Chapter IV

The Railways and Transformation: Before and After Independence

Introduction

In this chapter, I have chosen a few railway novels to highlight, firstly the changes that were brought in during the transition from colonial to the postcolonial/post independence period, and its social implications in relation to railway space as in *Bhowani Junction* (1954) by John Masters and *The Strike* (2009) by Anand Mahadevan, secondly, the role played by the railway in encouraging women's liberation and empowerment derived from novels like *Ladies Coupé* (2001) by Anita Nair, and thirdly, the railway as a saviour, hope and dream as in *Water* (2006) by Bapsi Sidhwa and *Pather Panchali* (1929) by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, and finally the railway as an ever inspiring source of imagery as in *Red Tin Roof* (1974) by Nirmal Verma. I also gather from my reading of these novels that the railway is represented as a unifying presence in a space of much diversity in the process of nation building. I seem to think that 'railway space' even in its isolated units like a coupe, a waiting room, or a compartment, etc. represents a microcosm of India as it is presented in the text as well as outside the text in the real world.

It is perhaps an observable fact that the railway stations when they were built were at a distance from the living spaces of people even though the central focus of every activity of the railway is in and around the station. It is perhaps because it needed a lot of space, and the traffic of passengers and goods would cause some disturbances and noise as a station is truly a "gateway through which people passed in endless profusion on a variety of missions—a place of motion

and emotion, arrival and departure, joy and sorrow, parting and reunion" (Richards 7). Considering the railway station as an entrance to the city, Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes that "the newly built railroad station was not an integral part of the city limits, and for a long time it remained an alien appendage" (171). Thus it seems somewhat outside the city space, but within its external boundaries, railway space got established keeping its distance and at the same time connecting distant spaces.

One reason probably for this isolation and difference was perhaps that the railway stations were built in different architectural styles, which made them stand apart from the rest. It is worth observing the major railway stations built in the nineteenth century for their architecture and even Jeffery Richards and John M. Mackenzie substantiate it when they say 'At its most basic level, the railway station was the nineteenth century's distinctive contribution to architectural forms' (33). Each railway station has a story to tell—a story of the combination of modern industrial construction and traditional architecture. In India proper stations were not built in the beginning except for wooden structures and later on when they were built they were cool classical pavilions (Richards 69). It was after The Mutiny of 1857 that fortified stations were built with walls and windows and the first major station built was in Madras in Romanesque revivalist style in the year 1868.[1] Most of the stations constructed during the nineteenth century were experiments of different architectural styles and most of them were built by the British rail companies. Jeffery Richards remarks that 'the immense complexity of British power had been perfectly represented in the greatest station ever built in India, the remarkable Victoria Terminus in Bombay' (70). It is built by the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in a combination of Gothic,

[1]Daniel Thorner. 'Great Britain and the Development of Indian Railways'. *Journal of Economic History.* 1951, 389-402.

Middle English, Venetian, Romanesque and Orientalist architectural styles and opened in the year 1887. There are stations built in the Mughal style in Lucknow, Agra, etc. (Richards71). Railway stations built during the twentieth century resemble bare square boxes and shrunk in size and grandeur, as Richards suggests that functionalism was taking over romanticism in the field of construction and architecture (74). Modern vision of a railway station seems to transform it into an urban icon with vast indoor platforms and raised glass-panelled walkways and giant, futuristic pillars[2] simple in style to suit the needs of the modern rail traffic.

Schivelbusch considers that a railway station has the unique look of a 'half factory' and 'half palace' (173). By the 'half factory' he means the railway platform that is open to the world at large and the 'half palace' the reception building opening towards the city. Thus keeping the stations a little away from the human settlements, I gather that the railway indirectly sustains the ancillary industries of cabs and taxi services too around the stations. Before the motor vehicles it was perhaps coaches, *tongas*, bullock carts, etc. For example we see in *Pather Panchali* Opu and his parents reach the railway station by a long bullock cart ride (350).

Thus a railway station existed like a small independent kingdom of majestic architecture, with its unique spatial order and characteristics. It is a unique space which retains certain order in spite of the chaos and confusion that prevail during the arrivals and departures which we can observe in any railway station. According to Bishwanath Ghosh, 'railway stations in India stand like fiercely independent states within cities and towns, insulated from the local flavour, as if they are

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[2]Helen Nicholson. The future of rail travel? From Chaotic Hub to 'Urban Icon'- The Striking Design that is set to transform India's New Delhi Station. *The Daily Mail*. 24 June 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-2666051/Is-future-rail-travel-Striking-design-brings-Indias-New-Delhi-station-21st-century.html?>

territories of a common colonial master sitting in Delhi, which they are anyway' (1). It is true that the railway was under the colonial masters in the beginning, and replaced by a railway board and the railway ministry under which the railway functions after the independence of India. But I find it difficult to agree with Ghosh's idea that the master who owns the railways sits in Delhi. The disagreement is due to the known facts that during the initial days it was different companies that operated the railways and each had its regional offices with the head quarters perhaps in London and not in Delhi. And after Independence a central board (a railway board existed even before Independence) and a ministry decided major strategies concerning the railway but a station does not seem to be 'insulated from local flavour'. The zonal and divisional administrative bodies decide local matters if any in consultation with the local administration. The three language policy with English, Hindi and the local language is used in the display of station name as well as in announcements, which perhaps also helps to identify the local flavour of dishes in the railway canteens and restaurants. It is perhaps true that people feel a certain distance and foreignness in their consciousness about the railways as unauthorised entry into certain spaces are restricted with 'no entry' signs and guarded by the railway police force and trespassing is punishable either by a penalty or imprisonment which is a little more than the restricted places that existed even in the past like schools, temples, etc. But that kind of discipline perhaps is essential for the successful operation of the system without undue interference.

When the railway arrived it was transportation par excellence beyond comparison in speed, as there was nothing faster than it anywhere in the world. Technology produced even more dramatic innovations like motor cars and jet planes for travel of shorter and longer distances respectively. In spite of claims of better technology and offering wondrous services, the level of

popularity these innovations have seem to be lesser than that of the trains. I think so because all the other travel modes including aeroplanes and motorcars though have some novels and stories based on them, they are comparatively lesser than the novels based on the railways with a genre of literature of its own. Though there is something called 'The Airport Novels', they are similar to the initial 'railway novels' that I have discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. These other modes of mobility too have some novels and books written over them like Arthur Hailey's *Airport* (1968) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) or Earnest Che Guevara's *Motor Cycle Diaries* (1995) in comparison with the vast collection of the railway novels. I think that the reason perhaps is that the travel by air proved to be beyond the reach of the multitude as it costs many times more than the rail fare and road trips were too uncomfortable for long distances. More over perhaps the comforts and advantages of train travel surpassed the other means. Paul Theroux's view of this might be taken to support the argument:

> The train can reassure you in awful places—a far cry from the anxious sweats of doom aeroplanes inspire, or the nauseating gas-sickness of the long-distance bus, or the paralysis that afflicts the car passenger. (3)

The rich in developed countries seem to have adopted air travel for longer distances and motor car for short travels, but in a country like India only a privileged minority could afford them. Though people even travel by trucks or hitch rides, often the trains seem to be the favoured choice in terms of money as well as comforts. The popularity that is enjoyed by the railway is reflected in its representations as Nilakant and Ramnarayan think: 'Whether in a postcard or a movie, the image of a train reflects strength, energy and life' (1). Active presence of the railway in movies, thrillers and popular fiction also bears testimony to its popularity. I think that a list of movies with the trains as themes or settings would be very long. Every aspect of the railway experience can serve a symbolic purpose in the writing of a novel (Richards 357) whether it is an

engine, railway lines, a journey or trip, a rail accident, or a train robbery and the list goes on and there are novels and movies representing them.

The Bengali film director Satayjit Ray in his *Apu Trilogy*[3] and *Nayak* (1966) used prominent images of the train. *Nayak* which is entirely set in a railway space tells the story of a stranger in an intimate compartment space. Railway Raju in R.K Narayan's *The Guide*[4] and Karma in Phanishwar Nath Renu's story, *The Fragrance of a Primitive Night*[5] are subjects of rail traffic whose conscience and perceptions are shaped by the modern mode of mobility. People still think about the railways, and write about the railways as they used to be in their early days, not only in India but also elsewhere as it is evident from some of the recent contributions like *The Girl on the Train by* Paula Hawkins.[6]

The railway in the subcontinent has two key divisions in its history—the colonial period, and the post independence period mainly in terms of its ownership. Until 1947 it was the colonizer's means of mobility and a means to safeguard the colonial interest. In post independence India it became a state owned enterprise and transformation of the railways into a narrative of 'nation building' (a new concept just as the trains were the new means) seems to be a slow process even after many decades of freedom. Transition from the colonial to the national was burdened with the political turmoil as detailed in the previous chapter. *Bhowani Junction* is a railway novel set in the transition period of the railways from a colonial project controlled by the British to the national system of the Indian Railways.

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[3]The *Apu Trilogy* comprises three Bengali films directed by Satyajit Ray: *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*) (1959). They are based on two Bengali novels written by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay: *Pather Panchali* (1929) and *Aparajito* (1932).
[4] R. K Narayan. *The Guide*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
[5]Panishwar Nath Renu. *The Third Vow and Other Stories*. Trans. Kathryn Hansen. New Delhi: Chanakya, 1986.
[6] Paula Hawkins. *The Girl on the Train*. London: Doubleday, 2015.

A Railway Junction and Transformation Time in *Bhowani Junction*

John Masters in his railway novel *Bhowani Junction* (1954) set in the year 1946, a year before independence and partition, includes a derailment, an employees' strike and a sabotage to add more troubles to an already ailing railway, and the efforts of the army to maintain peace and normalcy. The railways in the subcontinent have stories of its progress through the World Wars, independence struggle, newly attained freedom, partition, etc. As Ian Kerr explains 'Britain's international commitments entangled India' and 'three events in particular affected India and her railroads: World War I (1914-1918), the Great Depression of the 1930s and World-War II (1939-45) (Engines 130). The colonial legacy and the symbol of colonial power—the railway, was heavily strained by the wars as the 'British requisitioned locomotives (engines for drawing trains), rolling-stock (all types of railway vehicles other than locos), and permanent way material (rails, sleeper, fastenings, ballast, etc. used for rail construction) for use in the Middle East and elsewhere' (Kerr Engines 130). As J.N. Sahni explains, the railway itself got partitioned along the eastern and north western borders after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and many of its staff, many major workshops, bridges and tracks, depots and stores were lost without replacement (150-151). It is under such circumstances that the railway in *Bhowani Junction* had some more problems like a derailment, a strike, etc.

A derailment right in the beginning perhaps is a prefiguration of what is going to happen in the life of Victoria Jones and also of what awaits India. In the text Patrick Taylor represents the railway and Rodney Savage and his traditional Gurkha regiment represent the army with Victoria in between as a Special Liaison Officer that forms a triangle, surrounding which, the story unfurls. The name of the reigning queen seems to be symbolic as the Anglo-Indian girl seems to

rule over the hearts of three men representing three different classes like the Queen who ruled England as well as the colonies. The novel is set in a junction in which all the passengers take a different route to change and transformation, to their new destinations and life, some with wounds of losses, some with satisfaction of achievement and some with new missions and visions, along with the transformation of the nation into a new freedom, new government and a new railway administration. Even though the story is set in the years of the independence struggle, Masters does not so much as mention the struggle in the narrative as he is mostly engaged in establishing the superiority of the race, class and civilization of the British and the inferiority of the natives which shows his eurocentricity as he considers the movements as mere law and order problems that were to be taken care of.

Masters presents three hierarchical levels of existence in the novel—Europeans, Anglo-Indians[7] and the natives. Just as these three races are intermingled in a curious way, the railway, the army and the civil administration too are interlinked throughout the narrative creating an interesting plot and storyline which is realistic, autobiographical and historical. The Europeans appear to be super humans who look down upon everyone else in a demeaning manner. In the novel some of the highbred Anglo-Indians who are neither English nor Indian, but half-breeds, mimicked the British and considered the natives to be inferior. There is a fourth category of people who are natives but who considered themselves to be westernized with a false sense of appearances. The typical examples in the text are the local congressman Surabhai and the collector of Bhowani, Govindaswami. Surabhai, the leader of the local Congress Party, wears a collar and tie and a

[7] An 'Anglo-Indian' means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only. (As in the Government of India Act 1935, Article 366:2).

European coat along with a Gandhi cap and dhoti. He also wears yellow socks and maroon sock-suspenders, with tan and white co-respondent shoes altogether giving a comic appearance (129). He combines the local and European ways of clothing in his effort to mimic the British ways and to westernize himself. He does not adopt complete English attire, perhaps because he is the leader of the local political party and hence wants to retain some allegiance to it.

Govindaswami, the collector is fully westernized as he is educated in the west, has an accent and always wore narrow white duck trousers, a white coat and a white shirt with a black bow tie. His skin was deep purple black and he used white powder to lighten it (31). It is perhaps such elite natives who think of themselves to be westernised are called 'westoxicated'[8] as the sociologist Dipankar Gupta complains of the "westoxication" of India's elite (a term perhaps borrowed from the Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e-Ahmad).

Of all the four races Masters has dedicated his novel to the Anglo-Indian community, another legacy left by the colonizer. The term Anglo-Indian itself is a complicated one as in the beginning it was the British in India who were the Anglo-Indians and in that case John Masters and Colonel Savage come under that category. The mixed races were initially called Eurasians, but those who followed the paternal culture and religion began to call themselves Anglo-Indians and in the text it is the mixed races that are called the Anglo-Indians. They were also called cheechees, half-castes, eight-annas and blacky-whites (Masters 14) by the natives and the Europeans.

[8]Akash Kapur. "westoxication" of India's elite. *The International Herald Tribune***.** July 2010.

There was a time when the Anglo-Indians did not enjoy a position in society as 'The mixed liaisons were disdained by caste Hindus and Muslims, both of whom were strictly endogamous, to the extent that some officials maintained that "half-castes" should not be appointed to senior positions due to the lack of respect paid them by local Indians' (Macmenamin 74). After the initial movements of struggle for independence the British realised the loyalty of Anglo-Indians (as they did not take part actively in the independence struggle and supported the British) and appointed them in key positions as they needed people to run various state machineries. Marian Aguiar says that, one of the most distinct aspects of Anglo Indian identity has been its close relation to the railway and in 1923 nearly half of the Anglo Indian community were employed by or associated with the railways (21). Those who were employed by the railways also lived in the spacious railway houses furnished with second hand European furniture and pictures of the Emperor and Empress (perhaps Victoria and Albert) on the walls in their overt allegiance with the British. In *Bhowani Junction* all the Anglo-Indians are employed by the railways and live in the railway colony. They thus form a kind of a 'railway caste' and develop a railway language called 'Railway English' which is sprinkled with rail vocabulary and local slang.

