

Mapping the North as a Female Space in Aritha Van Herk's *Geografictione Places Far From Ellesmere*

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Places Far From Ellesmere has been brought forth in an innovative garb by van Herk which she calls a Geografictione, a new genre which has emerged out of the fusion of geography and fiction in the literary panorama. Aritha van Herk has brilliantly interwoven a logical pattern from some unconventional constituents unexplored so far in this remarkable Geografictione. A well orchestrated plot of this artistic creation immensely suits her explicit objective through which she successfully explores an exclusive domain for women bereft of male chauvinist interventions. By resorting to inter-textuality, van Herk has endeavoured to subvert and reinterpret the views of Tolstoy in presenting Anna Karenina and ensured for her a secure place where she may establish her independent identity without being bruised by the male counterparts. In order to counter the male dominated West, van Herk has justifiably projected the concept of North that may be identified by an attribute of female discourse.

The geografictione comprising one hundred and forty-three pages is an exploration for a different woman's space distinct from that of male which is symbolically depicted in the exploration of landscape. It is divided into four parts comprising four exploration sites: Edberg, coppice of desire and return; Edmonton, long division; Calgary, this growing graveyard; and Ellesmere, woman as island.

The narrator in the process of her descriptive narrative describes the search for a place, her 'Home' from Edberg through Edmonton and Calgary which ends in Ellesmere. The text begins thus,

Home: what you visit and abandon: too much forgotten/ too much remembered. An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures, the derivations of your dream geographies. Where you invented destinations. Always and unrelentingly (home) even after it is too late to be or to revert to (home), even after it pre/occupies the past tense (Ellesmere, 13-14).

The text begins with the word “home” that symbolizes the seat anchor, the point of origin wherefrom the mapping begins in life. Conventionally, van Herk’s exploration starts from home that marks the organic development of her plan that takes several twists and turns in the due course leading down to fruition in Ellesmere which is the final destination. This exploration vividly paints the feministic concerns of van Herk which she takes up as her mission and lastly carves out a niche for women where they may breathe independently without experiencing the domineering attitudes of males.

van Herk’s feministic orientation is evident in her delineation of the female protagonists in which she sets them free from the clutches of enslaving patriarchal society imposing its rules and regulations. They are highly individualistic, struggling to raze the boundaries of male conventions and aspiring to attain what is unattainable. Thus they leave an indelible mark and lasting impression on the minds of the readers. Her protagonists drawn from varied walks of life and different sections of society, with their biblical and mythological tinge display extraordinary courage in their fight with the adversities of life.

Like her heroines breaking the boundaries of conventional norms, van Herk experiments unconventional norms stretching the parameters of genre suitable for the profound insight of her complex characters.

As a feminist writer, van Herk appropriates the myth of the west and deconstructs the male discourse in her attempt to give a suitable and unbiased representation of women. She subverts the original myth in order to explore new horizon for women. van Herk states:

Women can write kitchen-sink realism about the limitations of their lives forever. But realism can become its own prison, its own enclosure. Fiction's mandate is to explore the possibilities of the imagination, the possibilities of the world beyond its closure (Jones 7).

Portraying the North as a space for woman's writing, van Herk subverts the ideal male topography. From the male perspective, the North is considered as something challenging where men can reveal their valour. To her, North is not just a direction, but a geographical space which discloses the geography of the mind. She describes in her essay "The Ethnic Gasp/ the Disenchanted Eye Unstoried."

North is not an ethnic designation in Canada; the notion of north is tossed about as casually as if it were nothing more than a direction, rather than a destination or even – quite possibly – an act of the imagination integral to Canada's collective ethnicity (76).

Sherrill Grace in **Canada and the Idea of the North - Introducing the North** writes:

Canada is not over. Indeed at the beginnings of the 21st century, the country is facing some splendid new beginnings, as well as some persistent changes. But it seems to me that now, more than ever before, it is important for the Canadians, to look north and in looking north to celebrate the creation of Nunavut, to appreciate the dependence of South on Canada's Northern resources, to recognize a crucial role we must play in safeguarding an Arctic environment, and in articulating politics for a circumpolar world. North is an idea as much as physical region that can be mapped\ and measured for nordicity (Google books).

