

Tracing the Entrails of Travel and Trauma

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Abstract— The paper centres on the concept of travel and its impact on the triple elements of gender, geographies and expositions of trauma therein. The article begins with an introduction outlining the concerns related to the topic, the fictional narrative and the theoretical lens chosen for the analysis. The second part of the essay examines the prospect of cultural mutability in changing landscapes. The third section traces the trajectory of the trauma of travelling across geographies. The conclusion attempts to answer the questions proposed for enquiry in the introduction.

Index Terms— Clavis aurea, geographies, gender, peregrination, trauma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nonpareil in its multiteity of life forms, phenomenal in its virtuosity as the nurturer sustaining all entities – animate and inanimate, terra firma is a marvel which defies definitional exactitude. The desire to explore the biosphere to savour its awe-inspiring topographical architectonics or to pursue pecuniary progression has impelled expeditions, voyages and emigration. Travel then becomes a gateway to widen one's horizons in pursuit of a cherished eidolon. But does travel bestow the benefits sought by travellers equitably? Probing into the farraginous facets of travel, this paper shall attempt to contemplate on and contextualize the imbrication of themes like – travel and gender, travel and geography and trauma narratives by placing the novel *Tell It to the Trees* by Indian-Canadian author Anita Rau Badami as its textual reference. This essay seeks to examine the following concerns: Is a sojourn across geographies a clavis aurea for women? Do geographies with their unfathomable diversity facilitate or frustrate an individual's efforts to dovetail into landscapes that they find themselves in due to compelled choices? What is the crux when a woman pilloried by her acquiescent mindscape tries to tread the unrelenting external landscape in the hope of redeeming herself from her agonizing actuality? Thus,

the intertwined thrust areas of travel, geography, gender and narratives of trauma present a case for recording perceptions of tracing the entrails of travel through the pernicious pathways of peregrinations through the theoretical lens of intersectionality.

II. KALEIDOSCOPIC LANDSCAPES AND CULTURAL IMMUTABILITY

Tell It to the Trees chronicles its protagonist Suman's travel history from Madras in the south to Agra in the north of India. Her travel beyond the city of residence was limited to the temple town of Tirupati, chaperoned by her aunt Madhu Kaki. The city of Agra charms her with its iconic landmark – the Taj Mahal. The trip also accords her an opportunity to clandestinely be a part of the rituals observed as part of the Hindu festival of Karva Chauth in her friend Lalli's grandparents' home. With their faces veiled to evade detection by the older women, the seventeen-year-old girls join the married women and wait with them “to glimpse the sharp crescent of the new moon as it fell from the sky into their mirrors. It was forbidden for them to stare up at that silver C of light – I have no idea who forbade them, or why” (Badami 19). Her participation in the alien cultural observance inspires Suman to envision an identity beyond how she or the world perceived her. She avers:

I gazed at my face dimly reflected in the mirror. I. Such a sliver of a word to hold the meaning and the matter of all that I was and would be. I believed that I was tougher than that frail stick of a word, I could leap over its scrawny boundaries; I could become more than I was (Badami 40).

The excursion to Agra beyond the familiar cityscape of Madras where she resided, enthuses Suman with the ardour of claiming her spot in the sky. But her vibrant dynamism is fugacious when it is vitiated by the cultural vibes she had been inculcated with. Notwithstanding the kinetic kaleidoscopic landscapes,

she had marvelled at, it is the static cultural ethos that dictates her aspirations. Suman divulges her prayer during her surreptitious participation in Karva Chauth: I too sent up a prayer to the wild-haired, ash-clothed God to send me a husband who would carry me away from my small life in one of the back alleys of the world...I too wished to be borne away on horseback, in a train, or a plane even in an ox-drawn cart if nothing else was available, by a man who would allow me to expand my boundaries, beyond that stick-insect of an I, who would show me the world, who would love me into being more than what I was (Badami 43).

