CHAPTER - ONE
The transition to a new age in turn necessitates a new perception and a new conception of *space-time*, the inhabiting of places, and of *containers* or envelops of identity.

*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*: Irigaray, Luce.
GEOGRAPHY AND FICTION: WRITING AS EXPLORATION

As narratives both fictional and geographical writings are discourses that mediate people and places. Texts produce meanings according to the conditions and contexts in which they are read or re-read. The relationship between the discourses of fiction and geography is not only affiliative, but also intertextual. This unique relationship transcends the boundaries of "metaphorical" and "material" space, while blending intellectual and "imaginative" objectives. These discourses are constructions of spaces in which human action literally takes place (Gregory, 1994:5). As James Clifford maintains:

We now have to make sense of a world without stable vantage points; a world in which the observers and the observed are in ceaseless fluid, and interactive motion, a world where human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate and subvert one another.

(James Clifford 1986: 1-26, quoted in Gregory, Derek 1994:9)

Clifford's view underlines the necessary conditions under which geographical and fictional writings are produced. The textuality of both fiction and geography variously deals with people and places mapping territories and imaginations. They also reflect upon life, upon its trials, tribulations, failures and triumphs, while holding them together in rhetorical representations. Aritha Van
Herk, a Canadian feminist writer, for the first time used the expression *geografictione* and has attempted to fictionalise geography. The process and practice of this new genre has been successfully accomplished by her in her work *Places Far From Ellesmere*.

Geography and fiction are about space and territories. Fiction as a narrative creates its own geography as it creates its own space. Geography defines itself as the study of the earth’s surface, the space within which the human population lives. It seeks to understand a person’s life in relation to places, habitations and environmental conditions that comprise his or her geographical world. As Richard Hartshorne, an American Geographer maintains in his work *Perspective on the Nature of Geography* that

> Geography is concerned to provide accurate, orderly and rational description and interpretation of the variable characters of Earth’s surface. (Hartshorne 1959: 12)

Geography tries to locate a place accurately with certain inherent attributes and tries to represent its location effectively through maps. The study of Geography disentangles the factors that lead to particular spatial patterns. However, geography primarily is associated with writing -- writing about the earth. It constructs the physical existence of landscapes, territories, and boundaries in words.

Fiction defines itself as a product of human imagination, thought and action and it refers primarily to “mental structures”. All mental activities are supposed to be fictional, because they shape materials, which are inherently shapeless. As mental
structures, fictional representations, though often considered false, are accepted as true for their psychic coherence. We must go on relying partly on these fictions, since there is no other way of making sense of things. Fiction seems to be relativist, because it sensitizes us to the limitations of our own and other people's outlook.

As a literary genre, fiction is inherently geographical. The world of fiction is made up of locations, settings, landscapes, perspectives and horizons. Various places and spaces are occupied by the fictional characters in the fictive world, which the narrator explores along with the reader. Fiction represents a field of varied, sometimes competing forms of geographical knowledge and experience, from a sensuous awareness of places to enlightened idea of a region and nation. As an impure art, the form of fiction has been speculative for it explores and articulates social milieu and mental conditions of its characters. In this sense, the novelist becomes an explorer like a geographer. The refinement of the fictional genre was appropriated with the refinement of a number of geographical discourses, such as town planning, estate improvement, cartography and topographical painting, which survey and record the spaces of the modern world.

Geography and literature may not be considered as the combination of two essentially different disciplines, objective and subjective, real and imaginary, but are overlapping and interconnected discourses that intersect each other at different levels. Following this, it may be asserted that the worldliness of literary texts and the imaginativeness of geographical texts conjoin to create the wonderful world of fictional writing. The imaginativeness of texts, fictional as well as geographical
reflects the images they express and the way they construct them, through modes of writing and compositions. The worldliness of a text consists of various contexts such as biographical, economic, institutional, geographical that are integrated by writing to make them intelligible. Geography in its extended sense is not confined to any one discipline or even to the specialized vocabularies of the academy. Instead it travels through social practices to a large extent and is implicated in myriad topographies of power and knowledge. People instinctively make sense of places, locations, territories and landscapes in everyday lives in a number of ways for a number of purposes. Geographers have used literature as resource, as evidences of past landscapes and benefited the creative writers by enhancing their capability to capture the subjective qualities of places, locales and people.

