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Across Two Worlds through a Shared Story of Womanhood in Bukowski's *Women* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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Abstract: In literature, the female gender is barely depicted as a fixed identity but rather a state of voice, control, and survival. The works of Charles Bukowski (*Women*) and Anita Nair (*Ladies Coupe*) appear to come out of irreconcilable narrative conventions: one is defined by a confessional male voice that addresses women, another one is defined by women speaking to themselves and becoming visible. But in both novels, the authors reveal the act of negotiation of women within arenas that continue to seek to enclose them. In *Women*, desire is expressed by the power of masculine that makes intimacy a matter of property - "I looked at her body and I knew I wanted her" - repetition which turns females into consumables already and at the same time, the frailty of the narrative supremacy unmasked (Bukowski, 45). The women who pass through the story of Bukowski do not want to be fixed but do not want to be forgotten, disturbing the very gaze that they are supposed to be giving meaning to. In comparison, *Ladies Coupe* builds womanhood through collective narration, where women express the inner struggles conditioned by marital relationships and labour, and periods of deep silence. The characters of Nair do not question "whether they are loved or not, but rather whether a woman can ever be herself in positions strictly prescribed to her, turning the railway couple into the ad-hoc zone of feminist expression and common protest" (Nair, 82). Womanhood in both novels illustrates itself in these repetitive emotional realities: confinement, desire, withdrawal, and survival as opposed to cultural confrontation per se. Taken collectively, these texts make known the womanhood as a negotiation that exists through anticipating and defining the self.

Keywords: Womanhood, Voice, Silence, Male gaze, Female Space, Cross cultural Feminism, Comparative literature.

Introduction

Femininity in fiction tends not to be a condition expressed with a sense of freedom, but one that is mediated through voice and power systems. Charles Bukowski in *Women* and Anita Nair in *Ladies Coupe*

represent this condition on the differing narrative positions of one, an aggressively masculine confession voice that discusses women and the other, a polyphonic female space where women speak of their individual histories.

In *Women*, the narration of Henry Chinaski informs female presence almost completely. His words degrade women to direct material attraction and emotional service: “I looked at her body and I knew I wanted her” (Bukowski, 19). This crude statement is not accidental, it creates a narrational scheme according to which women can only be as far as they please the male appetite. And naming and possession and abandonment become the grammar of womanhood. Instability, however, is also betrayed by Bukowski who is obsessively cataloguing the women. Chinaski is continuously in denial of being emotionally dependent, yet he continuously confesses to it: “As she left the room was dead” (Bukowski, 142). *Women*, in this case, serves as an object and anchor - sought after, rejected, and concealed.

The redistribution of voice deconstructs this story asymmetry as presented in Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupe*. The novel opens with a query that does not allow romanticism to play in it: “Could a woman remain unmarried and live happily?” (Nair, 21). This is not a rhetorical or abstract question, but it is structured in such a way that it determines the movement of the novel itself. Within the railroad carriage belonging to ladies, observation is substituted by stories, possession by testimony. Akhila is listening as women make their lives through moderation, accommodation and silent protest. Janaki admits to being tired of being dependent – “she says she has spent all her life bent over someone” (Nair, 33) - and Marikolanthu reveals the fact that “female sexuality is being punished and not a choice: they told me I was ruined. I felt erased” (Nair, 119). Such voices are not interested in validation, but in assertion.

Women, the male speech interferes with the female agency all the time. Even the instances of protest are introduced as defeat to the narrator: “She walked away and a part of me sank in me” (Bukowski, 117). The exit of the woman is not clarified but the absence of men is recorded. Silence as such is meaningful in *Ladies Coupe*. Akhila says “she was fed up of being the good daughter, which leaves fatigue as the political emotion and not a personal weakness” (Nair, 203). In all these texts, womanhood is neither passive nor resolved, on the contrary, it is constantly created by who may speak, who may become visible, and who may decide who manages to tell the story which will be preserved.