Thus due to the racist and ethnic colonial policy that preferred Anglo-Indians over the natives, thousands of Anglo-Indians for many years engaged themselves with the service of the railways, as they were given immediate lower positions than the Europeans, but above the natives. At some point of time they literally made the railways run as most of the train drivers were Anglo-Indians like Victoria's father, Ted Dunphy, her friend, etc. in the text and they had below them native workers as assistants. Victoria's father had two native firemen under him, Moti and Tamoo. An engine driver's job is responsible, reasonably paid (currently the designation is changed to 'loco pilot' after the implementation of the sixth pay commission) and a sort of a

dream job. Anglo-Indians in fact even believed that they were born with the purpose of running the trains as shown in Victoria's words:

> 'What are we going to do? We? If we stay the way we are we're going to run the bloody railway, of course! Isn't that what we were born for, man?'(49)

Anglo-Indians thus got stuck in time and in the space of the railway with which they identified themselves. They did not fit into the caste system of India other than the railway caste.

Anglo-Indians treated the natives with contempt and looked up to the Europeans. The best example is Patrick Taylor in the text who considered himself English. The Sirdarni, (a Sardar's wife usually spelt as Sardarni) mother of Ranjit, a railway clerk, expresses this racial animosity in the worst manner in an emotive utterance to Victoria that the Anglo-Indians 'spent a hundred years licking England's boots and kicking' (143) Indians with their own boots. Even amidst such loathing each needed the other in some capacity or the other to run the railways as Victoria explains this relationship in her own way as the English despise the Anglo-Indians but need them and Anglo-Indians despise Indians but need them like, 'the English say where the trains are to go to, we take them there, and the Indians pay for them and travel in them' (26).

Victoria with her remarkable beauty, manners, language, and bearing is different from the stereotypical community members perhaps because of her life in Delhi in the army, and she seems to be more English than the English. Stereotypical assumptions associated with the Anglo-Indians are often about their skin, dressing, hair, language, morals and contempt for everything native. Victoria is not pale skinned; she is sympathetic to the natives and even wears a sari. She is in search of her identity in the society in which she is not sure where she belongs, though she is fully aware of her roots and her unique position in India. After she causes the death of an English officer Macaulay who tries to take sexual advantage of her in his colonial might, all the

illusions she had of the English are lost (138). Victoria seems to kill symbolically the superiority of the British as the name sake of the officer, Lord Macaulay,[9] who had considered English education to be superior to the Indian system. She tries to convert to Sikhism to be a complete Indian, wears a sari, and thinks of marrying Ranjit, but realises that she does not know anything about the Indian ways. In the colonial space it is difficult for her to find her identity fixed. Victoria expects Ranjit to kiss her as a sign of commitment which his custom would not allow and there are clashes of cultural difference in everything that they try to do. Colonialism thus has created culturally different spaces that are neither quite English nor quite Indian. They are associated with the structures of colonial rule and exist still as its remnants.

During her so called courtship with Ranjit, Victoria is held in disgrace, disowned and ridiculed by her family and community members for deserting her boy friend from her own community for an Indian. Mohammad Jajja[10] feels that Victoria's situation at this juncture can be compared with the situation of Anna (93) of *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy 1877) in her disgrace. Anna was socially disgraced for living with Vronsky without divorcing her legally wedded husband. Victoria abandoning her community and her childhood sweetheart is not exactly in the same situation as that of Anna's. The existential choice of Anna and Victoria also differs as Anna chooses death under a train to escape the challenges that life imposed upon her. Discarding Ranjit and Sikhism, Victoria too reaches the railway station; but rather than death she finds love and sexual fulfilment in Colonel Rodney Savage. She is aware of the fact that in Europe and among the

[9]Henry Sharp. "Macaulay's Minutes on Education", Feb 02 1835, in *Selections from the Educational Records.* Calcutta: Bureau of Education, *1920*.
[10]Mohammad Jajja Ayub**. '***Bhowani Junction* (by John Masters): A Colonialist Narrative of the Celebration of British Superiority**'.** *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* (PJSS) Vol. 33, No. 1 (2013), 93.

Europeans she will never be accepted as an equal. She leaves Savage for Patrick in the end though she understands fully well his weaknesses and shortcomings.

Patrick is a typical Anglo-Indian who thinks England to be his home though he had never been there even once. He hates the natives taking up the jobs of running trains which he thinks is the right of his people (10). He does not like the natives wanting to be called themselves as 'Indians' and calls them only 'wogs' (9). He always wore his St. Thomas School tie and a cap to hide his Indianness (12, 14) and does not miss a chance to abuse and demean the natives (18, 19). He is the antithesis of the colonel, almost clownish and incompetent in everything that he attempts. Because of Patrick's negligence, Savage misses a chance to catch a revolutionary activist who is considered to wreck trains (61) and though unintentionally he causes the death of an orderly (386). In spite of all his pomposity, Patrick identifies himself with the railways and is committed to its smooth functioning and ready to be on duty at any time (39). Victoria chooses to live with harder decisions to stick to where she belongs to—India, her Anglo-Indian community, and to Patrick with all his failures, leaving Rodney Savage and a possible life in England had she married him.

Victoria seems to be an empowered and educated woman who is aware of her worth but caught in an identity crisis. She would rather kill than succumb to unsolicited advances and exploitation. Victoria's efforts to make out her life in three different situations with three men of different backgrounds, two from the railways and one from the army consumes a larger chunk of the narrative which I think is somewhat a parallel situation of the subcontinent, its crisis of an independent status and the problems of its nation building. India is about to be free but is pulled into three directions (India, West and East Pakistan) and the choice is always hard like that of

Victoria. The metaphor does not hold where Victoria has a choice, but India does not have. She could select to go with Savage, but India had to get rid of the British.

The railway dominates all along in all aspects as technology has its own register irrespective of the narratives developing in its surroundings. The readers are taken on a 'foot plate ride' along with Victoria and Colonel Savage in 'Driver Jones' Ninety-Eight Up[11] (264-71). A footplate is the platform behind the firebox of a steam locomotive on which the enginemen stand. Officials travel on this at times for inspecting the line. It is a different kind of experience of train travel which the passengers are not permitted to experience. Victoria's father is called Driver Jones, a combination of his name and his professional title. In railway language a station master is always a 'master', an example of some kind of identity that the language and technology create. Victoria's ride on the foot plate and her experience is narrated in detail with clever selection of words and phrases that the reader too gets familiar with like 'a ride in the cabin'. Through five pages of verbal display Masters throws some light on the working conditions and responsibilities of a steam engine driver, the extreme heat of the burning furnace in the engine room, the constant activities of the cabin crew and their different emotions through Victoria's experience:

> 'The furnace was a deep roaring bed of violent flames'... 'steam shot up forty feet into the air'... 'the exhaust settled down to a steady tramp, two beats a second—whoof-whoof-whoof-whoof-whoof'... 'Branch Line Crossover, clear. Up Yard Approach'... My own breathing ceased with the engine's. I felt that my nerves and muscles were slowly relaxing and settling back into old, well-worn places, and it was the jerk and heave of the footplate under my feet that was doing it'. (266-67)

This experience is in fact of a purely private railway space where outsiders other than the duty staff are forbidden. Victoria's request was refused at first by her father saying: 'In the cab girl? Oh, I wish I could, but I would lose my job'. What an unauthorised entry into the engine room

[11]Up trains means trains going to Mumbai (Bombay) and Down trains means trains going from Mumbai in India.

can do is dealt with in the section ahead in *The Strike*. It takes a military order from Savage for Victoria to travel under the pretext of military duty.

There is the public space of the railways which is the imagined community of modernity which includes the station, offices, etc. and the peripheral areas that are used for strikes and other national movements, in the text by the natives. But within this public space there are different spaces allotted according to the classes and races. Space other than the railway space in *Bhowani Junction* is essentially divided into spaces of communities. The clubs, the space of entertainment and informal gatherings also is separate likewise, and the European club was severely safe guarded. As Savage remembers, 'in practice, clubs were for Europeans only, or for Indians only or for Anglo-Indians only...generally that was the custom. No one had the power to abolish a custom' (309). The politics of place is practiced to the maximum discomfort of those who are supposed to be intruding. Victoria experiences this when she accompanies Savage to the European club one evening. Displeased with her presence in the club Mrs. Lanson lashes out:

> Oh, yes, Miss Jones. But you see, this club was supposed to be a place where we could get together and never see an Indian face—except the servants, of course—and remember our homes so far away'. (314-5)

Hence it is all about space, that the English need a space of their own to think about or rather exhibit their power of a space that is far away in Britain. The other three different representations of space in the novel are the European community space, the Anglo-Indian community space and a native Indian community space. A space in which all the three communities come together publicly and unofficially is the space of the railway station though ample restrictions and demarcations were in place to safeguard the privacy of the Europeans with separate waiting rooms and refreshment rooms where no Indians were allowed to enter unless for services as Mrs. Lanson declares above.

Patrick describes this distribution of space:

> There are really three separate Bhowanis—the Railway Lines, the cantonments, where the English live, and the city, where God knows how many thousand Indians are packed in like sardines. (9)

The native living space is represented by the house where Sirdarni lived with her son Ranjit. The house is situated somewhere within many layers of lanes, some dark, some with lights, some to the left, and some to the right and some short (139). The description of the house and the locality perhaps is intended to show the racist intention of the author to show it as a space of unlawful activities. Later on he proves it as the place is revealed to be the hiding place of the communist leader and a murder weapon, a broken piece of fish plate[12] with which Macaulay was killed.

The Anglo-Indians alone, of all the three groups, are fully identified and associated with the railways and their space is railway space. This is perhaps because they do not have a space either in the Indian or in the European society, as they are half castes/breeds and hence considered outcastes and marginalized by both the Indians and the British. They occupied semi-detached, numbered bungalows in the Railway Lines where the 'railway people' lived. It is only Victoria who constantly moves in and out of the triangular spatial order of the Europeans, the Anglo-Indians and the Indians many times over during the course of the narrative. She seems to be a 'railway girl' (16) as Patrick thinks of her who could name a train from its whistle as she lived in the railway quarters. She often visits the station to meet people, to meet her father or Patrick, and also for her work. She goes to the Sirdarni's house, first to save herself from the murder scene and then in an effort to Indianize herself. This signifies that she needs a particular space to identify herself with. Her work and Colonel Savage pull her to the temporary European space at

[12]A fish plate is a steel or wrought iron plate placed in pairs at rail joints to bring the rail heads together to strengthen the joint and form a continuous running surface.

a distance from the natives for some time. There are no sharp boundaries between these spaces but people like Mrs. Lanson keep mental barriers with casteist and racist genesis, though by the time in which the novel is set, such boundaries are about to give way to some other national boundaries of partition.

The world represented in the novel is the railway space. Just as the title suggests Bhowani is a railway space represented by the station imagined somewhere in the northern parts of the subcontinent which is a junction where different branch lines merge. This junction is a metaphor of the journey of life each character undertakes as it is the railway junction Bhowani where all the characters reside, interact, and act their roles. It is a place of arrivals and departures of both trains and people. Troops from the Royal Indian army arrive and change trains in Bhowani station along with other passengers in the text. It is a place where people and trains change their routes to different destinations. It is at this junction that Victoria meets Savage for the first time. And it is at this junction that they decide to part. Savage reflects on their decision to part and go their separate ways—he to England as his mission is over and Victoria to Patrick to begin a new life as Savage recollects:

> So there we were, at one o'clock in the morning, arrived at last at Bhowani Junction. All change at Bhowani Junction. Tigers over the footbridge for Number 2 Up Mail, people to Number 3 Platform for the slow train for the Bhanas branch! (390)

Savage considers himself a tiger, strong and fearless as a tiger. By hunting and killing a tiger in the presence of Victoria he had proved himself even stronger than a tiger. Though the colonel is the symbol of the so called civilization his name means uncivilized or wild and in that case the tiger is his equal. But if he considers the tiger as symbolic of the wild natives, then he has to control it as he controls the natives. I think it is his imperialistic as well as military machismo that is in display in the symbolic killing of the tiger. Colonel Rodney Savage and the Gurkha

regiment are also a complete contrast. The Gurkha regiment is a reference to nationalism but Savage directs them against the nationalist movements as typical imperialistic use of native forces against the natives. In spite of living in Bhowani for some time Savage feels that he arrived at last at the junction—a figurative mode of the ending of his relationship with Victoria, end of the novel and the end of imperialism (390).

Barring the European and Anglo-Indian clubs the only place where movement and action observed is the junction and the railway station. The Europeans conducted seeing offs as well as welcome parties for their officers in the railway stations with drinks and food. It was a common affair that happened very often and these were noisy affairs. A lot of money and services perhaps were used in such parties and a parallel political economy developed along the railway finances. When Savage arranges a party for Steve Ellington and his companions returning to England, he describes such parties to be boisterous and loud:

> Railway station parties used to be quite common before the war. The cause of them was always the same—someone going home to England. We'd sing up and down the platform and drink a lot in the refreshment room and make great nuisance of ourselves. (380)

This singing and dancing would continue in the European club as well as the Anglo-Indian clubs as the Anglo-Indians mimicked everything western. This culture was something new to the subcontinent and rather looked down upon. Noise and nuisance were created by the Europeans in the public place of the railways, but it is only the noisy crowds of the pushing, shoving and screaming of natives at one another is often highlighted in the colonial discourse and plenty of such examples are available even in *Bhowani Junction*. Even Victoria who is sympathetic towards the Indians and also makes sincere efforts to identify herself to be one, sees them collectively as the third class passengers jammed into their long, uncompartmented carriages

throwing ‘showers of peanut shells’ out of the windows and ‘occasional sharp jets of betel juice’ that added to the spattered red stains on the stone(273).

What Jefferey Richards and John M. Mackenzie say: ‘On a wider level *Bhowani Junction* epitomizes India at large’ (355) seems true though (mis)represented situations are seen by the colonial authors. The Congress Party is engaged fulltime in hastening the departure of the British through strikes, passive and non-violent resistance and disruption of communications, but their leaders are caricatured as silly idiots (Surabhai) or agents of the British and the communists (Surabhai, Kartar Singh and Mehta) who create violence and law and order problems. The communists are shown to infiltrate every movement to unleash riots, sabotage trains and spread communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. The British (Savage and his battalion) who ruthlessly and brutally suppress every movement are praised for their efforts to keep peace and for their determination to keep the trains running.

