



Reconstructing the Alien Land: The Spatiality of Exile in Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain*

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ABSTRACT : Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, space had mostly been perceived as a passive backdrop to the line of action of the story. However, with the wake of cultural geography, space is now conceived as not being inert, naïve and silent. Rather, it has been accepted that it gives voice to the real, the imaginary and the unconscious, equally important as a character. It is a physical as well as a mental construct produced by man in his various familial, religious, social, political, hierarchical, and hegemonic relations in the society. The most recurring theme of the fiction of the Brazilian bestselling novelist Paulo Coelho is that of spiritual enlightenment. He often narrates it as a spiritual quest wherein the seeker of spiritual truth or joy undergoes several phases, of initiation, of trials and of ultimate redemption all facilitated through the medium of journey. This paper is concerned with the Biblical story of the exile of Prophet Elijah to the city of Akbar as fictionally adapted in his novel *The Fifth Mountain* (1996). The paper explores how a foreigner rebuilds the city of his refuge and how space is constructed as a co-protagonist rendering political undercurrents in the narration of the exile in the novel.

Keywords– Cultural Geography, Exile, Paulo Coelho, Spatiality, *The Fifth Mountain*

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I. INTRODUCTION

A privileging of time over space is not new to literature. The spatial dimension has mostly been neglected or taken for granted when compared to the temporal, though both are interdependent entities. Narratives always treated the 'setting' or 'stage' as secondary to the character, who unfolds himself or herself within the range of a 'milieu'. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, space had mostly been perceived as a passive backdrop to the line of action of the story. However, with the wake of cultural geography and allied spatial literary theories of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey and Liz Bondi, space is now conceived as not inert, naïve and silent. Rather, it has been accepted that it gives voice to the real, the imaginary and the unconscious, equally important as a character.

In the words of the renowned geographer and spatial theorist Edward Soja, "Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience" (79-80). It is a physical as well as a mental construct produced by man in his various familial, religious, social, political, hierarchical, and hegemonic relations in the society. Space, like language, is fundamental to human experience. As such, taking space seriously requires deeper levels of deconstruction of critical thought in layers of abstraction.

Paulo Coelho is the famous bestselling novelist of New Age fiction who has conquered the world with his fictional and semi-autobiographical works of spiritual quests. Stephen M. Hart notes that Paulo Coelho's immensely popular magical realist fiction, *The Alchemist*, has already sold over 31 million copies. As a modern fable about following a person's dream, it is allegorized in the form of an adventure in search of a treasure that appeared in the dream of a shepherd boy Santiago. His other novels like *The Pilgrimage*, *Veronica Decides to Die*, *Zahir*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *The Winner Stands Alone*, *The Witch of Portobello* and *Aleph* are equally significant spiritual quests undertaken by people from different walks of life.

The most recurring theme of his fiction, as mentioned before, is that of spiritual enlightenment. This is often narrated as a spiritual quest wherein the seeker of spiritual truth or joy undergoes several phases, of initiation, of trials and of ultimate redemption all facilitated through the medium of journey. Studies on his fiction refer to the parallelism of the sojourner's physical journey with his spiritual journey. This paper,

however, is concerned with the political undercurrents within such a journey. Journeys dissolve, to a certain extent, the boundaries of geographical barriers, languages, cultures, customs and people. As a mirror reflects whatever comes in its way, all these dimensions work well in an introspective manner so as to help the protagonist to look into and perceive himself. The novel taken for analysis is *The Fifth Mountain*, published in 1996 which is an adaptation taken from the Old Testament of the Bible (1 Kings Chapters 17-19). The incorporation of the factual details of Elijah's exile does justice to the Biblical story partly and the rest of the story including his romance with the widow is a figment of Coelho's imagination.

II. REPRESENTATION OF SPACE IN LITERATURE AND IN PAULO COELHO'S FICTION

According to the human geographer Henri Lefebvre, "(social) space is a (social) product" (26). He conceives space as both a production and a force, and shatters the former representation of space as an empty container to be filled or a passive platform to be treaded upon. Instead, he recounts it to be produced by human actions. Rather, it also conceptualises space as a dynamic, vital process and not as a flaccid product.

Human interaction immediately colours the physical, natural space as cultural. This is why certain spaces are considered special and certain others are viewed with fear. The private space of home is always represented as the space of comfort and security, while the public space of the city is the space of arbitrariness and uncertainty. Exile/migration and homecoming are often portrayed in diasporic narratives as temporal concerns of nostalgia where one traces the past in the present. However, the cultural appropriation and acculturation involved in residing or settling in a foreign land involves tensions in the spatial dimension of the distance crossed and the spatial identity of citizenship, racial concerns and so on.