The subtitle "a geografictione," an amalgamation of map-making and fiction writing, "dismantles the conventions of the masculine north and deconstructs the hierarchy of an objective science (cartography) and subjective fiction" (Mott 105).

Thus van Herk, in her geografictione, draws a parallel between Anna and Ellesmere and transforms the landscape into an image of Anna's body. Anna, "a woman on the verge of flesh, with a full, solid figure is equated to Ellesmere which 'is a fat island, the tenth largest in the world, fat with the flesh of heated snow" (pp.96-97).

Marlene Goldman comments in "Earth-quaking the Kingdom of the Male Virgin: A Deleuzian Analysis of Aritha van Herk's **No Fixed Address** and **Places Far From Ellesmere**" thus:

In keeping with the tendency to view the landscape as a metaphor, the text identifies features of the Arctic...., with the character in Tolstoy's novel and the process of unreading (38).

As an intellectual and committed reader, van Herk is interested in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, the story and the heroine well introduced in the georafictione. Anna is introduced in the first section of the text 'Edberg, coppice of desire and return.'

The platform stood on the lip of the world, and if you could manage to ignore the cream cans, and tractor parts, the wooden baggage cart, you could imagine an Anna in black velvet stepping down to take a breath of fresh air on her way to one of the family estates... (p.16).

van Herk's women driven by determination rebel against the patriarchal society, forge ahead in an undaunted mood of will power, and strive for independence. They negate the idea of blank submission. Although the title of the last section "Ellesmere: Woman as Island" explicitly states the metaphor of woman as island, obviously she has used the same metaphor and envisioned the place as woman, giving female attribute to the landscape.

Everywhere is here. Your frozen dreams from the time when you stepped neatly down this sidewalk, your itchy palms from longing to be touched, your un/read stories. Edberg is an Ellesmere, an island shrouded in the wet snow of summer, with muskoxen waiting for their coats to grow. A movie un/made, with the auctioneer and pie makers as heroes..... Anna Karenina will get off to pace the platform for a few moments (p. 36).

Van Herk has slowly introduced Tolstoy's heroine preparing our minds to accept her in a new situation. "(... Anna)... just long enough to see Tolstoy's coachman and to remember that illegitimacy lurks everywhere, she has only to read the story differently her own story waiting to be un/read by the light of

places: all places with acts of reading as their histories, and all of them your homes” (p.37).

The meticulous care with which van Herk has described the place Edberg is marvellous. According to Mott, it is “semi-fictive autobiography,” as the protagonist describes her life through the description of landscape where she lived (Mott, 104).

Asta Mott, in the essay “Aritha Van Herk’s **Places Far From Ellesmere**: The Wild and Adventurous North?” says thus:

The approach to autobiography in **Places Far From Ellesmere** is also unusual. The book is narrated through the description of places; thus the focus is not only on the individual but also on the landscape. If male northerners tend to emphasize that the male subject is in control of the menacing landscape, van Herk’s text offers a different relationship between a human subject and a landscape (104).

The narrator’s experiences, reading into her past, by reading / unreading of the text slowly lead us on to Ellesmere. The topography is in minute description which is analogous to woman’s body. She hints also at woman’s unyielding and unbending temperament. “In the basement of the person rests the village of Edberg, refusing to be dislodged, a continuous grounding” (p.37).

van Herk strongly feels that women must shake themselves from the stringent conventional beliefs that they can only be mothers, or sisters or home makers. In the light of this context she writes in the article, “ A Gentle Circumcision,” referring to the writing of Canada as a masculine kingdom of adventure.