A nationalist movement, an attempt of sabotage, a murder, a blazing romance, a silent heart break—all in a railway setting uplifts this novel to the status perhaps of a railway-shop thriller, though Masters would think his novel to be of historical importance as it is somewhat autobiographical and most of the incidents are perhaps true as experienced and observed by him. A railway strike takes place in *Bhowani Junction* where the railway employees organize a strike along with the naval strike in Bombay and Karachi to realise their demands by boycotting work, gathering in protest and sloganeering. The strike in *Bhowani Junction* is suppressed with the high handedness of the army and the colonial administration as Colonel Savage makes his soldiers urinate on Surabhai, the local Congress leader and his people who lie down on the rails to block the movements of the trains (118). The strikers, caste Hindus scramble up and move out. But in

another railway novel by Anand Mahadevan titled *The Strike* (2009) in a similar situation the strikers on the tracks are killed accidently. This also implies that there were railway blocks or *railrokhos* in pre as well as post independence India—a new postcolonial word to the English language and local languages of India too. Thus showing how the railways modified or transformed consciousness even linguistically.

The Strike: In a Democracy and a National Railway

The Strike (2009) presents the post independence Indian scenario of a complicated political system seasoned with film stars, castes, atheists, bureaucrats, etc. mingled in the background of the railways. It is an Indian English railway bildungsroman in which the protagonist Hari belongs to a high caste Tamil Brahmin family and is set in the railway colony of Nagpur in Central India. Minakshi Mukerjee in a review published in 'The Hindu', calls it 'a railway novel—beginning and ending with a boy's fascination with trains and engines,' and 'seemingly autobiographical'.[13]

The novel is full of Hari's train travels, the first significant one to Benaras for the final rituals of his grandmother who died due to an accident caused indirectly by him and there is another accident in the end again indirectly caused by him which kills some other people. Hari's parents absolve him of the guilt of his grandmother's death insisting that it was not his fault, but his *patti*'s death lingers in his thoughts as it was linked with his craving to eat fish. Though his journey is more like a family tour for him, he resolves to cleanse himself, to ask forgiveness by entering the holiest of rivers and rinse off his sins in its divine swell (44), his sin of eating fish–a

[13]Minakshi Mukherjee "*The Strike*: Anand Mahadevan. A review" in The Hindu. http://www.thehindu.com/books/A-refreshingly-different-novel/article16874766.ece . August 13th 2009.

forbidden food by his traditional culture. But Hari disillusioned by the dirt in the water fails to understand how the dirty water could cleanse anything. The journey to Benaras is indeed a growing up experience for Hari as he gets to know many customs of his religion, about death and after death rituals. Hari lives in a kind of heterogeneous[14] time as Partha Chatterjee calls such time, and his growing up also signifies the coming to terms with many different kinds of consciousness. Eating a dish of fish is a sin according to tradition, perhaps a bigger sin than causing the death of a person though Hari lives and moves in a modern technological space. Contradictions of two entirely different times seem to merge into one in which Hari is situated but as Chatterjee puts it these "other" times are not mere survivors from a pre-modern past; they are new products of the encounter with modernity itself. One must, therefore, call it the heterogeneous time of modernity' (6). Hari thus lives and grows in a heterogeneous time which is a mix of traditions, superstitions, technology and modernity.

The compartmental space of a train which brought people 'spatially and socially'[15] together, its nature, and specifications were of considerable interest during the early days of the railways. Expectations of an egalitarian space of technology of the trains seems to have materialised partially as people of every class, creed and caste start at the same place, stop at the same place and share the same speed (Schivelbusch 72). But right from the beginning railways did classify its space and each class had its subjective experience of travel beating the notion of equality in space. Inside the cool and calm space of the first class cabin, Hari's family does not come across or interact with any other passengers. A lower class compartment however, has less order, lesser

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[14]Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation in Heterogeneous Time: The Politics of the Governed*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. 2004, 6.

[15]There is an entire chapter "The Compartment" in Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey*: *The Industrialization and Perception of Time and Space*. Berkeley: The University of California Press. 1986, 70-88.

space and fewer comforts but more people in them. Hari experiences both these classes as he also happens to travel in a second class compartment once. In contrast with his first class cabin Hari comes across uproarious laughter, ongoing card games, open discussions on films, current affairs, and politics among people from varied backgrounds and regions (39-40) as it indeed is a microcosm of India. Hari enjoys the comforts offered by the railway and his railway family (most of the male members of Hari's family are employed by the railways) travels mostly in the comfortable upper class compartment. There seems to be no restriction on any kind of food, traditional or not, as Mukund his co-passenger during his journey to Madras has his chicken dinner in the train as railway space allows it though Mrs. Sharma, another passenger expresses her disapproval of it (169). And as I find from the text most of Hari's growing up and learning experience take place in fact during his second class travelling.

I find in the novel Hari's Brahmin family with almost all the elders holding high posts in the official hierarchy of the railways represent and imitate the colonizer's superiority at least in some contexts as his mother, Savitri, seems to hold a kind of classist, casteist and brahminical contempt towards the lower class travellers and the railway labour class. When Hari's father is missing from their first class cabin she suggests that:

> He's probably in one of the second-class compartments with low-class men. Maybe even in the pantry talking to the railway labourers. (39)

Also after the accident, she blames her husband for what has happened because he took Hari 'around to meet low-class engine drivers and signalmen' (262). The transfer of the colonial attitude of superiority to the newly formed bureaucracy may be inferred from Savitri's contempt. In this categorization of the lower classes, she perhaps includes also the lower castes because in the railway's mobile space in India caste as a single factor did not merit segregation though the

distinction was present almost everywhere else and caste often got translated into class. Brahmanism is something that is very much in operation that would readily consider the lower castes as lower classes as well. During colonial days when upper class travelling was not for Indians, Brahmins would avoid train travel unless it was unavoidable as Kuberan in *Saraswativijayam* who would only travel in palanquins, willingly travels with the lower caste and class people to escape law. He travels in disguise perhaps for two reasons—to misguide the police and not to lose his caste for travelling with low castes if detected as I have discussed already in the last chapter.

As *The Strike* is a seemingly autobiographical novel, the author's juvenile curiosity and interest in girls, tasting a forbidden dish of fish, differences in cultural practices of his family with locals and his own friends who belong to different parts of the country, are vividly narrated mainly through the critical and naive eyes of young Hari. Hari lives in a railway colony, a unique space for its cosmopolitan nature as people from different socio-linguistic backgrounds live together. Hari's friends and neighbours Mohan and Anamika belong to Gujarat and Calcutta respectively. Summer holidays split Hari and his friends as trains carry them to different directions within the country, Hari to Madras, Mohan to Gujarat and Anamika to Calcutta to their grandparents and regional culture (71). The trains thus serve as a modern cultural space which transport people back into time by taking them to regional spaces which are traditional that is a movement from a modern industrial space and time of their occupations.

According to Minakshi Mukerjee 'this plural upbringing is very much part of a section of middle-class India' that Mahadevan has interwoven into his railway novel. Through his train journeys and visits to his home town, Hari encounters conflicts between what he has learned in

school and the realities on the ground in the process of his growing up. He understands that the idea of democracy which he has learned in school is often not appreciated by the masses that still held on to feudal practices (94). He observes a young generation losing its interest in the stories of the Independence Struggle and Partition and some people like Kollu-thatha, his grandfather, even longing for the days of British rule (31) even after years of independence in India. Most of Hari's growing up or coming to age happen during his train journeys and within the trains, post independence Indian space, which is a modern space of technology, though some of his travels are to traditional spaces like Benaras.

Hari like most other children is a railway fan, with his never ending curiosity and love for trains. His father being a railway engineer and his family closely connected with the railways, he gets more exposure to the railways, in its functioning and its culture. Any other young traveller perhaps would be as curious as Hari, but Hari's connections make it easier for him to get the desired information and experience. Mahadevan perhaps has adopted the narrative strategy of 'travel as education' when he presents Hari gathering knowledge on trains and its working pattern during his travels. Hari's curiosity and interest in details of how trains work may be due to his family being in railway jobs and closely connected with the railways. He also gets educated about the working of the railways by feeding his curiosity upon his father's knowledge during their travel together. Thus the railway space of mobility also functions as a space of nurturing besides the space of the railway colony; away from the space of home[16] where this nurturing takes place traditionally.

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[16] Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon. 1969, 4.

The railway journey in India and particularly the compartment is a site for discussion, opinion and talk. It probably is a lot different from the colonial distance that the English would maintain among the other passengers when seated face to face. To avoid contact and embarrassment the Europeans would bury their faces in newspapers or books (Schivelbusch 75). An incident that occurs during Hari's travel to Madras with his mother and the discussion he listens to, in the compartment, during his Benaras journey, seems to have a thread of narrative continuity. The incident is that the news of a much loved and worshipped actor turned politician's death makes the grieving followers halt the train as they want the whole world to mourn and take part in their grief. The Tamilian's love and worship of their filmy heroes turned politicians; a major theme of the narrative, is criticized by Girish, Hari's father, during his journey to Benaras. In fact he criticizes his own ethnic identity which includes hero worship. However he considers Tamil films superior to the Bollywood fantasies, perhaps an indirect affiliation to his Dravidian origin and culture. Elders worry that films have replaced religion. Girish being in a rational and modern space of the railways thus inherits a critique of his culture instead of upholding it alone. Thangarajan, Hari's uncle comments that films have become the 'The new opium for the masses' (100), a social and cultural change in modern society as youth give more importance to films, fan clubs of filmy heroes and their politics rather than to education and employment—a sad state of post independence politics of India which even lead the youth to a *railrokho*.

The railways always restricted its staff from strikes with laws,[17] and after the 1974 railway strike lead by George Fernandes, many more additional sections are included to deter the railway staff

[17]Section 173 of the Railway Act, 1989: It lays down the rule that if a railway servant entrusted with the responsibility of running a train abandons his duty, he can be punished with imprisonment for a term of up to two years, as well as a fine. There is a long lists of sections deterring the railway employees from strikes of any kind.

from striking though no such restraint or control is possible under the great democratic system when free citizens lie down on the tracks to prevent the trains from moving. Newspaper accounts and television clips show how the strikers often block the rail services, for example the Jat movement and the nationwide general strike called by central trade unions as recent as in the year 2016[18] which was withdrawn later, are examples. The railway space in independent India often becomes a platform to demonstrate grievances and protests. Aggrieved people resort to stop the trains, in order to make their point as it appears in an ironic point of view that, more the public inconvenience caused, better a point is made in a democracy. Wheels belonging to the engines of progress and national mobility are brought to a standstill once again in the year 1987 as shown in the text, by the party workers to mourn the death of M. G. Ramachandran, their Chief Minister; thus blocking the passage of people from all over India including Hari.

The novel right from the beginning is about Hari's interest in trains and engines. This obsession leads to the turning point in the novel as well as in Hari's life—the accident and death of some strikers. Trains are metaphorically addressed as monsters and killers due to the power of the engine and the certainty of death, if one comes under it by accident or otherwise. Many a railway novel and thriller include death in a train or by a train. Such death scenes are found in *Dombey and Son* (2002), *Anna Karenina* (2004), *La Bête Humaine* (1890), etc. These deaths are either caused by accidentally falling under the wheel, or by suicide. But Emile Zola concludes *La Bête*

[18]<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/haryana-jat-quota-reservation-stir-agitation-protest-violence-restart-curfew-around-rail-lines-2836250/>
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/Railway-unions-strike-deferred/articleshow/53144714.cms>

Humaine (1890), with a frightening scene of a driverless train full of soldiers bound for the Franco-Prussian frontier rolling on at unimaginable speed away from the rails.

A similar incident happens in a scene in *The Strike* as the engine gets powered and appears to move ahead driverless for an onlooker, as Hari who was inside was not seen from outside. Unlike the driverless train in Zola's novel Hari and the engine driver were present in the engine though Hari alone was at the controls and the train was stopped within no time, but not before the damage was done. Hari's effort was to calm down the striking people by shutting down the engine, but unwittingly orchestrates an accident which kills three strikers. The locomotive, a human creation free from human control wreaks havoc disregarding the space and time allotted for it as the narrator of Zola comments:

> What did it matter what victims it crushed in its path! Was it not, after all, heading into the future, heedless of the blood that was spilled? And on it sped through the darkness, driverless, like some blind, deaf, beast turned loose upon the field of death . . . (410)

What happens at the end in *The Strike* too is similar to the above quote 'what did it matter what victims it crushed in its path' as trains had always been used for different ends by different people. If the British used trains to consolidate its power and hold over the colony, Gandhi used it to unify the nationalist movement against them. It is possible to interpret the incident from different perspectives as the reader is left with no choice but to accept what the author conveys as an accident, to be the truth. From another point of view it may be considered as a bureaucratic or brahminical suppression of a proletarian like uprising. The 1974 railway strike demanding higher pay scale and world standard of working hours was brutally suppressed by the then government of Indira Gandhi.[19]

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[19]For more details refer, Stephen Sherlock. *The Indian Railway Strike of 1974: A Study of Power and Organised Labour*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2001.

Post independence India at times seems to have changed just its masters, as a man in Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* speaks out: 'We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians' (52). In *The Strike* the feudal loyalty and trust shown by the uneducated poor people towards Hari's grandfather too points out to a similar state of affairs. A culture embedded with corruption and unethical practices seem to mark the government and organizations like the railways. Thus an emboldened bureaucracy and railway administrative system manage a massive cover up by hushing up matters, disposing off of the bodies, conducting mock enquiries, destroying files, shedding money, transferring and punishing some lower officials, promoting and praising those who willingly collaborated, and sending Hari and his family abroad to avoid any future enquiries. Including the accident and the cover up which are perhaps often true to the working of the railways, the novel is a wealth of information on the railways.

Hari and his mother were travelling in a 'ladies coupé' when the strike and the accident occurred. Boys less than twelve years of age could travel with a woman in the ladies coupé, if unaccompanied by an adult male. This coupé has only four of its seats occupied and it is seldom shut and so two more persons from outside the coupé get included in this microcosm of India. The third member in the coupé is a Punjabi woman; Mrs. Sharma going to Madras to bring her injured army captain son home. There is her daughter who aspires to be a social worker inside ladies coupé accompanying her. There is the young and handsome Mukund with filmy dreams on the seat just outside the ladies cubicle. Finally there is Radha, a eunuch who travels in the vestibule and in the space between the toilets without a ticket as the sixth person to represent this

microcosm (128-129). All of them are not in the ladies coupé, but with the door open the segregation of space ends and the inside/outside separation is lost. But the women here have the option of shutting themselves from the world out if they choose to do so.

