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Women As An Island: A Feminist Re-Reading Of Aritha Van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere*

R. Preethi Vaishnavi^a, Dr. S. Ramya^b

^a Research Scholar, P.G. and Research Department of English, Kunthavai Naacchiyaar Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Thanjavur-613007, Tamil Nadu, India.

^b Research Adviser, P.G. and Research Department of English, Kunthavai Naacchiyaar Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Thanjavur-613007, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract

This paper delves into the boundaries of fiction writing and beyond, examining how geography impacts the entire plot of the novel, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, by attributing human characteristics to physical areas. The enthralling fact revealed in Aritha Van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere* is that geography allows for the re/reading of gender. The novel enables emancipation from servitude and establishes connection. The geographical locale transforms into the physical space that makes the unseen visible, so allowing for freedom of choice and action in an environment devoid of intervention. "Women as an island" is a fictitious concept that articulates a possible alternative for women in forging female identity through shared experiences and bonding through mental mapping and dream geography, which resulted in the establishment of a feminine utopia. The imagined construct of Ellesmere gives place to the growing concept of "woman as an island." Ellesmere, with its unreachability and cartographic portrayal, beckons self-fulfillment and self-expression.

Keywords: Women, Geography, Identity, History, Gender, Feminism, Desire.

1. Introduction

Aritha Van Herk is a sensitive and astute female writer who has established a name for herself in the Canadian literary scene. She is always experimenting with fiction writing, pioneering a new mode of conveying feminine problems. Her female heroes are perpetually on the lookout for liberty and space. In her writing, she strives to reconcile fiction and critical theory through the use of 'fictocriticism,' a technique that combines reality and fiction and blurs the border between fiction and theory. She coined the term *geografictione*, a hybrid Canadian-Italian word that combines geography and fiction in order to fictionalize geography through her lived experiences and so humanize geography by endowing it with human characteristics.

Aritha Van Herk's fourth novel, *Places Far From Ellesmere, a Geofictione: Explorations on Site* (1990), defies genre classification by fusing fiction, autobiography, and literary critique to create a new kind of fiction. By reworking Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, she subverts male authorship and challenges the gender stereotype in this classic story, in which Anna is mercilessly punished for her "desire." She takes Anna to Ellesmere Island, away from Russia, into a different geographical context, and attempts to re-read gender stereotypes in order to grant Anna greater freedom and autonomy.

Places Far From Ellesmere, as a literary work, explores human territory by transcending its bounds and redefining feminine connection. This novel is subtitled as a *geografictione*, a newly coined term that focuses on a feminine question. Indeed, this is a constructed genre and an invented space. This genre conjoins multiple genres as Leona Gom identifies; “In some places it is amemoir, in others history and often it is all of these together” (*Places Far from Home*, 125). It represents the island of Ellesmere, which serves as a metaphor for an illusory area reserved for women. Geography has always been a male discipline, with women traditionally excluded. *Places Far From Ellesmere* reintroduces women to Arctic region and tries to rework the northern narrative from a feminist perspective.

Aritha Van Herk is the narrator/protagonist and protagonist of the novel. She travels to Arctic Canada in order to claim the territory solely for women. North appears to be a more seminal zone that resists colonisation by male propaganda. North is a kind of undefined space devoid of speech; as such, it presents an opportunity to enter a new enigmatic discourse. Being a Northerner is a state of mind; similarly, Ellesmere is a mysterious invention of the female imagination.

Aritha Van Herk begins her journey toward self-actualization in Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Ellesmere, alongside Tolstoy’s notorious figure Anna Karenina, whose presence in the narrative is both exciting and intriguing. Aritha Van Herk creates a difficulty here in rescuing Anna from Nineteenth-Century Russia and relocating her in Twentieth-Century Ellesmere. She does so by attacking Tolstoy’s authorial intent in *Anna Karenina*. She attempts to establish her own authority, de-authorizing male concepts and assumptions in the process. Despite his “critic’s inviolability,” Tolstoy is accused of authorial hubris. Aritha Van Herk accuses him of being unjust to Anna, nearly suffocating her in the suffocating patriarchal atmosphere of nineteenth-century Russian society.

Places Far From Ellesmere presupposes “hypertextuality” and negotiates intertextuality through the transformation and deconstruction of male texts. Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy’s internationally praised and arguably most widely read novel, is reimagined intertextually to represent feminine resistance as a means of protest. The text’s intertextual negotiation enables criticism and reproduction of the innumerable other texts on similar subjects that have yet to be investigated. This text takes on a life of its own, analysing problematic issues such as sex, gender, desire, and so on, while also introducing new ways of creating female space. *Places Far From Ellesmere* is a self-reflexive construct that depicts an island as a woman’s own universe. The inter- and intra-differences in women’s identities are entwined in this. Ellesmere’s status as an island alludes to the woman’s status as an island.

