Affects and Care Labor in *Ladies Coupe*

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Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* (2001) is about six women who meet in an express train's compartment in southern India. One of these women, Akhila, is the narrator of the novel, while we hear the voices of the other women only when they narrate their stories in first person to Akhila. The way the women tell these stories one by one is in the spirit of empowering Akhila, who is portrayed as a woman bound within heteronormative ideas of coupledom and gender-based expectations of care labor within patriarchal families. The women also encourage her, by example, to question the accepted ethical model of feminist practice within an already unethical patriarchal structure of society.

gender caste care labor age affects resistance

1. Introduction

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* (2001) is a novel about six women, Akhila, Janaki, Sheela, Margaret, Prabha Devi, and Marikolanthu, who meet in an express train's compartment in southern India. One of these women, Akhila, is the narrator of the novel, while we hear the voices of the other women only when they narrate their stories in first person to Akhila. The way the women tell these stories one by one is in the spirit of empowering Akhila, who is portrayed as a woman bound within heteronormative ideas of coupledom and gender-based expectations of care labor within patriarchal families. This collective storytelling can be seen as a caregiving act that enables feminist resistance through the forging of friendships (Kanagasabai and Phadke 2023, p. 3). This kind of friendship "allows for surprising connections and the possibility of contesting power hierarchies" (Kanagasabai and Phadke 2023, p. 2). As Phadke and Kanagasabai argue, in this way, friendship is not just necessary within gender activism but is itself a form of feminist activism in the sense that it challenges the heteropatriarchal ordering of relationships1 by simply existing. The women, thus, transform the train's compartment into a space for feminist resistance merely through the formation of this bond by sharing personal stories. They also encourage Akhila, by example, to question the accepted ethical model of feminist practice within an already unethical patriarchal structure of society. This encouragement happens, I argue, as they recount instances of the unethical care practices by which they affectively resist different forms of violence they face within the upper caste, patriarchal, heteronormative family structure. I call these care practices unethical because the women, while relating their stories, themselves judge their course of action as immoral but also see it as appropriate. The forms of violence they face under patriarchy are intersectional based on overlapping identities of caste, age, and gender.

The women perform a kind of care labor for Akhila that is feminist in its intentions as the manner of storytelling and the contents of the stories reveal. In their stories, they also perform care duties but affectively resist the patriarchal

expectations embedded in these care duties, mostly through what might be considered unethical means. However, the assumptions around what is ethical or unethical within feminist resistance or resistance from any oppressed individual or group have been challenged by feminist scholars. Theoretically, I will frame my analysis of the text within the intersection of care studies, gender theory, and affect theory. Although other scholars on the novel have shed light on its feminist politics of self-discovery (Jitendra 2017), the importance of travel through which the novel attacks gender-based violence (Ambreen 2021), and the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, there has not been any scholarship on the novel's insight into the politics of care labor.

The field of Care Studies sees care in its various forms of occurrence—as relational, as labor, as a coercive system, and as caring for the self and one's own versus caring for a living. In the context of Anita Nair's novel, I am particularly interested in care as labor that is used by women to resist caste-based and age-based gendered oppressions. Since care signifies both the "mental disposition of concern" (Tronto 1998, p. 16) and "actual practices we engage in as a result of this concern" (Tronto 1998, p. 16), the question of the ethical implementation of care practices comes up. The women in Nair's novel trouble the idea of ethics in care practices by using care to harm their oppressors. Western colonizers traditionally used care discourses ideologically to justify their domination over native populations. The colonizing nations framed their concerns about civilizing and educating the 'primitive' colonized populations within a discourse of care (Narayan 1995, pp. 133–34). Translating this into a different context, one could think of the caregiver as gaining access to power and privilege through such 'paternalistic caring' (Narayan 1995, p. 135) practices, which are self-serving and malignant. I argue that the novel turns this idea of care with a malignant purpose into an empowering tool when used by the oppressed. This further complicates the notion of ethics within not just care but also feminist resistance.

The fact that care is never an idealized interaction that some care relations in media are represented as (like mother and child or doctor and patient) but is fraught with conflict, power struggles, and emotional labor (Tronto 1998, p. 17) makes the question of ethics in care practice even more important. A universalistic determination of what is ethical when care labor is used in feminist protest is problematic because just like between care and ethics, the relationship between feminist resistance and ethics is also not simplistic. Although the women in Nair's novel engage in individual methods of hitting back at their oppressors, which they acknowledge as not always ethically commendable (for instance, Marikolanthu sells her child and Ammumma body-shames her granddaughter), disruption of the status quo and not an allegiance to a universalized idea of ethics is the point of resistance in the kind of feminist resistance that the novel represents. It is more important to the women in Nair's novel to resist the structure of patriarchy based on caste or age that they face than to be worried about the higher moral consequences of their care practices. Selma Sevenhuijsen calls out the use of a "universalistic justice perspective" (Sevenhuijsen 1991, p. 180) when it comes to determining what is ethical in feminist practice. She suggests that in place of the "universalistic justice perspective", the understanding of ethics in the care domain suits feminist practice better because it keeps in mind the difference within the context of each woman. Sevenhuijsen writes "Within the care perspective, the moral self is by definition linked with others through an interactive pattern of actions, perceptions and interpretations" in which even moral dilemmas "are no longer primarily conflicts between discrete, coherent persons and their rights, but they are also conflicts about moral dilemmas or inner conflicts within persons (Sevenhuijsen 1991, p. 180)". The conception of the ethical is conducted by the moral self,

according to her, and when interpersonal relationships and inner conflicts are considered along with the social or political situation of the woman, a universally agreed upon idea of the ethical is hard to formulate. This makes the feminist ethics of resistance very dynamic. Considering Nair's novel, the contexts that inform the women's 'unethical' protest methods are therefore important as they encourage one to question the foundation of ethical feminist practice within relationships that women form based on care, like a homemaker's relationship with her family. In this sense, the article expands on the understanding of ethics within care practices and feminist practices in relation to the use of care labor for feminist resistance.