Cultural geography overwhelms and unsettles the opening up of new horizons that travel offers to an individual. The opportunity to break free from the shackles of socialisation is compromised to reinforce submission to an androcentric perception of the world. The events thereafter – Lalli's wedding with an exorbitant dowry and the young bride found hanging thereafter – agonize Suman, but she refuses to let her grief bog her down and keeps her streak of adventurous spirit alive. On graduating at twenty, the young lady has aspirations to achieve and sidelines the proposition of marriage. She says, "I still wanted other things then – to study some more, to find a job... to travel to strange places with names like New York, Trafalgar Square, Down Under, the Arctic and the Antarctic. I wanted and wanted everything that was out of reach" (Badami 42). Suman's statement proves that she considered marriage as the stereotypical destiny of girls a cacodoxy and sought to be solivagant exploring the globe. But Suman's "subject positioning" (Williams 9) in the social terrain with its prepotent gender hegemony disallows her to create possibilities which are puissant. The intersection of gender, the journey of self-discovery and cultural ideologies curtail the individual's endeavour to create an unallied self and instead culls out "self as a cultural reality" (Felski 78). As a result, Suman subjugates her 'self' to the confines of cultural conventions. She acknowledges:

I was part of a tight-knit, contained universe where everybody lived within an unwritten code of conduct the knowledge of which came to us with our mother's milk, was dinned into our skulls at every opportunity by our elders, inhaled from the virtuous, dusty air we breathed ... Forgiveness was not part of our vocabulary and to be cast out of our close-knit community was akin to being disowned by your own

mother, or, in my case, my father – an unbearable thing. It was like being exiled from the world, sent out alone into the unknowing silence of outer space.

It filled me with fear (Badami 44).

While the journey beyond the boundaries of her city of residence ignites her innate tendency to explore, her ingrained tendency of subscribing to gender norms pushes her to genuflection. In her attempt to remain acceptable within her community – the social world she inhabits, she discards her discernment. A discerning individual who questions societal norms is always an outcast because she or he is deemed abnormal. Mokokoma Mokhonoana aptly asserts that "A 'normal person' is what is left after society has squeezed out all unconventional opinions and aspirations out of a human being."

III. THE TRAUMA OF TRANSCENDING GEOGRAPHIES

Oppression has not only a when, but a where" (Grzanka 99). Patrick R. Grzanka in his essay "Space, Place, Communities, And Geographies", focuses on "the role those particular environments play in engendering privilege and disadvantage... (and) the ways in which the particulars of landscapes and geographies create sites of oppression" (99). The narrative in the novel *Tell It to the Trees* shows the impact of physical and social terrain on the psychological terrain of individuals. Though the locality where Suman lived was crowded and filthy, she like the teeming populace there had learnt to negotiate the place as well as the social space with its gender-specific curtailments. The passive acceptance of her ubiety privileges her. She declares:

We humans had learned to walk those streets like gods, omniscient, with eyes and ears all over our heads, always aware of that steaming pile of cow or dog shit to be avoided, the rickshaw or the scooter, the car or the bullock-cart, the thieves and the beggars, the touts and the vendors. We saw and heard everything and negotiated our lives through it all without too much damage to our bodies or souls. I can say with complete certainty that despite the dirt and the chaos and the lack of finery, we had that one thing that most people spend a lifetime looking for and never finding: happiness (Badami 18).

Matrimony makes Suman travel beyond the boundaries of the Indian sub-continent leaving behind

the world that she had been familiar with. She arrives at Merrit's Point, a nondescript small town in Northern British Columbia. On her arrival in an alien land, she is appalled by her husband Vikram's hostile reception at the airport simply because she had smiled at a man who had smiled at her. The scenic landscape comforts Suman after she encounters Vikram's cruelty. "That fresh air, the soaring mountains, the dark green trees. I forgot the cruelty that he had displayed only a short time before" (Badami 88). But the consolation that nature offered her was limited to summer and she detested the frozen landscape, its cessation of life and her matrimonial home where she had been incarcerated for eight years, enduring the physical violence and abuse perpetrated against her by the man she had married. Suman's mother-in-law Akka called Merrit's Point "Jehannum – the Urdu word for Hell" (Badami 103) The incapacitated old woman, bound to her wheelchair exhorts her daughter-in-law to run away from her son's demonic atrocities and offers Suman all the jewellery and money she had in her possession. Suman's step-daughter Varsha hides her step-mother's passport to prevent her from leaving. Her biological mother, Vikram's first wife had left them unable to bear the life of spousal torture and violence.

