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What are Women's Things? Feminist Materiality in *Ladies' Coupé*

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Abstract: The twentieth century has seen a shift towards material culture by erasing the subject-object binary and also by validating the agency of everyday objects in constituting the subjective consciousness of the user. It goes beyond consumerism and hopes to approach material objects as extensions of the self. The paper explores how materiality negotiates with the politics embedded in everyday life, struggle and resistance of women by attempting a close analysis of instances from Anitha Nair's *Ladies' Coupé* (1961). Anitha Nair deliberately picks objects like lunch boxes, saris, bangles, nose pins, cosmetics and perfumes and associates with her female characters to mediate the act of gender performance. In patriarchal structures, objects are also tools used to perpetuate ideology. The patriarchal society strips women off their autonomy and relegates them to the position of passive objects. However, it is intriguing to see that the novel carefully employs banal yet powerful objects from quotidian life also as sites of internalisation, resistance, awareness and liberation. They are not restrained as metaphors for domestic femininity, rather they illuminate female subjectivity.

The paper will scrutinise how objects and women constitute each other by adhering to prominent material culture theories propounded by Bill Brown, Daniel Miller and Arjun Appadurai. The paper aims to draw theoretical insights from Janet Hoskins' *Biographical Objects* and Sherry Turkle's *Evocative Things* to conceptualise feminist material culture. By mapping the material life of women familiar to us, the paper strives to unravel the complex materiality of the human subject and her objects that permeates social relations, power and history. Broadly, it will explore how material culture serves a legitimate way of understanding human life.

Keywords: *Material Objects, Thing Theory, Everyday life, Patriarchy, Gender and feminist consciousness, Indian Writing in English*

Gender is defined as a set of socio-culturally constructed meanings attached to sexes that permeates all aspects of an individual's life. It shapes values, behaviours, beliefs and attitudes. Society prescribes how the gendered body should negotiate with daily life, objects and other people. Gendered bodies of females are subjugated in a patriarchal society by the definitive use of ideologies and material artefacts. The paper holds a twofold goal. Primarily, it is an effort to analyse how gender invisibly exerts power through material objects. Secondly, it proposes a critical analysis of the same material objects to appreciate the agency inherent in them that makes women efficiently able to oppose her gendered identity. Considering the most discussed work *Ladies Coupé* by Anita Nair as the primary text, the paper exposes the ubiquitous yet subtle ways in which gender exploits everyday feminine objects to ingratiate itself into female consciousness and general social fabric. The protagonist Akhila carries the tension between the pressure to meet sociocultural expectations and ardent instinct to pursue individual freedom. On her journey, she meets other women who share the conflict to give up dreams in order to conform to gendered roles. The paper deviates from the idea that material practices are innocent and banal; they are, indeed, means by which gender distinctions are inflicted upon women. Ironically, such practices are dialectical, as clarified by principal female characters in the text. The framework embedded in the intimate interconnection between women and things emanates from the twentieth century's interest towards material turn. It hopes to stimulate new ways of interpreting (i) objects as extension of the self, (ii) the agency of material things in producing meanings in intimate, personal and social levels and finally (iii) material engagement as a legitimate way of living one's life or forming one's identity.

Making of 'Things'

Martin Heidegger revolutionised the concept of things by offering a phenomenological distinction between thing and object in his work *What is a Thing?* (1967). Heidegger contemplates the difference between a thing and an object with the intimation that an object transforms into a thing when it can no longer fulfill its conventional function. When an object is broken or misused, it transcends its ordinary role and becomes perceptible in new ways, thus becoming a thing. Heidegger inspired Bill Brown to write his influential essay "Thing theory" in 2001, and his subsequent monograph titled "A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature" in 2003. For Bill Brown, objects are "transparent" (4) items for which subjects have a known and clear sense of place, use and role. Things, on the other hand, are "opaque" (4) as they "manifest themselves once they interact with our bodies unexpectedly, break down, malfunction, shed their encoded social values, or elude our understanding...the very

semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects” (5).

Brown writes in his essay "Thing Theory":

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture - above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things” (6).

“The thingness of objects is an "excess" in objects, which exceeds the mere materialisation (physicality) or utilisation (function) of objects. This excess can be thought of as "the force of things" as metaphorical presences, by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems” (7).