Socio-Cultural Situations of the Readings

Women and *Ladies Coupe* worlds are marked by radically dissimilar socio-cultural forces, but in both instances, the womanhood is found in the frameworks of legitimizing male power and controlling female mobility. These novels are not just based on the geography, America and India, but the social processes that govern, narrate, and control gender. The America that Bukowski masquerades as is full of domination masquerading as choice; Nair India calls it by its name, duty. Both are characterized by the unequal provision of voice and space to define womanhood in both. This distinction is within narrative consequence. *Women* make the male-dominated circulation a norm, and *Ladies Coupe* allows women to talk long enough until the patriarchal time stops.

Portrayal of Women in Bukowski *Women*

In *Women*, the ownership of narratives cannot be separated with the representation. All the information the reader has about the female characters comes through the prism of Henry Chinaski, who takes over by dismissing all thought. Instead of introducing women, immediacy is brought in by introducing bodies, availability, and proximity. The uncouth confession of Chinaski – “I liked them when they were there and forgot them when they were gone” (Bukowski, 23) creates a narrative economy where women are objects to eat and not to be subjects.

The man gaze frames the novel on each and every level. Chinaski cites, identifies, and disenfranchises women through the manipulation of language. It is due to physical extravagance that one woman is memorable - “Her breasts were enormous and she knew it” (Bukowski, 41) - to emotional inconvenience that the other is – “She wanted too much” (Bukowski, 96). These definitions make complexity less functional. Desire replaces dialogue. When women are talking, they are throttled into the crumbs or responses without being allowed to develop the narrative. It is not just misogyny but epistemic closure: women are unable to say anything other than the narrator allows.

However, the masculine authority is also unstable revealed in the text of Bukowski. Dependence on emotions is something that goes against Chinaski when he repeatedly insists on detachment. He admits when Lydia leaves him, that “he felt hollowed out, just like something important was missing” (Bukowski, 138). This scene breaks the pretence of power. The women he shuns as substitutes make indelible marks in his life. His

violence against intimacy is a defense mechanism and not dominance. This contradiction is repeated severally in the novel: women are said to be disposable, but their absence throws him into turmoil.

Feminist agency in *Women* comes as a result of refusal. “Chinaski is resentful when women walk away, defy or deny him affection. She was not mine anymore and I despised that” (Bukowski, 112). The possession of the same is emotional rather than sexual. It is shown through the story that masculinity is not threatened by a feminist opposition but by the mere fact that women decided to distance themselves.

Chinaski fails to learn to listen; he still tells us the stories of the women in pieces. It is this unwillingness to set the score straight that is what renders *Women* analytically useful. In this order, womanhood is a place of projection - wished, accused, recalled - not clearly known at all. *Women* therefore is a paradoxical text, a text reeking of women but unyielding to feminine subjectivity. The novel reveals how male centered presentation can overrun interior life despite being obsessive in narration of encounters. Bukowski accidentally demonstrates the emotional emptiness of a masculinity that talks all the time but never listens.

Female Personification in Anita Nair *Ladies Coupe*

When Feminism places women into a situation of less masculine discourse, *Ladies Coupe* shows an inversion of that reasoning where womanhood becomes core of a group speech. Anita Nair organizes the novel on the basis of listening and not conquest. Women in the railway compartment are not looked at; they are the ones who narrate about themselves. Akhila is well aware of the scarcity of such a space at the introduction: “in this couple, nobody questioned who I belonged to” (Nair, 18). The belonging, which is typically adopted by the family or by the marriage, is momentarily put on hold.

The storyline of each woman allows disproving the belief that suffering can be equated with satisfaction. Dependence defines the life of Janaki who is exposed to how protection can turn to erasure. She says she was taught not to stand, only lean (Nair, 34). The gendered pedagogy that she states is one where femininity is being trained as obedient rather than self-defining. The story of Prabha Devi is yet another complication of respectability. “She is materialistically well off yet admits that she was living like a well-kept room, orderly, silent, and closed” (Nair, 91). Stability on the domestic scale, in this case, hides emotional choking. The testimonial of Marikolanthu rejects romanticism. Her statements, such as, they said “I was a woman without

shame, yet nobody questioned where my permission was” (Nair, 123), reveal the way the patriarchal perception functions based on silence instead of the legislation. Sexual violence is not perceived as deviation but an implication of social hierarchy. Nair gives back authority to an otherwise illegitimate voice by letting Marikolanthu talk without the narrative correction of it.