In South Asian academic discourse within the humanities and social sciences, care is a topic that is studied not only as it operates within the home but also transnationally. Feminist scholars like Uma Narayan (1995), Kumkum Sangari (2020), Kavita Panjabi (2020), Banerjee and Castillo (2020), and Acharya and Christopher (2022), among others, have worked extensively on the political possibilities of care as labor for social reproduction or as care relationships within the colonial context, the transnational labor market (including commercial surrogacy and mail-order brides), the domestic space of the family home, and recently in COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 South Asia. Anita Ghai (2019) has worked on gender, care, and disability, stressing the neglect that mothers of disabled children suffer since the lion's share of care work falls on women within South Asian families. Globally, there is feminist activism for the universalization of care in the form of healthcare and childcare. Virginia Held writes that feminists have pushed for a new model of morality to be followed within international law-making and global relations—instead of the ethics of justice, the ethics of care (Held 2004, p. 142). However, as Held argues, the ethics of care hardly agree with feminist ethics because of the unequal distribution of care labor within society based on gender. At the same time, an ethic of care that does not adhere to feminist standards is hardly ethical, as per Held (Held 2004, p. 146). The universalization of care tries to bridge this gap between care ethics as it stands in society and feminist ethics. It advocates for care to be seen as an ethical framework for justice and as a political as well as a personal ethic, with the state being equally responsible for the best methods of childcare or elder care instead of being reliant on the labor of women alone (Held 2004, pp. 148–49). The reliance on women and marginalized communities to perform this labor solely amounts to discrimination and negligence towards the caregivers. The women in Nair's novel inhabit such positions of discrimination as caregivers. The novel portrays their resistance against gender-based expectations of care labor within the household as personal stories of triumph. However, through their self-proclaimed unethical nature and their feminist focus on female bonding, these stories of resistance politically challenge the patriarchal ethics of care.

Within South Asian families, the idea of "gendered familialism" (Hill et al. 2017, p. 12) is prevalent, which makes care labor a solely feminine activity: "Gendered familialism reflects the belief that care is primarily a private familial (and female) responsibility, based on two assumptions: that families are altruistic and that care work is a natural function of women and girls." (Hill et al. 2017, p. 12). In this sense, women within households are expected to perform care labor in order to be altruistic towards other family members. Post-neoliberalism in India in the 1990s, this model of caregiving shifted a little in the sense that women were expected to be engaged in paid work, at least in the urban areas, but also be equally adept at managing household chores (Bhalla 2008, p. 71). So, domestic care workers, who are women mostly from lower caste and class communities, were increasingly being employed to fill in for the women engaged in jobs outside the home. Sara Dickey writes that "domestic workers helped these

[upper and middle class] women support their families' class standing by maintaining clean and ordered homes and by enabling them to pursue other status-producing activities or their own employment." (Dickey 2000, p. 462). Due to domestic workers taking care of the household chores and processes of social reproduction, upper caste women could go outside and do jobs that enhanced their social standing, unlike the work at home. Thus, a new status quo was created, keeping the outside masculine labor/inside feminine labor binary intact through a reordering of patriarchy. Domestic care labor, an important part of social reproduction, is "often sustained by normative and regulatory marriage, the control of sexuality, procreation, domestic services, and resources in familial regimes" (Sangari 2020, p. 49), which are all embedded in caste violence and ageist conventions. As I argue, the gender-based distribution of care labor within the families represented in *Ladies Coupé* also intersects with caste and age.

Affect plays a significant role in feminist resistance through care labor in *Ladies Coupé*. The bulk of the labor of social reproduction relies on emotional or affective labor. Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labor as that which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others–[…] the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place" (Hochschild 1983, p. 7). One is supposed to keep their real emotions rising out of the situation suppressed, particularly if these are negative emotions, and instead labor to display positive emotions to induce satisfaction and security in the care-receiver. This could be as simple as putting on a smile on one's face while serving food to the members of the family after an already exhausting day in the kitchen, thus combining both physical care labor as well as its affective counterpart. In *Ladies Coupé*, Akhila relays that her mother had a strict prototype for what a good homemaker should be like in addition to the fact that she was suspicious of women who did not model themselves as a future homemaker. This prototype involved, as Hochschild puts it, inducing and suppressing emotions to foster a household that has little to no situations of conflict. For instance, she cooked with a slavish devotion to her husband: "Feast, feast, my husband, my lord and master. On my flesh, my soul, my kathrika-bhajis (Nair 2001, p. 47)", in which there is a suggestion of a willingness to self-immolate to sustain the husband and the household, equating one's own flesh and soul with the food cooked. This is the model of emotional labor that Hochschild talks about, in which the cost of performing emotional care labor would mean a kind of self-effacement—a situation where the care laborer would become "estranged or alienated from an aspect of the self, either the body or the margins of the soul, that is used to do the work" (Hochschild 1983, p. 7). This idea of the self-effacing homemaker is subverted by many female characters in the novel in a way that the very idea of care as nurturing is questioned. The women reclaim the requirement of a fragile self to ensure its productive expenditure by spending this self towards a disruptive end.