According to him, habit is a way for humans to establish a connection with their material possessions. By regularly interacting with objects, we not only give them life but also bring structure and organisation to our lives. When an object breaks down, our habit of using it is disrupted, leading to new ways of understanding the object. This shift in perspective allows us to view the object in a subject-object relationship, where the object becomes more autonomous and self-assertive. Thing theorists argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between things and people, where they both contribute to each other’s agency. The theory explores the dynamics between human subjects and inanimate things, shedding light on the formation of subjectivity.

In anthropology, material culture theories studied physical objects, ranging from clothing to architecture as tangible reflections of a society’s cultural values, practices and structural arrangements, hierarchical structural organization. Daniel Miller, in his work *Materiality* (2005) upsets the traditional distinction between subject and object. Rather than reducing the material culture to the utilitarian point of view or to symbolic representation of the social codes, Miller demonstrates that social worlds were as much constituted by materiality. Miller addresses the plurality of the forms of materiality by stating that “The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge... it implies that much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that

habituates and prompts us” (4). Arjun Appadurai's influential book *The Social Life of Things* (1986) in which the editor's introduction in combination with the chapter by Kopytoff re-considered the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of commodities. According to him, the value of a commodity rests with its exchange. Appadurai argues that commodities are not just objects of economic exchange, but are also deeply embedded in cultural and social systems. He introduces the concept of “commodity as a social relationship” to describe how commodities acquire meaning through their social and cultural context. Janet Hoskin's theory of *Biographical Objects* credit objects with agential capacity. “Objects themselves may not be animated, but their relations have certainly animated many debates about the ways to understand society, culture and human lives” (82). Hoskins propounds that objects enable reflexivity and introspection and thus become tools for knowing deeply about one's own self. People cannot be disentangled from things they valued. She refers a personally meaningful possession as biographical object and pronounces to pay more attention to how such objects tell gendered stories. The essay emphasises the role of personal possessions in private spaces in accumulating meanings through ownership, circulation and historic use. It argues how they are involved in the production of memories, identity and social relationships.

Ladies Coupé: Intimate Material Space of Liberation

The society has divided spaces into private and public with strict guidelines as far as women are considered. This segregation between the safety of home and the evil world is the ideology that has continued dictating the society for decades. The domestic sphere is the space assigned to women wherein women are expected or rather compelled to perform gendered identity and household chores. Thus the space informs them the duties, behaviours and meaning of their life. The physical space of the house indeed acts as an institution that trains women on how to act when she steps out into the wilderness of the public. Girls are educated to inhabit this gendered space and once married off, women end up their life without reprimanding this sociocultural construct. Here women are reduced to objects, devoid of subjective agency and continue to exist serving the functions set forth by tradition. They are made immobile and passive entities - incapable of leaving this ‘cosy’ private sphere, never being able to own a space of their own.

The events in *Ladies Coupé* take place in the titular compartment that escapes patriarchal surveillance. It is a liminal space that breaks away from gender norms. The women passengers Akhilandeswari, Marikolanthu, Margaret Paulraj, Sheela Vasudevan, Janaki Prabhakar and Janaki Prabhakar, develop a camaraderie in that enclosed, but protected space. “They had established a connection. Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance from each other's lives, aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls wouldn't go beyond this night or the

contained space” (37). They share smiles, sit cross-legged, comb hair and offer each other snacks. These women, from different backgrounds, share oranges, chocolates and personal stories; they converse about happiness and confusions regarding family life, inner struggles and aspirations, conflicts between identity and social roles. The allocation of this space, away from the private and public spheres, is crucial, in terms of the comfort, friendship, contentment and solace they finally feel in life. It is not only a meeting point for several women to share their personal stories, but also a mirror- like space that helps them to finally encounter their own secrets, desires, and fears which they shunned for so long. Suspended from the constraints of everyday space, the coupé is a moving space. It is not a fixed space like a patriarchal house, kitchen, bedroom or office; but a material site that helps them have a transformation or rather a journey inwards. The female bodies sharing the same space also enjoy emotional safety and collective partaking of emotions which they have been missing all throughout their life with partners or families. The coupé is not claustrophobic, but liberating where they reimagine their choices, recollect their pasts and recognise their identities. This material space provides them with the experience of freedom and autonomy. As they alight from the train one by one, they are still not independent of their roles of wife or daughter or sister, but now they are clearly reminded of their needs. In both the public and private domains, delineated by patriarchal society, women hesitate to voice their dreams, desires as well as questions whereas the coupé ’s liminal material space drives away their hesitations and silences. Their individuality is alive like never before and they are collectively listened to. The material environment is invested with the authenticity of female experiences. Anita Nair carefully installs a moving train that synonymises with the journey of their lives. Women open up about their aversions towards family, revulsions against husbands and acts of resistance like extra marital affairs and exploration of sexuality which will be barely revealed in the public or private forums. Every woman has her way of negotiating with the patriarchal structure (as discussed in the following sections), though not overtly. The space inside the coupé —flowy, dynamic, loud—in contrast to the restrictive, static and disciplined patriarchal spheres is a metaphorical extension of female subjectivity. It enforces them to consider how they exercised agency in converting those gendered spaces into one that assented to their needs - the primary need being resistance against the imposition of female submissiveness.