The institutionalization of geography during the late nineteenth century has made geography entrapped in a world of contracting spaces and expanding aspirations. On the other hand, academic institutionalization of fiction has made fiction experimental in nature. Fiction has become far more adventurous in scope and writers have taken excess liberty with fictional genre, adapting to its deviant form and content in order to create a fictional territory for the reader as well as for the writer himself/herself.

This so-called experimental fiction allows a reader to explore the fictional territories by involving himself/herself in the narrative. A reader explores these territories according to his/her subjective responses to life's experience both at the levels of reality and illusion. Aritha Van Herk came up with the idea of
*geografictione*, a hybrid Canadian Italian word — combining geography with fiction in order to fictionalize geography through her lived experiences and thus to humanize geography attributing human traits.

The process of exploration is not only an activity to overcome distances, but also to create "imaginative geographies". The explorers have experienced different realities and hidden secrets of different regions as they travelled. More than that they have constructed particular ways of reading the explored territories, places and people. John Berger Cosgrove showed how the concept of landscape formed a bourgeois "way of seeing" during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This concept was very much rooted in the spirit of Renaissance humanism and in the exercise of power. If the argument is that a landscape is "a way of seeing", then, there will be a number of ways of seeing it. One may deduce from this that there apparently will be a male and a female perspective of seeing, experiencing and writing about places and people.

Recent studies on imaginative geographies have examined the processes in which images and fantasies about the colonial worlds were articulated within the texts of geographers, soldiers, missionaries, anthropologists, novelists and administrators. Explorers' tales were lavishly illustrated with images of fabulous creatures, awe-inspiring landscapes and daring deeds. The story of exploration has frequently been interpreted as the gradual triumph of modern geographical science over the mysteries of the earth. Geographical knowledge was represented as a tool of
empire building enabling both the acquisition of territory and the exploitation of resources.

V.S. Naipaul in his novel *A Way In The World* (1994) has explored his geographical knowledge, by portraying Trinidad in depth along with Venezuela. He speaks about *small island geography* and *colonial geography*. Even Hardy, Faulkner, Lawrence and many others have created “partly real, partly imaginative” worlds to give regional uniqueness to their fictions. William Faulkner is most deeply *Southern* of *Southern* writers -- the setting and scene of most of his novels, is his legendary *Yoknapatawpha* County. It is supposed to be in north-western Mississippi, with its county seat, called Jefferson. Yoknapatawpha County of Faulkner’s legend is based closely upon the Oxford and Lafayette County of geographical fact South,(its people with racial identity) forms the subject of his fiction -- an inescapably inevitable subject. Hardy and Faulkner particularly mythicised landscapes of “Wessex” and “Yoknapatawhna” in their respective fictions and Lawrence could never forget “Eastwood” and “Haggs Farm” which, according to him, made up “the country of my hear”. Haggs Farm was an inseparable landscape of his memory mapping Nottinghamshire with its mining environment turned everything to vile and ugliness became a part of London life. The very landscape of Nottinghamshire spoke about mining community and their lives with acquired attributes. Hardy and Faulkner mostly portrayed social misfits as protagonists who occupy the fringes of conventional rural society. This imaginative stance leads to the exploration of that society in fiction. Hardy was the great model of provincial writer of genius who
forced the literary world to listen to him and he caught the vivid imagination of Geographers.