In the study of South Asian feminist resistance, the mobilization of emotions is an oft-discussed topic. While emotions are involved at every level of state politics, right from "party activists expressing their joy after an electoral victory" by dancing on the streets to the "expression of anger and despair" after the death of a political leader, often going as far as suicide in South India (Blom and Lama-Rewal 2020, p. 6), political protests have also been based primarily on affective mobilization. This kind of protest could be even through voting, which deaths (assassinations, to be specific) of political leaders like Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Indira Gandhi in India brought about, when "many voters used the electoral channel to express their grief" (Blom and Lama-Rewal 2020, p. 6). The use of care

labor in political protests has also come up in recent years, like the cooking and sharing of food in the anti-CAA and NRC protests in Shaheen Bagh. The Muslim women protestors there, along with the men, used this care act as a "non-violent affective strategy" by appearing to "cohere to the oppressive structure of mandatory care work" that is imposed on women and instead using it to mobilize against authoritarianism (Mitra 2023, p. 7). As discussed earlier, Nithila Kanagasabai and Shilpa Phadke have also talked about care within friendships in South Asian feminist activism, both on the street and online (Kanagasabai and Phadke 2023, p. 2), which has helped thoughts and strategies for resistance to evolve (Kanagasabai and Phadke 2023, p. 4). Focusing on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, this article discusses the affective feminist resistance through care labor by four female characters—Akhila, Janaki, Marikolanthu, and Ammumma/Sheila's grandmother. As the latter three share their stories with Akhila, the primary narrator of the novel, the possibility of feminist resistance through friendship is established. Through the kind of resistance portrayed in these narratives—of Akhila and of the other women as told to Akhila—any rigid idea of feminist ethics of resistance is challenged. I also highlight how the patriarchal structures that these women fight foster a caste-based and age-based distribution of care labor, which are both deeply gendered.

2. Caste

One of the primary social contexts that inform care labor in Nair's novel is caste. The heteropatriarchal family that Akhila's mother wants to prepare her daughters for, and that Akhila craves in terms of her relationship with men, is a Hindu upper caste enterprise. The women Akhila meets on the train, saving Marikolanthu, all advise her from an upper caste perspective, which becomes even more evident when they collectively try to avoid Marikolanthu: "She didn't look like one of them. It wasn't that she was dressed poorly or that there was about her the stink of poverty […] Besides, they were sure that she didn't speak English as they all did. That was enough to put a distance between them and her." (Nair 2001, p. 18). The female friendship and feminist solidarity that is created against patriarchy in this coupé is, therefore, caste-exclusive. This is representative of the marginalization of Dalit women's voices within not just the South Asian feminist movements but also within anti-caste activism in India historically. As Sharmila Rege writes,

The Phule-Ambedkarite legacy is invoked to justify the largely high caste subject of the second wave of women's movement in Maharashtra…… It is precisely because of the Phule-Ambedkar legacy that there is such a split between caste and gender which erases the dalit women's oppression; and this by both the dalit and feminist inheritors of the legacy.

(Rege 2000, p. 493)

Marikolanthu's story, therefore, not only criticizes the dominantly high caste feminist solidarity in the train coupé but also intervenes within the caste-blind nature of their challenge to feminist ethics. She points out to Akhila: "[…] But last night, all of you shut me out from your conversation simply because you thought I did not belong. You looked at my clothes, my face, and decided that I was not your kind." (Nair 2001, p. 187). Then, she laughs at their struggles for being sheltered within caste privilege: "You were right to think that I am not your kind. It is true. I don't belong with you. Not because I am poor or uneducated. But because you have all led such sheltered lives, yes, even you.

I heard each one of them tell you the story of their lives and I thought, these women are making such a fuss about little things. What would they ever do if real tragedy confronted them?" (Nair 2001, p. 187). The question of feminist ethics within Dalit women's resistance is an important point of discussion here. The novel shows in this conversation between Marikolanthu and Akhila that what is a subversion of accepted ethical feminist practice within Savarna feminism would hardly be allotted the same social admiration if carried out by Dalit women, particularly when feminist solidarity within Savarna women excludes Dalit women. Moreover, there is no recognition of caste privilege within their stories of empowerment. This is why, to Marikolanthu, their struggles under patriarchy seem like "fuss over little things" and their subversion of care ethics hardly impressive.

Dalit feminist scholars have written extensively on the intersections of caste and gender within care work in South Asia. Erin K. Fletcher et al. argue that data show more restriction of women to housework in upper caste households in South Asia (Fletcher et al. 2017, p. 3), ensuring their lesser participation in the outside labor force. However, while upper caste women, when employed outside, tend to be placed in formal sectors, lower caste women do not receive that benefit. The kind of care labor most women domestic care laborers do in India, a sizable portion of them being lower caste, falls under the informal employment category. There is a servile aspect to it as well that can be traced back to the construction of domestic labor in eighteenth-century India under the British (Satyogi 2021, p. 40). The employment of domestic care workers is "beyond the purview of protective labor legislation and basic social security provisions" (Hill and Palriwala 2017, p. 137), leading to risky work environments for them (Hill and Palriwala 2017, p. 138). Moreover, since the lower caste body is seen as a polluting body, the domestic worker of a lower caste is subjected to more control and supervision than an upper caste worker. The domestic worker, whether of the lower or upper caste, is seen as bringing dirt (as pathogens, lower class language, and the tendency to steal) into the clean household of the employer (Dickey 2000, p. 473). As a Dalit woman domestic worker, which Marikolanthu is, this stigmatization of the worker's body as a dirty object increases. However, the stigmatization of Dalits is not limited to their body but also extends to their food, which, I argue, Akhila weaponizes for her own feminist resistance.

The purity discourse, of which untouchability is an offshoot, is crucial to the functioning of the caste system in South Asia. B.R. Ambedkar states that the *Manusmriti* outlines numerous ways in which Brahmins can become defiled, physical contact with a non-Brahmin being just one of them (Ambedkar 1948, p. 13). Within this idea, every non-Brahmin qualifies as impure, but the "taint of impurity" does not fall on the non-Brahmin upper castes (Ambedkar 1948, p. 13). Suraj Yengde adds that even the rise in economic and academic status does not relieve the Dalit body of its stigma of dirt: "I was no one, my credentials and my desire could not shine through. […] The strict apartheid based on caste and religion retains absolute sanctity, giving little or no occasion to understand the humanity of the 'lowly,' 'polluted' or 'unmeritocratic' Dalit" (Yengde 2019, p. 14). However, the Dalit woman's body suffers a more complex form of stigmatization.

