself frankly, the sensitive issue of homo sexuality is bound to come. The issue still being in its nascent stage in this country, the writer deals with it gracefully. Mari's encounter with the two Lesbian English Doctor influences her expression of devotion to Sujatha. Anita Nair has moulded her thoughts into easy and significant words without any superfluities of expression. In spite of all the turmoil and horrors she experienced, thirty-one-year-old Mari, a maid servant and a helper, ultimately wrests control of her destiny and seeks, measure of happiness for herself and her thirteen years old son Muthu whose existence she has ignored until now. Marikolanthu, one of the central characters in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, represents the complexities of marginalization, resilience, and eventual empowerment in the face of immense personal trauma. Born into poverty and deprived of many choices, Marikolanthu's life is shaped by the rigid expectations of a patriarchal society. Her story is marked by profound suffering, beginning with sexual violence, which leads to an unwanted pregnancy and social ostracism. As a single mother, she faces scorn and isolation, struggling to reclaim her dignity. However, what makes Marikolanthu's narrative striking is her slow but determined journey toward reclaiming her agency.

Instead of succumbing to the circumstances that continuously suppress her, she finds strength in her work and in asserting control over her life. Nair portrays Marikolanthu as a complex figure who challenges the conventional portrayal of victimhood, showing that resilience is not linear and empowerment comes in subtle, sometimes unconventional ways. Marikolanthu's character stands testament to the struggles of women on the fringes of society and their potential for rebirth, even after devastating hardship.

Keywords: Trauma, miserable, exploit, Marikolanthu, innocence, destroyed, victimhood, resilience, Anita Nair, *Ladies' Coupe*.

Anita Nair is an acclaimed Indian novelist best known for her vivid writing that delves into the intricacies of human relationships, gender, and Indian culture. Born on January 26, 1966, in Shoranur, Kerala, she spent most of her formative years in Chennai before settling permanently in Bangalore. Her literary career is marked by her understanding of women's lives in contemporary India. Nair started her professional career as a short story and poetry writer in the 1990s. She was first noticed as she had published *Satyr of the Subway*, a collection of short stories which was a regional finalist of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1997. She received national and international fame with her debut novel, "The Better Man" (1999).

"The Better Man" is a Kerala village-set novel that provides a moving portrait of the return of a bachelor to his native place, intelligently interwoven with love, acceptance, and the battle between tradition and modernity. Her "Ladies Coupé" (2001) is one of her best novels. The novel tells us about the life of Akhila, who is a 45-year-old spinster traveling in a train coupe filled with women, seeking personal answers about life, freedom, and happiness. Reading through the stories of her fellow travellers, Nair thinks about how

society defined women and how women looked for themselves.

The book has been translated into over 30 languages and set Nair in contemporary Indian writing. Anita Nair's novels traverse different genres like fiction, poetry, travelogue, crime fiction, historical fiction, and children's fiction. A few of her other popular novels are "Mistress" (2005), "Lessons in Forgetting" (2010), and "Cut Like Wound" (2012), which brought a brooding Bangalore-based detective Inspector Gowda. This was her entry into crime fiction, and following the sequels "Chain of Custody", 2015, and "Hot Stage", 2022, which were widely praised for the narration with incisive social commentary. In addition to novels, Nair has written books such as *Adventures of Nonu*, the *Skating Squirrel* and has retold *The Mahabharata* in a children's form as *Mahabharata for Children*.

Nair has also published a collection of poems, *Malabar Mind*. Nair's prose is mediated through her Malayali background, feminist consciousness, and acute observation of the Indian urban-rural mind. Her novels are renowned for their complex women characters, evocative depictions of Kerala landscapes, and explorations of themes of identity, liberty, and moral complexity. Besides her literary achievements, Anita Nair has also received various awards such as the FLO Women Achievers Award and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. She has also been a writer-in-residence in universities all over the world and is still a leading voice in Indian literature. She is now based in Bangalore and keeps writing, as well as mentoring young writers. Her literary life is a reflection of her diverse and commitment to representing the complex truths of Indian life.

"*Ladies Coupé*" is a critically acclaimed novel by Indian author Anita Nair in 2001. It is the story of Akhila, a 45-year-old unmarried woman who has spent her life as a daughter, a sister, and a breadwinner in a typical South Indian family. Imprisoned and seeking explanation, Akhila rides the train in search of solitude and answers for a woman's need for freedom and friendship. Situated in the ladies' only section of an Indian train, the novel is narrated through the interactions of five other women and Akhila, each of whom tells her life story. Through these stories, varied problems such as marriage, love, lust, abuse, and freedom are discussed which form a heterodox view of

Indian womanhood.