Radha is a *hijra* (eunuch) who does not have a ticket to travel. It is not given in the text why (she) did not buy a ticket, but a probable reason is that a reservation requisition form has a box in which the 'sex' of the person is to be entered. Radha who does not belong to any sex thus perhaps is not able to attain a reserved space in a train exactly as the ambiguity of a eunuch's space is in society though Radha seems to be proud of her chosen status as she explains how one is selected and initiated into the *hijra* community. It is Radha who is a consolation to Savitri after the theft. It is Radha who knows the cultural history of the land, it is Radha who is of assistance to all after the accident and in the end it is Radha who is used as a prop to squash the case. Still for (her?) there is no space in society. When Radha enters the ladies coupé, no one stops (her?), whereas Mukund is not allowed to enter the coupé (154). However, Radha has no place in civil society though (she?) is undeniably a part of it, as she has no reserved space, but is travelling by the train.

Mahadevan describes the railways with authentic information like that of an insider whether it is the methods of its working, technological aspects, corruption and mismanagement of railway administration, or the political implications on the government owned and operated technology. It is perhaps India that the railways represent in the text as the strikers try to present before it their grievances. The accident and the unscheduled arrival of the train bring in memories of partition and the 'ghost trains' (227). A strike is normally conducted by the employees to force the administration to grant their demands of better pay and working conditions or for retribution

of any injustice done. But the strike in the text is conducted by a few citizens asserting their rights and a *railrokho* is a way of being heard which is metaphorically crushed by the upper class/upper caste people and is also hushed up in what is called 'classic Indian style'.

As a part of Hari's growing up during his train journeys, his newly aroused awareness of sexual inclinations and the first adolescent stirring of homoerotic sexuality are experienced inside the train. His embarrassment, guilt, his well-intended efforts that end in devastations, etc. seem to be set as a precursor to his growing up from an engine loving little boy. Hari is a privileged child whose long-time dream of entering inside a railway engine is fulfilled even if many problems accompanied the process. But there are many people and children in remote villages who have had no opportunity to get even a glimpse of a train in their life time like Durga in *Pather Panchali* (1929) by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay

***Pather Panchali*: A Little Song of an Unfulfilled Dream**

Pather Panchali[20] or Song of the Road is Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's novel in which Opu and Durga's Brahmin family, living in poverty in a tiny Bengali village is introduced. Opu's family consists of his scholarly father, Horihor, who miserably fails to support his household, a strong-willed, sharp-tongued, and frustrated mother, Shorbojoya, and a naughty but loving older sister, Durga, whom he loves dearly. Of all the narratives of the series—*The Apu Trilogy*, the railway is least present physically in *Pather Panchali*. In the latter two, trains are a regular feature of everyday life. Opu's older sister Durga too is present only in *Pather Panchali* as she dies an untimely death without her simple desire of seeing a train accomplished.

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[20]*Pather Panchali* is the first part of the *Apu Trilogy*(1955) a series of Bengali films by Satayajit Ray, the next two in the series being *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956) and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959)

In the film adaptation of the story, the trains have a more prominent role as Durga and Opu in fact get to see a speeding train. In one of the scenes of the film the children walk several miles and are ecstatic to witness a train passing by and they run along with it. In the film the train scene perhaps provides the visual effects enhanced by light, sound and camera tricks with the children being outside the train. In the text, a train appears only in the end, after Durga's death leaving her desire to see a train unfulfilled. There is an incident in the novel where Opu and Durga while trying to get their lost calf home, hoped to get to see a railway line, and even a train, but had to give up before witnessing any and return home (145). Later on his father took Opu along the same railway line which they were in search of and he was extremely excited and curious with numerous questions in his mind. Opu wanted to see the train for which 'they would only have had to wait four or five hours by the railway at the most, and the train would have come. But he just could not get his father to let him wait for it' (159). Like any other child he had a lot of questions but had to satisfy his curiosity by supplementing his imagination and reasoning. Though he could not really see a train, his young mind stored all that he saw to narrate to his sister.

> 'Opu bounded through the gate on to the line. He looked up and down the track; his eyes wide open with surprise as he took in every detail. Why do those two iron rails run side by side like that? Are they what the train goes on? Why should it? Why should it go along them instead of across the fields? Doesn't it ever come off? What are those things? Are they what are called wires? What is that whispering noise they are making? Is it a message going along them? Whose message can it be and why is he sending it? Where is the station? Is it this way or that? (147)

Opu is very anxious to see a train as he has a lot of ideas about it. But that does not happen, because of the absence of a train. The train is in constant deferral for Opu and Durga. The train is present in their consciousness and hence Durga too ask questions like 'How long were the rails you saw, Opu? I suppose the wires were hanging down? Did you see a train? Did one go past

while you were there?'(159). But Opu had not seen a train and he could not describe what a train looked like. Opu had his imaginary world and visions, whereas Durga had her ideas of a train from pictures. She had no desire for a different world or different life except one deep longing and that was to see a train.

The tragedy of Durga's life is that she dies without fulfilling her desire even though the railways had been established in India since 1853. Perhaps the village was so remote that the railway did not extend itself to Nischindipur. In the politics of what is important and what is not, to invest on, the life of a few poor people might have had not enough weight. Or from the view point of political economy it was not a profitable venture to introduce the railway to the village. It is also possible that the place has no significance in the political map. The railway being a commercial as well as a social institution perhaps has the moral responsibility of providing the facility to the villagers. But even today as it is shown inside the narrative the situation exists in the real world outside, with some places still not connected with the railways.

The last words Durga uttered during her sickness before death were, 'Opu, when I get better will you take me to see a train?' (358). Her words of desire signify the social injustice due to unequal distribution of resources and the craving of a deprived soul that should touch the modern consciousness to think about the thousands like Durga who have not seen a train even today. Opu had promised to take her for a train ride, but she left the world without waiting for it. It is after Durga's death that Opu travels on a train with his parents and begins his journey towards his future. Trains were already there during the time of the narrative but it is hidden from the children. It is a metaphorical game of 'hide and seek' that the trains play; when they seek they do not find, but when Durga stops seeking, it appears to Opu.

Horihor, the father of the children, is aware of the trains, has seen them and used them. But Horihor is a priest and his higher ambition is to become a poet or a playwright. He is not practical enough to change his profession or to use his knowledge for economic advantages. He does not have the technical penchant to use the railways in any way for his family's benefit. He travels all through the narrative, but is not able to make a decent living for his family. Being a scholar Horihor brought books and other reading materials for his son whenever he returned from his travels. This shows that printing technology has reached the village, though not railway technology. Durga seems to have seen a picture of a train in some books. She knows it to be very long with a lot of wheels and an engine in the front. She thinks that it has fire inside and smoke comes out of it. She is also aware that the train and its wheels are made of iron, not wood like that of the bullock carts (213).

The onset of modernity in India is perhaps a theme of this railway novel. Though the novel was first published in the year 1929, there is no indication of the years during which the story is set and life in the village resembles medieval times. Apart from the mention of the railway in a few places and some hints of vibrating telegraph poles, no technology seems to have made any inroads into the society; the village appears to be extremely backward and the residents seem to live so much as they have lived for centuries. Kushwant Singh's Mano Majra without the railway station would resemble the village in the text. Dilapidated remains of indigo factories and the tomb of one of the manager's little son who died in the year 1860 as is engraved on the tombstone, gives an idea that the temporal setting of the story is some time after the year 1860.

(Indigo cultivation had been a burden over the poor farmers and it had lead to a nationalist movement. Though brutally suppressed many times, the agitation was finally successful. Long time indigo plantation[21] could be a reason for the poverty in the region.)

Another person who is curious about the railway in the text is another young woman always addressed as 'Gokul's wife' who is treated like a slave in the family often beaten up by her husband and abused by her mother-in-law. She is a poor man's daughter, married and destined for household work day and night even without enough food, (the outcome of a faulty economy of production and distribution and political economy in India in spite of modernism in technology) yet she is good humoured, kind, and curious. She is curious about the trains that pass 'through holes cut in the mountains' in Gaya and Benaras (203). Her expression of tunnels in her own terms is the 'holes cut in mountains'. This is the way she looks at the world and understands it through her limited language of expression. She wonders how tunnels keep from collapsing and though she does not understand the nuances of engineering; she has a lot of questions. Unlike Durga, she has at least once travelled by train, though for a very short distance, to visit some temples. She too perhaps lives in a heterogeneous time in her traditional role of a submissively slogging wife with a consciousness of modern technological space and time.

The narrative has its merit of realistic and idealistic narration in portraying the romantic day-to-day village life of the children, Opu and Durga. The freedom of childhood is presented as it is lived by the children in their subjectivity in a village setting. Long durations of time seem to have passed without any obvious change in the redundant life of the people in the village and I think that is because modern technology like trains that would have brought in changes had not

[21] For more on Indigo refer Prakash Kumar.*Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

yet made its inroads to the village. The trains appear only in the fringes in the text as well as outside the text. It is present in the conscience of the children but not physically present in the text, as it appears only at the very end in the text.

Indir Thakrun, an old relative of Durga and Opu, who recalls some old stories, is the only link between the past and the present. Indir was married to a *kulin* (upper caste) Brahmin who had many wives and left her without any money and she thinks that it is an old story that took place in the distant past. She is an old woman of seventy five and 'the road of her life was an old road' (8), which she had walked along since childhood. But all that seems to have happened long back and all her friends dead long back and forgotten. The nature of female time seems to be immeasurable just as it is cyclical, while male time is measurable. Though modernity seems to erase this dichotomy, Indir had been of the olden days, without being aware as to even how old it was:

> Many years had passed since then. Many generations of water lilies had grown and died in the Shankari pond. Sitanath Mukherji had planted some new mango trees in what had been the Chokrobortis' garden but they too had become old and died. New families had come to live in some of the houses in the village, but others had been abandoned and were now in ruins. Many Golok Chokrobortis and Brojo Chokrobortis had died been forgotten: and the clear waters of the Ichamoti, in the endless tides of time, had swept away like a straw or a fleck of foam all the Johnsons and Thomsons of the indigo factory, and all the Majumdars. (6, 7)

But nothing seems to have changed. Girls still got married though a miserable and sad future awaited them generation after generation and parents seemed eager to marry them off.

Through these past events that are gone, time seems to be measured in the village only through an account of the generations of people who lived and went just like plants and flowers that withered in time. Large chunks of time pass, differently accounted by the people. If Indir measures time with the duration of a generation, children do it with an annual festival celebrated

in the village or flowering and fruiting times of the trees and plants (93). *Pather Panchali* is a narrative mostly seen through the eyes of children in fragmented frames of everyday events, through which they lived their life. Desire and lack of fulfilment is in constant conflict in the novel. Durga wants to see a train, perhaps her desire for a modern life which is not fulfilled. Opu loved his sister, followed her and perhaps desired to grow up together, but her death quashed that desire. He desired to take Durga for a train ride, but she could not wait for that. The narrative is full of such conflicts perhaps unknown to the modern urban world.

The children live in a small secluded village where time passes in leisurely pace unnoticed in the absence of haste and restrictions. Yet they devise their own means of measuring it in terms of space like length, etc. Opu can identify the part of a day from the length of the shadow of a bamboo tree. For example:

> He knew it was midday because the shadow of the bamboo clump was not lying across the yard in a long line between east and west—village folk still tell the time of day by the length of shadows of that ancient banyan tree which grows in the vast Shonadanga plain. (215)

Time is measured through the lens of childhood when a single summer can be felt like an epoch with childish elongation of time which also is reflected in discontinuity of time in the text with irregular short and long gaps like the baby Opu's smile leads to the narration of Horihor's marriage and his first visit to his wife after ten years (31). This perhaps is in accordance with the theory of creation of 'spatial' fiction which needs a way in 'which the temporal sequentiality of the story is neutralized by an appropriate abandonment of chronological presentation'.[22] Durga

[22]Ivo Vidan. 'Time Sequence in Spatial Fiction' *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction.* Edit. Hoffman, Michael&Patrick Murphy. London: Duke University Press. 1988, 444.

seemed to be in no need to measure time as she instinctively knew when to return home from her wanderings.

Opu's perception of nature and time are not coloured with technological inputs or insights largely due to the absence of trains and its temporality. Mahadevan's privileged protagonist Hari lives in the technological space of the railways and has access to formal education. Opu on the other hand, as a child does not have railways, but he has some other technology. He learns a lot from the limited printed material he has and all the rest from the observation of nature. But when Opu was introduced to the world of trains and industries later, his perception perhaps underwent a change in the sequels of the novel. Subjectivity and spontaneity of perception of space and time is also felt through the child's angle of thoughts as Opu was a silent dreamer whose imagination could contain his limited universe, nature and time at large merged to be one with his personal nature and time:

> It made him sad to think that happy things could have an end, and that Time could snatch away the hours of gold. The wonderful thing about the champak flowers today was that they seemed able to make Time recoil upon itself and to cancel the sense of loss which often grieved him. The past became present again and he was out at his play once more. It was late, but he still lay on, his face buried deep on his posy and his heart warm with the joys he had plucked back from the thieving hand of time. (224,225)

Opu's notion of time resembles pre-industrial time that seems to be merged with nature as it also appears to be in childhood. This merger may get separated during the process of growing up just as the nation waking up to a new consciousness with modern technology.

Opu had set his spatial boundaries according to his imagination as he had not been wandering as much as Durga as her mother blames her that she is never at home and that it is only hunger that brings her home, while she can account for Opu's presence at home (64). Durga wanders off like her calf, for the wild nature is perhaps like a home for them. This seems to be

an aspect of romanticism which one can see in poetry and drama and in fiction here the expansiveness that does not keep to boundaries. This pre-industrial, boundless, romantic space also suggests that the industrial age perhaps will keep people hedged in within their boundaries.

Opu was too young to wander in the wilderness and weaker in health with his boundaries set within the neighbourhood. He was his mother's favoured child, attached to her and perhaps in a state as the psychological umbilical cord being not yet cut. Confined thus within the boundaries, he had his frontiers wider in his mental space as Durga scaled the physical wilderness of nature. He thought the space beyond what he had experienced was the land of fairies and exiled princes. He believed that no man lived beyond the limits of the known space of his neighbourhood, where uncertainties ruled, as the narrator puts it:

> Until today the boundaries of his world had been Nera's house on the one side and the land in front of his own home as far as Ranu's place on the other...Anything further away than this, he imagined, could only be the land of the fairy tales his mother used to tell him. (57)

He was aware of the uncertainties perhaps in his own childish imagination of fairies and demons. But the coming of the railway too implies uncertainties as the modernism of the railways imply chance encounters and meetings. Beyond the boundaries one may lose control of one's life faced with new experiences which could be controlled by staying within the boundaries. Opu perhaps experienced these uncertainties when he grew up in a city space later.