The marking of the Dalit woman's body as dirty also means that she performs the housework that is considered beneath the upper caste women in the family (Aloysius et al. 2020, p. 176). However, what makes the Dalit female domestic worker's position more dire than a Dalit man in this position is the double bind of the violence she faces from patriarchy: "[…] she is devalued not only as woman but also as Dalit. Patriarchy submits her to male control of

her body and sexuality. The ritual-based caste structure allocates demeaning labor to her and denotes her low social standing as being due to her impure caste" (Aloysius et al. 2020, p. 178). Ironically, Dalit women's bodies are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by upper caste men even though they are considered dirty (Aloysius et al. 2020, p. 177). The expectations of care labor within patriarchal households from upper caste and lower caste women is the similarity between these two social identities although the kind of labor expected varies. In the following sections, I closely analyze two situations in Akhila and in Marikolanthu's story, where they employ care labor unethically to resist caste-based violence and care expectations based on gender. These two instances are Akhila boiling and eating eggs to spite her sister, Padma, and Marikolanthu bringing up her son, born from Murugesan's rape of her, to ultimately sell him as a child laborer at Murugesan's factory. The affects engendered through these self-proclaimed unethical care practices only enhance the supposedly malignant nature of these acts. In Akhila's cooking of eggs within a Brahmin household, the affect generated through the care labor of cooking is disgust. In Marikolanthu's case, she sells her child at Murugesan's factory to weaponize upper caste obliviousness of the consequences of caste-based violence against Murugesan's factory.

- Disgust

The affect associated with the Dalit body and food is disgust. Sianne Ngai formulates disgust as a combination of desire to possess and to exclude at the same time: "In the *Critique of Judgement*, what makes the object abhorrent is precisely its outrageous claim for desirability. […] Disgust both includes and attacks the very opposition between itself and desire, and, in doing so, destroys not only "aesthetical satisfaction" but the disinterestedness on which it depends." (Ngai 2005, p. 335). This explains the dichotomous desire as well as hatred that Murugesan experienced for Marikolanthu as he raped her. Margrit Pernau writes: "Disgust is central for the stability of the caste system, and notably of untouchability, and this holds true even for people who in a different context are committed to its abolition." (Pernau 2021, p. 118). Akhila's desire for eggs might not be classified as a subset of disgust, but viewed within the larger context of the upper caste desire to possess and enjoy the lower caste body, her desire for eggs as a Brahmin woman takes on a different meaning. This is especially evident when she weaponizes caste-based disgust around meat and eggs within a Brahmin household in her care-labor-based resistance against patriarchal impositions. She does this despite being Brahmin herself and not being vulnerable to the kind of exclusions that a Dalit woman might have faced from the upper caste.

After her father's unexpected death, the role of breadwinner is imposed on Akhila, which cages her in a way where she is not even allowed the freedom to marry, unlike her younger sisters and brother. She must look after her aged mother and later comply with the upper caste-based gendered expectations of her married sister, Padma. At the same time, she must fulfill the breadwinner role imposed on her. Vibha Bhalla classifies this complicated and paradoxical expectation from a female bread-earning caregiver within the heteronormative family as the "Super-Women" phenomenon. The super-women are women of the post-1947 era in India and in the diaspora who could balance both domestic chores and a job outside (Bhalla 2008, p. 71). The "Super-Women" phenomenon gave rise to a conflict within the identities of the modern Indian "superwoman", just like the conflict Akhila feels, because "their labor force participation in India occurred without redefining women's traditional household responsibilities, and their identity remained rooted in their domestic roles." (Bhalla 2008, p. 83). Therefore, while Akhila's father is

replaced by Akhila as “the head of the household” (Nair 2001, p. 84), Padma mocks Akhila’s incompetence with household chores: “Why, my seven-year-old Madhavi is a better housekeeper than she is.” (Nair 2001, p. 163). She implies that in being inept at processes of social reproduction despite being entirely responsible for the financial stability of the household, Akhila is an immature woman or not a grown woman yet and comparable to a child. Akhila cooking an egg in the kitchen at this point to provoke Padma cuts across this upper caste gender expectation in the realm of domestic care work. One must keep in mind that this tragedy of the neoliberal woman, pulled between the demands of the capitalist workforce outside and the care labor required of her at home, is also an upper caste privilege for Akhila. As Mary E. John writes,

I am now trying to get to the peculiar nature of the normative domestic realm—where wives render their labor ‘lovingly,’ seemingly outside the circuits of exchange value, but actually not, for there is a market wage for housework already in place, whose bottom end is amongst the most exploited imaginable. When we keep asking ourselves about the persistent non-recognition of women’s work in the home (my wife does not work, my mother does not work, say patriarchal husbands and children to this very day), we are simultaneously forgetting the labors of those that are even deeper in the shadows, whose devaluation, in my view, is part of the overall problem of valuing domestic labor itself. An essential aspect of this overall devaluation, of course, is that ‘their’ domestic spaces need not count for anything in comparison to ‘ours’. This is the humiliation and failure every domestic worker knows, as she combines poorly paid domestic work in the households of others together with unpaid labor in her own.

(John 2013, p. 186)

Akhila’s recourse to domestic care labor to protest her patriarchally expected embodiment of the ‘superwoman’ is therefore an upper caste woman’s critique of forced domestic care labor, which she would otherwise have delegated to a Dalit woman. In this provocative act of protest, there is a kind of ‘devaluation’ of the hypothetical care laborer’s ‘domestic space’ by ridiculing the expectation of care labor at home from a breadwinning woman. Therefore, the ethical complexity of this act of resistance must also be kept in mind because Akhila’s use of the affect of caste disgust to take revenge is possible because she is upper caste; a Dalit woman would have made herself more vulnerable if she cooked an egg in a Brahmin household with open defiance.