Things that Rebel

Margaret Shanthi’s life centers on revenge towards her narcissist and authoritarian husband Ebenezer Paulraj. A school principal by profession, he wields power through discipline, control and fear and never compromises his oppressive masculine superiority. She endures emotional distance, domestic hardships, forced abortion, suppression of feelings dissatisfaction in married life and difference of opinions. She lived invisibly, without acknowledgement, in the loop of cooking for him, laundering

and pressing his clothes, cleaning the shelves, making beds and changing towels. The societal stigma associated with divorce and lack of understanding from her own family entrap her. Margaret equates herself with water - “Supercritical water. Capable of dissolving just about anything which, as mere water, it wouldn’t even dare aspire to. Raging with a vehemence that could burn and destroy poisons that if allowed to remain, would kill all that was natural and good” (104). She calls Ebenezer “Oily. Dense. Sour. Explosive. Given to extremes. Capable of wiping out all that was water, fluid and alive. Fortified to char almost anything that was organic – wood, paper, sugar, dreams. Concentrated sulphuric acid. H₂SO₄. Hydrogen sulphate. King of chemicals. Oil of vitriol” (128).

“God didn't make Ebenezer Paulraj a fat man... I did it with the sole desire for revenge” (103). As a docile wife, her responsibility was to cook obediently for her husband and to treat his friends. This routine normal act is manipulated as the method of destruction. Margaret’s food is not intended to nourish her husband. She actively uses food as an instrument to impair the health of her husband. Reading in line with Brown’s Thing Theory, it is already established that an object becomes a thing as it deviates from its intended function. Also, the manipulation of a thing’s function - thingness - changes the subject-object relationship in novel ways.

If Ebe had a weakness, it was food. He loved eating; the richer the food, the better he liked it. Fatty bacon, roe-filled sardines, chicken liver, the globs of fat that butchers threw in to make up for the bones when selling mutton, double-yolked eggs, mangoes with cream and ripe sapodillas, puris, fritters, chips – heavy with oil, dense with calories. But Ebe loved his body even more. So he controlled his natural fondness for eating” (130).

The surplus of rich and splendid food prepared by Margaret does not strengthen Ebenezer, but weakens him physically and psychologically. She feeds his hunger - but cooking is not the language of love featuring aromas and flavours, but a chemical process carefully orchestrated eliciting desired results. Food becomes a thing that subverts a suppressive patriarchal system, as Bill Brown would have it. In the narrative, a cane is presented as a prosthetic extension of Ebenezer’s authority in school. The slim cane and his dainty grip exerts his quintessential authority in social spaces, making it an absolute instrument that constitutes his subjectivity. As he becomes fat, he loses his grip to hold a slim cane. His discipline and order fails miserably. It falls out of use. Its absence from his life marks Margaret’s successful rebellion against the powerful masculinity. Margaret creatively turns food into an instrument of resistance instead of affirming the gender roles constructed by the society. The conversion of food into a “thing” also involves a destabilisation of the traditional system of cooking which is built on

women's passivity and obedience. Margaret inverts this servitude by turning domestic materiality into a mechanism of control directed back at the male figure.