Opu as a child is being contained within the limits of his perceived space and he used his imagination of the world of fairy tales to contain him within his space. Mere awareness of distance was enough to fill his little mind with a feeling of wonder and make him happy in the absence of a train in his reach to take him to these spaces. His imagination carried him through

the blue sky which was a long way off, and to the paper kite that flew in it (68). Later on in his life he got trains to hitch himself to fly away though with a silent pain in his heart where the memory of his sister was preserved.

Durga's father seems to be a patriarch who was interested in educating his son but not his daughter. In spite of being a scholar, I think that he was not able to imagine a world with an educated daughter, in his traditional mindset of domesticity for women. While Opu developed interest in books and reading, Durga educated herself in the open world outside as she developed her understanding of every tree, every path, and the time of flowering and ripening of fruits as she roamed wild and fearless (74).

The spaces of abstraction and concreteness like the space of knowledge or nature that become gendered spaces that the author seems to configure keeping to the conventional way of operation but at the same time it becomes a critique of the division and gendering as it is in the case of Opu and Durga's spaces. For Durga the village was her universe and though she was aware of faraway places like Calcutta, she would not dream of leaving her world. In her childhood world of limited space the binaries of 'faraway', and 'near' perhaps existed at the level of her narrow spatial understandings. Yet she was aware that Calcutta was far away, a notion that was annihilated with the arrival of the railways and the notion of annihilation of space and time as discussed in the second chapter in which I introduced concepts of space. She was a child of nature and I think looking at her from within a romantic notion one may perhaps think that she would have withered if replanted in a city like Calcutta and in some curious way she herself seems to have been aware of this fact. Or perhaps her obsession with trains would have made her love the city and the novel experiences that the city could have offered her. It is perhaps for the

reader to speculate as the train becomes a marker of development in terms of time, culture and experience. But it has not reached Durga's world which is still a kind of a 'primitive' world.

Though Durga was the stronger of the two children, the author seems to be taking a narrative choice (of Opu to live and get access to the modern life in the city and a future) in which he perhaps shows his patriarchal bias. Durga's short duration of life on earth spent in exploring the jungle and the neighbour's orchards unaware of the restrictions of time and space, culminated on a fateful night which unleashed fury of nature and gods as a hurricane's blast destroyed their hut and took away her life. Helplessly marooned in water, without food, medicine and transportation and a sick child Shorbojoya attributes everything to fate and the wrath of the divine. She is unable to think in modern terms, that is, the lack of access to basic needs that are missing instead of the mythical concerns of Gods and fate. The lack of the railway to the village seems to be ironic in a society which already had welcomed the railway. Rather than thinking in terms of the social inequality and injustice, Shorbojoya attributes everything to Gods

> This must be the voice of the Destroyer himself, Shiva, whom nothing neither pity nor drunken intoxication, could deflect from his purpose, or turn aside from his duty, predestined before the beginning of time, to descend upon the earth in utter annihilation, leaving no more of the smiling land than remains of a star which disintegrates in endless space and hurtles down to the depth of chaos below. (286-287)

This is a typical expression of surrender to the notions of the divine fury when one fails to pin point the real culprit, here the modern consciousness that is often insensitive to the needs of the masses in terms of political economy. Considering the village and the country as a whole some have access to modern technology while others feed off agricultural technology. Political economy would like to have it that way so that there are a few people who are always going to be impoverished rural agricultural labourers while others get the benefits of political economy of the city as that is more convenient a space for development and progress. People in the villages

though are governed by political economy of grains, water, cows, grass, fodder, etc. most of the benefits remain elusive to them due to faulty policies. A victim of such discriminations, Durga after communicating her feverish desire of seeing a train, perhaps a symbolic wish to see progress reach her village, breathed her last. Opu in the end finds a train that carries him to the future though full of uncertainties. Durga is denied the privilege, but another Durga named Chuiya almost her alter ego finds her rescue and a hope of a future at a different time in a different place in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* (2006).

Water: Railway as a Hope and Redeemer

The novel *Water* (2006) by Bapsi Sidhwa is an account of child marriage and the plight of widows sometimes less than ten years of age. I have selected this novel for the purpose that the technology of the railway is seen as a saviour or rescuer in this novel though it arrives again right in the end. It is only the last chapter, of the twenty one chaptered novel, that deals with the railway. But the intensity of the narrative built up during the previous chapters gets eased metaphorically into the railway space as Chuyia is accepted into it. Though the railway is present in this society, its use for the widows is perhaps limited as a conveyance for them to reach the ashrams. Shakuntala, Kalyani and all the other widows did not get any relief due to this technology. The railway is brought into the narrative too late. Shakuntala gets the information about the train as well as courage to take action only when Kalyani is no more and Chuyia is cruelly battered and almost dead. All the miseries, sadness and tension that is built up in the novel gets a relief as Shakuntala releases Chuyia whom she was carrying into the moving train.

In patriarchal societies of the subcontinent all the decision making powers are enjoyed by men especially in the matters of marriage of girls. They decide who girls should marry, and that she

should leave her maternal home. Chuyia has two brothers, Prasad and Mohan, and they all live in the same house but in different spaces. Prasad and Mohan have their male space and need not leave that space to adjust with a new family. But six year old Chuyia is conditioned by her patriarchal family and she is being prepared to leave her family. The patriarchal male from his space of authority thus wielded power upon the female space. Some men marry off their daughters as young as six years with men of even sixty, considering only their wealth and at times the girl's poor father could not reject a rich man's proposal however old the groom was. And when the old man dies, the young girl is branded as a widow and condemned to a life deprived of her home and every comfort. The dowry that the girl's parents pay the groom is appropriated by his surviving family and the widow is often subjected to torture and sexual abuse before being thrown out of the house or put into an ashram. This is what had happened with Madhumati the widow who runs the ashram when her husband died. She had to bring a lot of pressure with some influential help to get back a part of her dowry (84-86).

Somnath, Chuyia's father, tells Chuyia's mother that a girl is destined to leave her parents' home early or she will bring disgrace to it. She is safe and happy only in her husband's care (14). He further reminds her of the tradition that prescribes the role of women as 'outside of marriage the wife has no recognized existence in our tradition. A woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all!' (15). This implies that she is not created to have daughters, but only sons to continue the lineage of patriarchy.

According to the scriptures venerated by patriarchy (Dharma Shastra) 'widowhood was the punishment for a sinful existence in the past,' (66) and the widows atoned for it with prayer and observance of fasts as prescribed. Even the sight of a widow was considered as something

inauspicious, so inauspicious that if sighted at the beginning of an auspicious venture, the venture itself had to be postponed (143). According to the *Manusmriti*, the foremost Sanskrit text in the orthodox tradition, a widow's head is to be shaved, her ornaments to be removed, and she is expected to remain in perpetual mourning. She is to observe fasts, give up eating "hot" foods in order to cool her sexual energy, avoid auspicious occasions because she is considered inauspicious (for having caused her husband's death), and to remain celibate, devout and loyal to her husband's memory (171). A widow had two options, either to commit *sati* and die with her husband or live in self-denial to pray for her husband's soul.

The gap between the culture detailed above and a modern egalitarian society is a wide one, though existing simultaneously and a narrow bridge to connect the two perhaps is the modern technology of the railways as Sidhwa slowly leads the narrative to that end. After reaching there too the future is not guaranteed but uncertain and the author chooses to leave Chuiya to her fate in the train that carries her to some future. The old widow Shakuntala perhaps thought whatever Chuyia's future would be, it could be no worse than what she underwent in the ashram.

Chuyia is deterritorialized from her home and reterritorialized in an ashram in Benaras like the other widows and her agony is like that of a tree when uprooted from its native soil and transplanted in an unfriendly alien culture and soil, a very painful process, as Marlene Nourbese Philip gives a description of a plant's transplantation in 'The Practical Guide to Gardening.'[23] It may be observed that if not done carefully and nurtured properly the replanted plant dies in a short while and I think that the plight of the widows in the text are like roughly uprooted and

[23] Philip, Nourbese M. *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks.* Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1989, 85. Quoted by S.P. Sylvester. 'Language of Dissent: African Caribbean Canadian Women Writers'. A thesis submitted to the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 2003.

mishandled plants. Chuyia's reterritorialization with a shaved head, devoid of material possessions and clothed in a plain white cotton sari is into a ghetto run by a widow who is a drug addict. She was allowed just one meal a day and reduced to begging. This inhuman practice I observe as something that is in contrast with the notion of modernity and modern consciousness. Modernity implies an impression of equal citizenship and opportunity for all in a national space as Anthony Giddens argues:

> The development of modern social institutions and their worldwide spread have created vastly greater opportunities for human beings to enjoy a secure and rewarding existence than any type of pre-modern system. (7)

A human being just for being a woman subjected to such degradation on account of someone else's demise is patriarchy's challenge to the modern notions of equality and liberty.

The widows were considered inauspicious and one is made to believe that it was a profane space they occupied. They were considered unlucky in auspicious venues and almost treated as untouchables but the issue of their exploitation was not addressed politically so much as many other social evils because of patriarchy's tendency to undermine the issues concerning women. Patriarchal gender politics of the worst order seems to have led to the exploitation of widows including sexual exploitation. The whole issue seems to be in tune with the politics of economy as the reason behind sending the widows away could have been, as Shakuntala explains to Narayan:

> ...one less mouth to feed, four saris, one bed to let...There is no other reason. Disguised as religion, it's just about money. (209)

This politics of money and gender also seems to have commercialized sex work and the owners of the ashrams keeping the profits. It is contradictory that the widow's ashrams like Chuyia's existed even though the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act was enacted as early as 1856 which

legalised the remarriage of Hindu widows in all jurisdictions of India under East India Company rule.[24]

Chuyia's life would have been a few years of exploitation and constant assaults with an imminent tragic end unless Shakuntala had taken matters into her own hands and decided to put Chuyia in the train that was taking Gandhiji along, away from the space of stigma and a cursed life. Gandhiji's train though rescues Chuyia in the text, his own relationship with the railways and trains seem to be full of conflicts and contradictions. Gandhi had openly expressed his disdain for machinery as a whole and the railways in particular in *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule*.[25] He held the view that the English could continue to hold power upon India only with the help of the railways, the railways which according to him, 'accentuate the evil nature of man: Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity', and that, 'good travels at a snail's pace—it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways' and hence the railway is 'evil' (42). I find it strange that he could not see the train as a modernizing force which would demolish caste and other such evil practices present in society and would bring in social equality.

In the text it is given that the British, cognizant of his power, had resignedly allotted the train to carry Gandhi and his followers across India to meet with a populace clamouring to see him, (226) and that he had been travelling by train and meeting people at railway stations. In *Hind Swaraj*, he says that 'it was after the advent of the railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railways that we are beginning to abolish those distinctions' (43). It is strange that a person who had given the

[24]Lucy Carroll, "Law, Custom, and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856". *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*. Sumit Sarkar & Tanika Sarkar. Edit. New York: Indiana University Press". 2008, 78. ISBN 978-0-253-22049-3. Retrieved in July 2014.
[25]M.K.Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938.

impression of working to uplift the lower castes declares that in India (with its untouchables and stigma attached to widowhood) there were no distinctions. Or perhaps he has approved the castes and *varnas* in society at an earlier stage in his life which he changed later as Arundhati Roy mentions in her preface *The Doctor and the Saint* (2014) which is a book length preface to B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihiliation of Caste*. (Written in 1936) Gandhi further has added that, the 'railways are a most dangerous institution. Owing to them, man has gone further away from his Maker' (44). It seems to be a kind of blindness and lack of awareness of the sufferings of poverty and humiliation. Despite being preached against so vehemently, the train was integral to the formation of India. Proof of this fact may be that in spite of his rash criticism, Gandhi travelled all over India by trains during the freedom struggle and nationalist movements.

Shakuntala in the novel thought that it was Gandhi and his train that were the only hope of rescue for Chuyia. Shakuntala carrying Chuyia ran along the train as 'the iron wheels of the train slowly creaked into motion and steam billowed out of its smokestack' (226). She ran faster with appeals as the train moved past her, though it was a dangerous effort from her side. Finally a hand reached out from the train and Narayan who had become a disciple of Gandhi caught hold of and swept Chuyia up into the train. The train moved on ahead with the promise of a future for Chuyia either as a Gandhi follower or as the adopted daughter of Narayan. Narayan had planned earlier to marry Kalyani and to adopt Chuyia as their daughter (196). The railway finally served as the saviour of Chuyia, the child widow, from miseries of her wretched life.

As Sidhwa has expressed in her acknowledgements, (236) she has borrowed the early life and surroundings of Chuyia from Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali***.** Life of Chuyia and Durga, of *Pather Panchali*, are almost similar in many aspects till the marriage of Chuyia. Both are poor

Brahmin girls who love their family, especially their brothers. Romantic images of the children in both the novels show that both of them are so much a part of wild nature that they know each tree and plant and enjoy their fruits with enormous joy and love. Durga's parents though, want to marry her off; they are not successful in the venture as she leaves this world early. Chuyia too dies a symbolic death with the death of her so called husband, as her life almost ends there. Durga did not wait for the train to arrive for her rescue, whereas in the end, Chuyia manages to escape the depressing life of widowhood in the ghettoes. After all the sad events and helpless circumstances, there is a ray of hope and a feeling of redemption for her in the end ironically in Gandhiji's train. For Durga the train was a liberator mentally, a desire to hold on to, but for Chuyia it proved to be a physical and political liberator in the end as she continues her journey by train literally as well as figuratively.

Ladies Coupé: A Liberating Female Space

Virginia Wolf in her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'[26] tells the story of a journey from Richmond to Waterloo by train. She makes use of a train compartment where one finds characters like her old woman Mrs. Brown making 'someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about them' (31). The train here is perhaps used as a metaphor for modernity as modernity has often been associated with mobility and a 'journey as the means and metaphor for personal transformation' (Aguiar 2). And these are chance encounters between strangers in a public space of the railways, a feature of modernity. The connection between modernity and mobility is often expressed through representations in textual form with characters moving to one place or the other.