Cooking food as an act of malignant care labor occurs in Margaret’s story as well, although her resistance is visceral (as opposed to Akhila’s, which is symbolic)—she feeds oil-rich delicacies to her egotistic and condescending husband, Ebenezer, to make him gain weight and slowly hurt his pride over his physical appearance. Moreover, while the sensuous appeal of oil-rich food operates in Margaret’s resistance, Akhila’s resistance operates on Padma’s Brahminical disgust towards meat and eggs, considered to belong to low caste culture. Although she had cooked eggs in front of her mother before to satisfy her own appetite for them, when she cooks eggs in front of Padma, she has rebellious intentions: “But now that she lived in what were her entitled living quarters, she decided to resurrect her everyday egg.” (Nair 2001, p. 161). Padma shames her: “How can you? We are Brahmins. We are not supposed to. It is against the norms of our caste.” (Nair 2001, pp. 161–62). Food taboos against meat-eating, particularly beef, have been the essence of caste purity discourses in India since before

British rule. C. Sathyamala presents B.R. Ambedkar's description of caste-based food taboos by explaining that there is a distinction between plant-eating and meat-eating Hindus, but a further taboo exists between both these and beef-eating ones. There is yet another distinction between those who eat fresh beef and those who eat carrion, in which the latter is marked as 'untouchable' (Sathyamala 2019, pp. 881–82). Carrion consumption converts the 'untouchable' section of the low caste Hindus into an object of disgust, although it is a condition brought about by the upper caste Hindus: "Living on the doles of the upper caste and forced to perform the scavenging work– including the removal of dead animals as their caste obligation and not having access to live cattle whose fresh meat could be consumed– eating the flesh of the dead cow was one of the few ways of adding to their meagre food basket." (Sathyamala 2019, p. 882). There is, however, a lumping of all meat and eggs into low caste food by Brahmins, touting vegetarianism as a "morally superior" food choice and a marker of upper caste identity (Sathyamala 2019, p. 880). This is the socio-cultural baggage that the egg carries within the Brahmin household—a representation of the low caste body—arousing disgust within the upper caste subject, Padma. This caste-based disgust is used as an affective tool of resistance by Akhila in her care labor.

By producing disgust through the cooking of an egg in a Brahmin household, Akhila deliberately also becomes a figure of disgust and abjection as she has come in contact with the object of disgust, the egg. Disgust here "marks the recoiling of a disenchanted but politically invested subject" (Adkins 2019, p. 170). In this case, the politically invested subject is Padma, who expresses insecurity as an upper caste woman facing the threat of pollution from the object of disgust, Akhila, and, recoils. Akhila, by embodying a debased position by consuming eggs as an upper caste woman, uses this disgust aroused in Padma as a "language of abjection" (Adkins 2019, p. 170). She repulses Padma with this language symbolically by cooking the egg at first and then when found out, verbally: "This is my house and if I wish to eat eggs here or prance around naked, I will do so. If someone doesn't care for it, they are free to leave." (Nair 2001, p. 162). The juxtaposition of eating eggs along with prancing naked underlines her effort to disgust Padma so that she could drive her away and reclaim her space and dignity in the house. This is also a disgust similar to what the low caste body evokes in the upper caste, a disgust that stems from the stigmatization of manual labor and those engaged with it.

Within a caste-structured society, labor not only has economic value but also affective value in terms of stigma and humiliation—the lower the task in the labor hierarchy, the more the stigma and shame attached to performing it. Disgust is directed at the body engaged in these lower ranks of labor since "stigma cannot be abstracted from the body" (John 2013, p. 183). Thus, Akhila's body, even though upper caste, embodies the stigma that the lower caste body assumes in cooking and eating eggs. However, Akhila is voluntarily performing a kind of care labor, that is, cooking eggs, which is degrading in a Brahmin household because it has a caste impurity attached to it. She, thus, participates in a malignant act of care, malignant because it purportedly harms sentiments of caste purity. She evokes "projective disgust", that is, the kind of disgust that "leads to some type of avoidance of bodily contact" (Hasan et al. 2018, p. 5), which, in Padma's case, is a possible contact with eggs and Akhila's body because she is consuming eggs and polluting the family's caste. This evocation functions as her act of resistance because she is struggling with Brahmanical heteronormative ideas of the woman and femininity, and this care labor becomes her opportunity to challenge upper caste heteronormativity—by cooking an egg as a Brahmin woman.

- Obliviousness

Marikolanthu weaponizes upper caste obliviousness of the effects of their violence on the lower caste by at first nurturing her son, who is born of her rape by Murugesan, her upper caste employer's relative, and then selling him to his father's factory as a child laborer, his identity unknown to his father. Among the pollutants that are feared to invade the upper caste and middle caste household via the body of the domestic worker, sex with the employer or any one of the family members is seen as particularly deadly (Dickey 2000, p. 477), which subjects the female domestic worker to constant suspicion of supposedly seducing family members. The low caste body is anyway 'sexed' (John 2013, p. 183), which means that any kind of labor, whether in the care domain or in the public manual labor domain "marks the lower caste working body as sexually available to men of all castes" (John 2013, p. 184). This sexualization of the low caste care laborer's body as a projection of power that takes place in the upper caste domestic space leads to Marikolanthu's rape. This is why Murugesan says to her as he forces himself on her: "You have more rights in that house than my sister. It's time someone reminded you of who you are." (Nair 2001, p. 240). However, once Sujata, her employer, and Marikolanthu's mother come to know she is pregnant and it is because of Murugesan, they think the moral course of action would be to tell Murugesan to marry her instead of letting her marry a man of her choice.