The young Sheela is another character who realises the power of things. Her dying grandmother is a strong woman who is conscious of her individual self. A woman of status and self respect, she yearns to to be immaculately dressed even on the deathbed with cancer. The society tries to prevent her from eating the food she like showing the reason of illness and restricts her wish to wear jewellery because she was old. The grandmother's wish for material things is not superficial indulgence, but her awareness about dignity and authority which is often diminished by the patriarchal system. She asserts: "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" (66). The patriarchal system regards a woman useful only when she is young. In her old age, a woman is treated as a discarded object of no utility. The grandmother strongly declares her resentment towards this materialistic attitude and derives pleasure in grooming herself with calamine lotion, lavender and gold jewellery. The society rebukes when a woman claims her identity, but grandmother, even after being called eccentric, continues not to compromise her body and beauty. Sheela is the only one to extend a sense of understanding that the old woman always wanted to die a graceful death, without repulsing her own body. The men in home and women conditioned by the men, do not heed to pay respect to another woman's desire for nobility. Sheela dolls up the body by all her usual finery, much to everybody's mortification. She braids Ammumma's hair, rubs foundation into face, pours expensive talc and rims her eyes with a kohl. The make-up stuff becomes things of identity. Though it is believed we leave back every material possession at the face of death, the grandmother's character illustrates another reality that material things add more value to a person in death and decay. Material possessions confer a bigger sense of fulfilment, reinforcing the notion that objects constitute subjects and vice versa. In both events, material objects—food and jewellery—occupy a central position in the narrative. Their properties are exploited as a complicated means of subverting the traditional patriarchal order. Material objects from the quotidian life thus acquire power and agency which enable the subjects to achieve what they have been denied throughout.

Evocative Object: Akhila's Gunny Thread

The narrative follows Akhila, a 45-year-old single woman working in the income tax department, who lives her life as a scapegoat, by providing for her family and ends up alone in life with unfulfilled desires, lost hopes and confusions. Akhila's character is introduced as a stereotype through material objects such as starched cotton saris and photochromatic glasses. These material markers construct the image of a typical unmarried, mid-aged, employed woman of self control, strict routine and propriety

who should/will never violate the moral standards set by patriarchal judgement. Society uses these material objects to stop her from exploring her pleasures, vulnerabilities and instincts. They are objects that discipline her body according to societal expectations. Akhila never defies what society expects her to wear. However, in her private space, she holds only one thing close to heart- a giant ball of left over gunny thread. Intriguingly, it is not a gift or keepsake. It is not a totem of an idyllic childhood or a souvenir reminding an innocent love affair. Yet she decides not to let go of it. Attempting a comparison between these objects - the imposed objects and the evocative object - show how society manipulates the use of material objects to oppress individuality of women and in turn how Akhila defiantly leaves societal restraints and liberates her femininity by holding on to one personal possession.

The imposed things are extensions of patriarchal society that aims to discipline and govern the body and thereby the subjectivity of women. The society decides what an elderly spinster must wear and structures these material items in such a way that they distance her from all worldly joys. The sari reflects the highly inflexible social structures which fail to appreciate individual freedom. The glasses, which she never wears inside her home, separates her from the real world. Together they organise Akhila's identity into a conventional pattern of the cultural stereotype of a single woman with rigid demeanour who has no hopes to fulfill. The everyday items like clothing and accessories which seem natural thus become instruments that wield power by pervading her subjecthood, recasting her identity and shaping her in particular ways. Ultimately, objects create/discipline subjects and 'naturally' distribute socio-cultural meanings widely. Simultaneously they embody Akhila's internalised suppression of desire and individuality.

In Evocative Objects: Things We Think With, Sherry Turkle views objects in a different light:

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with (5).

Evocative objects help the user in many ways. They catalyse self creation, merge thought and feeling. Another defining feature of evocative objects is that they are sites charged with emotions. Evocative objects possess the capacity to generate affective resonance. The second crucial thing in Akhila's narrative is her gunny thread which is preserved since childhood. The humble object is charged with multiple layers of meaning, but it received only scant attention so far, This is an endeavour to scrutinise how it illuminates a spinster's vital inner world drawing insights from Turkle's idea. This

section will explore how Akhila challenges patriarchal oppression by attaching herself to this ordinary thing.

Akhila had the habit of collecting every scrap of gunny thread from weekly groceries. “On Sunday afternoons, she sat unravelling the knots and tying broken ends so that all she had to do was fasten it to the ball that was already as big as a coconut” (Nair 63). While her mother found her devotion derogatory and as a waste of time, Akhila experienced it as a meaningful activity. Gunny thread is an unflattering form made from jute fibre. In Hindi, ‘*goni*’ meant cheap or coarse. Akhila, in a way, identifies with its material properties. It is not delicate or luxurious like silk, but abrasive. It is physically fragile, seemingly insignificant after use and invisible, still it survives decades mirroring Akhila’s endurance. Akhila’s tactile engagement with the thread foreshadows how in near future she would become an unattractive gunny thread that holds together her family through everyday labour and is left unattended and forgotten. Gunny thread parallels Akhila’s world which is occupied by modesty, domestic labour, middle class restraints and everyday struggles. Akhila develops affective attachment with this trivial thing.

