

Review

Landscape: Psychological, geographical and cultural nexuses

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Through the different forms of landscape, the writers of South Asia render their texts with an indigenous flavour as well as a universal one. This paper aims to unearth the South Asian novels, *Noor* and *Ladies Coupe* with reference to the geographical, psychological and cultural landscape in these works of fiction. The paper will explore the psychological nexuses of landscape with reference to Sorayya Khan's novel, *Noor*, while accounting impinges of geographical landscape on the psyche of the characters. Finally, the cultural landscape will be discussed with reference to Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupe*. Through an exploration of these three forms of landscape an attempt will be made to see how landscape works as an important cohesive device that adds to the psychological, geographical and cultural make-up of a literary text.

Key words: Landscape, indigenous, amorphous memories, diaspora, claustrophobic.

INTRODUCTION

'Each day I live in a glass room unless I break it with the thrusting of my senses and pass through the splintered walls to the great landscape.' (Peake Mervyn, 2009).

According to the oxford dictionary, landscape is 'a piece of inland scenery'. (Ostler, George 1930, 457) The various defining features of a scenery thus, contribute and represent the landscape of the area. Landscape in Literature has become an important part of narrative at the hands of the writer. Through his creativity, the writer often uses descriptions of the landscape to compliment/add to the plot or the characters of his literary text. Christopher Salter and William J. Lloyd write about landscape saying that it 'is what lies between our minds

and our horizon.' (21) The writer thus establishes a relationship between the mind and the horizon by creatively relating the abstractness of the character's emotion with the concreteness of the geographical or physical landscape that surrounds him/her. Thus, landscape in literature comes into close contact with the development of a plot, theme or the characterization of a character, thereby complimenting not only the geographical but also the psychological and cultural aspects of a literary text.

In South Asian fiction, the concept of landscape becomes a means through which the writer gives his text both an aboriginal tinge as well as all encompassing. This paper attempts to explore the South Asian novels, *Noor*

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and *Ladies Coupe* with reference to the environmental, psychosomatic and cultural landscape that function visibly in these works of fiction. Herein, these nexuses are explored turn by turn by developing a linkage of textually and intertextuality of these texts to substantiate the stance.

Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor* operates on a psychological level, where the abnormal daughter named Noor facilitates in bringing out the suppressed past of the characters through depictions of her innocent sketches, drawings and paintings. Whereas Noor's abnormality is initially considered as a hindrance by the society and even by her own father, Noor ultimately proves herself to be a special child, who is in fact a connection between the characters and their hidden past. Her mother Sajida depicts the beauty of her child's talent stating that 'Noor's drawings were...windows into another world, far away and distant, which might have ceased to exist without Noor.'* (Sorayya Khan, 140) Indeed, a past that they had buried within them in a 'wall-sized cabinet of drawers that (had been) nailed closed' (Khan, 75) is pried open by Noor.

Noor's drawings are initially pages and pages filled in with the colour blue. For Sajida this 'blue was movement' and each page revealed a 'different pulse' (Khan, 43). Her depiction of the water and symbolically of the Bay of Bengal adds to the symbolic significance of the recurrent image of water that runs throughout the novel. It becomes an image signifying both destruction as well as redemption. Noor not only colours the pages blue but is also calmed by the continuous flow of water, thereby pressing the need of the characters to confront their suppressed guilt in order to seek the redemptive power of facing their memories and thus filling the empty void within themselves. Water, in the novel also specifically denotes the destructive cyclone that hit East Pakistan and took with it millions of lives, including Sajida's real family. Thus, the blue coloured pages reminded Sajida of her past life, and the 'wall of water' (Khan, 29) that ripped her apart from her family.

Water also comes to signify the dreaded monsoon season which agitates Ali, for it reminds him of his murky past during the war. Noor frequently draws scenes from Ali's memory of the war and also draws him in his soldier suit, reminding him of the man he once was, and the memories he now suppresses. However, the novel reaches its climax with Ali's agitation, when Noor re-creates his memory where he supervised the burial of the dead. The sudden rainstorm that transformed their pit into a 'filthy pond', (Khan, 243) symbolically represents the filthy, murky and marshy memories that Ali must confront. It is the recounting of this memory by Ali to Sajida, that finally lays Ali at rest and also clarifies the obscure and hazy memories of Sajida. Though Noor's drawing

withheld a dark secret of Ali's past, which he is finally instigated to reveal, it is important to note that it is through these instigations to confront their memories that the characters are able to lay their agitated minds at rest.