Although she is the victim of Murugesan's crime, she is denied the right to have a family of her preference as she is pressured to pay for her perpetrator's crime by marrying him. The reason she is given is rooted in the typical misogynist values patriarchy subjects rape victims to: "Who will marry you? Your life is over, and you'll end up in the gutter like a street dog with its litter… you have nothing left in your life" (Nair 2001, p. 245). This kind of imposition of a heteronormative family structure post-rape on Marikolanthu is a double-edged sword because heteronormative family values are not only misogynist but also casteist, with 'heredity' and 'biology' being foundational to the exclusion of certain genders, certain sexualities, and certain castes (Weiss 2001, p. 125). Marikolanthu is already removed from this structure because she has been raped and because she is a low caste woman. Moreover, since she chooses to not marry Murugesan, she risks further exclusion.

The denial of justice to Marikolanthu only motivates her to take a vigilantist route; she brings up the child born of the rape and then arranges his employment as an eight-year-old child laborer in Murugesan's silk factory, abandoning him to his fate there:

A perverse satisfaction flared within me. Murugesan might not know it but I had sold him his own son. I had finally collected rent for nine months of housing the boy. With the rent money raised from the boy's sweat and blood, I would destroy the house and the bond that wove our lives together.

(Nair 2001, p. 265)

She takes advantage of Murugesan as well as the little boy's obliviousness to being part of a revenge plot. Murugesan is not aware of having a son by Marikolanthu, which makes it easier for her to sell the child to his factory. She couches the act as part of her care labor for the child's education, calling the work at the factory a sort

of schooling: “They will teach you a trade here; how to weave. In that sense, it is like a school.” (Nair 2001, p. 265). However, it is an act that is aimed at putting an end to any more maternal care labor she would need to do for the eight-year-old and, also at the same time, placing a value on the care labor she had performed for a child she did not want by taking ‘rent money’. Although her son is obviously not responsible for the violence on her, she sees him as Murugesan and society’s tool to bring about more pain in her life, since she was tricked into not aborting him by Periamma the midwife: “The sight of one’s own baby; the feeling of holding your own baby in your arms–Periamma thought all of it would make me want the child. But she didn’t know me well enough, nor the power of hate” (Nair 2001, p. 249). She resists this expectation of benign natural care labor from her as an upper caste imposition.

The regulation of the maternal body within patriarchy, especially during pregnancy, is based on ideas of caste purity. Sucharita Sarkar writes with reference to feminist scholar V. Geetha that women’s bodies are seen as “gateways” to the caste system in the sense that the mother “literally passes the purity of caste to the offspring through her uterine fluids and her breastmilk.” (Sarkar 2020, pp. 41–42). Not only that but the understanding of maternal care and nurture within a Hindu society is skewed towards upper caste patriarchal mandates, which automatically demonizes lower caste motherhood. This makes Marikolanthu’s life as an unwed mother even more difficult. She is denied the right to abort the child, and she is constantly asked to fit into upper caste ideas of motherhood as the sole aim of a moral woman. This is why even though Sujata Akka knew about her precarious situation, she calls her a “fiend” for “turning away from her child.” (Nair 2001, p. 263). By using obliviousness as an affective tool of resistance through her supposed securing of the child’s future, she not only lashes against casteist violence on her but also this imposed upper caste expectation of benign natural care from her.

Obliviousness is utilized as an affective tool of resistance in its two manifestations—upper caste obliviousness (as seen in Murugesan) and childish innocence (as seen in her son). Caste privilege ensures obliviousness within the upper castes with respect to their casteist violence, although Murugesan’s son is, of course, not being seen as engaging in such obliviousness. This maintenance of upper caste obliviousness is similar to how White innocence is maintained in the racial dynamics of the West.

Upper caste members of society see “caste only as ‘other’s’ open practices of hostility or discrimination and not as an epistemic and structural part of Indian society” (Komalam 2023, p. 4), just like it is with Whites’ supposed unawareness of structural racism and their part in it. Along with the denial of these hierarchical structures, there is also a tendency to either not acknowledge or deflect blame by upper castes and Whites for casteist and racist violence. The obliviousness displayed by Murugesan is an example of this latter tendency. It also is not just operating on an individual level but also on a societal level as Sujata and even Marikolanthu’s own mother try to paper over the crime by forcing her to marry him and then shaming her for not complying. The fact that this is a casteist crime that needs to be addressed legally is not brought up at all, thus upholding the assumed innocence of the upper caste. As Phillip and Lowery emphasize, this obliviousness is used to “hide privilege and its illegitimacy from others” as well as the own self because it oils a hierarchical system whose open acceptance might provoke resistance. Therefore, Marikolanthu’s weaponization of this obliviousness by selling the son born of her rape by an upper caste man and then witnessing the obliviousness of the son as he dances at his father’s funeral exposes this carefully cultivated innocence. Her “satisfaction” (Nair 2001, p. 265) at the successful playing out of her planned

resistance through care labor and the affect, obliviousness, is “perverse” (Nair 2001, p. 265) for this reason—it scapegoats the innocence of a child but also the feigned innocence of the upper caste man even after his death.

3. Age

The women’s relationship with care labor in Nair’s novel is also determined in complicated ways by their age and social conventions around it. Social reproduction in the form of childcare within South Asian households tends to be sometimes distributed among extended family members like the child’s paternal or maternal grandparents, particularly grandmothers. In some cases, the grandmother might be more involved in the child’s nurture than the mother (Bhopal 1998, p. 488). The expectations of care labor from aged women like Sheela’s grandmother and Janaki, a middle-aged woman about to become a grandmother, are primarily in the area of emotional labor like “correcting during mistakes, comforting when in distress, abetting cultural transmission, and openly having an opinion on the most intimate decision of choosing a life partner” (Gray et al. 2019, p. 7). However, Janaki and Sheela’s grandmother reject such care expectations and instead use care labor to resist these conventions, challenging this kind of “intergenerational contract” (Raja 2013, p. 79), which imposes these expectations without the aged woman’s consent. The contract is applicable the other way too because of “the paucity of alternative old age guarantees and services to complement or substitute for family support (for example, state welfare)” (Raja 2013, p. 79), although even with the availability of state welfare, sending aged parents to old age homes, for instance, is stigmatized in South Asia as a shirking of filial responsibility.

