

RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH TRAVEL: A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE* AND VIKAS BAHL'S *QUEEN*

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Abstract:The research paper intends to do an in depth study into 'The reconstruction of female identity through the experience of travelling as it is portrayed in the female protagonists of Anita Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* and VikasBahl's movie *Queen*. Travelling proves to be a way to both Akhila, the female protagonist in *Ladies Coupe* and Rani, the heroine of the film *Queen* to encounter who they are, how much they can rise to, what they believe in, how they can come out of their shells and where they want to go defeating the societal expectations. These women characters with a spark in their minds, breaks down their boundaries and limits and moreover they continue to inspire women around the world. Both the novel and the movie prove that travelling enriches a woman's insights since it provides her with enormous unique experiences.

Keywords:Female identity, Ladies Coupe, Queen, Reconstruction, Travelling.

Introduction:Indian English language writer, Anita Nair describes in her novel *LadiesCoupe*, the journey of a middle-aged Indian Tamil Brahmin woman, Akhilandeshwari, single and an income-tax clerk, who has never been allowed to live outside her prescribed roles, decides to get a one-way train ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari, to be all alone for the first time in her life. But she shares the ladies coupe with five other women, who bring change in her life with their stories, in the space of a one night travel.

Queen is 2014 Indian Bollywood film directed by VikasBahl which tells the story of Rani Mehra, an under-confident girl from New Delhi who has never left her house alone, embarks on her honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam by herself after her fiancé calls off their wedding claiming that her conservative habits would be a wrong match for him since his life style has changed after living abroad. She slowly begins to gain confidence by taking control of her decisions and thus begins her self-discovery.

The novel and the film juxtapose the innocent ordinary women characters in the beginning and their transformation into strong, independent women at the end. The experiences of travel bring into their lives a complete difference and it made them stand out at the end. The female protagonists in both the primary texts are realizing their personal calls and are daring to move away from the norms and restrictions of the patriarchal society. They acquired an indefinable power after their solo travelling. The researcher choose these primary texts because in this world of rapid change the women like Akhila and Rani just take power rather than waiting for somebody to give it to them. Both these texts declare the undefeatable power of women and their determination to break down walls and to defy stereotypes.

The research paper throws light into the transformative power of travelling, the knowledge

one acquires through travelling which transforms the world around them. Transformation can be viewed as the journey of discovery and how magical travelling is to reaffirm the faith of women in themselves to protest against living under rules and prejudices and attitudes which keeps on destructing their own personal strength. It explores the tension of self-actualization which comes in conflict with familial responsibility in a society with traditional values.

In *Ladies coupe*, Anita Nair from the very beginning hints at the transformation that travelling could bring in the life of a woman,

"This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape. The long concrete corridor that stretches into the night segmented by signboards and the light and shadow of station lights. The moving hands of a clock beating an urgent rhythm to the din of mounted TV screens and the creak of trolleys laden with baskets and sacks. The crackling of the public address system as it hisses into life, announcing arrivals and departures."^[1]

Akhila is a sort of woman who often thought of this, of being part of a wave that pours into compartments and settles on seats, stowing baggage and clutching tickets, of sitting with her back to the world, with her eyes looking ahead. Similar is the situation with Rani Mehra whose ultimate aim in life is to marry. The life circumstances and the family backgrounds of both Akhila and Rani are similar, since they played certain roles assigned to them by the society forgetting their dreams. Both of them does what is expected of them and dreams about the rest. No one ever cared to ask them what their desires or dreams are. People close to them never considered them as women, someone who has needs and longings just like them. But both these women are hungry for life and experiences. The moment when these two women takes an independent decision, to travel alone, Akhila to Kanyakumari and Rani to Paris, begins the

reconstruction of their identities. They start off their journey seeking answers to many questions, predominant among them being, can a woman live by herself?

Ladies coupe and *Queen* puts forward the hindrances faced by women when they choose to travel alone. "Is she travelling alone or is someone going with her? A man, perhaps" [Nair 5]. The society finds it difficult to accept the idea of a woman travelling alone despite the fact that travelling actually helps her to grow. Women are not supposed to be subject to hustle and bustle, lecherous looks and groping hands that were part of the experience of standing in the general ladies queue. Society always demands husbands, or brothers, or fathers to guard, hovering in the periphery while their womenfolk stood, and hands knotting the ends of their sareepallus.