Representing the lived space of exile through language is problematical owing to its fluid, transgressing and destabilizing traits. Since space is not fixed and static for a person in exile, perceptions of the same space vary from person to person. So, constructing it textually gives privilege to the allegorical form of narration that uses fables and myths to give the text to the reader for interpretation. Thus the space as a text in Coelho's fiction inscribes social codes of meaning that transcend cultures.

Coelho's fiction abound with discontented individuals longing for a transformation and most of them accomplish this through journeys either chosen by themselves or imposed on them by harsh situations. His novels focus on the lives of women and men alike, the commonality being the dissatisfaction they experience in their lives. Hart comments that Coelho's fiction promotes the idea that each of us has a magical answer to life's secret buried deep down within us, and that it is up to us to search the reality around us until we finally discover what it is (Hart 226).

A common feature of Coelho's wandering characters is that their travels demand great physical or mental toil and a consequent spiritual elevation. Most of them are on a quest seeking a fulfilment in life, depending on how blank they feel themselves to be. The 'blank' itself is a spatial term that calls for a multidisciplinary deconstruction. The exile in *The Fifth Mountain* can be deconstructed as a political trajectory of acculturation. The representation of unlimited association with spaces – political, religious and cultural- can be seen embodied in the exile of Prophet Elijah. Coelho's places, as characters themselves, play multiple roles too, as Foucault's heterotopias. The city of Akbar and the fifth mountain are animated as co-protagonists in the novel *The Fifth Mountain* with heterotopic functions.

III. REPRESENTATION OF SPACE AS CO-PROTAGONIST IN THE FIFTH MOUNTAIN

The Fifth Mountain draws the picture of Prophet Elijah being exiled from his land by Queen Jezebel because of his disobedience to her statutes. Guided by a divine vision to go to the distant city of Zarephath, or better known as Akbar in the novel, Elijah takes the journey of exile from his homeland. He encounters a widow as per the vision when he reaches the city, who was totally devastated by poverty. Elijah performs a miracle whereby her empty jar of oil and flour gets replenished and the widow provides him shelter. A relationship of trust and love gradually develops between them in the course of time as Elijah performs a significant miracle in her life, by bringing life back to her dying son.

Elijah becomes a socially admired figure among the people and the Governor of the city seemed to trust in his wisdom. When the army of Assyrians request passage through the city, he advises the Governor to take a diplomatic decision and let them pass through the city. However, the High Priest of the city, well assisted by a threatened army General, puts Elijah in danger by putting the situation in front of the public. The public demanded a defensive attack on the otherwise peaceful group of Assyrians thus invariably provoking their anger.

In short, by attributing the cause of the war from Assyrians to Elijah, the High Priest invites mass appeal against him from the public claiming that he is responsible for the wrath of the gods residing in the sacred Fifth Mountain. The city is attacked and very quickly gets ruined. The widow dies in the ruins, and before she takes her last breath, she requests Elijah to rebuild the city of Akbar and to safeguard her son forever.

Elijah's struggling efforts for the reconstruction of the city from ruins becomes the crux of the novel. In the end, when the High Priest demands that Elijah ascend the hill to seek atonement and contrary to their belief, he returns safely without being consumed by the wrath of gods and is heroically welcomed to the city.

The liminality question of the discourse of space based on inclusion/ exclusion, and exile/elopement and so on produces deeper layers of meaning in alien/alienated spaces. Liminality is the quality of 'in-between'ness as in a threshold, where the boundary of inclusion and exclusion is very fragile because the border is always a contested space. The Prophet is 'at home' in the city of Akbar with the widow's comforting presence and the refuge he needed from Queen Jezebel's anger. However, a foreigner is always looked with distrust and the people of the foreign land are never in terms with their attitude towards the foreigner. The liminality of the land of his exile as encountered by Elijah entails a contestation and negotiation of the solitary foreigner in an alien land.

Whether self-realised or imposed upon, exile denotes an apparent absence of homeland and a postponement of comfort zone – a Derridean play of shattering the centre and shaking the binaries of inside and outside. This not only constructs spatial liminality but also a textual interplay of 'difference'. The dynamics of the presence and absence of space and meaning resists the conventional discourses of inclusion and exclusion, thereby demystifying the traditional notion of space.

