Spatio Temporal Conflicts and Adjustments in Aritha Van Herk’s No Fixed Address and Rohinton Mistry’s Such A Long Journey

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Abstract: Canadian and Indian English writing has long been grounded in spatiotemporal specificity yet a reverse trend has also developed where the travels and journeys of the protagonists across regions and landscapes ultimately led into inner worlds of consciousness. Canadian and Indian writing conventions might form what can be artistically described as a collage where multihued, multilingual, multi ethnic experiences congregate and evolve. The experiences of expatriates and emigrants also form a part of this tapestry. The metaphor of travel, journey whether outward or inward has been a powerful motif in postcolonial writing providing creative fodder to artistically inclined writers but all works depicting journeys need not be action packed, movement oriented, result specific. The varied response of writers to spatio temporal issues can be best discussed by taking as specimens, Aritha Van Herk’s No Fixed Address, an out rightly feminist, action packed, picaresque, revolutionary text depicting an outward journey as well as a mental travesty simultaneously for its spirited protagonist Arachne Manteia. Rohinton Mistry, an Indian settled in Canada, also treats the issue of spatio temporal grounding, more specifically the ambiguous Phoenix like search for ‘home territory’, in the trials and travails of Gustav Noble in Such A Long Journey. Gustav, though grounded in a changing world, continues to persevere in bringing order into an insane world not by physically crusading for it but placing his trust in the long established conventions and divine interventions. My paper seeks to examine the varied use of the metaphor of ‘travel’ employed by the two writers in their canonical texts and their varied treatment of the same timeless theme of ‘Home is where we have to gather Grace’.

Key words: picaresque; journey; expatriate; alienation; dilemma; quest

Since time immemorial, creative writers have been preoccupied by, obsessed with, entangled in and mulled over the theme of the elusive ‘Quest’ which has sometimes manifested itself in the form of search for the Holy Grail, at other times the quest for the pious Holy land or the desire for the elusive homeland, the Utopian world or even the divine beloved. This motif of ‘Quest’ usually has the concept of a ‘Journey’ whether it be physical, mental, spiritual or metaphorical, attached with it. Every quest commences with a journey and culminates in either success or failure or an epiphany. The journey acts as a catalyst to help the
protagonist understand his life and times better. A powerful literary genre associated with journeys is picaresque fiction which emerged with Cervantes’ Don Quixote, continues to be avidly used by popular writers even today in its conventional usage as well as new intermixtures.

Another important aspect related to modern literature writing especially in the post colonial context, is the importance of locale, setting, backdrop, which in the hands of modern writers has been portrayed as powerfully as flesh and blood characters. No longer is the background setting irrelevant, it demands and achieves, as much attention as the characters. Human entanglement with nature and his surrounding environs has also gone up, an excellent example of which can be seen in Arachne’s engrossment with maps and geographical land area in No Fixed Address. “Arachne looks down at the slow ground and thinks of travelling, spidering her own map over the intricate roads of the world.” (223) Let me also emphasise over here that the Canadian mindset is influenced by its colossal vastness and emptiness of landscape which breeds vacuity, while the sheer complexity and diversity of the Indian landscape bespeaks creative engagement.

Colonization of one half of mankind by the other half has also had a powerful impact on the psyche of the colonized which in turn has left a remarkable imprint on the creative writer and tinted the lens with which he views the world. Commencing with Heart of Darkness, the post colonial experience has engaged creative writers like no other theme and questions of patriotism, gender, identity, subalternism and nationality have also intermingled with the colonial discourse.

Reverting back to the oft employed metaphors of ‘Quest’ and ‘Journey’, we now examine two modern masterpieces from disparate backgrounds and countries which wrestle with spatio temporal concepts of time and place and reveal how each protagonist achieves his nirvana by disparate methods. Here, it is important and ironical to note that the two authors, Aritha Van Herk and Rohinton Mistry, in spite of their disparate backgrounds, cultural identities and world views, are presently residents of the same country, Canada.