Even for the twentieth century authors like Norman Mailer, America is still portrayed as ‘a beauty of magnificence unparalleled’, ‘a beauty with a leprous skin ... heavy with child’ and a ‘tormented lovely girl’ in *Armies of the Night* (1968). In this work a series of images reflect the range of conflicting feelings that Americans currently project on to the landscape. Annette Kolodny traces the web of images that focus the metaphor of *land as woman*. A series of oppositions in the nineteenth century thought between passive foliation and active impregnation are associated with American landscape. Frontier imagery in American imagination was “shaped by personal psychology, social context, milieu and changing geography”, while masculine image stresses the existence of a virgin land, a veritable garden of Eden with immense possibilities to be “taken” and “possessed” and exploited. The feminine images, by contrasts, view American landscape as a garden to be cultivated, nurtured and cared for considering a natural role for human being in the scheme of things.

During the time of Imperialism and Empire Building not only fictional heroes of the exploration and exploitation like Mr. Kurtz (*The Heart of Darkness* 1899), but explorers, the hunters, soldiers, the missionaries, the administrators, all in particular ways have provided moral models for a generation of empire builders. There was hardly any space and scope for women explorers in the colonial discourse. Of course, during the Victorian period, a lady like Isabela Bird went on travelling of her own
and in the process exploring not only new lands and people but herself. Her travelogue is unique for she has articulated her own identity and experience. However, male Geographers never bothered to include the experience of female explorers in the geographical discourse.

The female responses to sights and scenes or to landscapes are wonderfully unique to geographical imaginations. The quest for truth, discovery, self-realization and self-actualization is as much a male as female desire. Annette Kolodny in her book *The Lady of the Land* (1975) tries to trace the metaphorical representation of the land as a feminine entity throughout American history. She incorporates the innumerable but contradictory ways in which men articulate the land with the attributes of *Virgin Mother* and *Mistress*. Land as a fundamental attribute of geography is inseparably related to a place. A place has a character and a personae of its own and it comes alive in the works of creative writers where geographical territories although real become fictional. Annette Kolodny further surveyed the American literary history and showed how the New World was constantly fancied as a means of male gratification, for a virgin land to be conquered and tamed by the forces of male aggression.

Contemporary writings on “geography” are filled with assumptions about gender, as well as empire. It is not that geography serves only one sole purpose of empire building by extending and occupying territories, but geography is instrumental in other aspects too. Fiction, today has encroached into geography in a big way demolishing the boundary demarcated between fiction and non-fiction.
Fiction has fictionalised geography by reinterpreting the landscape and rediscovering the place in a new form that is through personification. The disappointing part is that it has taken a male form in male writings. Alan Sillitoe's "Nottingham novels" are comprehensively masculine, structured almost entirely on the expression or repression of male desire, whether in its more visceral or more enlightened modes. The very conventions of mapping, which help to fix Nottingham's geography, also release the author and his subject from purely local, vernacular associations, co-ordinating Nottingham to other cities and their cultural traditions. Sillitoe's Nottingham stands as a sexual battleground in which women are considered as sexual objects to be possessed or owned without identity and individuality.

"Women's way of knowing" could immensely contribute to the rewriting of histories of geography and geography of histories. The stories of women travelers are incredibly varied yet they share some common trends. One is their quite explicit recognition of the personal goals of their travels. The so-called objective discoveries of new places were not separated from the discovery of themselves. Their understanding emanent from internal sources for most of them seek places where they could live a desired life denied at home. For the women explorers of Victorian age, growing up in worlds circumscribed by Victorian standards and expectations, freedom could only be assured living in places away from that set up. Women travelled, then, for quite specific reasons. But actually they were seeking as much empowerment and self-knowledge as "objective knowledge". Their satisfaction was derived not in the external discovery of "new geographies", but in the process of
exploring, in experiencing a world in which they could participate in their own terms.

To explore a world both figuratively and literally involves an active participation of the subject as observer. Although male explorers were also interested in self-exploration however for them external discovery of places was the top most priority to quench the male thirst of adventure. Women were in fact more free in their travels as there was no such institutional context. So they were more often aware only of their subjective goals.