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[26] Virginia Wolf. 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'. *Essentials of the Theories of Fiction.* Edit. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy. London: Duke Murphy Press.1988, 24.

Wolf substantiates this scheme as she says that all novels begin with an old lady sitting in the corner opposite, (31) in a train, and all that the writer has to do is to observe the character, and weave a story around him/her, using creativity and imagination that is possible with the aid of technology, like in the corner of a train:

> I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive has been evolved. (31)

Thus for Wolf the novel advances through the character and it is the dealing with the character that is the major concern of the novel. William H. Gass argues that: 'great character is the most obvious single mark of great literature' (268). According to Gass everything else in the novel is attached to the characters unlike Aristotle's view of character as a servant of dramatic action (269). Wolf presents her specimen characters in a common railway carriage to which anyone can jump in. Anita Nair brings together her six female characters in a second class ladies coupé and lets them introduce themselves and talk out their character in her novel *Ladies Coupé* (2001) within a shared space and shared confidences.

Anita Nair selects as the setting of her novel a 'ladies coupé' as the title suggests, the interiors of a train, a second class coupé consisting of six berths exclusively for six women travelling unaccompanied by men. The title perhaps suggests a space where upper class women gather or a coupé for the ladies (wives of titled men) to travel. But in India every woman is also a lady irrespective of her class or birth as the word 'lady' in Indian English denotes woman. Anita Nair perhaps is having a take on Indian English considering the six women in the coupe as 'ladies' including Marikolanthu. As a feminist she seems being humorous about the concept of a 'Lady' which is unthinkable for Marxist feminists. Hence a ladies coupé is nothing but a women's space

that can be a closed space with three berths on either side to accommodate six women travelling some long distances.

Anita Nair in the author's note mentions that there was a special counter for ladies and a ladies coupé in most overnight trains with second class reservation compartments until early 1998. Indian Railways provided this facility, for women travellers and since then the ladies coupé was converted into lone lower births in deferent coupés and the special counter too was abolished in most of the stations. Marian Aguiar has traced correspondence since as early as 1869[27] with suggestions and oppositions of separate space for Indian women in *purdah* in the public space of the railways (19). In 1870, the *zenana* carriage was introduced which became the ladies coupé later which seems to have no counterpart in Britain[28] because gender disparity in Britain was perhaps not so pronounced as it was in India. It was thus the railway settled on a second class carriage with a women's compartment separated by a corridor that could be closed from within. This was meant for the upper class women who could/would not travel by first class (could not because the Europeans would not allow, and would not because of the presence of men). Thus the railway seems to have fixed boundaries of race, class and gender in its public space and assisted in fixing the binaries of these categories. The Railways also seems to have provided a platform for women's liberation as they could now travel alone if they wished which was an unthinkable adventure before trains when they had to walk most of the way. Even after the trains arrived in India, women had no freedom to use it for a long time as patriarchy objected to women being subjected to 'visual contact' or 'rude gaze of the public' (Aguiar 135). I think that this

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[27] R.P. Jenkins. Commissioner of Patna, June 21, 1869. Bengal Proceedings. Public Works Department: Railway Branch, September1869, no. 99.

[28]Laura Bear. Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the intimate Historical Self. New York: Columbia University Press.2007, 50-53. quoted by Aguiar.

segregation of space and making invisible to the public gaze is again a symbol of patriarchal control of women's sexuality, desires and freedom.

Anita Nair's story is set sometime before 1998, when ladies coupés still existed, precisely in 1980s as the death of Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran in 1987 is mentioned. Women could assemble in different spaces like kitchens, *zenanas* (enclosed rooms where women in *purdah* could meet close male members of the family), etc. but even these spaces do not guarantee absolute privacy. No other space perhaps could have served as aptly the purpose of the confessions of the six women from varied backgrounds of life. Through their confessions they also reveal how they once forgot their womanhood and how they choose to handle their situations and get back to their lives successfully. As much as they confess and reveal their life's secrets to Akhila, it is also a self-revelation to themselves.

Passengers in the ladies coupé belonged to varied backgrounds, age and class but united against the male dominated society. Akhilandeshwari the protagonist is not so much a victim of patriarchal domination at home because she dons the mantle of the provider. But her father was a complete master of the household, pampered by his slavish wife, as what he wanted from his wife was 'to look after his needs', while he provided for the family. When Akhila took the mantle of the provider upon herself, she was accepted for the role of the provider. But her empowerment was curbed by patriarchal norms, as she was not allowed to live alone. It is kind of liberating for the woman once she takes the role of the provider, but in Akhila's case her existence as a woman ends there as well her name. No one calls her by name as a sign of respect; either she is *akka* (older sister) or madam and even her mother calls her *ammadi*, not Akhila. If it is a man who is the provider, he enjoys authority, control and freedom not only in financial

matters but also over his dependents. In Akhila's household the role of the bread winner—a patriarchal privilege falls upon her. With her job and her new positions others as well as Akhila forget her womanhood, her desires and aspirations. Akhila sees herself as a 'spinster, government employee, historian', and 'eater of eggs' (90). In her state of mind she sees and defines herself as all the above except that she is a woman. Barring the term 'spinster' all the rest denote a genderless being. Eater of eggs is something next to monstrosity in her traditional Brahmin family though it is a simple rebellious pleasure Akhila decided for herself. Her stiff starched cotton saris seem to metaphorically represent herself as Akhila's life was like her 'starched cotton saris that demand much planning and thinking ahead' (3). Like the cotton saris that are starched in advance Akhila's life too moved in a pre-planned order of daily activities and stiffness perhaps became the characteristic of her sari as well as her own personality as V. Chandra suggests that, 'the starch entered her personality and soul'.[29]

Frederick Engels[30] holds the view that family division of labour and the unrecorded and unpaid home labour are the reasons for suppression of women. According to Engels:

> 'The modern individual family is based on open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman; and modern society is a mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules. Today in the great majority of cases, the man has to be the earner, the bread winner of the family, at least among the propertied classes, and this gives him a dominating position which requires no special legal privileges. In the family he is the bourgeois, the wife represents the proletariat. (Engels 39)

He seems to think that economic independence of the man earns him privileges and power. But the gender disparity in India is such that even a woman who earns for the family is still

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[29]V. Chandra. 'Journey of self-discovery in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé. Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow.* Volume 9, 2009. ISSN. 1930-02940.

[30]Friedrich Engels. *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State.* 1884 Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1993, 1999, 2000.

suppressed and has neither privileges nor power. The family members appear to control her and suppress her under the pretext of providing protection for her even while they themselves depended on her financially.

Akhila was still the proletariat even after attaining financial independence as others still dominated her and she was told that a woman cannot live alone, though she was convinced that she could. Freedom of movement which Akhila experienced everyday through her train travel to work perhaps fuelled her aspiration for freedom that she decided to travel alone to a faraway place. The railways provided an escape route to those who craved for change and freedom with its mobility. It is an escape from the familiar world and its problems to unknown spaces and experiences. This craving for freedom perhaps is a romantic notion like acquiring a pair of wings to fly away and the railway seems to provide those wings. It seems that a new space and strange companions with complete privacy in the ladies coupé enable confessions and revelations which may not be possible anywhere else.

It is said in the text that Akhila always did what is expected of her and she has never climbed into an overnight train (1). Getting into an overnight train perhaps is a step towards freedom of modernity which was not expected of a single woman from a traditional family. Once she has decided to do the unexpected and reached the railway station, her olfactory imagination associates the smells of the platform with a sense of escape. The novel documents the smells of 'baskets of snacks, jasmine wound in the hair, sweat and hair-oil, talcum powder and stale food, moist gunny bags and the raw green-tinged reek of bamboo baskets' (1) in the station that is associates with a feeling of escape or travel.

The recurring expressions like ‘leaving’, ‘running away’, ‘pulling out’, and ‘escaping’ further connect the station with her olfactory memory. Akhila feels that people are escaping to different ‘aspects of richness which she had no notion’ of (1). Perhaps she felt so because she knew that some people travel for material gain of richness and some perhaps for richness of experience as she was about to gain as never before. Akhila feels that railway stations are the junctions of ‘reunions’ and ‘farewells’, encrusted with a ‘smile’, ‘tears’, ‘anger’, ‘irritation’, ‘anxiety’, ‘boredom’ and ‘stillness’ most of which she has never experienced herself.

A train connected different points in space, through its stations and also connected real life and dreams as the novel tells us that Akhila is a forty five year old single woman, ‘sans rose-coloured spectacles, sans husband, children home and family’ (2). Whatever she does not do, she dreams. She dreams of ‘a train that trundles, truckles and troops into a station’; with her seated by a window and the moon hangs at her shoulder and rides with her (2). The fast moving scenery viewed from a train window holds a novel experience at night for Akhila as she observes everything to the minute details. She dreams that she watches from within for a fraction of a second through the window frame of the train about the houses with lights and people huddled inside and railway crossings with still motorists on both sides watching the fast movement of the trains. Akhila thus becomes a dreamer given to speculations and experiences even some kind of disorientation as she dreams being there and not being there (2) at the same time because in her dreams she is inside a train, moving and watching the scenes outside but she is not present in the train.

Akhila first travels through her dreams, a different perception from a different angle, viewing the world from within the train through the window. She is being there and not being there; she

longs to be there but is restricted. It is the presences of events and experiences that she dreams of in their absences. She perhaps longs to experience the intensity of the many feelings expressed in the junctions as she herself is devoid of such emotions. Railway stations or trains were not new to Akhila as she had travelled by the suburban trains for twenty years to and from her work place and hence she was physically being there. That was her travel for work and back home, a routine to which she was bound in her starched cotton saris, her existential being. She plans to break this routine, to board a train and to go somewhere; the land's end, perhaps Kanyakumari in a bright coloured sari symbolically leaving behind her the dull and colourless saris and life to experience the presences in her life, perhaps presences of freedom, colours and emotions.

I think a second class compartment is the place where one would encounter the real culture of a population as there are no restrictions or stiffness of the upper classes. In today's scenario in any long distance express trains we can observe that normally there are around twelve second class compartments and three to five upper class/air conditioned compartments. So a large number of people travel by second class as Akhila too could only manage to get a second class ticket. She bonds well with her co-travellers through mutual sharing of personal stories. She ascertains her decision to go forward and expand her vision of life, as everyone in the ladies coupé related their stories to her and she could interpret their lives and hers accordingly.

Story telling makes travels free from monotony and interesting and many literary creations are based on this idea of travel stories like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.[31] In *Saraswativijayam* when Kuberan travels with a group of people walking together, they share some stories to make the

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[31] Geoffery Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook, 1993. <http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/>

journey easier. Nair uses this narrative technique as her characters are engaged in travel. Each passenger gets a chapter and Akhila's story unwinds in between. Akhila asks them for an opinion if a woman can live alone, and each one in turn provides her life story with intimate details to help her to find her own answer. Nair seems to have selected such characters that each one had an inspiring story for Akhila who was in search of answers to her existential problems. It is perhaps the female bonding that brings out the personal stories with all secrets and details which would never have been uttered in the presence of men. It is also an example of Indian culture where complete strangers share their private matters in a train or in any public place. Here the line between the private and the public is somewhat blurred. Train space is a public space. But within that public space a private space is segregated for women. The story that each one shares is a private one, but becomes public once it is shared.

At the station as always crowded with people and luggage and fast movements amidst shouts and cries, Akhila assesses the passengers from the manner in which they wait for the train to arrive as though she is reading the station. Here I think it is the author as Akhila who observes objects and people who others often take for granted and never see in spite of looking at them. Akhila is perhaps trained by using technology of the train and its culture during her daily train journeys to observe and perceive differently. With her power of observation she could be a writer of novels as Virginia Wolf suggests finding characters in a train interesting enough to write a novel on.

I find it important to note that Akhila in the railway station observes how time is experienced subjectively by people of different ages and sexes. She perhaps has the ability to read the other passengers differently and assess them in a different manner. She observes the unhurried and calm waiting of elderly couples, who she thinks know that the train would arrive sooner or later,

and that three steps would take them to the compartment, which will carry them to their destination. She observes the fidgety humans craning their necks, shuffling their feet or manifesting other signs of dissatisfaction to be young and restless. She notices the activities and sights so common on any railway platform like the 'porters' alongside the 'piled up suitcases', 'vendors with coffee and tea urns', 'packets of biscuits and glossy magazines', etc. (166). These sights are so common that escape the ordinary observation but Akhila keenly foregrounds this commonness staged in the station background, a probable boring experience for others. Overcrowded platforms, with the whole family of uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents seeing off a lone passenger is a common sight in India especially when the trains run late. Akhila attaches the story of the 'burden of other people's dreams' that the lone passenger carries on his shoulders (9). It is a familiar story for her as she herself for a long time was carrying with her the dreams of her family members to be fulfilled during commuting to work and back.

Navtej Sarna comments that, 'It is ironical that Anita Nair should choose a ladies-only train compartment as the setting for a novel that is predominantly preoccupied with issues of women's equality'.[32] But I think that only a railway carriage could bring Nair's six women together for an overnight chance meeting, for they possessed no common ground to congregate elsewhere rather than travelling by chance in the same direction, by the same train, in the same coupé . All of them are going to different destinations in their lives though in the same direction on the train. As soon as they settle in the ladies coupé the exchange of details of their destination and the

[32] Navtej Sarna. 'A Sisterhood of Space'. A Review of *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair.Published in '*The Times Literary Supplement*,' 24/05/2002.

purpose of their travel takes place as it is commonly done in Indian trains as they begin chatting immediately.

Rail technology has perhaps changed the life of women all over the world, as women now can dare to feel their femaleness, their identity, and their strength. I think it is interesting to note that the stories that Akhila's co-passengers share are not based on male fixations but planned and implemented by female experience and perspective by each one of them. Akhilandeshwari's mother, the traditional good Brahmin housewife, would have never dared to travel alone even by a train. All that she ever wanted to be in her life was to be a 'good wife', (14) because she was probably a conservationist of the traditions of patriarchy she believed in. As the wife of a Brahmin man keeping to the culture and tradition of a religion which is patriarchal she agrees with the role of men and women as prescribed by religion. Thus she objected to the idea of women being equal in marriage and the idea of women taking a man's role as she believed that gods had not meant them to do so.

