

MAPPING TRAVELS OF THE DETERRITORIALIZED: A STUDY OF ANITA NAIR'S *IDRIS: KEEPER OF THE LIGHT*

Sasikumar. P

Research Scholar, Department of Research in English, Government College, Mokeri, University of Calicut, Mokeri, Kerala, India

Received: 10 Apr 2019

Accepted: 25 Apr 2019

Published: 30 Apr 2019

ABSTRACT

Travels are ineluctable part of human life: it can render answers to various unrequited and enigmatic questions confronted by individuals in their quotidian routines. Novels map varied forms of travels to reinterpret the hidden layers of life and to make sense of various spatial and social relations. Anita Nair's Idris: Keeper of the Light surveys varied modes of travels as well as probes the relation between displacement and relocation in human existence. The vertical and horizontal movements of man, with its own patterns of experiences, have their own trajectories emanating from spatial relations and perceptions. It is very arduous for individuals to overcome the forces of territorial actuation in life, as sometimes it may devastate whatever affinities they have with native places and livid spaces. Travel as a theme and as a narrative technique can be used to locate both the physical and metaphoric signification of life in literary works.

KEYWORDS: *Literary Cartography, Displacement, Spatial Identity, Deterritorialization*

INTRODUCTION

Travels can define human life: it can also bring out endless probabilities of human imaginations. They map various social and spatial relations modifying our experience of space and place to make sense of various geographical realities as a way to interpret the world. The history of mankind can be cartographed from the wanderings of early humans to the manned space missions of today which unshackle limits of spatial and temporal realms with infinite choices signifying familial as well as societal locations of inclusions and the diasporic movement of the vulnerable due to poverty and war. Life is a summation of such assorted journeys and it may also be one's displacement from homelands or deterritorialization from lived spaces and places. All attempt to complete their travel in order to return to their roots, from where the journey has begun, but only a few can accomplish it in the short span of their life.

Mapping Travels of the Deterritorialized

Every individual's life consists of a series of journeys as they wish for traversing interminable terrains of real and imagined spaces. Displacement, relocation, diffusion, and exile are part of varied types of movements in human life, and among them, displacement has more influence on human beings than other forms of spatial shifts. Robert R. Tally says in his *Spatiality*, "Displacement, perhaps more than a homely rootedness in place, underscores the critical importance of spatial

relations in our attempts to interpret, and change, the world” (Tally, 2013, p. 13). Whether it is mere exploration to one’s self or search for one’s roots, every journey has its own agony and ecstasy.

Travels can reveal the hidden layers of human mind disentangling structures of space and place embedded in the unconscious which are aligned to particular locations due to the forces of attraction and repulsion emanating from natural bonds with it. Lynda gadamson in her Thematic Guide to the American Novel observes, “One who takes a journey moves from one place to another. Usually, the journey is physical, but often characters take metaphoric journeys” (Adamson, 2002, p. 184). The literary works include such spatial representations and signification through which inner and outer selves of characters identify the locations to which they are attached. In his *Spatiality*, Robert R.Tally says,

Literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live. Or maybe literature helps readers get a sense of the worlds in which others have lived, currently live, or will live in times to come (Tally, 2013, p. 2).

Anita Nair’s *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is such an enquiry about signification and representation of human life. It is also a book of journeys and exiles: almost all characters are caught in the predicament of the latitudinal shift in their urge for travel. They map their location with respect to their shared sensibilities and desire either to be on the move or to place themselves in their familiar spatial and cultural locations which are in their native place or in their lived places. It is also an attempt to erase the borders of political imaginations in order to create a territory of freedom.

Idris, the protagonist of this novel, is a man with an insatiable thirst for travels. He always introduces himself as “I am Idris. Idris Mayamoon Samataar Guleed. Previously of Dikhil. Now an eternal traveller seeking the measure of earth and man” (Nair, 2014, p.49). Travels give meaning to his life; he takes up various occupations in order to satisfy his incessant inner urge to see various places. He does not have any other aspiration than exuberant and unrestrained rambling throughout the world, and he is overwhelmed in wandering in uncharted as well as unmapped lands. He, who is epitomised as a man with an unfathomed spirit of travel in his blood, has even been ready to do anything to explore such unknown and strange lands.