By reading these tales, Akhila begins to reassess her life and decisions, posing questions like whether a lady needs a man to complete her. *Ladies Coupé* is an introspective feminist novel that turns the social game on its head and reveals the inner world of women. With exquisite prose and powerful characterizations, Anita Nair spins an engrossing story of exploration, courage, and the quiet bravery of women discovering their own self. In *Ladies Coupé*, Anita Nair traces the converging themes of trauma and redemption in the private lives of six women, each of whom had experienced emotional, physical, or mental suffering in a patriarchal society. The protagonist, Akhila, has lived a life of implicit sacrifice and loneliness, marked by the trauma of having to suppress desires in order to meet familial expectations. Her quest within the train is a symbolically and literally quest for healing. The other women in the coupé—Janaki, Margaret, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolunthu—describe their own traumas, including arranged marriages, emotional abuse, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation. These shared stories reveal how cultural expectations try to silence women's suffering, forcing them into roles that submerge their freedom and autonomy. The novel is also, however, insistent on revival and resilience. Each woman, in her own way, finds a way to reclaim voice and identity.

The very process of narration is therapeutic, allowing the speaker and listener—Akhila—to reflect back, heal, and grow. Ultimately, "*Ladies Coupé*" is an ode to the inner strength of women, proving that even in the case of extreme trauma, rebirth can become possible through self-awareness, sisterhood, and the courage to take one's own route.

In spite of all the suffering and cruelties she has endured, thirty-one-year-old Mari, a maid servant and an assistant, takes back control of her life and sets out for herself and for her thirteen years old son Muthu whose life she has neglected until now. Marikolunthu, the central character of Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, represents the complexities of marginalization, survival, and eventual empowerment following massive individual tragedy. Poor at birth, Marikolunthu is deprived of many possibilities, and her life is marked by patriarchal society's conforming expectations. Her existence is marked by extreme

suffering, beginning with rape, followed by an unwelcome pregnancy and ostracism from society.

As a single mother, she is sneered and ostracized, struggling to regain her dignity. What is, however, interesting about the story of Marikolunthu is her slow yet strong movement towards reclaiming her agency. Instead of succumbing to the circumstances that always suborn her, she finds strength in her work and in taking charge of her life. Nair's Marikolunthu is a complex character who negates the stereotypical picture of victimhood and proves that resilience is not a linear process and empowerment is subtle and sometimes unorthodox. Marikolunthu's personality is a testament to the adversities of marginalized women and their potential for reviving themselves even in the wake of disastrous adversity. The author describes Marikolunthu's happy-go-lucky childhood. As a young girl, Marikolunthu led a life shaped by close rapport with her father, who lovingly described the marikolunthu leaf accompanied by kanakambaram flowers—an early encounter that reaffirmed her identity and worth:

"What is a marikolunthu except a spike of green leaves?" (Nair 214)

Without the smell of the marikolanthu, the kanakambaram is a dried flower." (Nair 214) This playful banter is proof of her father's kindness and innocence of her childhood—built on innocence and love. In spite of facing adversity, her childhood had moments of freedom, family intimacy, and childhood magic. She looks back at rural living and school nostalgically, though cut short by economic hardship.

Before the trauma that disrupted her trajectory, Marikolunthu embodied innocence and responsibility of youth—first as filial daughter and later as care-giving girl nursemaid in the Chettiar household. Her early willingness to help attests to a trusting, loyal, and unsophisticated upbringing. Despite destitution, she carried an air of optimism and soft devotion inspired by rural culture. The transition from schoolgirl to caretaker was not out of will but necessity. Marikolunthu was a caretaker in the Chettiar's house where her mother was a cook. This attests to both her innocence and expectation placed upon her childhood—that of a sweet, obedient girl embarking on new chores for reasons of family need.