Explorations involve discovering and separating of unknown lands and people. In this sense writing is exploration for it opens up new avenues. Explorers are both outsiders and insiders— they observe and yet become participants in the lives and lands that they travel through. To “conquer” and to “penetrate” unexplored lands or places were considered a purely male activity—“suppressing foreign lands as they had suppressed women” (Said 1978).

People create structures in the context of places, those structures then condition the making of people. The places can change in terms of both their context and extent. The people-place-interaction incorporates a place-place or people in place interaction while establishing external as well as internal linkages. A powerful sense of interplay is seen between a specific character’s sensibility and a specific sense of place and time. In Places Far From Ellesmere, Aritha Van Herk herself becomes the protagonist and a participant in the text. She relives through her experiences at three different places—Edberg, Edmonton and Calgary while creating
an utopia for women in the desert island, Ellesmere. She wants to be in Ellesmere with Anna Karenina to breathe freely without patriarchal bondage. Here writing becomes a real exiting experience and self-assuring exploration for the writer exhorts the readers to question while interrogating herself and a particular text like Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Van Herk here explored the multiple possibilities that are available to a writer to create works of fiction through auto-representation and self-reflexivity.

Geography builds up the psychology in a sense that a place determines the temperament and outlook of a person as she/he is inseparable to its surroundings. To put in other words, no one can be “outside geography” and its influence. Thomas Hardy’s and William Faulkner’s usual obsession with a place, in an intimate sense, indicates a desire to forget the words to engage with more fundamental, palpable realities of life, that is the land, the reasons, physical labour and instincts, traditional agrarian mores, folk-culture. Their fictional worlds define man’s identity largely through his relationship with his environment. So a place, a location or simply the geography can be powerful once articulated in language for it transforms the inanimate to living beings, and humanises a place. However, Van Herk makes a difference in using a different language in attributing material context for creating gendered spaces.

The theme of post-modern fiction itself is the composition of fiction at the level of enunciation and the enounced. At the level of enunciation there is an obvious concern with the role of the narrator and the narratee. Plurality of narrative voices are introduced and in most cases the narrators are writers. This is an exploration too
Post modern writing gives way to aleatory writing, parody and pastiche that questions the story, forms a tissue of intertextuality. Moreover the representation of the author in the work leads to self-parody. The conventional demarcations between fact and fiction, present and past, reality and artifice have collapsed and it is manifested in texts.

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, the author is simply not the narrator but a reader, a participant and a character too. In her creative endeavour, she changes the role of the reader by provoking, accusing, questioning them and thus forcing the reader to get involved in the narrative. Even she revolutionized the role of the narrator in the text, employing the narrator as both character and reader. She initiates the readers into the act of re-reading/un-reading different places in the novel and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

Geography which was once ascribed as “mother of all sciences” considered to be a “robust manly science”, due to the chauvinistic attitude of the male geographers. They thought it was male prerogative to explore territories and conquer the entire horizon. The Western Canadian writers believed and behaved in a manner that exploring North in writing is only man’s business and privilege. The Northern territory, still unexplored at large is full of adventure because it is associated with mystery and romance that imbued the geographical imagination. Van Herk in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, demolishes the patriarchal myth by contextualizing the remote island in her work. The post-modern female writers have been trying to deconstruct
the old patriarchal myths and attitude to reconstruct everything in their own way self reflexively articulating female identity and experience. Van Herk maintains:

"Writing place: hiding place" (p. 21).

A writer with a mask/without a mask explores many hidden truths to justify certain issues. For writers a writing place is a hiding place, for it provides them a location and in a sense writing provides solace to the bruised female hearts/egos. Writing works as a therapy for women to vent out the rage and fury. The suppressed feeling of an oppressed community (woman as a community) is expressed in an overt form. The gradual erasure of "I" in women's writing reflects the significant blending of personal reminiscence and factual observation.