This odd thing of privilege makes appearance twice in the narrative. It acts as a bridge between her childhood and adulthood. While untangling it was part of her favourite gaming activity in the past, in present it acts as a reminder to remove confusions regarding the pursuit of her love life. It remains hidden inside the suitcase for a long time, just like Akhila’s repressed desire and love for Hari. Akhila abandon’s Hari’s romantic advancements pointing out the age difference between them. Her wish for lovelife is buried beneath the societal rules, but like the gunny thread, it does not vanish. Symbolically and materially, Akhila untangles her vulnerabilities and need for emotional support.

Akhila took the ball of thread and looked at it. She had thought it had all been used up. But here it was; a remainder of her past. She unrolled a length and tugged at it. It held and Akhila smiled. The thread still had some life in it (165).

She understands the meaninglessness in living for her selfish family. Also, she reflects on how societal structures smother her freedom. Her act of loosening the thread becomes her message for life. Life is to be explored and lived to its fullest. The evocative object of gunny thread inspires her to bind hearts with love. It is a material companion to her self-realisation. Hidden in the suitcase, alongside Hari’s cards, it offers her the strength to embrace suppressed emotions:

Hari. That one unresolved tangle. That one knot she had severed rather than unravelled. And she thinks, I must sort that out too. I must find out what happened to him. And I must do it today, now, when I feel whole and strong” (290).

Moving Object: Marikolanthu's Gifts and Body

Marikolanthu is a Dalit woman with no privileges of being rich, educated or protected by a family. She takes up different roles such as maid, cook and attender to lead a life of respect. However, she is stripped off all dignity and reduced to a passive body that is forced into rape, lesbianism, undesired pregnancy and motherhood. Marikolanthu narrates that her mother worked as a cook at the elite Chettiar's house and soon she was employed as babysitter of Sujata Akka's son, the daughter-in-law of Chettiar. She received glass bangles, rolled gold chain, duplicate silk sari, wristwatch, cotton skirt and old anklets with few silver beads missing from Sujata Akka for her work. Marikolanthu says, "Sujata Akka made me her slave with her cast-off glass bangles. She wore them for a few days and then either got tired of them or broke so many that she had to buy a dozen new bangles. But to me they were precious possessions— red, blue and green, with purple flecks and silver dust" (Nair 228). The vibrant material environment of Marikolanthu speaks volumes on behalf of its voiceless subject. The things passed down are not really gifts, but items previously worn and now discarded by the owner. However, they add new meanings to Marikolanthu's life and acquire value. Despite her impoverished circumstances, the young Marikolanthu imagines a beautiful future that revolves around a happy family, respected femininity and motherhood. With a poignant naivety characteristic of her, she associates the possession of these items with social prestige and believes that these 'special gifts' elevate her social status. This aspirational attachment reveals how profoundly social value is mediated through objects.

The French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his influential work *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925) analyses that the recipient forms a bond of obligation with the giver once a gift is exchanged. A gift is forever tied to the giver. Its ownership mostly rests with the giver and regarding the receiver, there is an urgency to act reciprocate without delay. These goods are not inactive, instead they exert power on the receiver and necessitate the action to find another equivalent gift. In due course, the returned gift is also bound to the giver, creating a strong bond between the two people - eventually they own a part of each other. Mauss asserts, "one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul" (41).

The major transfer of goods happens through cycles of obligatory returns of gifts and consequently social ties are generated. Thus there is a constant exchange of essential or spiritual matters between two individuals, social ranks and generations. Mauss explains three key obligations surrounding gift exchange: "to give, to receive, to reciprocate" (50).

Mauss' concept of gift informs the complicated life situation faced by Marikolanthu. Accordingly, she has no right to refuse second hand gifts in the first place. The ownership, use and transfer of material objects signal how Marikolanthu internalises the cultural logic that equates possession with status. The obligation to return the gifts is also imperative so that Marikolanthu happily decides to present her material body- the very body she once decked by the gifts. Indebted to Sujata Akka, she even dares to become the surrogate wife of Sujata's husband, so that she is not disturbed by him.