Marikolunthu's childhood, though plain, was one of family endearment and childhood joy. Her naivety is shown in the exchange with her father and in her first accepting of responsibility. These memories of her early life stand sharply contrasted to the atrocities that follow and weigh down the poignancy of her later trauma. Marikolunthu's life is a series of tragedies spawned by poverty and patriarchal oppression leading to sexual exploitation and pregnancy. Her destiny brings focus to the social marginalization and exposure of women, in particular, from lower castes and economic sectors. The result involves physical and psychological trauma, social exclusion, and helplessness. Marikolunthu's father died when she was a child, and her mother had to work in the Chettiar's house as a cook. She gets seduced and pregnant by Murugesan, a relative of the Chettiar, while working at the Chettiar's house.

Marikolunthu's status is not acknowledged or assisted by her family or community, which indicates the lack of protection and agency of women. Her pregnancy and the underlying situation led to social isolation and further marginalization. She is forced to work to support herself and her son, always facing poverty and deprivation.

Marikolunthu's experience leads to severe psychological trauma, including shame, alienation, and powerlessness. She undergoes physical suffering and torture through the pregnancy, potential health issues, and the physical exertion of her travail. She is ostracized by her society due to the status of her pregnancy and her inferior social standing. Marikolunthu's life brings to light the lack of control women have over their lives and bodies in a patriarchal society. She clings to taking care of her son in spite of the ordeal, demonstrating a belligerent spirit against adversity.

Marikolunthu's trauma could be explained with the assistance of Psychoanalytic Theory. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory proposes that human behaviour is determined by unconscious psychological impulses and early childhood experiences. It emphasizes the interaction among the id, ego, and superego, and proposes that unresolved conflicts during psychosexual stages may lead to personality development problems.

Freud distinguished three levels of consciousness: the conscious (immediate awareness), the preconscious (easily recalled memories), and the unconscious (ideas, affects, and wishes outside awareness). Based on this a Psychoanalytic Reading of Marikolunthu can be done.

The Unconscious and Repression - Freud concentrated on the role of the unconscious mind in creating human behavior. Marikolunthu holds much of her trauma in her repressed feelings and memories regarding her rape and neglect as a child.

Sexual violation and repression: Her rape is a grounding, traumatic event. While she tells about it openly later in the novel, she had repressed much of the emotional consequences (guilt, shame, anger) for years. This repression is evidenced in her subsequent lack of interest in sexuality and emotional remoteness.

Defense mechanisms: Her hardness and denial of femininity are also to be understood as defense mechanisms—mechanisms of self-protection against coming to terms with her trauma.

The Id, Ego, and Superego Freud's structural model of the psyche comprises: Id: Primitive urges and appetites

Ego: Rational self, mediator between the id and superego

Superego: Moral conscience with social influence In Marikolunthu: Her id is suppressed. She despises desire after being raped, so much so that she despises her body and sex as a whole. Her superego is too high-strung—she internalizes the societal moral condemnation of "fallen women," and so reaps feelings of crushing guilt and self-loathing. Her ego struggles to mediate between the two, resulting in emotional numbness and aggressive rejection of traditional femininity (shaving her head, wearing men's clothes).

Complex / Maternal Figures

Freud's thesis regarding early family dynamics argues that repressed parental conflicts heavily shape adult personality.

Marikolunthu's mother is unavailable emotionally,

working long hours as a domestic servant. This emotional deprivation might be the reason why she later has such difficulty with emotional care and closeness.

The lack of a good father image is equally important. She had an ineffective and weak father. He died early in life. This could be the cause of her ambivalent feelings towards men and extreme distrust of male authority.

Sexual Identity and Gender Ambiguity

Marikolunthu breaks gender boundaries—emotionally and physically. This is a manifestation of:

Gender dysphoria or opposition to conventional gender roles as an emotional response to trauma. Her resistance to sexual identity can be seen through a Freudian lens as sublimation—directing libidinal energy into other non-sexual outlets (such as caregiving of her son or working in fields).

Trauma and the Compulsive Repeat

Freud had seen that individuals with unresolved trauma unconsciously reproduce or relive some aspects of it.

Marikolunthu does not repeat the act in the literal sense but emotionally dissociates herself, rejecting love or affection and thus regaining the isolation and loneliness subsequent to the rape.

She emotionally toughens herself, preparing for further harm—a common response exhibited by trauma survivors.

A Fractured Psyche

Psychoanalysis foregrounds Marikolunthu as a character shaped by deep unconscious traumas, whose external protest conceals a pain-ridden, shamed, and repressed inner life. Her trajectory in *Ladies Coupé* is not a trajectory of redemption but of reclaiming her own narrative and asserting her truth, and that in itself is a psychological recovery.