Aritha Van Herk constructs an idealised world in which fictional characters created by a male author and a female writer form a filial tie that transcends time and space. This bonding signifies the concept of “woman as island,” endowing the concept with new meaning and a key vantage point. The concept of an island may be idealised. For a woman, the journey toward self-actualization begins with the concept of rewriting gender. As she mentions,

...you have begun to read this discontented text, this corpulent Russian novel that pretended for so long to read the essential psyche of the passionate woman succumbing to extreme and impossible passions, infecting all around her. Anna tried, convicted, condemned, you are on Ellesmere Island ...you arefi-ee to un/read yourself, home, Anna. (91)

A new beginning begins with a self-reflective mood, attempting to ascertain one’s relationship with people or locations. Aritha Van Herk commences the process of taking a region - an island - with the goal of establishing a “women’s utopia.” The second portion germinates this whimsical notion, which is then stated as a possible location for women’s world in the third section. She is particularly fixated on the concept of giving Anna complete independence in order to inspire her to reread her own story and to foster a healthy environment for women. Feminism envisions an equal world order - one devoid of male supremacy, domination, or servitude of women. It envisions a future devoid of patriarchal projections.

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, woman emerges as an island, because no amount of hammering can mould a floating island into a metal bar. It will keep its uniqueness due to its odd isolation, inaccessibility. Thus, if a woman can emerge as an island, she empowers herself by transgressing and transcending while keeping her feminine core. While the concept of the “woman as island” may indicate escapism, this is not the case, as the idealised concept is one of autonomy and self-actualization. While this is a hypothetical possibility, it does not negate its implication in reality. It is a woman’s method of demonstrating to the world that there is another possibility that ensures complete freedom from biological needs.

Geographically speaking, an island is not a dependent area; it distinguishes itself through its autonomous and self-contained representation. Ellesmere is a fat island, the tenth largest in the globe, “fat with distance, with unreachability with mystery” (90). Ellesmere is a “happy island,” and perhaps its pleasure stems from its isolation, its whiteness, its snow-covered landscape, and its uniqueness. It is an island replete with inevitabilities - mountains, rivers, and a three-week-long wonderful summer. However, “no train” leaves you completely isolated from the rest of the world. It has waited so long, like a “languid body,” to float into a geografitone, asserting its identical existence in a certain region or yearning for a fictional voice. Ellesmere’s wait is identical to Anna’s century-long wait to be rediscovered in a new fictitious realm in order to experience desire, to vanish from the world in order to achieve a different sort of visibility. For “moments of erasure are only available in fiction and on desert islands” (87), where one can achieve *geografitone* of soul. Aritha Van Herk states that.

From here it is impossible to read the world, the world exists only in some enigmatic novel far beyond this sky, this dome of green, this stony ground, the glaciers you are trekking toward. In a never/read text, you lose the text of your usual fiction. (121)

Ellesmere is a metaphor for the fresh text to be written by/about women in order to cultivate a new perspective on things while warily reading one’s own text. The topic of women’s autonomy is inextricably linked to the issue of choice, the freedom to select, and the ability to prioritise needs. When identity is viewed as the cornerstone of women’s fight, a new woman emerges who is aware of her choices and responsibilities. Men are suspicious of this woman.

Aritha Van Herk intertextualizes Ellesmere, the isolated island that metaphorically represents “woman,” in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, by interrogating Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, a masterpiece of Russian literature. Tolstoy’s Anna becomes “a fictional mirror of a male reading of woman” (82) in her work. She subverts the male writers’ long-held notion and arrogance that the North or the unique Arctic area was exclusively male domain, strictly a no-zone. Woman’s she reimagines Anna Karenina from a female perspective and relocates her in the twentieth century, allowing her considerable flexibility to interpret herself anew. Aritha Van Herk conducts a critical examination of the nineteenth-century patriarchal presentation of Anna. She deconstructs male authors’ traditional portrayal of female characters and poses the question, “How to read past this male Historiographical fiction?” (84) She encourages Anna, as a reader of Anna Karenina, to accompany her to the Arctic Island, not only to disrupt patriarchal notions of place, territory, and dominion, but also to rediscover herself as an autonomous human being alongside the author.

Anna has been chastised for an inordinate amount of time; it is time to transport her to Ellesmere. She has never visited. For no one is likely to transport “a woman as difficult as she is lengthy, as goddamned heavy as she is” to a location where she may be analysed. The remoteness of the island also suggests the author’s undisturbed link with a character rescued from a masculine book that transcends time and geography. This connecting is extended once more to the notion of a community, while also rescuing and giving voice to other stranded characters in male writings. She observes, “Anna, all Anna women written by men, now re/read by women. The reader un/reading the Anna” (85). While preparing for the journey into the Arctic land, she purposefully chooses Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina as her companion text, rather than any other. She believes that writing this one book is significantly more difficult than packing her belongings. The massive size of this single book demonstrates the breadth of women’s

burdens over generations. The task is to deconstruct the male text and re-contextualize it through rereading.