The novel begins with a journey of Idris and his father in 1625 A D. Being part of a community of travelling merchants of Africa, he had enjoyed travelling even as a child and his father taught him the wonderful secrets of unacquainted lands, unfathomed seas and inscrutable sky. In his youth, he began to chart out his own path leaving his father’s footprints in search of the wonders of unfamiliar places, countries and cultures which are appeared as a part of a great book of knowledge before him. Even though he is a one-eyed man, he can drink the infinite variety of colours, tastes and smells around him. He learns much from his travels: he masters many trades, acquires expertise in many fields and studies various branches of knowledge. Despite his physical and social ineptitude, he can transform himself to such an individual who is respected by everyone. “When he walked into a room everyone fell silent and waited for him to talk. He makes everything seem doable” (Nair, 2014, p.254). He does not taste failure in his plans, even though sometimes his paths are arduous and tortuous.

Idris has his own philosophy of travel. He tells to Baapa Gurukkal, “A traveller has to keep an open mind. A traveller travels not knowing what happens next? A traveller is one who erases the expectation from his lexicon” (Nair, 2014, p. 46). He shares his life experiences and way of life as, “A traveller has to travel with both his mind and feet” (Nair, 2014, p. 46)

and reveals his helplessness, "I travel because I don't know what else to do" (Nair, 2014, p. 50). When Sala Pokkar, friend, philosopher and guide of Idris in his south Indian wandering, advises him to stop wandering the earth like a homeless nomad (Nair, 2014, p. 289) he replies, "It is not good for a grown man to sit around doing nothing" (Nair, 2014, p. 289). He is a monomaniac who is obsessed with travel around the world.

Idris visits Kerala twice. In his first visit, he met Kuttimalu, a woman of well-known Nair family, and had a son in their amorphous relationship. When Idris arrives again in Kerala after a decade later, he circumstantially meets Kandavar, his son. He feels parental affection welled up in his heart unwrapping irrepressibly. He tells Kuttimalu that he is willing to take them to anywhere else as the customs and conventions of Kerala do not allow them to live as a family as he is a foreigner, but she refuses. Then eternal traveller realizes that the attachment of homelands is stronger than familial attraction. Kuttimalu's travels are limited to the place and space of her ancestral house and its precincts. She does not have any intention to go against the customs and conventions of her land. Besides, it is too loathsome to her to move away from her nativesoil.

Idris does not have a permanent place to live; he does not wish for it either. He tells Baapa Gurukkal, "To have a home one's own would necessitate a routine and regular hours" (Nair, 2014, p.49). A man whose heart has been overpowered by the spirit of travel cannot lead a flaccid life away from the fervent call of the unknown and unexplored lands. But in such journeys, he meets many persons - both men and women - who are not inclined to relocate their lives. Margarida, a harlot, whom he meets in Damascus is one of them. When he advises her to escape from the place which always tortures and imprisons her, she replies, "This is my home. This is where I belong" (197). Even though he offers her a better life, she refuses it as she feels the force of attraction of her lived space is more intense than a life of freedom and happiness. "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty" (Bachelard, Jolas, & Danielewski, 1994, p. 4). In the middle of their journey, Kandavar tells Idris, "I can't stop thinking of home" (Nair, 2014, p. 238). He cannot think about life without the lived places and spaces which are structured in his mind and heart as he is a person imbibed the spirit of his native land.

The house and the land, where one lives, have colligation with dwellers. "Attachment to the homeland is a common human emotion" (Tuan, 2001, p. 158). The colour, smell, and taste of the soil are a part of every individual's arrays of self. So to abandon such a place is like giving up one's own life. Being an eternal traveller, Idris does not anchor his life in anywhere. Yet, he can relish the diverse flavours of unaccustomed territories and has short duration courtships with several women of such places. Idris and Kandavar come to know each other at the end, and a few people who were very close to them also realized the hidden bond between them. But he cannot reveal it to all as the laws and customs do not approve such association and even his son is not willing for that as he liked to go along with their conventions. Idris can save his son by preventing him in joining in chaverpada, the suicide squad of warriors of the local ruler, and sacrificing his life at a tender age. He can travel with his son for some time, though he has to return him to his mother and has to depart from there. The son also wishes the same. He tells him at the end of their journey, "you have to go now" (Nair, 2014, p. 374). So the life of the eternal traveller has to continue as a rootless and deterritorialized individual and his desire for reterritorialization miserably failed, though he wished to cling to Malabar with Kuttimalu and Kandavar at the later stage of his life.

Idris has many friends and followers who always regard him as a great traveller as well as an extraordinary scholar. Some of the women whom he meets are also surprised and spell bound by his stories of great adventures and a few of them seems to be infatuated by his zealous expeditions in far off lands. Thilothamma is one of them who adores him and requests him to stay with her. But she is not inclined to leave her native land, like that of Kuttimalu, as she feels the ties of her native place are stronger than her intense passion for Idris. When Thilothamma's husband suggested her to sell her ancestral property, she replies:

No. I will not sell this land. This is the land my great-grandfather lost his life for. This the land my father killed my great-grandfather for. This is the land that robbed me of my youth and dreams. This is the land that defines me and my past. I will not sell it as long as I breathe. Please try to understand (Nair, 2014, p. 322).