The place she lives is one from which she cannot escape, ostensibly because she had no access to her passport. Suman expresses her helplessness when she says:

So here I am stuck in a world full of borders and boundaries, unable to travel because I can't show proof of my identity to the people who guard the entryways and exits. It is not enough to say, I am Suman, daughter of a beloved man, wife of a hated one. I still need a piece of paper with my photograph, stamped by the government of a country. Without that I am nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian, my custodian, my prison (Badami 122).

"A world full of borders and boundaries" (Badami 122) is synonymous with how "visible" and "invisible power" (Gaventa 29) operates in social spaces that can again diversify into "smooth" and "striated spaces" (Deleuze and Guattari 479). John Gaventa elucidates the dynamics involved in the functioning of places and spaces. "Inherent also in the idea of spaces and places, is also 'the imaginary boundary'. Power relations help to shape the boundaries of participatory spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter, with

which identities, discourses and interests" (26). Suman's identity is shaped by the compelling gender roles that patriarchy inflicts on women. In her role as the devoted daughter, her deference towards the filial honour stops her from returning to her marital home lest her breaking free from matrimony sullied her father's honour. Being a dutiful wife, she was the custodian of her family's honour and was bound by duty to keep the domestic violence she suffered a secret from outsiders. In her place as the mother to her step-daughter Varsha and biological son Hemant, daughter-in-law to her ailing mother-in-law she was their caregiver which made her an indispensable as well as the most vulnerable entity in the familial space. These gender roles construe compelling images of women and conceding to them, women involuntarily construct "the imaginary boundary" (Gaventa 24). Once the boundaries are demarcated, the interplay of "visible and hidden power" (Gaventa 29) denies access to women to places and spaces of power. Gaventa explains that "visible power includes the visible and definable aspects of political power – the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions (29). Terming "invisible power" as the most "insidious", Gaventa states that: invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation by influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo – even their own superiority or inferiority. Process of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe (29).

Intimidated by "invisible power", Suman accepts her exclusion from "smooth space – an environment, a landscape (vast or microscopic) in which a subject operates" (Deleuze and Guattari 479). A subjugated subject like Suman is devoid of agency and hence the space she is placed in is "striated space – that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, organizes horizontal lines...with vertical planes" (Deleuze and Guattari 479). Suman's gendered identity is the fixed element around which her stereotypical roles, dependent status, illuminating flashes reminding her of her education empowering her to chart her own course, her instant relapsing into passivity ordained by patriarchy are variable elements that criss-cross to imprison her in what Patricia Hill Collins terms

“matrix of domination” in the “striated space” (Deleuze and Guattari 479) of the domestic arena she exists in, be it her natal home in India or her marital home across geographies at Merrit’s Point.

IV. CONCLUSION

Tell It to the Trees hints at elements of the landscape too – the trees, colluding with the functional dynamics of place and space to perpetuate oppression. To keep up the façade of family honour, Akka the matriarch instructs her granddaughter Varsha to confide the family’s dark secrets to the trees in the wilderness because they would retain confidentiality. When ideologies of gender inequality are emblazoned in the mindscape of women the sojourn they undertake beyond known geographies, does not capacitate them with a *clavis aurea*. Instead of opening up new vistas, the journey puts them in jeopardy in an alien landscape. The pervasive, persuasive and permissive power of innocuous cultural conditioning transcends geographies, impeding an individual’s efforts to escape from the oppugnant aura of the unacquainted topography. Its relentless rebuttal of recalcitrance ensures denial of exploring new possibilities for women in a familiar socio-cultural and geographical landscape as well. An acquiescent mindset annuls discernment essential for eliminating internal conflicts. The internal chaos generates a mental miasma, which in perception extends to the external landscape making it impossible to negotiate the space, in the hope of redeeming oneself from misery. Thus, protean and promising peregrinations are rendered pernicious due to the carceral character of culture.

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