The couple in itself is a feminist spatial metaphor. It is transient, locomotive and uncovered yet it allows articulation. The moving train is in contrast to the immobile domestic spaces limiting these women, as it lets memory emerge without distraction. Her case of Margaret Shanti quitting her marriage is an example of silent protest. She says “she no longer explained herself, and silence serves as a tactic and not a form of submission” (Nair, 147). The resistance in Nair world is not to be conducted in a spectacle format, but it happens in withdrawal, refusal and redefinition. The change which happened to Akhila is not fast and easy. Through listening, she reinvents the possibility in herself. In the latter part, she admits that “she did not require authorization to live” (Nair, 212).

Common Themes of Femininity in Two Worlds:

Although *Women* and *Ladies Coupe* have drastically different narrative settings, the two novels find a point of convergence in one fact: being a woman means living a constant negotiation with power. Structural resemblance cannot be eliminated by cultural distance. Throughout the two novels, women face the issue of containment, conditional desire, and emotional erasure but in varying economic terms of narrative. Conditional visibility is one of such themes. In *Women*, there are only women when they are wanted. Chinaski confirms by saying that “they were gone when he did not desire them anymore” (Bukowski, 58). Here visibility is reliant on the attention of males, as soon as the desire is lost, the narrative interest is lost. The inverse is the case in *Ladies Coupe*. *Women* are concealed in societal existence but entirely manifested in intimate expression. Janaki notes, “there was not a person out in sight. Here, I am heard” (Nair, 36).

Unrecognized emotional labor is another similar theme. *Women* that Bukowski uses accept the instability, rage, and solitude of the narrator but their efforts go unrecognized. “She would hear me out one night after another and I did not provide anything back to her” (Bukowski, 104). Emotional availability turns out to be anticipation not trade. On the same note, Nair women relate their lives as being on survival at the expense of

having identity. Prabha Devi thinks “it was my burden and to everyone I was their comfort” (Nair, 95). In both texts, emotional work characterises womanhood, and hence it is not visible structurally.

Another similarity is space coming out as a common limitation. Bukowski women traverse through manned places - rooms, bars, beds without marking them as their own. They abandon but fail to make space different. The ladies compartment, on the contrary, takes over the space temporarily by conversational means. But even this area is temporary. Akhila realizes how weak it is: “When the train stops so will our freedom” (Nair, 167). In both novels, womanhood is in the borrowed or transitional spaces that are not ever under full security. In both novels, women bargain on terms that they did not create whether it is through speech denied or speech reclaimed. The meeting point is not in experience but struggle: the continued attempt to maintain selfhood in the face of conditioning which attempts to break it down.

Comparing Two different views on Womanhood:

In *Women*, it is male confession that mediates womanhood. Chinaski is a first-person narrator who assumes itself a central role, with women being something that interrupts his loneliness or the continuation of his sexual urge. His voice dominates meaning. Even the instances of seeming helplessness strengthen the domination: “I told her everything, and she remained” (Bukowski, 109). In comparison, *Ladies Coupe* cannot accept one authoritative voice. Nair is able to create a womanhood based on narrative plurality, where contradiction, hesitation, and silence can co-exist. The stories of each woman are revisions of the others. “Advice and closure do not solve Akhila who does not realize who she is without duty” (Nair, 204). Rather, uncertainty itself is also a valid condition. The situation here does not define womanhood as stable but through constant questioning of oneself. Authorship is very instrumental in this divergence. As Bukowski claims experiential authenticity, he writes about women. However, this authenticity is masculine. Passion replaces knowledge. When Chinaski narrates, “they were all different and all the same” (Bukowski, 67) difference is lost and reproduced. Excess eliminates individuality. Nair on the other hand writes like women.

The other major difference is in resolution. The novel by Bukowski does not have ethical or emotional changes. Chinaski is the same, goes on with his cycles. Womanhood is out of the metamorphosis. Change is internal and incomplete in *Ladies Coupe*. Akhila never dethrones the patriarchy but changes her relationship

with it. "I will determine what is harmful to me" (Nair, 213). Such silence is an indication of agency with no spectacle. Finally, the juxtaposition brings out two narrative ethics. *Women* reveal the way of domination by masculine voice without responsibility. *Ladies Coupe* portrays the redistribution of power through shared narration. Womanhood in Bukowski is performed. In Nair, it is a thing told into existence.