So it was to preserve her happiness, her position in the household, her hold over Sridhar Anna that I welcomed Sridhar Anna into my body. As long as I fed his appetites, he would never seek another woman. As long as I was available, he would never trouble Sujata Akka on the days he was at home. As long as it was me, I would ask no more of him than what I already had. I was sister to the real thing and I desired no more" (Nair 232).

She sympathises with Sujatha's dissatisfaction and loneliness and feels the necessity to mitigate her suffering. She feels obliged to save Sujata - "I rained a million raindrops of sensual pleasure that she gathered with the thirst of one who is condemned to a desert for life and has lost all hope of ever chancing upon an oasis" (231). Marikolanthu compensates all the gifts she has taken from Sujatha by giving away her body to satiate the lust of both that wife and husband. The sacrifice and compulsion is nuanced.

The material things associated with her that adorn her body and ultimately her body itself are never owned by her. The material environment of Marikolanthu throws light into her life characterised by subjugation and exploitation. Tragic enough, they work as bad omens which signified her loss of virginity and social damage. They are reminders of all injustice and violence she endured in life. However, Marikolanthu demonstrates strength and reclaims her body and independence by shifting from her hometown. She repairs her body by dismissing ornaments and transforms her imposed or objectified femininity to an active self. Marikolanthu was no more than an object that was moved, used, transferred, exploited, traded and circulated by different people for their own benefits and pleasure. Nevertheless, she reclaims agency over her body and identity and subverts the oppressive structures. This transformation illustrates how material culture can move one from reinforcing subjugation to enabling quiet feminist resistance.

The Housewife Material: From Janaki's Utensils to Prabha's Cosmetics

Sarah Pink, in *Home Truths Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*, undertakes an extensive study on housework and explicates how mundane activities might be performative. First, gender performativity must be understood as a ritualised part expressed or internalised in everyday life and action. Second, agency coupled with intentionality is instrumental, that is she advocates for self consciousness along with gender performativity in housework. To be often self-conscious and part of performativity, but it must be recognized that this agency is not unfettered, it occurs in relation to the constraints of existing terms (or actions) of reference. Third, individual resourcefulness and imagination must be viewed as key forces in material to surmount existing conventional gendered approaches. This section probes into the material practices of domestic work and examines how continuity and change are created through everyday actions/objects in the home. It compares wives shaped by traditional and contemporary social contexts, tracing their confirming and revolutionary responses to established gender norms.

Married at the age of 18, Janaki Prabhakar recounts how her marriage evolved from initial repulsion to a comfortable companionship in the course of 40 years. Regarded as an ideal housewife by society, her life is a constant performance of traditional duties like observing rituals, cooking, cleaning, caring for her husband and son. Janaki's contemplations of a life post the death of the husband fills her with the fear of loneliness which demonstrates how societal expectations have trapped her into the role of a good wife and housewife, severing her longing for independence. She wishes to cocoon from the real world as "a weak, helpless creature...as a composed and contented woman" (35). Next, the narrative shifts to the life story of Akhila's mother who is portrayed as a perfect housewife who abides by all the traditional instructions. She is a woman who has deeply internalised patriarchal practices. Her everyday material routines stem from psychological conditioning rather than conscious choice. Her habits as well as actions sustaining the domestic order perpetuate benevolent patriarchy. She believes in a familial dynamic where an authoritarian male who is kind, protective and intelligent rules and a naive, selfless and infantilised woman comfortably attends to all his needs. Akhila's mother never realises that subtle oppression of women's autonomy is no different from overt repressive forces.

The repetitive material acts of their everyday life leads them to a habituated conformity. They obsessively perform kitchen work, observe rituals for the well-being of the family, aim for the contentment of the husband and live to gain acceptance from the society. The housewife identifies with her home, but feels isolated the moment she relaxes from her chores. When the husband dies or the children grow up, they are concerned about the loss of meaning in life and the house becomes a restrictive space. Hence, material practices that make their services available to other members are to

be continued and repeated. It is problematic that the choice they made during young age incapacitate them and construct a reality of a responsible housewife that denies agency and self awareness. The women in this system are also deprived of emotional capital - an ability to form and maintain intimate connections with oneself and others and end up being invisible in the material environment. In patriarchal cultures, many women are remembered not by name but by roles like wife or mother. Akhila's mother is never given a name, but referred to as Amma, representing an entire generation of traditional mothers. Curiously, Janaki's name is Sita's synonym, emphasising the image of a woman who is devoted to her husband and moves from father's care to husband's care to son's care. Here, Anita Nair juxtaposes two powerful cultural archetypes of ideal womanhood. *Amma* and *Janaki* encode the inheritance and transmission of female roles or identities as designed by a male chauvinistic society. Against these models, the author establishes the character of Prabha Devi, who is married but not typical.