Try being female and living in the kingdom of the male virgin: try being female and writing in the kingdom of the male virgin. Women must come to a place in this kingdom themselves but until now it has been dominated by a romantic fiction that is disintegrating like paper cowboy put into water. The kingdom boasts adventure and chivalry; it proudly displays all the characteristics of romanticism: innovation, spontaneity, sensuous nuance, limitless aspiration. This is big sky country; both the fiction and its criticism have relied on endless landscape as a metaphor. But it is also a kingdom which practices a kind of perverse courtly love: don't touch the lady. She'll sully your purity (259).

The second section with the title Edmonton, the long division, begins with the following lines that symbolically signify division of the soul... in an islanded sublimation. It also shows how Edmonton weans the traveller from Edberg. Each section begins with the subtitle Exploration site. The writer begins with the description of the North Saskatchewan. The place name blooms with the love later on, love of woman.

The North Saskatchewan curving the town in half: north/south; business / pleasure; government / learning. The few bridges incidental to separation and the high brows of the river banking their own domain. Here is the city that will divide you from the country, that will wean you from Edberg, its wide streets and narrow alleys leading towards seduction. This is the quandary you face, your problem in long division: north/south (p.43).

...Long division: what you were never good at, had to concentrate for practice. What choices are there? You set up the equation, begin with a thick stemmed land lady who rustles through your closets when you are in

classes, who insists you are amoral because you resist falling in love: not yet, not just yet (p.44).

The section "Calgary" presents the theme of death. She has chosen Calgary as a place of growing graveyard. She begins by saying "From within the grave you can only leave into light, burst through dark soil, arrival the admission of belonging: here/there/ within. Or coming from..."(p. 57).

She gives a definition of graves, "It's been said, before: archaeologies are (in)formed by those who (in)vent them. Graves are for their visitors..... And stones will work their way to the surface, no matter, how buried and buried again..... Well yes, it is death that makes a place of its own. A city is counted for the people who die there, and who stay, are buried. There aren't enough graveyards, people go away to die: their bones go elsewhere" (p.59).

van Herk vents her thought on death and grave in an interview, "A grave is a fine and private place but none I think do there embrace. My fixation on graves and coffins is really strange. I guess, I think of death as a real act of freedom. That may sound quite macabre to you, but I do not think of death as such a negative slate. Not that I believe in heaven..."(Tamara Piano).

For van Herk death is a kind of escape,

... a very freeing space where you were not having to listen, pay attention, breathe and think, eat and sleep.....we only have the coffin for the people who put the body away. The body does not need the coffin to be contained. We put them inside this thing to say they are really dead and so I guess I have this notion that coffins or genres of books or even lives can be escaped or even transformed. I am constantly trying to escape (ibid).

In the last section entitled Ellesmere, woman as island, multiple themes such as Ellesmere as woman, as envisioned by the writer, Ellesmere- the place as a state of mind, as a place to escape for woman, the northern influence, predominantly emphasized North as a utopian space for women. Finally Tolstoy's Anna as re/read by the author and literary critics, surfaces. Anna's consummate escape to Ellesmere from the clutches of Tolstoy or Vronsky and Karenin has been created by van Herk with the intention of creating a space of freedom for women on one hand and for readers on the other. "Anna Karenina should have escaped to Ellesmere"(p.77).

If Tolstoy had suffered her, if she hadn't been a woman created and governed by a blind and obstinate man. This is a remedy you want to propose to her, Ellesmere, as if it were a nectar she could swallow or inhale. A consummate escape from Vronsky and Karenin, Ellesmere, the most northerly of extreme Arctic islands, probably un/named when Tolstoy invented her, probably unheard of, like Anna herself. A lost heroine. Lost in Russia, lost in love, lost in the nineteenth century. The special lostness of an invented character whose inventor revenged himself on her through the failings he invented for her (p.77).

Regarding "her Island, tabula rasa" (77), in an interview with Nicole Dargent, on being asked if Ellesmere is a state of mind, van Herk affirms, "Absolutely! And once if you actually go to the place called Ellesmere the only thing you will discover is that place is a state of mind. You won't find out that - I mean, you will find about Ellesmere but it is still very much a created space, it is an invention, it is an act of the imagination"(Tamara Piano).