In *The Fifth Mountain*, the exile of Prophet Elijah raises questions of subverting mythic and pre-given male subjectivity to demythifying the same by female presence. That the man is exiled from his homeland by a woman, Queen Jezebel and comforted in the foreign land by another woman, the widow of Zarephath engenders and problematises the patriarchal spatial ideas of inclusion and exclusion. Elijah escapes the wrath of Queen Jezebel, "a woman unlike others" (*The Fifth Mountain* 12) and is "sustained" (*ibid* 31) by a widow in Zarephath. The principle of inclusion is glued together by two antagonistic entities i.e., dream and law – the widow had dreamt of a voice telling her to receive the stranger who sought her – whereas the law of hospitality in the city was an ancient custom: "if a city were to deny shelter to a traveler, the sons of its inhabitants would later face the same difficulty" (*ibid* 40).

Coelho dexterously situates his story on and beyond the geography of the Fifth Mountain and the city of Akbar – both themselves contrary to each other as natural space of unevenness and holiness and human space of culture and settlement. While the former evokes awe and sacredness, the latter represents the human potential for manipulating space (rebuilding a city from its remains).

The symbolism of the Fifth Mountain and the city in ruins is of paramount significance when read from the perspective of cultural geography. The city is projected on the woman, and rebuilding it from the ruins symbolizes reconstructing her memory. The Fifth Mountain bears a silent witness to the Assyrian invasion of the city of Akbar and to the trauma that befalls the city. The mountain as a backdrop is but not a silent witness to the mental torture of Elijah. According to the legends of the city, the Fifth Mountain is the sacred abode of gods and the ideal realm of purity, crossing which a sinner would be killed. Instead, in the novel, it serves as a foil to the purity of the mind of Elijah and leaves him unharmed. A phenomenological analysis would point to the practices of ascending and descending the mountain as a symbol for the prophet's transcending his own self. It can also be read as a site of collective unconscious that demarcates the abode of gods, the sacred realm of worship, from the city of human inhabitants, the secular realm.

In contrast to the divine or sacred represented by the natural space, the secular or profane is represented by the urban cityspace. The destruction and reconstruction of the city of Akbar symbolizes an identity loss and social construction of the ego. It embodies the cultural memory of perennial fear of the ideal of purity and threat of death being an absolute space. The physical space of the fifth mountain is constructed in the imagined space of the beholders – priests and masses alike. However, the constructed nature of the purity ordeal of the mountain is subverted as the prophet, an unbeliever of the residing god, encroaching the sacred domain returns untouched, alive and more powerful.

The cultural memory of Akbar with its past, conquests, ancient gods and lores of battles was recorded through the priests. However the political agency of the priests in governance is evident through the strategic conspiracy that the high priest makes with the commander so that instead of defending against the Assyrian army, they plotted Elijah, staking the security of their own land. The agency to withhold and filter information from the public is mediated and represented by the sacred profession of priesthood, which subverts the religious discourse of spiritual authenticity.

The recovery of Byblos as the symbol representing the rehabilitation of the cultural memory of the city reconciles the foreigner to the exiled land. Further, the concept of the widow's learning Byblos enables her to shed the inhibitions of a domestic figure and thus foregrounds the feminist empowerment in the novel. In the death wish of the widow, there is a symbolic gesture of regeneration of the city and its heritage of writing. In considering the widow's son as his own, the appropriation and transculturation inevitable in any long exile happens to Elijah too.

Institution of kingship and political role of religion spatialises faith to the structure of the 'state', internally and externally to the foreign territories of rule. The insistence of Jezebel to mandatorily worship her deity, Baal or the Phoenician god, is an instance of naturalising her beliefs and as a means of imposing her hegemony. Elijah's resistance to their suppression of faith challenges the discourse of fundamentalism. This resistance is also evident in his triumphant return from the Fifth Mountain untouched by the rival gods' wrath.

IV. CONCLUSION

In brief, *The Fifth Mountain* superficially draws the age old connection between woman and nature (or the land). The novel strategically facilitates the widow to get morphed into the land. With the city of Akbar waiting to be rebuilt to its lost grandeur, she is enabled to participate in the literal conflation of herself with the natural world. Femininity here is problematic because the cityspace which is gendered masculine by patriarchal ideology is thwarted and instead, projected as feminine. The rebuilt city becomes a feminine site of desire and memory as opposed to its masculine space of domination and rule. Mutilation of the landscape is rendered synonymous to the verbal or visual if not corporeal violation of the woman. The destruction and hence disintegration of a whole cultural memory is saved by Elijah's attempt to reintegrate the widow's memory through the rebuilding process of the city. The notion of exile is redefined with a rewriting of the alien space through reconstruction of the city in the hands of the stranger foreigner. Thus a reversal of the subaltern position is facilitated, accentuating the distortion of established privileges and binaries. In short, the novel *The Fifth Mountain* can be viewed as a political allegory of space in the multifariousness of its physical, mental and socio-cultural dimensions.

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