Prabha Devi's quest becomes a search for a self beyond wifehood or motherhood. In conservative families unwed daughters, even though docile and well mannered, are a concern. Girls like Prabha Devi are trained to become good housewives and constantly reminded that failure to perform so would entail dangerous outcomes.

the true test of a woman lies in the curd she makes and even there Prabha Devi excelled...Her voice rose pleasingly full when she was asked to join in the singing at a puja. She walked with small mincing steps, her head forever bowed, suppliant, womanly (154).

Prabha Devi's role as a wife does not involve any domestic chores. She lives in abundance of jewellery and maids. But soon this respected wife also encounters the everyday experience of boredom and desolation resulting in looking for means to reject the available material forms. She turns away from kitchen utensils and satin bedsheets and exercises agency on her feminine elements like clothing and accessories. Prabha manifests empowerment through new material acquisitions - "the vials of perfume; a make-up kit; lingerie frothy with artificial lace" (160). She represents the housewife of contemporary times, who departs from the imposed tasks and unapologetically embarks on a journey that celebrates her femininity. She dreams to rule her life herself, swinging her hair and striding confidently. " Her daring acts of wearing heels, lipsticks, cosmetics and silky caftans with ornately embroidered designs are critical points in her journey towards self awareness. Initially she believes in protesting against the restrained role of traditional housewife. Adornments and sensual presentation of her body to become a desirable female is her conscious choice. Nonetheless, she understands that attracting male gaze is not the freedom she longs for. To be appreciated as a desirable female body is again conforming to the

patriarchal standards. It is important to clarify that cosmetics and accessories have not failed her or reduced her to objectification. Rather, these material experiments enable a process of learning and unlearning. The willingness to try, misjudge, reflect and recalibrate becomes evidence of genuine personal growth and independence. Material objects here function as mediators of self-knowledge rather than superficial indulgences or tokens of vanity. This process culminates in her decision to learn swimming. Unlike adornments, the swimming suit becomes her favorite material object that sets her body in motion, self control and balance. To float becomes a metaphor for sustaining her body on her own terms, free from the evaluative sexist gaze. The material environment repurposes her femininity as something lived, felt, and self-directed rather than socially prescribed.

Prabha Devi bares the reality of being a housewife—

He will pet you and cosset you at first, for after all, you are appealing to the male in him to protect and safeguard. But it will be only a matter of days before he turns into a tyrant who will want to control your every thought...There is an alternative. You could choose to demonstrate how independent you are and show him how well you manage by yourself ...I wish I knew. I wish my mother had told me what was the right thing to do. Or perhaps the truth is, she didn't know either ” (69).

The patriarchal structures produce a false sense of choice as well as consciousness in women. The negotiations with the material environments that are essentially counter sites to traditional patriarchal set up aids Prabha to redefine herself as a new mother. This new mother perceives that women ought to prioritise self consciousness and autonomy.

In conclusion, juxtaposing various theories of material culture, the paper dissolves the boundary between subject and object. The paper aimed to postulate women's acts of resistance in material objects and micro practices in domestic life, drawing on theories of material culture and gender. While an androcentrically organised society puts women's honor in precarity, treating women as 'objects', women find comfort and confidence in 'things'. Anita Nair's women hold onto their commonplace things, taken from everyday lives to reflect on their subjective consciousness, to survive and to retaliate. The things go beyond the material properties and assume a power of agency that they spread to the consciousness of women users. Unlike vocal protests, the material environment prepares women to denounce patriarchy in subtle ways, on a daily basis, clinging to the true self. Women's capacity to gain her freedom and authority is found to have been operating through a network of metaphorical objects and spaces. Ultimately, matter becomes the essence of subjectivity and thingness becomes a site that produces meaning. Women's things are not simply witnesses or metaphorical extensions, but active participants that help them embrace their power and vitality.

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