She continues,

It is that but even more than that. It is not that it is a blank slate, but it is an enigmatic slate. It has been written on but it is not easy to read or to invent the text but it has been written on. I mean Inuit people have lived there and live there, other people have gone around it or over it or through it, so it is not unwritten on, it is just that what is written on it is very enigmatic (ibid).

Ellesmere is a place where “you want to forget the world’s war and peace. And read about love. Even love as doomed as you know Anna’s to be” (p.82).

Men underestimating the capacity of women, and women writer’s potential, she bluntly has a dig at men’s inflated pride.

“Take *War and Peace*”, suggests Rudy Wiebe. He would, having once insisted that the reason women will never be Great writers is because, they do not set themselves great subjects. “Like what?” you asked him, then furious, offended. “Like war and peace”, he said in his Yahweh voice.

“Women write only out of their viscera.” The word viscera in his mouth scornful and repellent, plump with blood and bread. Since then you have learned the viscera of men larger and more dangerous, hidden as they are in an inflated sense of themselves centering the subject of greatness (p.81).

She is equally persistent asserting her female position, “War and peace exactly what you wish to leave behind in lower Canada. But you take *Anna Karenin*” (p. 81).

In Ellesmere, Anna reads her own experiences, her own reading/unreading. “You want to read yourself (in a mirror) and Anna a fictional mirror of a male reading of women. Perhaps you can un/read her, set her free. There on that desert island, between the harebells and the blue dreaming of glaciers” (p.82).

In a conventional, patriarchal, male-dominated society, women are left with no options but to submit themselves to the mundane realities of life with the options of marriage, love, harassment, dejection and death. van Herk boldly projects Anna as a symbol for all women characters caught in the web of male prejudice, relieving them from the entrapment of conventional plot, reading and interpretation. She states,

You know at least a hundred Annas, stranded in fictional love affairs written by men who do not know that Ellesmere exists. Come to that, women are all Annas, caught or not, Annas sweating their way from one day to the next. They know their wars within their orbits, between their children and husband and lovers, need and desire and the desperate necessities of symmetry, how they will be always and forever, culpable, exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles (p.82).

As we journey along with the narrator, we understand that van Herk constantly makes reference to North. We are given to understand that

Ellesmere is Anna, Anna’s story, articulated in the geography of place. But you are Ellesmere, this mystery of polar desert, remote of all Canada’s island flock. As far as it is possible to get away; and you will fly still farther

north, not even close to Hazen yet, its eurhythmic allure (p.89).

van Herk admits women to Arctic space, the so-called male territory creating a space for women, exploring the unexplored mysterious female self, hence the complex reading becomes the exploration of the self through the exploration of the land.

You are caught between Anna and Ellesmere.....This is pleasure: escape, water, wind, air, rocks, the lake still frozen in the distance behind you, the potential of glacial ice and snow, of always reading an eternal book, of Anna reading this book you are in, this book of the north, un/read because mysterious, this female desert land and its secret reasons and desires (p. 130).

The citation articulates feminist approach and postmodernist aspect in that it shows the relationship between the text and the reader and views reading as a creative act like writing itself, besides projecting a female image delineated through female gaze in conflation with the geography of the land.

Here on Ellesmere, you see, now how reading is an alien act,

such a strange activity, beside the daily notions of sleeping and eating fetching water and walking, of tilting your head to look at the sky, of stooping to rest. Only the north can teach what reading means, and you are a woman in the north, reading a woman written by a man to whom women were a mystery..... A northern: unread Anna (pp.132-133).

The choice of north as a female space is presented as a kind of counterpart to the male defined west, which van Herk voices forth in the interview.

