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## JOURNEY AS A MOTIF OF SELF DISCOVERY IN ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper intends to explore the theme of self discovery through the act of journey in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. Travel narratives are broad genres which illuminate mainly on people, place and culture. Journeys form the focal point of every travel narrative. In literature, the motif of journey is used as a distinctive idea or theme and is used to represent a character's epiphany or self realization. It provides a personal assertion outside the compressed state of one's life. Journey is seen as a means of confrontation and as an act of self discovery throughout the novel *Ladies Coupe*. *Ladies Coupe* deals with a woman's quest for strength and independence. Women should realize how important they are, not only at home but also in the society in which they live. They should assert their independence and identity. This can be achieved through the process of self discovery and journey is one of the means to achieve self discovery.

**Keywords:** Journey, Escape, Liberation, Identity, Self discovery

Journey is a frequent motif in literature. It provides experience, quest for self identity and one's own individuality and is a source of personal growth. Journey is an act that helps one to transgress the social, cultural, racial and ethnical boundaries that exist among communities. "We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls" (Nin 98). Traveling gives us the much awaited chance to discover new lives and new souls and through them the deepest parts of ourselves. Indeed sometimes one just needs to get lost on an introspective journey to find ourselves. When we travel we are the custodian of our time and we design our own journey which gives us the courage to take our life into our own hands and thus to pursue our dreams. Traveling make us to take complete responsibility for ourselves and our

actions reveal the immense strength we hold within ourselves and what we are capable of.

"We leave something of ourselves behind when we leave a place; we stay there, even though we go away. And there are things in us that we can find again only by going back there" (Mercier 243). Once we are exposed to the variety of cultures and mentalities of the world, we acquire a broad perspective which gives the freedom to step out of the society-constructed image of ourselves and to become the person who we really are. Moreover, travel fills our body, soul and mind with strength and positivity and all our thoughts, words, actions and emotions will then radiate from this inner core. *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* defines travel literature as:

Non fiction prose form that depends largely on the wit, powers of observation, and character of the traveler for its success. In the past centuries, the traveler tended to be an adventurer or a connoisseur of art, landscape, or strange customs who may also have been a writer of merit. (Kuiper 1128)

Travel narratives are prose forms which are written out of traveler's personal experience and they are considered as an important genre of literary study. They are records of places, people and events of a particular region from the traveler's point of view.

Roy Bridges, a critic on travel narrative comments on the significance of the genre in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*:

Travel writing... has a complex relationship with the situations in which it arouse. It is taken to mean a discourse to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture. Travel writing may embrace approaches ranging from an exposition of the results of scientific exploration claiming to be objective and value free to be frankly subjective description of the impact of an area and its people on the writer's sensibilities. (53)

In philosophy, the journey is more valuable than the destination. The benefits of journey can emerge from the self knowledge and experiences developed on the way. Many philosophers praise journey as a means to broaden the horizons as well as learning and enhancing intelligence. Journey is a source of self exploration and a cause of experience and memories. It improves sociability and thus strengthens the human society.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* communicates the theme of self discovery through journey. It illustrates the life of Akhila and how she discovers herself through a train journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. So the paper explains how the protagonist Akhila attains self discovery through the act of journey.

Anita Nair, an Indian English writer, explores the feminine consciousness of the women characters and enriches their inner self. The novel *Ladies Coupe* portrays the problems of women at varied socio-

economic levels and age groups in the society. The title of the novel *Ladies Coupe* seems much interesting. Ladies coupe is a compartment in a train that is reserved for women. In this coupe Akhila, the protagonist begins her journey from Bangalore along with five other women. Even though they confine to a minimal space, their thoughts and words are beyond boundaries. Journey can be seen as a desire or need to escape from the current situation: inner conflicts or external obstructions. In *Ladies Coupe*, Nair uses journey as an act of confrontation to realities of life.

In the Bangalore Cantonment Station, she gets obsessed by the station life and the strange mixture of emotions that make up its special atmosphere. The novel begins with the description of a railway station and it connects to the idea of women's liberation.

This is the way it has always been: the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape.... Akhila has often dreamt of this. Of being part of such 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. Of leaving. Of running away. Of pulling out. Of escaping. (1)

Akhila gets fed up with her multiple roles of daughter, sister, aunt, sister-in-law and the only provider of the family. "She was always an extension of someone's identity. Chandra's daughter; Narayan's Akka; Priya's aunt; Murthy's sister-in-law...Akhila wished for once someone would see her as a whole being" (200). So she decides to take up a journey in order to break away from all the constraints that pull her back and thus making her a different woman. By living in a pre-determined world, neither is she free to capture her goals, nor to convert her dreams into realities. Hungry for life and experience, yearning to content, she sets out for a journey. Anita Nair chooses a ladies compartment as the setting of the novel. There she meets five other women, who have some stories to tell. Even though they differ from each other, their stories have got a common thread, the tragic situation of Indian women in a male dominated society. All these

stories are an endeavour to answer Akhila's problematic question: Whether a woman can stay single and be happy? For Akhila, an answer to this question was an attempt to find her own identity: "So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all? If she did, what was her identity?" (84).