Janaki uses care labor to free herself from heteronormative roles like being a good mother or a good wife by rebuilding her relationship with her husband as purely amorous after her son has a baby. She shows dissatisfaction at her son’s lack of regard for her age and the expectations of care labor imposed on her when she bursts into tears towards the end of the story. Sheela’s grandmother, Ammumma, on the other hand, teaches Sheela, her grandchild, to deck her corpse because she does not want to die ugly, thus indoctrinating her with body-shame through her storytelling. I analyze two incidents in this regard—Janaki crying as her son yells at her for being too pampered by the men in the family and Ammumma teaching Sheela about acceptable beauty standards for women, irrespective of age.

- Dissatisfaction

Janaki is a middle-aged woman who feels her marriage with her husband has undergone changes as she has aged and taken on new roles, like being a mother and then edging towards being a grandmother. She calls it her “certain age” (Nair 2001, p. 30) in which she has grown too “sensitive” (Nair 2001, p. 31) to the little things in their marriage because she internally despises the changes that age has brought upon her and hates that her husband remains consistent, unaffected by any “mood-swings” (Nair 2001, p. 31): “The beating of his heart slowed him down, sometimes it crashed in his ears, but he didn’t forget his place as a husband, father and provider. She didn’t think he loved her any less because of her mood swings. He just understood– an understanding person always suffers.” (Nair 2001, p. 31). Janaki portrays herself in her head as an unreasonable wife under whom her husband “suffers” because of societal expectations that a caring wife be mindful of the affection she gets from her husband

and be satisfied with it. There is a clear indication that her continuous dissatisfaction is owing to her menopause, which she euphemizes as a "certain age": "[…] maybe it [the certain age] hit her when she stopped marking the calendar on the day her periods began" (Nair 2001, p. 31). One important caveat here is that feminists have pushed back against the general pathologization of menopause in biomedical discourse since it can also be a liberating time in women's lives (Tiwari and Sharma 2017, p. 95). For some women, menopause can also be a surgical rather than a natural experience (Tiwari and Sharma 2017, p. 96). Since Janaki herself associates her dissatisfaction with her menopause, it is important to highlight the negative emotional health conditions created by it.

Janaki values her relationship with her husband in terms of her sexual attractiveness to him more than her fulfillment of maternal or grandmaternal care duties. This is especially evident when she feels irritated and humiliated by her husband referring to her as "Mummy" in front of her son and daughter-in-law: "She wanted to scream, 'Don't call me Mummy. I'm not your mummy. I am your wife. Remember, you used to call me Janu once. Wife. Darling. Sweetheart. And if you find it hard saying those, call me woman, but don't call me Mummy!'" (Nair 2001, p. 34). The use of the term denoting only her maternal function in the family, even by her husband, desexualizes her, which only exacerbates her anxiety around social and market conceptions of menopausal women as unattractive and unfit for romance: "After forty years, there were no more surprises, no jarring notes, no peek-a-boos from behind doors. There was just this friendly love advertising liked to capitalize on." (Nair 2001, p. 27). This kind of thinking is rooted in ancient patriarchal notions around menopausal women as sexually undesirable because they supposedly had "degenerative affects" on male virility if men engaged in sex with them (Tiwari and Sharma 2017, p. 100). This affective orientation of the society around menopausal women only damages their mental health as they reach that "certain age".

Janaki struggles with her self-image of a perhaps undesirable wife post-menopause, owing to the social beliefs about menopausal women in South Asia. The expectation of emotional care labor on her—to be, what Sara Ahmed calls, a "happy housewife", borrowing from Betty Freidan's idea of the happy American housewife (Ahmed 2010, p. 50)—only contributes to her dissatisfaction, which she utilizes within her care labor at her son's home to resist gendered care expectations as mother and grandmother. The "happy housewife" is a woman in the heteronormative domestic space who ensures the happiness of the family through her affective labor of being happy as well as her physical care labor/social reproductive duties (Ahmed 2010, p. 53). Janaki's failure to perform this kind of care labor post-menopause marks her as "spoilt" (Nair 2001, p. 36), in her son's words, because although she is not laboring to produce happiness in herself and in the household, her husband continues to care for her, which is seen as "pamper"ing (Nair 2001, p. 36), denoting the undeserved nature of this care work by her husband. Despite being in this position, Janaki manages to use dissatisfaction to work for her and resist the care responsibilities expected from her as an aged mother and prospective grandmother. Janaki's show of dissatisfaction instead of compliance with this figure of the "happy housewife" when she starts crying evokes her husband's chastisement of her son for insulting her. She insists to her husband that her son is causing her dissatisfaction: "She complained that her son had changed, and she no longer knew this man whose voice, when it was directed towards her, was heavy with a suppressed dislike" (Nair 2001, p. 36). As she complains, she is also performing care labor for her son and her grandchild by insisting that she and her husband go to assist their son

and daughter-in-law in the hospital while their baby is being born (Nair 2001, p. 36). She expresses dissatisfaction with her son while performing her duties as a good mother and prospective grandmother so that her husband never sees her as an uncaring mother or grandmother, which underlines the affective poignancy of her care labor as resistance. Her husband sees their son as ungrateful instead and decides that they will not live there anymore, freeing Janaki of all forms of care labor (as a mother or grandmother). Instead, she is able to revel in marital sexual bliss, thus also taking care of her post-menopausal insecurity.