Marikolunthu's trauma is deeply repressed, especially her rape by Murugesan, a wealthy employer. She carries with her silent shame, perplexity, and emotional detachment for years. Under Freud's theory, this repressed trauma may result in withdrawal from

feelings, distorted self, and detachment—traits which are quite obvious in her life. She suppresses her wants and never allows anyone to approach her, not even her child.

RESILIENCE THEORY

Resilience Theory focuses on an individual's ability to change, recover, and develop in the face of adversity. It is not a lack of suffering but rather the capability of dealing, recovering, and even transforming after experiencing trauma.

The central components of resilience theory are:

1. Protective factors (social support, personal strengths)
2. Coping mechanisms
3. Post-traumatic growth
4. Adaptability in adverse environments

Difficulty that interrupts her life and the corresponding Resilience as demonstrated by Marikolunthu in Ladies' coupe can be analyzed as follows:

1. Difficulty as a Grounding of Her Narrative

Marikolunthu faces multiple layers of difficulty:

Poverty and marginalization: Born to a poor, lower-caste family
Neglect and loss: Mother absent and father dead

Sexual trauma: Raped by the relative of her employer

Stigma: Loathed for being victimized and ostracized

Single motherhood: Forced to raise a child she never wanted

Despite all of this crushing trauma, she emerges alive—emotionally, mentally, and physically.

2. Internal Protective Factors

Marikolunthu's strength of resilience is found within her inner self, though not at first glance:

Courage to share her trauma: The act of discussing rape in a conservative society takes great inner strength. Her openness is not weakness—it's a resilient re-taking of her narrative.

Autonomy: She lives and works on her own terms, rejecting traditional roles.

Emotional integrity: She declines to sugarcoat her experience or deny her feelings, which are essential to healing.

Flexibility: Instead of becoming a victim, she reconstructs herself—unconventionally—beyond the rules that once constrained her.

Coping Mechanisms

Marikolunthu copes on multidimensional levels:

1. Defying conventional femininity: Her shaved hair and men's clothing represent a symbolic resistance to being victimized or objectified again.

2. Emotional numbness: Her distance from others and child is preservation, not lack of feeling—it's a survival mechanism.

3. Autonomy and hard work: She constructs an existence that stands apart from anyone despite emotional numbing.

These are harsh, perhaps, but they capture how resilience will often take inexact forms in challenging environments.

4. Post-Traumatic Growth

Marikolunthu grows, rather than just survives, by the end of her narrative

1. She begins to accept her past without letting it define her future.

2. Her self-consciousness, as seen in her narrative, is a developmental aspect of identity—she moves from shame to empowerment.

3. Telling her story allows her to break cycles of silence and stigma, and possibly empower others as well.

5. Contextual & Social Factors

While she has fragile outside protective systems (like family or community), the ladies' coupé itself is a temporary safe space—a most unconventional context in which women speak, validate, and support each other.

This shared space provides her:

With a venue to process her trauma in the presence of

un-judgy listeners to listen to herself—maybe for the first time

This social connection is a key resilience-promoting factor. Marikolunthu analysed through a Resilient Lens:

Factor of Resilience Theory:

Experience of Marikolunthu Adversity:

Rape, poverty, stigma, emotional isolation Protective factors:

Inner strength, honesty, adaptability Coping strategies:

Emotional detachment, rejection of norms, self-reliance Post-traumatic growth:

Acceptance of trauma, redefined identity, empowerment Social support:

Temporary but meaningful support from women in the coupé

Marikolunthu's story is not a story of traditional healing—it's one of survival in raw, unseemly, and often painful forms. Her ability to survive, reframe, and own her experience as her own is an extraordinary example of how resilience doesn't always manifest in the form of hope—it sometimes manifests in the form of survival with resistance.

Despite her trauma, Marikolunthu exhibits quiet strength. She lives on, raises her child, and tells her story—a rebellious act in a culture that mutes women's pain. Her story resists the idea that trauma kills and instead shows that survival is a form of strength even when rebirth is incomplete. Marikolunthu is a richly detailed description of complex trauma. Anita Nair presents her as not just a victim, but as a survivor of pain, shame, and incremental self-awareness. Her story shows how deeply trauma shapes identity—and how narrative itself becomes a path to rebirth.

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