I think males have tried to control the frontier always. That's their territory, and that's where they go, when they want to run away from women. So for them west was always a frontier to run away to. And when you run out of west, I mean on a certain stage you hit the west end of Canada, and can't go any further except into the ocean. And then actually by the time you get to Japan and to China, you are in the East again. And so they get really upset, because they have no more west left so they sort of did a turn and started going up north. But I think north is a more seminal space that does not permit itself to be colonized by the masculine interrogation and so I like the notion of north but also you noticed in *Places Far From Ellesmere* I am actually going over to Russia. If you keep going north you actually start going south. I think of the north as this wonderful kind of open space that does not already have a discourse attributed to it and that discourse you can alter or usurp or enter. So it is not so limited as the West (Nicole Dargent).

van Herk seems to be inspired by the incredible north. She asserts that she likes "the notion of being Northern. Being enigmatic, being unable to read...." (*ibid*)

Go, north, Anna, go north. If there are westerns, why can there not be northerns? Northerns of the heart..... Anna has been punished too long. Take her with you to Ellesmere. You're sure she's never been there, no one else is likely to have carried a woman as difficult, as lengthy, as goddamned heavy as she is along (p.85).

van Herk is heaping all her admonition and anger in a very satirical vein on Tolstoy's narrow views of women.

Why, Anna, a self-indulgent character, created by man who couldn't imagine women enacting anything more interesting than adultery or motherhood. Prescribed choices: mothers, saints or whores. Why Karenina, with Tolstoy at the pen, Tolstoy mad with Theological tracts, with pleas for vegetarianism, with fulminations against liquor and tobacco? Tolstoy the sermonizer convinced that were the seat of corruption, Tolstoy the moralist, Tolstoy the refusnik? A man so childish he ran away from home at the age of eighty-two, following his viscera? (p.81)

Aritha van Herk's intention in weaving inter-textuality of **Anna Karenina** is to analyze the difference between a man's writing and a woman's writing of the female character. She intends to read the voluminous novel of eight hundred and fifty pages "as a lesson, to solve a problem in how to think about love; to solve a problem in the (grave) differences between men's writing and women's writing; to solve problem in sexual judgment. To investigate viscera and mirrors; passions and polemics. Even though you know you'll be stuck with Tolstoy, that the order and the rules are male, that he writes Anna no choices." (p.82)

Aritha desires to revive Anna who is dead due to the...

transparency of Tolstoy's blame, You know where she is going, have pre / read that destination. But re/reading her, in Ellesmere a/ new, reading her whole, you can re/write her too. The un/read face of desolation, Anna in Ellesmere's brief summering (p.83).

van Herk becomes too sentimental. "Anna. All Annas are women written by men, now re/read by women. The reader un/reading the Anna.

Vengeance is mine, and I will repay" (p.85).

As van Herk weaves her childhood recollections about Edberg, Edmonton, and Calgary- "as a well-groomed cemetery", she sees Ellesmere as a "languid body."

"Ellesmere will appear like a languid body below you, the island only waiting finally to float into a geografictione, like Anna waiting so long backstage on the yet to arrive, the interminably delayed train" (p.87).

The peasant/ writer/ Tolstoy is not so much beating her into a plowshare as raping her,..... Tolstoy, he the peasant who severs / penetrates her with the iron, a symbolic but obviously a sexual attack:..... annihilates Anna for her sexual nature. The same peasant muttering the same incomprehensible foreign language grinds Anna beneath the freight cars of the train (p.119).

In her review of **Places Far From Ellesmere**, Ann Beer argues that the literary criticism in this text "becomes almost as disruptive, and as damaging, as the authorial arrogance of which Tolstoy himself stands accused" (35-6).

Leona Gom in her review of **Places Far From Ellesmere** eulogizes the way in which van Herk has razed the male topography by her profound insight of male atrocities and her efforts to free 'Annas' from male clutches.

...the understanding of Anna that van Herk comes to, seems heightened for us by the unusual place in which she and we find it. I would prefer to find more such literary analyses in such unacademic places" (126).

The setting of the text, a travel memoir, is spread over four places, cartographically starting from Edberg, moving through Edmonton and Calgary to Ellesmere towards North as exploration sites. Each site signifies the metaphorical meaning, beginning with yearning of the narrator leading to the long division symbolic of duality of body/ mind, truth/ fiction, victor/ victim, illusion/ reality, life/ death, and self/ other. Calgary- the growing graveyard symbolizing death which is actually an act of freedom--- from torture and injustice leads to Ellesmere, “a place for women to disappear to” to North. It is a dream place, an inevitable presence, writing space and mythical identity. North is a prime point of significance in Canadian national identity too.