The first work under scrutiny is Aritha Van Herk’s No Fixed Address(1986) with an iconoclast protagonist Arachne Mantea whose name carries mythological overtones of the famous weaver from Ovid’s
Metamorphoses who had defeated the Goddess Athena in a weaving contest and after vainly gloating over her artistic perfection, was doomed to be turned into a spider. Her surname ‘mantea’ in Latin refers to pickpocketing. Structurally, No Fixed Address is a post modern text with narrative innovation, magic realism, an episodic structure with 68 chapters of varying length of which 21 are in flashback, Gothic overtones, picaresque like delineations and all the hallmarks of a bildungsroman. The chief link between disparate incidents is the central character, Arachne, a lady of indeterminate age, an unlikely heroine who lives by her own rules, an unfeminine, muscularly built woman sans make up and other female trappings, a confirmed adulterer always on the lookout for road-jockeys, a scarred child of East end, an unlikely and stubborn bus driver, a wildly successful lingerie seller with as much self assurance and optimism as a mouse.

Arachne, an unwanted child of parents from a disadvantaged background has known and seen it all even before she reaches adulthood. She hides her dissatisfaction with life by donning the mundane uniform of a bus driver but there is light at the end of the tunnel after her chance meeting with the urbane, sophisticated, cultured Thomas Tefler. Her urban nightmare promises to have a Cinderella like ending but for her own stubborn resistance. She becomes a lingerie seller to satisfy her craving for finding new places on the map, picks up people off the road to satisfy her nocturnal cravings, befriends and kidnaps a 90 year old finally landing up on the wrong side of law. Killing, theft, knock outs are all in her realm for she had headed a street gang christened ‘Black Widows’ during her childhood years. “No Fixed Address challenges established representations of Woman through its portrayal of Arachne, an amoral underwear salesperson, who indulges in the pleasures of a nomadic existence” (Goldman, “Earth-quaking” 36).

Arachne is her own arch enemy and when the world rebukes, she kicks back with all her might. Her only redeeming feature is her obsession with maps, her relentless desire to keep travelling, her passionate attachment towards her sole material possession, a vintage Mercedes. For her, movement is the only alternative to stifling immobility and emotional death.

No Fixed Address (An Amorous Journey) can be read as an overtly feminist treatise. “The text engages in a feminist, subversive appropriation of the motifs of mapping and exploration to effect the deterritorialization of maps plotted by
established, patriarchal discourses.” (Goldman, Paths 134) Exploration and mapping are historically associated with men, women being omitted on the explorers’ side and often on the side of the explored as well. What can be traced in feminist literature dealing with landscape and its geographical representation is that land has often been equalled with being female, e.g. in phrases such as ‘the virgin land’ so the masculine explorer out to discover new lands can be read as attempting to conquer female space.

Van Herk’s Arachne is a much loved and much despised literary figure. Her amorality, rebelliousness and tough stands evoke strong criticism as well as rave reviews. “Arachne’s sexual encounters are both an inversion of the sexual stereotype of the male predator and a means of erasing boundaries between male/female, black/white, self/other, young/old, and alive/dead. All of these binaries are invoked and the borders between them are broken.” (Miller) Her defiance is reminiscent of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter while her travelling streak might be equated to that of Defoe’s Moll Flanders.

At the other end of the spatio temporal spectrum is Gustad Noble in Rohinton Mistry’s Such A Long Journey(1991), the book borrowing its title from T.S.Eliot’s famous poem Journey of the Magi. Rohinton’s masterpiece depicts the life of a common clerk in an Indian bank in times of national pandemonium. His family name, Noble gives inkling into some of his sterling qualities. He is honest, hardworking, religious, punctual, and responsible though a trifle short tempered. As the novel unfolds, his troubles multiply with an errant elder son, a mooning younger son making up to his worst neighbours’ offspring, a sick young daughter, a grievously ill friend, another absconding friend, and the background of a full fledged war at the frontiers of India. Gustad’s cup of worries keeps brimming over and his nostalgia for the lost past keeps threatening his repose and forbearance.