While Sajida and Ali, take great interest in Noor's drawings, her father Hussain turns a blind eye towards them. He fails to approach them with the same pride as of his wife. For him, her drawings are a reminder of what his daughter lacked: 'He believed the drawings reflected his daughter's mind, amorphous and unformed, so much so that the ugliness of what she'd spilled onto paper was the very essence of what she was.' (Khan, 44) Sorayya Khan, however infuses a hint of irony in this statement, for Noor does not display the 'ugliness' of her 'unformed' mind, but brings out the 'amorphous' memories of her family which they had long suppressed. Through her drawing of the Italian shoe, Noor reminds her father of the duty towards his family that he had turned his back upon. The Italian shoe reminds him of the secret meetings he used to have with Sajida prior to his marriage. The romantic relationship that he reflects upon is mingled with the betrayal of this relationship in the present. It is then that Hussain is gripped with a strong sense of guilt and he finally begins to make amends with his daughter and his wife. Through Noor's drawings, Hussain realizes the beauty of his daughter's talent. He begins to see, what he had initially considered as faults and weaknesses in his daughter, as her greatest strengths.

Thus, Noor's drawings become a means of portraying the psychological landscape of the characters. She brings to the forefront what the characters themselves had tried hard to hide and suppress within their minds. She becomes a connection to their past and thus helps them come to terms with their memories. In fact Noor's drawings can also be seen more as an initiative and an impetus to provoke the characters to reflect within themselves. Eudora Welty's assessment of Katherine Ann Porter's style is in fact reflective of Noor's character and the drawings she depicts. She says that Katherine 'shows us that we do not have to see a story unfolding to know what is taking place. For all we are to know, she is not looking at it happen herself when she writes it; for her eyes are always looking through the gauze of the passing scene, not distracted by the immediate and transitory; her vision is reflective.' (Aggie) Thus, Noor's drawings too are suggestions that trigger the characters to see beyond her portrayals and to reflect on their memories of the past. Ellen Piffer also writes:

'Th(e) suggestive relationship between outer surface and inner experience, th(e) psychological-or psychologized-landscape, mediates between the outer, objective world and the inner, subjective world; it elicits a sympathetic response to the characters while providing the possibility for their objective assessment.' (Pifer 1973, 274).

* Khan, Sorayya. *Noor*. Islamabad: Alhamra Puvlishing, 2003.

DISCUSSION

The geographical landscape of *Noor* also adds to the psyche, setting and the theme of the novel. The new house that Ali builds for his family speaks, as Nanijan suspects, 'to the dark secrets all men of war shared'. (Khan, 53) The house has its back to the beautiful Margalla Hills, and even the bathroom windows that offered the view of the mountains are 'enclosed in iron cages which impinged on the views of the Margalla Hills.' (Khan, 54 to 55) These strong fortresses built by Ali portray his desire to fortify himself against the memories of war. Whereas for Nanijan, the mountains have an aesthetic appeal, for Ali they are merely reminders of the war.

Moreover, it is also significant to note the destruction of the geographical landscape. In 'Noor' Ali comments on the beauty and the fertility of East Pakistan's land. But with the outcome of war, this fertile land is infringed upon and reduced to a war torn area that is characterized by the graves of the dead. The fertile land of East Pakistan is therefore transformed into a barren land of death. A similar idea is also portrayed in Chandani Lokuge's 'Turtle Nest', where Mala, on being pregnant with Mohan's baby retches under the Jak tree and also tears out 'the entrails of a ripe jak fruit.' This Jak tree, is characteristic of the Srilankan landscape and Mala's vomit underneath this tree symbolically signifies a diseased and infected birth. It comments upon the fertility of the character and the land that has been taken away. On one level it hints at the colonial infiltration that has robbed the native residents of their land. On another level, it also hints at the diasporic identity of Aruni, who fails to belong in Srilanka. Just as Mala tears out the entrails of the fruit, similarly Aruni too becomes a ripped entrail of her mother's progeny.

Another important aspect of landscape dominant in literary texts is the cultural landscape, which gives the readers an insight into the way of life led by a particular society. Anita Nair's *Ladies' Coupe*, can be analysed in this term. The novel gives the readers an insight into the values, norms and the style of life that governs the people of Bangalore. It emphasizes upon the power of the male gender over that of the female and establishes the society as one that is based on patriarchal power. The novel thus, takes the readers on a journey of the various experiences that women are made to go through under the cultural landscape of patriarchal domination.

