The Travelling Subject In Elizabeth Bishop’s Poems

“All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper just running down the edges of different countries and continents, looking for something.”

– Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop’s works stir up those parts of reader’s hearts which lay hidden even from itself. The travel theme in Bishop’s woks stem from the relentless traveller she has been her entire life. There are on the forefront two kinds of travel that she hops on ever since her birth. On the one hand, Bishop travels out of necessity in the initial years of her life when her father dies and her mother admitted to hospital. This displacement that she faces impacts bishop in such a manner that for the longest time she is not able to decide or figure out which abode is her home. On the other hand, she travels willingly, after her graduation, it may be a series of complicated travel but it was regulated by a sense of freedom. The tumult of making sense of the definition of “home” appears in almost all of her work. Bishop also focuses on physical and imaginative travel. This theme can largely be seen in the poems such as, “Questions on Travel”. Elizabeth bishop goes on a quest as a poet and as a traveller in her poems wherein she tries to understand herself while trying to make sense of the surroundings. She tries to focus on concrete details and through that tries to find a focal point in a world which is in flux. In her work, there is also a tinge of coloniality, whether it be in effecting the culture of the place visited or through “driving into interior”.

The travel in American Poetry scene emerged from the fascination with Britain’s culture of Grand Tours. The imperial legacy of United Kingdom was deeply influential in making the intellectual elite wanting to explore. It would not be baseless to say that the US was looking to establish cultural and economic hegemony. After World War II, America started looking for both soft and hard power and hence cultivated the culture of voyeurism. Hence, the travelling became both an escape and re-establishment. Elizabeth Bishop was a part of this culture unintentionally. She travelled profusely. There is a sense of home, homesickness and home-boundedness which hovers around Bishop’s poems. As mentioned in Helen Vendler’s essay “Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherwordly” there is an interpenetration of domestic and the strange as in her poem “Arrival at Santos”. The dislocation and displacement makes Bishop more prone to give critical remarks and instead of decluttering the quest, complicates even more. The only period of satisfaction it seems which was bestowed on her was the period of her stay in Brazil where she reached unplanned and stayed for 15 years with partner Lota.

The travel theme in bishop’s work is related with her preoccupation with how she feels when it comes to “belongingness” and “home” with constantly travelling. Zygmunt Bauman, in “From Pilgrim to Tourist” posits that with the continuously changing time, the sense of one’s home is faded and ultimately lost, what remains however is having a home which is not constructed within four walls, a street, etc. In short, the sense of home then has transcended the idea of physicality and reached a spiritual and metaphysical focal point embedded in the layers of travelling. The travel, hence, itself becomes the home. While one can say that Bishop might have found her home in Brazil yet there are instances wherein her work focus on alienation towards the culture more than belonginess. The reader can always find self-locating elements in

Bishop’s work. In the poem, “The Map”, Newfoundland and Labrador are the places which the poet has known.

The travel theme in Elizabeth Bishop’s poems is most aptly depicted in,” Question on Travel”. This poem questions the idea of travel in repeated questions thrown on the stage, not exactly meant to be answered. There is a sense of travel weariness, in “too many waterfalls”. The poem conveys the energy and unhindered movement of the natural world, ”keep travelling, travelled”. She suggests that as tourist, we are like intruders into world that is not ours. “is it right to be watching strangers in a play/ in this strangest of theatres?”. There is a sense of ambiguity which is highlighted in the poem which remains until the very last line of the poem. By the end of the poem, it feels like the poet is questioning herself and then in a swift motion projects same questions to the readers. There is “looking for something” manifestation throughout the poem. The poem addresses the general idea of tourist travel. The poet believes that travelling is mainly done to answer question about oneself, but in this poem, poet is deliberating if travelling makes sense at all. There is exhaustion from travelling, travellers feel unnecessary burden to like and cherish the culture of the land they have visited; hence she criticizes the travel as voyeurism. The utter need to satiate oneself from visiting places when it’s not the case always. She mentions two types of travelling, physical and imaginary.

The poem feels crowded in the initial line, “ too many waterfalls”. The imagery soon takes a destructive turn wherein,’ ..if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling, the mountains look like the hulled of capsized ships” with the tone colonial mindset this marks the start of interrogation. The argumentative feel like question to self. This poem complicates relationship between mind and imaginative travel and physical travel expanding the horizon of mind. To travel out of necessity implies, displacement, disharmony and when travel for pleasure we tend to explore places already explored, “postcard places”, moving towards colonial setting. By the end of the poem, the poet is still to decide whether travelling is positive or negative.

Works Cited:

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