When Akhila's father died, Akhila 'became the man of the family' as she got his job on compassionate grounds. Along with the job she got the responsibility of keeping her family's bodies and souls together (75). Economic situations and survival issues can make one compromise on cultural and religious belief and also one may twist or rephrase the norms according to the situation as Akhila's mother had no objection to Akila taking the job. She had no objection because they had no other means of survival and besides, Akhila was not yet a wife. Akhila's family always told her that a woman can neither live alone nor cope alone. In the narrative, to try to cope alone and live alone, Akhila chose a train to begin with and she 'felt fear propel her' into the train (16). A train is perhaps the easiest available mode of travel as she needs

to go far and this signifies the train as the metaphor of modernity contributing to women's liberation. In addition to the freedom and the route of escape that the train offered, the ladies coupé offered a special atmosphere of privacy with a door to keep away the men and the rest of the world, for six women to share their life's stories which they may not dare to share with everyone, though that seems to be a common practice in India.

Starting a conversation as soon as seated, sharing food and prying into the personal history of all the passengers seems to be a common practice among Indian train travellers compared to the tight lipped travelling elsewhere. This particular observation of Indian culture is expressed by the author as Akhila felt she could share everything about herself with the other travellers in the train as she knew that they may never meet again, in their life time, by chance (20). In Indian trains people open a conversation and continue with their stories irrespective of the listener's interest and pry into the lives of others as Akhila's friend warns her that in the ladies coupé she will be stuck with five women who will all want to know the story of her life (7). Akhila with her desire to talk to any woman about her concerns and worries about a life alone asks her co-passengers about their views on if 'a woman can live alone' (21) as the enquiries on her marital status began. Her question works more as an opening for a discussion or a debate than an enquiry and opens up a floodgate of different stories and experiences.

Train journeys provide leisure for speculation and as all settled down for the night Akhila shuts her eyes and tries to let the rhythm of the train lull her to sleep as she gets into a regressive stage of infancy. She imagines the coupé to be her mother's protective lap cradling, rocking and stroking her brow, urging her to think and to dream and the rhythmic sounds of the train lulling her off to sleep. From the baby in the cradle feeling she moves into the image of 'noisy mating of

the wheel and track' of the train and drifts into an erotic dream. In a new space of freedom and expectations Akhila relives her different stages of life and perhaps dares to dream again and rekindle her desires in a woman's space provided in the train.

Akhila's story unfolds in flashbacks during her journey to Kanyakumari in between the stories of her companions. Akhila broods over her first and only love that was found and lost in a train. The novel tells us that Akhila met Hari everyday seated across from her on the window seat and a romantic episode sprouted in the interior space of the first class compartment of a local train. From the opposite seats they progressed to the adjacent seats and to intimate rendezvous in beaches, parks and to a weekend in the beach resort near Mahabalipuram. Akhila also bade her goodbye to Hari in the train on their way back fearing the social ostracism they might face due to her being much older than him. I think Akhila is not a feminist in this regard to question the patriarchal notion of the desirable age differences. She also seems not strong enough to face the ostracizing society and its queries. But time that brings in the aging process, selfishness of her family, her position as an empowered woman with a stable economic background and the encouragement and support from her friends and other women embolden her to rethink her stand and begin from where she left. By the end of her train journey that began with hesitations and doubts, she emerges determined and sure about the life she will live.

The narrative which is interspersed with the stories of other travellers and Akhila, the author seems to halt in between for Akhila to observe in detail certain common scenes which people take for granted. From the lives of other people and her own introspections, Akhila returns to the reality of the present and the fact that she is travelling in a train through such observations. She perhaps connects her past life—years that passed identical with monotonous activities, like the

inner side of railway stations that look alike, with the 'dripping tap' and 'puddles of water', 'passengers with clenched faces and feverish eyes', 'occupied benches', 'cigarette butts', 'a crumpled coffee cup', 'a chocolate wrapper', 'a banana peel',, etc. as cannot recognize a railway station unless the name is not smudged or erased. She remembers her 'starched and ironed' life with the same activities repeated over and again day after day like the commonalties of station after station. Railways in general have influenced the food habits of people as at every station, cuisine with the local flavour is available and local varieties of food are served to the passengers who are ready to experiment. This is one aspect that is opposed to the commonness of the railway stations and Prabha Devi, one of the ladies coupé passengers who is aware of this fact, suggests that while going to a new place, one should try the local flavour (167).

Even though all the six women are South Indians, Akhila is Tamil and so are Margaret and Marikolanthu. Sheela and Janaki are Malayalees and Prabha Devi, most probably a Kannadiga and somehow they all seem to belong to different regions within South India. All of them seem to belong to middle class, upper caste families except for Marikolantu who the others think is different because probably her occupation as a maidservant is evident from her appearance. Janaki, the oldest among them is represented by the images of "angel" and "monster", created by male authors as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (596) point out. Janaki's son says that she was a woman who was taken care of like a princess, and spoilt by everyone (38). Yet she was like 'the angel in the house,'[33] because in her angelic disposition, Janaki would not express her feelings of resentment or aggression to anyone. This is seen when the novel says that as a young bride, she neither expressed her repulsion for her husband's touch, nor the pain which she could grind

[33]Coventry Patmore. *The Angel in the House*. London: George Bell and Son. 1885. It is a verse sequence praising and narrating the courtship and marriage of Honoria as quoted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

'when it came, between her teeth, and swallow it down with the cry that threw itself up her throat' (26). When her daughter-in-law would get on her nerves she 'deflected her antagonism between them with composure' (33). Sometimes she wanted to slap her husband's face till his 'pride crumbled in his eyes and scattered in the air' (34), but she neither slapped him nor showed him her frustration. Thus she hid some of the monster traits with composure under the facade of her angelic self, hidden from the world. But inside the ladies coupé, for Akhila's benefit as well as to prove her opinion she exposes both the angel as well as the monster in her. Thus perhaps she has managed to kill both her angelic and monstrous self to be her real self with a newly formed relationship with her husband—'friendly love', as she has reached a 'certain age'.

After forty years of marriage to Prabhakar, Janaki feels that she has reached a 'certain age' where nothing matters. After a period of initial feelings of revulsion for her husband, a slow rhythmical life of love and friendship was formed along with parenthood, and finally some day she reached that 'certain age' though she cannot pinpoint when. All her suppressed feelings and resentments pour out without any inhibition or provocation in the confined space of ladies coupé. Janaki is finally transformed to start a new life certainly with her husband and her message for Akhila is that it is better to have a man in her life. Janaki's story perhaps influences Akhila to such an extent that she decides finally to search for Hari.

If Janaki realized that she could come to terms with her real self, killing both the 'angel' and the 'monster' at the age of fifty eight, Sheela, the youngest traveller in the coupé, is caught between the adult world of power equations and egos of the elders. She is confused as her father who encouraged her to be witty and was proud of her sense of humour when she was a small girl, thought of the same as 'questioning his authority' when she was grown up a little later. She

ironically advises all the fathers to teach their daughter to swallow her words, make her speak nice and pleasant innocuous things, and to kill her spirit and tame her tongue (70) so that the girl can be saved from confusion. I think by voicing Sheela's reaction Nair tries to challenge the patriarchy that deprive women their right of expression, language and 'pen' as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that when 'a woman is denied the autonomy—the subjectivity—that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture (whose emblem might well be the pen) but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness …' (598). Sheela understands this denial as well as she understands her grandmother who still held on to her matriarchal world in spite of the changes and transformation of modernity that her children had undergone.

Grandma's matriarchal advice to Sheela was that, 'The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy' (68). If Sheela is denied of her words, her arguments and her 'pen', she expresses her subjectivity by adorning her grandmother in her death bed as she thought her grandma would have liked to be, and received disapproval from her parents. Perhaps with her example she encourages Akhila to voice her concerns and stand firm in her convictions. While grooming her grandmother, she was convinced that her grandmother would approve of her action as the old lady always wanted to be well groomed. Perhaps this is another guideline for Akhila to forgo her stiffness of spinsterhood, to groom herself and celebrate her womanhood. However restricted Sheela was in her home, she bares every concern of hers in the ladies coupé and is convinced of rightness of her stance. She thinks that her understanding of her *Ammumma* (grandmother) would lead her to her liberation as she enters adulthood.

Unlike Sheela whose grandmother advised her to please herself, in the text, Margaret and Prabha Devi were always advised and trained to please others especially the men in their lives. Margaret Shanti's story tells Akhila how she dealt with her narcissistic self-righteous husband Ebenezer Paulraj, the principal of a school, who had been cruel to young children. Margaret's story of her courtship, marriage and disillusionment of what she thought of her husband, and the way she succeeded in breaking him slowly perhaps could never have been shared with anyone, in a society where child widows are condemned to life of penance as discussed in the section dealing with *Water*. But for Akhila's sake she narrates her whole story in the ladies coupe to prove that 'a woman doesn't really need a man' and that it is a 'myth that men have tried to twist into reality' (95). Margaret's story is somewhat a refutation of Janaki's story and conclusion that it is better to have a man in a woman's life as the narrative style takes a debating turn.

Another character that the novel depicts is Prabha Devi. Prabha Devi was the fifth child of her parents after four boys, whom her father considered as born to ruin his business plans. This is a typical patriarchal notion that the family business can prosper only through sons. His disapproval and rejection of the arrival of a girl child even after four boys is akin to Mr. Dombey in Dickens's *Dombey and Son.* Mr. Dombey had considered his daughter to be a piece of base coin that could not be invested; he ignored her and resented her survival after the death of his son. Prabha Devi a rich and submissive wife lived unsure of her role in life, her sexuality, her desirability, etc. until she realised that she had forgotten her own voice. She had ceased to exist as a person. She existed in a state of non-being, existentially alienated from her real self. Finally, learning to swim all by herself was a metaphorical achievement and fulfilment for her. The achievement of ability to float in the water made her feel that her body does not matter, a weightless non being and yet a being at the same time, reconciliation with her physical existence

and her alienated self. All women's support within the railway space gives her enough courage to narrate her 'whole' story to Akhila.

The last of the passengers whom everyone ignored so far thinking that she was not their kind, perhaps because her poverty and sufferings were evident in her appearance, was Marikolanthu, a servant girl. Though they were all educated upper class women with great experience, they seem to have nurtured class discrimination in society. Marikolanthu had listened to all and tells Akhila that all of them including Akhila had a sheltered life and were making a fuss about little things. She was the one who had experienced the cruelty of the world and real tragedy in life (209). Of all the six women Marikolanthu's story is the most tragic because she was subjected to rape by a member of her employer's family and she had become a mother who hated her child born of rape. Later she was abandoned by her brothers as well as her employer. Her story is the last and the culmination of all the stories. The previous stories were the stories of upper class women and all of them had certain common aspects like a protected life and most of their problems were within the family or in their own inner world of the self. But Marikolanthu's story is a story of extreme poverty combined with exploitation by the upper class including rape. Rejected by her former employer and her own family, she has found peace in the end by learning to love her son and starting her life afresh with a new job in a new place.

Train journeys thus provide one with a temporary arrangement of kinship and sharing and a platform for understanding and advising which has a certain and definite ending that is the destination station, where one witnesses a lot of farewells, promises to keep in touch and updates, which are forgotten as soon as one alights from the train. Akhila's temporary friends left her one by one with last minute bits of advice, farewells and promises to meet again, when they

reached their different destinations (207). For that short duration, they were all equals without any class or caste differences, bonded together with the slender thread of camaraderie of being co-passengers which breaks as soon as one alight at the destination. The narrative develops to its end as one by one the characters leave the train, leaving Akhila with enough to contemplate on and decide for herself. What Bishwanath Ghosh says about trains as great levellers and the symbols of national integration seems true:

> India can have no better symbol for national integration than the railways. The railway reservation form doesn't ask you anything beyond your name, age, gender and address. In trains people of two castes who would otherwise not likely to be seen in each other's company, cohabit without fuss for hours, even a couple of days. A millionaire who travels in a first class air-conditioned compartment to maintain his exclusivity is forced to share the makeshift bedroom with a much poorer countryman who happens to be travelling on office expense. In the air-conditioned coupé, they are equals: the rich man putting up with the snoring of the poor. (2)

Akhila's coupé also had a mixed population of different ages, religious faiths and classes. Akhila could get along well with all gaining inspiration from all. During the journey she is the only one who makes an effort to communicate with Marikolanthu and when others leave the train she listens to her story.

It can be observed in the text that Akhila's olfactory sensation and imagination perhaps developed as a regular train commuter as mentioned earlier, let her know 'every station, every landmark, every level crossing, and every ditch they ran alongside. Even before the train sped through Korattur, she would take a deep breath and screw up her face to prevent the stench from the milk pasteurizing factory from riding up her nostrils' (138). I think that one has to just switch over to the London suburbs after a few years gap to see Rachel, in Paula Hawkins's *Girl on the Train* (2015), another Akhila perhaps following the same rhythmic routine. I chose to include a modern railway novel from Britain in my study as I found it important to observe the way people

think about trains after nearly two centuries of its inception and in spite of the latest technological inventions of aeroplanes and fast motor cars in the post modern world. It seems that still the punctuality instilled by the trains works, and Rachel, the leading character, even if she is an alcoholic and unemployed does not miss her trains. Unlike Akhila, who went to fulfil the demands of a job, because her family had to survive, Rachael rides on trains to keep up an impression of her being in a job, as punctually as she took the morning and evening trains. She herself agrees saying, 'in the morning, I take the 8.04 and in the evening, I come back on the 17.56. That's my train. It's the one I take. That's the way it is' (159). She behaved like any other commuter though the only thing she did was drinking alcohol while commuting and during her stops.

Rachel observed everything through the window in great detail as there were no job worries to preoccupy her thoughts and different stories form in her imagination, entangled in the railway track, and families stationed in the houses by the track where a red signal halts the trains regularly. Most of the stories she imagines about the people whom she watches are not the same as that develops in the narrative. However she had a set of eyes that observed things differently from that of an average London commuter. It seems as if she got voyeuristic pleasure as she got familiar with each and every person in the houses across the railway, or railway tracks without their knowledge of being observed. Some of her observations helped in unravelling details of a murder in the end. Just as the people travelling in the train provide characters for Woolf, people outside, who are observed from the windows of the train, too; seem to be characters good enough for a novel.

Megan, one of the three women characters in *Girl on the Train* has an auditory memory just as Akhila had her olfactory memory. She can hear the train coming and its rhythm and movements she has learnt by heart as 'it picks up speed, as it accelerates out of Northcote station and then, after rattling round the bend, it starts to slow down, from a rattle to a rumble, and then sometimes a screech of brakes as it stops at the signal a couple of hundred yards from the house (25). She heard the trains as others saw the trains. Her auditory memory is such that she does not even watch the trains go past, but just listens and experiences a visit to any place just sitting with her eyes closed. Sound of the trains can take her anywhere she wants as she says:

> I could be in the south of Spain, at the beach; I could be in Italy, the Cinque Terre, all those pretty coloured houses and the trains ferrying the tourists back and forth. I could be back in Holkham with the screech of gulls in my ears and salt on my tongue and a ghost train passing on the rusted track half a mile away. (25)

Thus the sound of the trains put her in travel mode, and in her imagination she almost experienced the places as though she really visited them. Such was Megan's affinity with the technology of mobility even in the jet age.