Anita Nair begins by providing her readers and the protagonist of the novel, Akhila, with a narrative given by the old woman, Janaki. Through her, Nair establishes the age old tradition of male superiority and demonstrates how the tradition has carried on till the modern times as well. Janaki recounts her story and relates how she was kept under ignorance of the entire concept of marriage. Besides being taught the 'arts of cooking and cleaning,

sewing and packing' she was told that she must bend herself to the will of her husband and 'accept whatever he does' (Nair, 26). With this concept of the dutiful wife drilled into her mind, Janaki narrates her eventual dependence upon her husband that left her unable to live without him. The young women, Margaret Shanti and Prabha Devi also recount their experience of marriage, where they too are expected to quietly submit themselves to the wishes and desires of their husbands.

Through the narration of the experiences of these women, Anita Nair points out the gaping wholes within the cultural landscape that women were expected to abide by. Prabha Devi, in submitting herself to the control of her husband sadly realizes how a woman is not taught to strike a balance in her marital relationship. If submissive, the husband takes complete reign over her life, and if independent, she loses the companionship she might need in hard times. She comments:

'Where is the middle path, the golden mean? ... I wish my mother had told me what was the right thing to do. Or perhaps the truth is, she didn't know either.' (Nair 2003, 199)

Even the unmarried protagonist of the novel, Akhila is brought up with these stereo typical concepts. Her mother deliberately generated the myth 'about a tyrant husband who was easily annoyed and could be placated only by her complete devotion.' (Nair 2003, 12) In fact the role of the dutiful/submissive wife, as Nair points out seeped into the smallest aspects of the life of a woman. Even the kolam as Akhila mentions had to 'reflect who you are: a good housewife' (Nair, 53)

Within this cultural landscape Anita Nair situates the protagonist of the novel, Akhila who is unmarried at forty-five. Through her situation Nair points out the vanity of the social and cultural landscape, upon which the entire society functioned. Anita Nair points out how, despite being unmarried, and being thrust upon with the role of the 'man of the house', Akhila still fails to escape from the cultural system. While Akhila is expected to shoulder the burden of her entire family, and to fulfill their needs, she is also expected to comply to the will of her younger brothers for the fulfillment of her personal needs and desires. Her independence thus becomes limited only to the extent of providing for others and not to the extent of providing for herself.

Anita Nair, also points out how the cultural landscape limits Akhila in nourishing her personal desires. In catering to the needs of her family, the subject of Akhila's marriage shrinks into the background before disappearing completely. However, with the appearance of Hari in Akhila's life, Nair establishes the desires of women who nourish dreams of being cherished, wanted

and loved. Akhila falls in love with Hari, but it is her cultural limitation that hinders her from continuing her relationship with him. She realizes that her relationship would be disapproved by her mother who lived in a world where 'women never knew what it was to desire' (Nair, 160) Also on a social level, Akhila realizes that she and Hari 'were an anomaly' (Nair, 161).

Moreover, Nair also points out how this claustrophobic system continues to demand more and more from Akhila. Her desire to live on her own and to break free from the constraints of her family is tainted with the social repute that she will have to endure. She is constantly reminded of the reputation of her family and of herself that she must protect:

'It's improper for a woman to live alone. What will society say? ...There will be a whole lot of questions that will pop up about your reputation.' (Nair 2003, 216-217).

Thus, the novel 'Ladies' Coupe' establishes the fickleness of the cultural system that limits the woman from asserting herself as an individual. Anita Nair clearly voices this perception through the character of Karpagram, Akhila's friend who dares to defy the cultural set-up that demands her to dress in white after the demise of her husband. She states:

'...it is natural for a woman to want to be feminine. It has nothing to do with whether she is married or not and whether her husband is alive or dead. Who made these laws anyway? Some man who couldn't bear the thought that in spite of his death, his wife continued to be attractive to other men.' (Nair 2003, 213).

CONCLUSION

Landscape can therefore be seen as an important

cohesive device that adds to the psychological, geographical and cultural make-up of a literary text. Through the different forms of landscape, the writers of South Asia render their texts with an indigenous flavour as well as a universal one. Moreover, these concepts of landscapes add to the creativity of a literary work. Christopher Salter and William J. Lloyd state that 'The strength of landscape in literature lies in its subtle human qualities, (in) its potential for revealing the hidden dimensions of human meanings, and not in its objectivity.'(22)

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests

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