Critical Frameworks and Feminist Frameworks

The idea of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey comes in handy especially in understanding *Women*. Even though Mulvey constructs her theory concerning the cinema, its logic is the same when it comes to the prose writing of Bukowski. The narration of Chinaski has placed women as objects of visual and sexual consumption. His words "I watched her walk away and thought about the next one" (Bukowski, 71) - objectify womanhood into series as opposed to subjectivity. According to feminist theory, it is objectification by narration: women are created in order to be observed, wanted, and substituted. It does not matter that they are interiorized, in respect of narrative.

Emotional exposure does not make patriarchy unstable: it puts it back to its feet. The idea of bell hooks that patriarchy is a situation that gives men the opportunity to be emotional without giving up power comes into play. The weakness of Chinaski does not turn into responsibility. Even when the author is at his lowest point, the story is still masculine. *Ladies Coupe*, in its turn, is similar to standpoint feminism which states that the marginalized voices generate alternative knowledge. The women Nair speaks about do so as people who were in flesh and blood. Their stories reveal the nature of patriarchy as practiced in daily activities instead of being violence directed toward them. It is evident that "gender oppression is practiced through normalization, not coercion as Janaki admits when she states that she did not know that she had other options" (Nair, 38).

The compartment Nair is in turns into a counter-space in which women put a pause on surveillance. Cross-cultural feminism adds to the problem of comparison even more. This framework does not oppose Western and Indian settings as it focuses on the structural resonance. Patriarchy appears in various forms, yet its consequences - silence, emotional work, lack of autonomy are similar. *Women* in Bukowski, women in Nair, are erased in narratives, are socialized respectively. Lastly, recent feminist theory - such as that of Ariharan on voice and marginality - notes that "the presence of narrative makes a political statement. The same can be seen in the works of other authors who note that women were frequently kept quiet in order to contain them, rather

than the absence of voice” (Ariharan, 2025). This observation is a linking of the two texts. In *Women*, silence identifies erasure. Silence is interrupted, retrieved, and re-marked in *Ladies Coupe*. The novels create an understanding of womanhood, which is not represented by narrative form, but actually produced through the structures. Feminist theory is therefore not an outside tool, but a tool of interpretation, whereby we observe the role that literature plays in either perpetuating or opposing gendered power.

Conclusion

Bukowski and Nair are writing in opposite poles of gendered power, but where their novels meet is a key point: it is never neutral, as a woman is influenced, restricted or liberated by the person who is in control of the narrative. In *Women*, Bukowski confessional masculinity prevails in the narration arena. *Women* go round the text as desire, interruption, and loss but never as a sustained consciousness. The voice of Chinaski asserts honesty and denies reciprocity. It is not his lack of knowledge but his unwillingness to do what they desired. Womanhood in this text does not live through discourse but rather through exodus, lack and residual feelings.

Ladies Coupe answers this narrative violence by recreating the womanhood via mutual articulation. Nair does not want to accept a unique female experience and, on the contrary, introduces a plural, contradictory and incomplete vision of womanhood. The women in the couple are not after a solution but recognition. “It does not break down patriarchy, but in internalized erasure, Akhila realizes that she is not incomplete” (Nair, 214). In this case, womanhood cannot be determined by the persistence itself, but by the daring enough to label dissatisfaction.

Cultural opposition is not what renders this comparative reading important but narrative ethics. The text by Bukowski shows the way women may be omnipresent in a novel and yet never heard. Nair is right because his text illustrates how little space can create huge selfhood when voice is distributed. Their combination demonstrates that being female is not merely experienced constrainedly, but it is also negotiated linguistically, silently, and expressionistically. Instead of making the suffering of women thematic material it explores the way in which narration is made a power field. Putting a male-written confession and a woman-focused polyphonic novel next to each other, the analysis shows how womanhood turns a different way when the power to narrate the story is transferred.

Finally, *Women and Ladies Coupe* can be a wake-up call to us that literature does not just observe gendered realities - it is involved in their creation. Critical reading in womanhood is to read not merely that which is written of women, but of whom it is written, who is permitted to speak, who is interrupted, who is left after the end of the story.

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