The novel and the movie proves that the women traveller's identity has no substantial meaning if she does not consider others. It is only in relation to others that she knows herself and her position in the world. She cannot fully participate in the world when she condemns herself to imaginary confinement. Akhila's initial reflections, on her and her life is made clear when she agrees with her mother,

"But when one lives in a society, one has to conform to its expectations. I am not one of those revolutionaries who can stand up to the world. I'm a simple woman. A widow. And I need to belong to the society we live in." [Nair 83]

All of Akhila's wondrous explorations and magical discoveries were locked within the fragile shell of an egg. But Akhila's life and views gets transformed hearing the stories of the other five passengers in the coupe starting with Janaki who believed that a woman's duty was to get married, to be a good wife and mother. She believed that the home was the woman's kingdom. But during her journey, all of a sudden she realises that her home ceased to interest her, none of the beliefs with which she had built her life around had any meaning. All the female characters that we see in the novel and the movie undergo reconstruction through the experiences that they gain through travelling.

The life experiences of Janaki make Akhila look deep into herself, and the purpose of her existence,

"So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity? Did her heart skip a beat when it saw a mango tree studded with blossoms? Did the feel of rain on her bare skin send a line of goose bumps down her spine? Did she sing? Did she dream? Did she weep for no reason?" [Nair 84]

Similarly Rani starts to identify herself when she made friends with Vijayalakshmi, a hotel staff. Vijay's attitude towards life surprised Rani and great realizations begins to strike her. Rani at every step

liberates herself from the psychological bondage imposed on her by her overbearing fiancé. She discovers a version of herself she didn't know existed. From a starry eyed young girl whose sole aim in life is marriage, to a woman who knows her mind and realizes there's much more to life, Rani's transformation is complete.

Women travellers like Akhila develop a separate feminine experience. She is been uprooted and most of the time thrown among radically unfamiliar surroundings. She is constantly challenged by the alien and tends to judge the new by the old familiar values, both personal and cultural. It is during this process that reconstruction of identity starts to take its shape. Different people have different stories to narrate and the battles that they fight is entirely different from one another and travelling is one way in which people get to know the life of others. Each confronting life and trying to make some sense of its uncertain lines. Through her journey, for the first time Akhilarealises that, along the pathway of life she is not the only traveller. There are others who need her help. There are feet to steady, hands to grasp, minds to encourage, hearts to inspire and souls to save. Reconstruction within Akhila begins when she starts thinking, "If they could somehow do that, as well as they knew best, why can't I?" [Nair 90]

Akhila discovers the fact that, once you stop worrying what the world will think of you, your life will become that much easier to live. Akhila was suddenly struck by the condition of individual lives. All the women she met during the course of her journey, she thought, Janaki, Sheela, and even Margaret who wears self-sufficiency as a halo, are trying to make some sense of their own existence by talking about it to anyone who will listen. Akhila's past starts to haunt her, the relationship that she had with Hari, who is younger than her but loved her so much, and the negligence that she had shown him fearing the society.

"Had she made a mistake when she gave up Hari? Or was it the right thing to have done? What was it that had held her back? How was she to shake off these crumbs of regret that still clung to her? Perhaps if I let myself, I too will arrive at happiness. A wild warming, a magic content, an inner peace, all from knowing that the past years haven't been in vain and what lies ahead will bring forth more than what I have resigned myself to accepting as my lot. Perhaps it is not too late, Akhila thought. That while what she had lost might be irretrievable, life would toss forth a second chance." [Nair 155]

The drastic change that a one night's travel bought in the life of an ordinary woman and her thought process becomes evident from the above paragraph. Akhila for the first time in her life starts to completely assure who she is, what she wants, what

she likes and what she don't. Travelling made Akhila a different person. It reconstructed her identity. She is not the Akhila who boarded the train last night. She starts to feel a heady anticipation that was the aftermath of all the revelations. She too decided to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its bank. Likewise, in *Queen* we see the gradual transformation of Rani, when she becomes friends with her roommates in Amsterdam, where at first she was horrified at the thought of having to share a room with three men. On her return to India, we see a confident and completely different Rani, who, on her way home from the airport, stops at the home of her fiancé to return the engagement ring. There is no bitterness, only relief and gratitude, when she hugs him one last time. Her self-actualization is complete. Although *Ladies Coupe* came in 2001 and *Queen* in 2014, there is a lot of similarity between these two

texts, since it deals with the same topic. This topic stands out to be very relevant in this 21st century since the women characters in the novel *Ladies Coupe* and the heroine of the movie *Queen* are strong, powerful and they stand as the symbol of success. Women travellers especially solo women travellers like Rani Mehra, the heroine of the movie *Queen*, have changed and there has been a considerable increase in their numbers when compared to the past ten years. It opens before them wide horizons of endless possibilities and it leaves a mark on them which will stay forever. The confidence for which these women are fighting can be easily achieved through travelling which is very important for the women as they walk into their life experiences with new eyes and different colours.

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