Van Herk divides the novel into four distinguished sections, named after four different geographical locales in Canada — Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary and Ellesmere. These places again represent certain attributes to relate them to certain significant themes. There are the places where Van Herk lived and experienced its surroundings. She relives her experience through the fractionalized narrative of these places through memory mapping and dream geography. The author explores her formative years — childhood, youth and adulthood with the help of rememory, placing herself again in each of these places while creating an utopia for women in the remote iceclad islands of Ellesmere.

Van Herk opens her novel Places Far From Ellesmere with the portrayal of Edberg: "Edberg, Coppice of desire and return". The journey through re-living, re-experiencing and re-discovering the self begins at Edberg, a small, semi urban town.
Edberg is a schedule, a reminder of the outside world -- North/South. Modern day movement is a part of geography and the movement of “self” symbolically commences with the moving train that allows entry and exit. The train journey to specific destination can be identified with the journey of the self aiming at the goal of attaining self-hood and autonomy that has to originate somewhere and Edberg indicates that beginning. The railway platform at Edberg is transformed to a person that acts in a human way. A railway platform witnessing so many incidents both fulfilling and disappointing, (including Anna’s tragic death) acts as a human agent;

How many farewells/ deaths/ welcomes/ shopping trips did that train’s platform launch; or abortions/ abandonment’s/ divorces?

[p.18]

Edberg is considered to be a lifeless person -- full of gloom -- whose soul cannot be elevated:

“Dust over all. A dead town: Edberg” [p.20]

Edberg: Deadberg. [p.22]

Despite all untoward happenings/mishappenings and heartbreaks a town exists. So does a person:

Dream yourself a place: Edberg [p.20]

A place is justified with certain territorial attributes just as a person becomes a person with certain human attributes. Edberg is a place far from Ellesmere, which is mere, insignificant and hardly acknowledged. So Edberg takes the form of a “woman” whose entity is almost a non-entity except as an alluring object of sex and
passion. The different places of Edberg -- the bus garage, the hardware store, Erickson’s Locker plant, co-op store, the hotel, the post office are renewed as sites with inherent traits for,

... the site persists, renews its presence. (P.32)

Even writing as a site of exploration renews the previously told/heard/read stories in a new dimension. That is a kind of intertextuality and transtextuality, which is apparently dominant in Places Far From Ellesmere. Moreover geography and fiction intermingle with each other:

... trying to find Russia, and where will it all end? With murder? With a woman in a novel getting off a train in Edberg, her red bag in her hand, seeking to fulfill a fiction?

[PP.33-34]

Edberg is fictionalized in the first section of the book. Anna gets down from a train in Edberg, a semi-urban town to fulfill previously unfulfilled desires. Anna suffered in the hands of a Russian male author that also reflects the gender bias in nineteenth century Russian context. That is why the ‘feminist writer’ (as she insists on that), Van Herk locates Anna in Canadian context and in twentieth century context she tries to transform Anna into a modern woman, aware of identity and selfhood who is empowered to read her own story from a female point of view:

... she has only to read the story differently, her own story waiting to be unread by the light of these places. [P.36]
Edberg as geographical location has created its own fiction and a reader has to identify his/her own personal geography in reading of Van Herk’s *Geografictione-Places Far from Ellemere*. Territorial divisions or geographical boundary of Edmonton is developed as narrative exploration. Even the text itself is extended to a city or place waiting to be explored just as Anna is waiting to be re/read. In this section, “Edmonton, long division”, Van Herk maintains a sense of historicity to deal with the geographical location of Edmonton. History relates to the sense of time and place, thus enchains geography in it. Van Herk depicts herself in this section openly, and she becomes a part of the text and geography too, as nothing is “outside geography”. The desire to create an island to be inhabited by only women germinates in this section, it gets momentum in the third section and finally is articulated as a probable locale for women’s world, a space to be occupied. The geographical division is transformed to a division of the “self”. Edmonton pretends to be another place—which is indeed a human act, a human being indulges in dream geography to be anywhere he longs to be in. As a matter of fact one is strongly rooted in one place which gives a sense of belonging. Man develops an emotional attachment to a place as he satisfies his biological as well as esthetical need from it as “man cannot live by bread alone”. The human attitude and attachment to territory compel them to defend their living space and this space plays a significant role in the fictional narrative.