Anna is regarded to be the pinnacle of the nineteenth-century psychological novel, its pinnacle, and hence “you can read her only in extreme north,” where the tendrils of patriarchy are still somewhat out of reach. Transferring or transporting may allow for the deconstruction of previous texts written by male authors. The vindictive impulse compels her to retaliate against one of Canada’s most distinguished novelists, who once stated, “women write only out of their viscera, so women will never be great writers as they do not set themselves great subjects like *War and Peace*” (*Places Far From Ellesmere*, 80). Aritha Van Herk seizes the opportunity to criticise Tolstoy for his portrayal of Anna.

Aritha Van Herk’s *Ellesmere* is not Tolstoy’s nineteenth century Petersburg or Moscow, but a woman’s own world. It is a utopia that is unique. There are no standards to follow or violate, and no one sits in judgement there. It is unrestricted and unrestricted. *Ellesmere* also promises resistance, manifested through the reading of past literature and the recovery of stranded characters in male texts. It creates an area that may be entered and claimed as one’s own. Anna is travelling to *Ellesmere* along with the author, because this Anna needs a friend, a woman friend, a reader to share her experiences. For spouses and lovers are always and only fictional entities. Tolstoy predetermines everyone’s fate authoritatively. Women as readers and characters in his work must be voiced, and he must therefore pay attention to what they say; “we had such awful husbands. Tolstoy, are you listening?” (103) However, in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, these characters are invited to a particular geographical site in order to express their love. In this way, georafictione’s implications for places, people, and passion become clear. The author begins to doubt everything in an attempt to alter Anna’s terrible existence and eventual death. She explains: “Tolstoy could have let her run away to *Ellesmere* but he was not aware of *Ellesmere* perhaps. He could not bear it that there exists another northern island unexplored” (99).

The connotation seemed to be fairly clear: northern horror is equivalent to female subjugation. That is why the narrative excludes and ignores princess Myagky. Tolstoy never permitted this lady to take the lead, despite her rational reasoning ability and proclivity for standing with Anna. Perhaps he was afraid of the feminine bonding that would have grown if he had allowed it to, and thus nipped the possibility in the bud. According to Aritha Van Herk: “The Princess reads with devastating accuracy but though she is mis/read, she reads her mis/reading with the most astute readings” (102).

Anna, created by a man, written by a man, read by men, and corrected by men, now relocates to *Ellesmere* in order to be set free from the gloom of Tolstoy’s work. Only the north, the remote region, can demonstrate what reading entails. It is an entirely other experience, a quest to rediscover a woman written about by a guy who did not do her justice. To soothe damaged hearts, the environment brings pleasure, the joy of oblivion. It expresses liberty and flight. The two ladies are visibly invisible to the rest of the world, avoid being observed, and are condemned. For “Anna can invent herself in an undocumented landscape, an undetermined fiction” (125) a new sort of visibility develops to enact one’s own moment in the world.

While dismantling *Anna Karenina*, Aritha Van Herk is re-creating new ways to re/read Anna, while also re-reading gender. This option is generated by an uninhabited island cut off from the rest of the world, which is free of predefined normative methods of reading/unreading one’s own story. Aritha Van Herk is not demanding anything more than that these women be treated more humanely, with respect and dignity. Moral and immoral questions should not be put exclusively on women, while men get away scot-free. The upset emotion develops into hostility, which enables one to act vindictively in attitude and behaviour. Women should not be compelled to participate in such situations. This social element pertaining to gender interactions must be altered.

Aritha Van Herk’s *Places Far From Ellesmere* enables the reader to read beyond the written word and explore beyond the realms of fiction. Anna abandoned everything - relationships, institutions, customs, and practises - and relives them through experiences relating to reading about love, receiving love readings, and redefining desire in a continuously frozen world. Aritha Van Herk is overjoyed to

inform Anna that “you are now on Ellesmere Island.” You are free to delete/read any content that pertains to you, your home, Anna, or the rest of Canada” (91). Aritha Van Herk’s primary goal with this work is to liberate Anna from Tolstoy’s patriarchal shackles. Aritha Van Herk reclaims Anna’s sovereignty and restores her honour by creating an epitaph for her.

2. Conclusion

To sum-up, this paper concludes that it is time to “un/read and re/read” historical literary texts in order to analyse women’s positions as the “other” or as subjects of male desire, domination, and gaze. Aritha Van Herk succeeds in bringing such issues to the foreground through an invented genre of georafictione and a dramatic rhetorical and linguistic performance. Although utopian, her work is more highly regarded for giving voice to all the suppressed individuals seen in the pages of historical fiction. Aritha Van Herk debunks the patriarchal stereotype in *Places Far From Ellesmere* by contextualising the distant island in her novel.

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