Idris meets Hussain at Dabhol, who is with him in his expedition to Golkonda for diamond mining. Though Dabhol is an ordinary town, Hussain cherishes his native place. Sala Pokkar, one of his ardent follower is also enmeshed in territorial anguish and anxiety. Despite Idris' attempt to find a place in the orthodox society of Malabar for him, he fails in it. He visits Kerala second time to regain what he lost in the first visit. "It cannot be guessed what will get from the journey to that past. Nothing happened. While his son, Kandavar, is inside the house, Idris stands before the closed door. Idris returned as he came." (Nair, 2014, p. 358). Then he realised bonds of spatial consciousness and cultural identity were structured more deeply than the familial relationships.

Kandavar, Sala Pokkar, and Hussain are also fascinated by travels, but they either return to their native lands or follow circular trajectories in which their native places always being the final destination. Kandavar's travels with his father resemble journeys of Idris with his own father in his childhood. While Idris always wishes to be displaced away from the roots, Kandavar is very much anxious to return to his roots and is not obsessed with travel like that of his father. Sala Pokkar and Hussain do not feel any incessant impulse for travel like that of Idris as to them it is only a means to make a livelihood than the exploration of the wonders of unstructured imaginations and realities.

Idris has been torn by actuation of his consciousness. Having been enjoyed travelling as part of his trading activities, he does not have any wish to settle down permanently. As a trader and merchant, he drinks his life to its lees and his heart is brimming with enthusiasm for travel to explore the unexplored. Travelling is part of the arrays of his mental structures which motivates him to pursue his unrestrained ambition to be on the move forever. But everything gets changed as a sudden after his first meeting with Kuttimalu and he tries to reach the shores of Malabar to be near to her. But his attempts become futile as she values her own position in the caste-ridden society of Malabar which was so rigid that nobody was allowed to move out without losing their status in the society. That would be an exit from the social and cultural fabric of the land to which she belongs and she cherishes very much. Both Kuttimalu and Kandavar are attached to the spaces and places of their native place so that they are unable to come out of the bonds of their territorial connections. Idris also attached to land and culture of his loved ones; as his heart is tethered to the pinions of pure affection for his son, love and desire for Kuttimalu and wishes to be rooted in the same land. But both of them shut the door before him leaving thoroughly shattered. The central conflict of this novel is actually centred on the spatial consciousness of those who are territorialized and who are deterritorialized.

Anita Nair has answered all of the questions about uncertainty and fluidity of self and identity of Idris through numerous suggestions in narration. Idris fails to make his own space and place in any place. The novelist relates place to

native place and space to the house. The novel ends with a statement that “Kandavar was home” (Nair, 2014, p.375). The novel has a number of characters who are anxious to reach home. “Would his life always be this? One port after another, one adventure after another, till he was old and tired and would be condemned to leave out his days in a hut somewhere in Dikhil, alone with his memories ? What would any of this mean then? (Nair, 2014, p. 304)” Idris realises that his life is a great failure. He does not think about the success and failure in his life till then; he is floated in the current of the fiery life. He travels to several places because someone asked him to follow them and to some other places, he decides by himself merely to explore it. The journey with Kandavar, to persuade him not to join the chaverpada, the suicide squad of warriors, which would have made him a martyr like that of his cousin, transforms him. But at the end of the novel, he becomes a changed man. The time he spends along with his son has ignited a strong passion for a householder’s life. The man with a stoical philosophy is overwhelmed by the emotions which are he despised once and desires for the presence of son and his mother with him.

CONCLUSIONS

In the literary cartography of *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, Anita Nair attempts to visibilize maps of various kinds of journeys: some of which are monotonous, some are adventurous and soul - searching and a few others are multi-structured and enigmatic. Idris, the eternal traveller, suffers the most as he is tormented not only by his own consciousness but also by the call of the mundane world to subdue his spatial identity and cartographic anxiety. The rootlessness and affinity for nomadic displacement is the share of his patrimony and heritage which haunts him and defeats him at the end even though he is willing to redraw routes of his journeys. So the tragedy of his life is partly made by himself and partly by his heritage.

REFERENCES

1. Adamson, L. G. (2002). *Thematic Guide to the American Novel*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
2. Bachelard, G., Jolas, M., & Danielewski, M. Z. (1994). *The poetics of space*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
3. Nair, A. (2014). *Idris: Keeper of the light*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
4. Tally, R. T. (2013). *Spatiality*. London: Routledge.
5. Tuan, Y. (2001). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