Ever since the advent of the railways people observed it with different reactions. Some simply loved it, some hated it and some had mixed feelings and these reactions are always reflected in its representations. Charles Dickens (1866) had mixed reactions as he approved the benefits of the technology and at the same time was worried about the other factors like accidents and devastation of nature. Tolstoy (1877) had a negative approach towards the railways as through his character Levin he showed his disapproval of railroad, industrialization and all the modern technology (83). It appears that even today the situation is more or less the same as in the novel *The Girl on the Train*, among the three female protagonists, two of them Rachel and Megan

loved the railway and trains, but Anna hated it. Rachel selected the house for the sake of her love for trains as she declares:

> I loved that house. I was the one who insisted we buy it, despite its location. I like being down there on the tracks, I liked watching the trains go by, I enjoyed the sound of them, not the scream of the intercity express but the old-fashioned trundling of ancient rolling stock. (42)

Rachel loved trains so much that she used to dream of 'taking romantic train journeys (45). But for Anna, trains gave her the feeling that she was observed at all times due to the closeness of the tracks and the moving trains which often halted near the house. She always felt the paranoia, a feeling of being watched. This feeling may either be a postmodern experience of being over watched, or perhaps the schizophrenic paranoia of 'watching eyes', where there are none. The trains had been there since years, a part of human life for a long while, but it still evokes strong reactions in people which find such symbolic representations in narratives.

Trains as Metaphor in *Red Tin Roof* and Other Railway Novels:

Nirmal Verma, one of the major proponents of *Nayi Kahani* (new story), a Hindi literary movement, was a modernist whose novel *The Red Tin Roof* (written in Hindi as *Lal Teen Ki Chhat* in 1974 and translated by Kuldeep Singh in 1997) tells the story of a young girl Kaya growing up on the mysterious mountains of Shimla. Images of trains winding through the hilly tracks and crashing out from the tunnel like a dragon spouting smoke (39) add to the mystery of the mountains. *Red Tin Roof* is the coming of age story of Kaya who moves her unsteady steps from her lonely childhood to puberty and adolescence, a difficult and turbulent journey. Most of the story is presented through her childhood observations which lend magic to everything from hills to trees, wind, sounds and human behavior and the mysterious presence of a railway and the trains adding to the mysteries of the mountains. Kaya and her brother Chhote live their lonely

days and nights in a mysterious and magical space and time of their childhood, as children are usually drawn to magic and mystery. They consider their cousin Lama who is probably a schizophrenic, as mysterious. They search for her presence and think that they experience her even during her absence. They imagine Lam's presence on the mountains, at the railway tracks and in the banging of the door at nights, of the room in which she used to stay. The mountain trains add to the mystery as they make strange noises and echoes in the valley, crash out of the tunnel and make many appearances and disappearances in the winding tracks while ascending and descending the mountains. Thus it is a magical space and time that the children experience in the text, as Kaya's thoughts and reflections are weird at times as it is narrated in the beginning:

> Kaya opened her eyes, then shut them again. Time dragged by. Her fingers clenched a corner of her quilt. She lay rigid in her bed, possessed by a sinister thought that her head had moved round to her feet, towards the door. This of course was preposterous: head and feet couldn't possibly be together in one place. (5)

This perhaps is a dream of Kaya or her imagination as her thoughts and dreams are entwined in mysteries. According to Sigmund Freud: 'Every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life (35). Kaya's experience during the waking hours on the mountains and by the railway line perhaps works like a Freudian stimulus in producing her dream. The way her head moves slowly towards her feet in the dream perhaps has the memory of a train on a winding track which might appear as the engine trying to approach the tail end though it does not happen as Kaya's head does not meet her legs.

Kaya's childhood is burdened with the memory of blood and death along a 'gleaming railway line' and over the 'dank darkness of the tunnel through which the track runs' (25). Images of

iron, blood, and death play strange patterns in her life as she witnesses the death of her dog Ginny crushed on the iron rail by the train, and Ginny's blood on the rail.

Everything appears hazy and dreamy like a child's curious painting with a multitude of colours emerging from the child's imagination. These may include the smallest of movements in nature, a person like Lama suffering from some mental disorder or Mrs. Joshua's senility. The mysterious dark tunnel and the emerging train perhaps signify the still birth that Kaya observed hiding in a cold and dark night. To me the narrative at times appears to present a feeling of helpless confusion of a blurred vision of mountains, colours, shapes, atmosphere and behaviour of people, as everything move in slow motion in a dreary winter evening or a lazy summer day. Yet the story emerges without any haste in the narrative style of slow motion just as the train emerges out of the tunnel first only by the sounds of light 'distant rumble' followed by louder sound like that of a huge boulder and then the actual train approaching unhurriedly (37) as the children wait with bated breath. The mysterious dark tunnel which makes Lama and Kaya wait with anxiety and expectation as often mentioned in the text perhaps represent the Freudian mixture of adolescent fear and anxiety:

> The tendency towards fending off what is sexual is further intensified by the fact that in young unmarried women sensual excitation has an admixture of anxiety, of fear of what is coming, what is unknown and half-suspected. (245)

The dark tunnel perhaps symbolises Kaya's anxiety and fear of the slow speed of her physical growth and maturation, and Lama's fear of an impending marriage. A railway system is cleverly woven through the narrative as well as in the psyche of the children. It is done through the constant mention of the trains, the railway tracks and the tunnel and the childhood games of Chhote in which movements of trains figure in. The space around the railway tunnel and the tracks seem to be the favourite spots of Kaya and Lama. Perhaps this is the famous Barog tunnel

which claimed the life of a European engineer whose skills failed him in constructing it. Lama perhaps is aware of the legend which draws her to the tunnel and images of death. The image of a killer train emerges as Ginny the dog is killed by the train (38) though Kaya is not sure if it was an accident or Lama lured or tricked the puppy towards the train.

Continuity of the railway tracks seems to metaphorically represent continuity of life and flow of life for Kaya. After witnessing the still birth of a sibling, in her silent grief Kaya imagines walking along the railway track where Ginny the dog lay breathing once immediately before her death. Kaya in her imagination feels that as long as she keeps on walking along the tracks, Ginny would be safe and the still born would breathe even as the tracks shudder under the train (63). With her father always away and a mother who is an invalid the tracks seem to be the only things of stability and the trains that are punctually in time is something that moves with some speed in a painfully slow life on the mountain.

Chotte's childhood memories are all associated with the trains in the absence of any other modern gadgets as the narrator says that he had memories that 'chugged out like a toy train on its tracks carrying him past wayside stations which more or less resembled one another, year after year, from one season to the next' (10). When he is reminded of his father his train gets 'pulled in at the summer station' and it stopped only at Summer Stations as his father visited usually only during summer time. Chhote's life too seems to be moving parallel to this memory with its repetitions of seasons and slow motion of time with the only change of his father's visit during summers.

Mental illness and trains seem to have some connection in the narratives. For example, Dostoevsky's Myshkin in *The Idiot* is introduced during a train journey and Zola's maniac

Jacques Lantier is an engine driver with the railways. Lama loved to be near the railway line and behaved strangely whenever the trains passed. Lama seems to have somehow connected and attached herself to the railway system and Kaya feels that Lama is still over there, by the railway track even after she has left the place (24). Lama with her mental instabilities perhaps contemplated suicide by the railway lines or had a desire to put Kaya on the lines as she did with Ginny. Perhaps she lured Ginny with endearing calls to the railway line and pushed her under the wheels to watch Ginny release her soul. Unlike Kaya, Lama was in the least affected by the death, as she was obsessed with the notion of death, in her words, a 'release' (37).

Kaya herself seems to have some kind of mental imbalance being developed as she could see people not present and hear sounds that do not exist. She had a lonely life on the mysterious mountains in a creaky old house. In a mystical atmosphere with superstitions and perceived childhood notions of magic, the only rational space in her life seems to be that of the railways. That is why perhaps she finds herself spending most of her time by the railway tracks. She also undergoes a symbolic transformation by the passing train. It was by the railway line Kaya wanted to redeem herself from sin, fear, cowardice and selfishness in the presence of God. It was when the train loomed out of the tunnel and approached Kaya that she had her transformation, a feeling of relief, cleansing and freedom to move ahead. It was a transition from an elongated childhood to puberty and adolescence for which Kaya had been waiting and praying for long. Kaya so long clung to her childhood, her memories, the red tin roofed house and the mountains. It was the end of a lonely and anxious childhood which she could leave behind in her life's journey ahead. Now she is ready to begin her journey and unlike Mrs. Joshua, Kaya can board a train. Kaya while attending to Mrs. Joshua during her last days developed the image of a

helpless and defeated passenger who could not travel anymore as she connects everything to an image of train and the railway:

> I thought of a hapless passenger who fails to board a moving train despite a chase and helping hands urging her on. Mrs. Joshua was that defeated passenger, receding, slipping into the darkness as the train pulled out, even as I strained to hold on to her. (155)

As Mrs. Joshua came to the end of her life's journey Kaya is ready to begin her own journey to her future.

Nirmal Verma treats time and space in the novel at his will as the speed of the narrative is at a standstill sometimes, or too slow to trace, like the endless silent waiting in the beginning of the narrative, for Kaya to emerge and embark on her journey to the boarding school. It is like the variations of pace of Kaya's growing up. Kaya vents her impatience and bewilderment at the slowness of her biological clock, in attaining adolescence in tune with the slowness of nature, and life during winter as well as in summer among the hills and forests through outbursts of her excess feelings.

> She had a strange overwhelming feeling of time flowing on. No one in the house—not Beeru at his piano, not Chacha in the library, not the woman with the nose-ring in the quarters—seemed aware that everything inside one goes still, time begins to flow: not the time of clocks; which had no significance for Kaya—but the other kind which rolled out like a ball of wool at each tug of a pair of knitting needles. (125)

She is aware of the changes that she might undergo from the enquiries of her mother and her uncle's mistress, and she had submitted her body to the goddess *kali* in anticipation of what was to come. She had her own notions about the passage of time developed through her life on the hills, which she thinks is different from other people's perception.

Time appears not to move in a linear fashion, but in fragments of short and long blurred memory, infused with deep feelings in which nature and atmosphere seem to contribute and decide its motion. It is exactly like the movement of a train which is linear is seen in fragments as it circles the mountains. The narrator comments on perception of time by Kaya and Chhote. "Kaya could earmark time into portions of days and months, and so console herself" of a possible end to her loneliness and absence. But for Chhote time was "invisible, infinite, endless; to him every event partook of eternity, so that whoever left seemed to be going away for all time. A storm broke within Chhote" (77) as parting of a person from an already lonely life was all the more painful.

Kaya perhaps could understand duration, a particular duration at school and an earmarked or saved time of holidays to spend at home. It is the childhood recollections in a 'stream of consciousness'[34] in the text which has neither linear nor cyclic regularity as unpredictable thoughts occupy the minds of the children at any given point of time. For Kaya time and space have a single objective meaning or a possibility of interchange as she thinks that 'a month at Chachaji's house would, she suspected, stretch out like a desert' (77). It is perhaps the child's unique perception of time and space or it could be the author's notion of time and space as an indivisible entity as spacetime as mentioned in the first chapter.

In most of the railway novels trains are used symbolically and metaphorically. In Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, the presence of the train is symbolic in times of peace as well as of strife. During peace time trains organize the daily life of the villagers functioning as its alarm clock. It is the guardian of the lively activities of the people, it represents life, and its presence

[34]A narrative technique of mimetic of speeding awareness or expressing thoughts as they occur

and sounds are merry. After the partition when the trains turn to be ghost trains there is no light and no sounds, but only gloomy silence. Singh has anthropomorphized trains in *Train to Pakistan*. He picturizes the train as a hybrid between man and machine with 'the legs dangling down the sides from the roofs' (34) 'the heads and arms jammed in the windows' or the train having a 'solid crust of human beings on the roof'(90), and also the representation of its communal identity according to the crowd that it carried along. Singh narrates the activities of the trains often as he would narrate human activities.

> All trains coming from Delhi stopped and changed their drivers and guards before moving on to Pakistan. Those coming from Pakistan ran through with their engines screaming with release and relief. (81-82)

It was the trains that acted upon the needs of change of man power according to the communal route that it was to follow and heaves a sigh of relief on safe completion of a trip.

The trains that carry the dead and the dead alone is given the identity of ghost trains that run unscheduled and neither carrying human beings nor controlled by human beings. Singh's ghost trains get more of a human touch in Krishan Chander's short story 'Peshwar Express'[35] as the train dreams of a time of peace and peacetime activities. It aches for peace 'rather than witness bloodshed and be burdened with dead bodies, I want to carry grain to the famine-stricken areas. I want to visit coal mines, steel mills and fertilizer plants. And transport in my compartments happy and carefree peasants' (80). The train thinks like a peace loving human being. The image of train as a fire spitting monster with bright red eyes of lights at night and shrill whistles that has monstrously caused death is found in many narratives like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son, etc*. and in Anand Mahadevan's *The Strike.* Images of trains

[35]Krishan Chander. 'Peshawar Express'. *In Orphans of the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India*. edit. Saros Cowasjee. New Delhi: UBS Publishers.1995, 79-88.

representing speed, death, sensation, crime, etc. may be found in plenty in railway novels all over the world.

Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to trace a few stories of the railways as found in the railway novels concerned with its temporality and spatiality, fixing the role of the railways in colonial and post colonial India. The images it created, the lives that it changed and the way in which the railway itself is represented, etc. are discussed in some detail. Marian Aguiar suggests that the railway carriages function as a moving space, a 'microcosm of society, comprised of people of distinct faiths, different genders, various castes, and diverse classes' (104). This is found in almost all the railway novels discussed like *Ladies Coupé, The Strike, Bhowani Junction,* etc. Most of the railway novels provide such a window through which the passenger gets a quick vision of the nation outside (like Akhila, Hari and Rachel who observe through the train window) and the experience of an imagined nation inside. Kushwant Singh, Anita Nair, Anand Mahadevan, etc. have sought to articulate this modern subjectivity in the railway compartment.