Van Herk tells Anna in the georafictione: “Go north, Anna, go north. If there are westerners, why can there be no northerners? Northerners of the heart, harlequins, in reverse, bodice, rippers of paled faces and quick glances, able to withstand the scrutiny of relentless light or relentless dark. Anna has been punished too long. Take her with you to Ellesmere. You are sure, she has never been there,....” (p. 86).

‘North’ in the fiction symbolizes an essential source of myth, a convenient place to escape to. For the narrator, the north represents creativity, charm, invention, space and adventure. She says referring to Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina,

But whose invention is she? Tolstoy’s? The nineteenth century’s? Russia’s? The novel’s? Yours? She is the north’s invention, her figure only dreamable when the eye swings towards the polar star. But how then to read her? Is it possible to read her in the south, from the South? In that blindly south-faced reading, is it possible to read at all? You are closer To Moscow, than you are to Edmonton (p.113).

This is the recognition of the creative genius of a northerner, the creator of Anna who provided an opportunity to van Herk to go for a discourse, to show to the world the ways of males delineating the females. Through this she has tried to justify the imaginative potential of north wallowing in resourcefulness which women can tap and overshadow the west.

The narrator visualizes north as all that is charming, loving and mysterious.

You are caught between Anna and Ellesmere. Walking this landscape, indifferent, beyond beauty, toward the remote seat of the glacier you want to reach,... Without the need to insist on emancipation or escape... Ellesmere teaches pleasure, the pleasure of oblivion, pleasure endorsed, its doors thrown wide... This is pleasure: escape, water, wind, air, rocks, the lake still frozen in the distance, behind you, the potential of glacial ice and snow, of always reading an eternal book, of Anna reading this book you are in, this book of the north, un/read because mysterious, this female desert island and its secret reasons and desires (p.130).

Here, Ellesmere, Anna and north are all intertwined. Ellesmere becomes a state of meaningful existence for all the female victims who have suffered at the hands of male chauvinists. North is the place where this existence will bear the true meaning, where all the Annas can shape their future.

Hulan says in **Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture**.

An analysis of gender is a useful method to address issues of political power and difference. Representatives of imaginary north have frequently depended on concepts that are defined by a masculine-feminine opposition. As a

geographical location, the north provides writers with the setting for quest narratives, and heroic tales of survival. Such stories require their characters to attain qualities traditionally thought, exclusively associated with masculine identity, including self reliance, autonomy, and physical endurance. By having these qualities, the individual embraces and embodies the northern, “spirit” of character.” (p.245)

The concept of north is thus multi-faceted, all assimilating and powerful. It is equally associated with Canadian identity and van Herk seems to be very much mindful of it. Even the cover of the book is symbolic of myth of place, culture and gender, making an entry of female self in an imagined place, defying the masculine writing, and subverting and infiltrating the masculine Northern. Referring to the cover of the book, Mott says,

The cover reminds us that while the explorations to map the Canadian North were driven by scientific, economic and political motives they also drew on the mythologies of place, culture and gender of the day (Mott 106).

Thus, Aritha Van Herk’s **Places Far From Ellesmere** is a typical postmodern novel analyzing the postmodern aspects and feminist concerns in a different ambience in which female self is explored in the exploration of space, fiction of self is determined through the geography of the land. Ellesmere, the place, hence becomes an island in the world, which stands as a metaphor for escape, for fulfillment. van Herk frees Anna from the pages of Tolstoy and presents her distinctly, different from the fictional mirror of male reading a woman. Anna takes refuge in potent North which is endowed with all the attributes needed for the women to explore the possibilities in life without any intervention from male counterparts. The notion of North is really all encompassing, multi-dimensional as it

has been projected by van Herk as the bedrock for the fulfillment of all the aspirations of women folk.

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