- Body-shame

Within its Deleuzian conceptualization, shame as an affect is seen as particularly adhesive to the body and the mind at the same time. Elspeth Probyn writes “While many have argued that shame is about self-evaluation, or more precisely, the evaluation of the self by the self, Deleuze’s argument breaks with a tendency to conceptualize shame in banal psychological terms as an interior quality. Shame in Deleuze’s description comes from a complex disposition: it combines the inherent and the lived experience of social structures—the biology and biography of a person.” (Probyn 2010, pp. 81–82). In Sheela’s story, a particular kind of shame—body-shame, or the infliction of shame on an individual through an evaluation of their physical beauty—makes shame even closer to the biological while equally attacking the psychological. Ammumma, the woman who uses body-shame to resist patriarchy, is Sheela’s maternal grandmother, and when Sheela is telling the story to the women in the coupé, Ammumma has already passed away.

Ammumma has been a sullen matriarch all her life who realized early on that her children only care for her because they want a share in her property after her death. So, she decides to go and live with Sheela’s mother, who is the only one of her children who hankered for her mother’s love. The expectation of a self-sacrificial grandmother who performs all-giving emotional labor for her grandchildren is subverted by Ammumma through her twisted methods of emotional caregiving. Since this kind of emotional labor expectation from aged women in South Asian families also accompanies the general ageist expectation of aged women to be happily accepting of aging (De Vuyst 2022, p. 103) instead of indulging in vanity and anxiety about a supposedly degrading physical appearance, Ammumma’s pride in her wits and her beauty and her tips on cultivating sexually attractive femininity to her granddaughter, Sheela, is a politically provocative way of performing grandmotherly care labor. She performs this seemingly malignant care labor using body-shaming.

There is a direct link made in society between beauty and femininity, which Ammumma subscribes to as well, in the sense that only a certain kind of physical appearance denotes that a woman is adequately feminine. The patriarchal standard for beauty and femininity is generally correlated with the capability to reproduce, which is why as women cross the age of fertility, they are marked as sexually unattractive (Bovet 2018, p. 332). Ammumma’s beauty/femininity standard is like this model: “She carefully appraised every new woman she saw and most of them were found wanting. ‘You call that a woman! A proper woman has a good head of hair and a chest full of breasts.’ And a womb that blossomed readily.” (Nair 2001, p. 67). However, the affect she uses to express her approval or disapproval of a certain female body in terms of its beauty/femininity is body-shame. She body-shames women whose physical appearances do not suit her taste, including her granddaughter, and masks it as concern: “You

don't eat enough. You are so skinny. No man will want you for a wife. Men don't like bones in bed. Men like curves." (Nair 2001, p. 68). This is a twisted presentation of grandmotherly concern at not being able to find a suitable partner for her granddaughter, a function that is allotted to grandmothers in South Asian families (Gray et al. 2019, p. 7). Ammumma's act of body-shaming, as it turns out, is less a care labor for her granddaughter and more about her own self in the sense that it is a projection of her insecurity, which at the same time strives to challenge the patriarchal equation of aging with a depletion of beauty in women.

This insecurity stems from her equation of feminine beauty with female power, which is reflected in her proposed idea of self-serving beauty versus people-pleasing beauty:

As Sheela sat there on the balcony with the tweezers and a small hand mirror Ammumma could examine herself in, Ammumma said, 'You mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy […]'.

(Nair 2001, pp. 67–68)

Ammumma sees beauty as being invested with the power to make one feel happy about oneself, which is why she disregards social conceptions of aging as being detached from beauty as meaningless. She plucks her chin hair and grooms herself before going to sleep, aware of her inability to fulfill even her own beauty standards (which are not divorced from society's beauty standards) but still not giving up on the labor required to make oneself look attractive. Her resistance to social expectations of care labor imposed on her lies here since the care labor she engages in is directed at her own self, particularly her physical appearance, despite her being a grandmother. The employment of body-shaming others in this resistance is an aggressive defense against the shame she believes society is directing at her for not matching up to the patriarchal standards of beauty/femininity. For instance, the day before she was to be operated on, she over-ate and overslept, trying to forget that a part of her body would be surgically removed and that would "condemn her to be flawed for life" (Nair 2001, pp. 66–67). It is visible to Sheela that "Ammumma felt repulsed by her own body", wanting her to pluck "the straggly strands on the underside of her chin" (Nair 2001, p. 67) as a desperate attempt to salvage her beauty. Thus, we see Sara Ahmed's model of shame operating here, as referenced by Tanisha Spratt, in which shame (particularly body-shame here) is "a feeling that is produced by the observer suggest[ing] that one only feels shame when one recognizes in oneself what others perceive to be a source of shame" (Spratt 2023, p. 93), which here is predicated on the acceptable standards of beauty/femininity. In this case, the observer is Ammumma, who feels ashamed of her body hair. She draws sympathy towards herself through her performance of this body-shame, thus making body-shame work to disrupt the idea of a self-sacrificial and doting grandmother; instead of being devoted to her grandchildren and other members of the family, she focuses on the beautification of her own body.

Sheela decking up Ammumma's corpse in make-up and jewelry is the successful expression of Ammumma's resistance: "Sheela knew Ammumma would have preferred this to looking diseased and decaying" (Nair 2001, p. 74). Ammumma makes her own pleasures, centered on beauty and femininity, known through this malignant form

of care labor involving body-shaming. For instance, even when she discusses the death of another aged woman in the neighborhood with Sheela, she indoctrinates her with her standard of dignified femininity, shaming the woman's looks as she lay dead: "Lakshmi was such a well-groomed woman when she was alive. But you should have seen what they did to her today. […] every mole, vein and blemish exposed. […] And I realized this is what I too will end up looking like when I'm dead. And there will be nothing I can do to prevent it" (Nair 2001, p. 73). Sheela sympathizes with Ammumma as she engages in this double-edged body-shaming of Lakshmi as well as her future self as a corpse, so she promises that she would not let others see Ammumma like that when it is her turn. This is how Ammumma makes body-shaming a crucial affect of her malignant care labor in order to resist patriarchal ideas of grandmotherly care labor, aging, and beauty.

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