The third section, “Calgary: this growing graveyard” presents Calgary in its material/social aspects. The place has its own inertia that propels the author to be
constantly on the move—physical as well as imaginary to fictionalize/humanise her experiences of different places in underlining belongingness;

To dare to say here to die, to dare to stay after death, to implant yourself firmly and say, 'Here I stay', let those who would look for a record come here [P.61].

Calgary, famous for endless and potent light is counted for graveyards, "counted for the people buried there--because death makes a place its own". Van Herk's strange fixation on death comes to the forefront here to suggest that death is a real act of freedom. Calgary is full of charm and is also charmless at the same time. This duality reflects the modern day dilemma.

The final section of the novel, "Ellesmere, woman as island" is both integrative and disruptive for Ellesmere constructs and represents the idea of "woman as island". This arctic island despite its physical/natural harshness is chosen to be an ideal place for women to escape patriarchal domination. An island is not a dependant territory--it's representation underlines difference that is self-reflexive to women's identity. The idea is both symbolic and transgressive.

The regions, places, locales matter a lot as they are the prevailing conditions under which people live. Under these contingent circumstances people act as agents within the structures or constructs. These structures are nothing but means of organizing of human lives in relation to the place and environment. As V.S Naipaul puts it in *A Way In the World*:
We all inhabit a ‘construct’ of a world. Ancient peoples had their own. Our grandparents had their own, we cannot absolutely enter into their construct. [PP 154-155]

The human ways of life influence and subvert one another and in that process new cultures evolve. Everything is apparently fixed on a moving earth but the truth is everything is on motion. Even mountains and islands. No one can occupy a bounded or enclosed cultural space. Fiction or for that matter literature itself becomes a source of evidence for the changing concept of landscapes, cities and mountains or geographical masks. In this sense geography influences the writing of fiction, its formation, construction and design. The concept of intellectual landscapes works effectively to make fiction an exciting territory to escape to fulfill the desire of the heart. It’s again a part of mental mapping that constantly goes on creating dream geography or geography of mind. Van Herk maintains:

One can indulge in dream geography. A place is made up with the various contributions of the people of different regions. [P.20]

The Canadian writers both male and female frequently indulge in creating unique geographies for their fictions. Cartographer’s anxiety and desire bears upon imaginative mapping and fictionalization of territories. Some of the Canadian writers have been successful in employing metaphors of mapping in their works. These imaginary mappings often emerge as real territories. Margaret Lawrence’s Manawaka, Alice Munro’s Jubilee, Margaret Atwood’s, Grisweld, Robertson Davies’ Deptford Matt Cohen’s Salem, Janic Brown’s Shrewsbury are remarkable
examples of fictional geography just like much acclaimed Hardy's *Wessex*, Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha* and Lawrence's *Nottingham*. Iconography as the images of these fictionalized territories is impregnated with symbolic meanings. Thus the desert island Ellesmere, the snowclad white mountain symbolically stands for an utopia for the author, Anna and for other women including all those stranded fictional female characters.

Geographical exploration is associated with truth that stands witness to the harsh reality of the land and nature. Similarly writing confronts the ever-expanding sites of life. Writing is not always euphoric in nature, but an exciting experience that deals with places and people. It is sometimes an escape from the mundane reality of existence. Especially for female writers, it provides the required space for self-articulation and expression in a self-reflexivity that bears upon female identity and selfhood.

**Works cited**