Gustad faces the chaos of early morning traffic in Bombay to reach his office everyday, braves the temptations of a brothel to take his daughter to the family physician for that elusive cure, attempts to sanitise a polluted urban environment, has his eureka moment when he gets a dirty, smelly compound wall turned into a rarefied meeting of deities from all religious faiths, resists the temptation to snip off some portion for himself from a neat kitty of ten lakh rupees, braves bawdy jokes from his colleagues and threatening glares from his boss, overcomes a broken hip and a bankrupt family, the abracadabra
of a superstitious spouse, a fire and a police firing to eventually come to terms with his life and, perhaps unknowingly, internalize and accept an observation made by the street artist, that many of mankind's troubles arise from our attempts to deny the fact of the impermanent nature of the universe and to impose our ideas of permanence in its place.

Both Herk and Mistry work on disparate locales, disparate characters, backgrounds and stories but both share common concerns over the issue of spatio temporal identity, man’s position in the universe and order of things, problems of earthly conflict and adjustments. Both the writers tackle the metaphysical question of the value of the individual in a largely hostile and uncaring environment as well as the ultimate epistemological question of the worth of human life and learning. Mistry’s Gustad never ventures beyond the environs of Bombay except a brief two day trip to Delhi but we see Gustad’s internalization of his spatial concerns during his daily trips. Problems ranging from metaphysical to familial, crisscross in his mind in the midst of the great urban melee. The squalor, dirt, meanness of urban life nauseates him; the concept of human nobility seems belittling in the midst of defecating and fornicating humanity. The ideal world of his childhood perpetually returns and haunts him. He turns towards the past to visualize his ideal life and lowers his head in humbleness at the might of adverse circumstances.

On the other hand, Herk’s Arachne criss-crosses the Canadian prairies selling ladies’ lingerie, way laying available young men, never returning to the same town in a hurry, bravely facing the extremities of weather and vagaries of nature, mentally tussling with her wayward past, attempting to give up her rebelliousness and confirm to domesticity, pursuing an unconventional profession and lifestyle, firmly refusing to let herself loose her originality and slip into a stereotype. She constantly ruminates about her weak background and wonders what destiny holds in store for her. Where Gustad walks in the urban jungle, Arachne rampages in the wilderness with her Gothic fascination for graveyards and funerals. Both of them search for meaning in their life and the surrounding landscape becomes a medium to further their quest for self-knowledge. The quest for self-identity and realisation of their position in the world haunts and drives both these protagonists.

Both Gustad and Arachne have been moulded and branded by their past, Gustad by its gentility and nobility while Arachne by its meanness and its
inferiority. Both literary creations touch upon multicultural issues in their surrounding environment in variegated ways. Arachne touches upon the dominant Canadian concern of racialism when she briefly takes on a black lover while Mistry entangles with the dominant Indian problem of religious discord.

Gustad braves challenges by taking refuge in religion and normalcy while Arachne’s response to the closing in walls around her is complete break down and liberation. In the days after Arachne is on the run from police, not just her psyche but the entire structure of her thought suffers a break down. “It is a sudden dismantling of oppositions between outside and inside, between realist and fantastic fiction, between omniscient and fictionalized self-conscious narrator, that totally exposes the textual construction and unveils the text as a postmodern artifact.” (Darias-Beautell, “Panties” 157)

Arachne’s narrative is non linear, circular, shifting gears backwards and forwards, between first and third person narrator, between emotional confessions and stolid indifference while Gustad’s narrative plods on uniformly with faint peeps down memory lane but firmly rooted in reality with no magic realism, gothic underpinnings, no downright rebelliousness against the ways of the world. In spite of utmost pressure, his world never splinters and shatters.

To return to the spatio temporal concerns of the two authors, Aritha Van Herk’s fascination for landscape and cartography is legendary. Her sketching of the Canadian landscape is both attractive and repulsive, alienating and soul searching. Rohinton Mistry has also truthfully depicted the rainbow colours of Indian life which sometimes deepen into gloom and at others lighten into gaiety. Herk makes the landscape a macrocosm of Arachne’s concerns while the environs of Khodadad building become a microcosm containing the crux of all of Gustad’s earthly concerns.

Arachne’s response to the growing burden of spatio temporal concerns, expectations and responsibilities is to disappear, almost like a sage walking over water to glide away into the horizon while Gustad’s response to deepening gloom and anxiety is to plod on persistently, look for and cherish his little bit of sunshine and forget deeper existential anxieties “in a world where roadside latrines become temples and shrines, and temples and shrines become dust and ruin, does it matter where?”(Mistry, 338)
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