Akhila takes up the responsibility of her family after her father's death. As time passes her brothers Narayana and Narashiman and her sister Padma takes the gear of their own lives and neglects her. But the meeting with one of her school friends, Karpagham gives Akhila a kind of confidence to embark a new life. So she decides to do something that she has not done before and thus she takes a train ticket to Kanyakumari all alone. "Akhila felt a great desire to board a train. To leave. To go somewhere. Land's end, perhaps. Kanyakumari" (3). Kanyakumari is not a mere tourist spot for Akhila, but it is a perfect place for her mental state. It is a place of much significance, as Nair points out:

At Kanyakumari, the three seas meet. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. A quiet male ocean flanked by two restless female seas. Akhila had heard of how it was at Kanyakumari, only then it was called Cape Comorin, that Vivekananda flung himself into the churning waters and the salts of the three seas and swam to a rock upon which he sat resolutely, waiting for answers that had eluded him all his life. She had read that at Kanyakumari, the goddess, like her, had put her life on hold. And that the beach there was made up of multi-coloured sand; the fossilized remnants of a wedding feast that was never served or eaten. (3)

Through *Ladies Coupe*, Anita Nair brings out the strength which every individual possess. Though women do not disclose their life stories to others, the protagonist Akhila gets to know her fellow passengers in the ladies coupe, which offers an intimate space which she shares with five other women, Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela and Marikolanthu in her train journey to Kanyakumari. During the journey, Akhila seeks their help in solving her dilemma- whether a woman needs a man to complete her or whether she can

stay single and be happy. They advise her and ask her to decide for herself. These experiences help Akhila to break away from the chains of multiple identities as daughter, sister, aunt and provider. Finally it helps her to live her life and thus to assert her identity. She is courageous enough to break away from her old self. At the end of her journey her dilemma comes to an end. She realizes that she needs a man for companionship, a partner who would share her ups and downs. This realization makes Akhila to get back in touch with the guy she fell in love with.

The train journey provides Akhila with new experiences and observations. The simple act of buying breakfast from a station was a kind of transformation for Akhila. Upon Prabha Devi's words, who says "What is the point in coming to a new place if we do everything the way we do it at home?" Akhila tries foods which are strange to her, "gingerly placing a piece of appam in her mouth" (167). She never knew that she liked 'the aroma of food wrapped in banana leaf' and wonders "how strange it is that someone has to tell us what we like and what we don't" (167). Here she emerges as a woman of choices. Akhila discovers her likes and dislikes and establishes her own identity, moving away from the socially prescribed norms. Thus her journey to Kanyakumari was an act of liberation and self discovery.

Through the journey, she becomes free to imagine much new possibilities for her life. Before the journey, Akhila has done only "what is expected of her; she dreams about the rest. Which is why she collects epithets of hope like children collect ticket stubs. To her, hope is enmeshed with unrequited desires" (1-2). The old Akhila is described as: "So this then Akhila. Forty-five years old. Sans rose-colored spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect" (2). When she arrives at the railway station, "She felt her lips stretch into a smile.... I will board a train and allow it to lead me into a horizon I will not recognize" (8). As she reaches Kanyakumari, she gets the courage to act, act according to her will and finally she decides to live a life of her own. Through the journey, Akhila undergoes a development from which she gains

greater understanding about life. The novel also focuses on women's search for freedom and identity.

After traveling in an enclosed space in the train, Akhila faces the vast ocean and the sea breeze of Kanyakumari, which symbolizes her shift from a closed space to the openness of the world and its immense possibilities. She got transformed and now she wants to be "Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother" (206). Akhila symbolizes the woman's quest for space and identity. She is traveling alone for the first time in order to break away from the conservative upbringing she has had. The narrative of Akhila's co-passengers in the coupe strengthens her and she becomes determined. Akhila acquires championship in life by the end of her journey through the pursuit of self discovery. She finally wipes out the influence of patriarchal society, finds her strength, asserts herself and wins her right to live independently without the constraint of responsibilities. When she reaches Kanyakumari, she emerges as a new Akhila who has successfully discovered her own self and identity.

Akhila has no more fears. Why then should she walk with a downcast head? She throws her head back and voices her triumph. The young man stands by the door and asks, 'Shall I come back tomorrow?' Akhila smiles. He hasn't even asked her what her name is. Which is exactly how she wants it. (275)

Akhila becomes independent in Kanyakumari, where she gains the courage to contact Hari, the man she has sacrificed once in order to avoid the prejudice of the society. The air of her new found confidence makes her call Hari and thus through this act, she is trying to confront her past. "The telephone on the table near the bed rings. Akhila walks towards it. Her heart races. She wonders: could it be him? Hari's voice is low and cautious; incredulous, too. 'Hello,' she says. 'This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari'" (276).

Hari answers the call but Anita Nair chooses not to disclose what he has said. The narrative is open ended. Whatever it might be, a new Akhila is born, with immense potential and grace, capable of building a new life for herself. After the life changing

journey, Akhila highlights her name at the end as if her identity has been restored and decides to live for herself and thus to pursue her dreams. "There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered" (270). Thus, the journey here transforms and evolves Akhila as a woman of self identity.

The journey in *Ladies Coupe* provides the opportunity to challenge the conservative society and to revise the cultural prescriptions. It helps the central character to discover her inner strength, revise her identity and assert her autonomy. She discovers herself for who she is and the traits and emotions she obtain, that makes her the person that she is. At the end of the novel, we realize that every person possess some fine qualities and inner power which they are unaware of and it can be brought out through the process of self discovery, achieved as a result of a journey. Anita Nair affirms that through the act of journey, the woman keeps growing and expanding her horizon as a being and has grown into a deeper and richer state of existence. By using the motif of journey, she is making the woman to shift from a state of confined space to a wider space of openness.

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