

The Post Space in Michelle de Kretser's The Questions of Travel

Exist(ing) Identity of Ravi and Laura

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Abstract— This paper examines the implications of post-space to the identity construction of the main characters, Ravi and Laura in the work of Sri Lankan Australian writer, Michelle De Kretser's *The Questions of Travel*. It investigates the journeys of the characters in Sydney, the meeting point or the post space of Ravi and Laura in which they have to negotiate themselves to the already-existed system. De Kretser's *The Questions of Travel*, apparently positions the two characters as the representatives of opposing poles, East and West. It can be found out that Ravi and Laura in the end lead the principle of colonial space. Ravi fails to appropriate himself to the Australian environment, while Laura reinforces her status as a white Australian by consistently leading a colonial path.

Keywords—*post-colonialism, space, post space, identity, Australia*

I. INTRODUCTION

As a field of academic investigation, post-colonialism emerges in the period of anti-colonial struggles against colonial territorial control both mentally and physically, particularly in Africa and Asia [1]. It is emphasized that colonialism entails not only economic exploitation and political subordination, but also involves the practices of cultural power over the subordinated. This long-established historical practice has nailed its influential discourse through manifestations including administration, knowledge, territory, and identity. Consequently, British and West-European culture disparages the traditions of non-Western cultures and it leaves chaos. Space receives particular attention in the study of postcolonialism. Space in the enclave of postcolonial study is the colonizer's tool to penetrate the colonial practices. Responsively, in its practice, post-colonialism proposes a pattern of resistance to the colonial biases, especially at an already-anchored historic level in the colonized nations.

As an alternative to resistance, post-colonial fiction erects a challenge to the chaotic space in the colonized nations deployed by the colonial in its relation to keeping their legitimation. Post-colonial fiction can be a tendency to oppose colonial ideas by involving an *alternative* space referring to freedom, independence, and infinity. Nonetheless, as it is already noted, it is not simply about proposing themes such as nationalism, decolonization, and resistance, but how it can deconstruct any colonial discourse. It is not simply about

rebuild something, but it is also about how to let all discourses in pieces. This paper discusses the possible reproduction of colonial discourse on the main characters, Ravi Mendis and Laura Fraser in Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* [2]. From her perspectives of Asian Australian, De Kretser introduces the modern Australia through the cross cultural experiences[3][4]. This paper specifically engages with Sara Upstone's points on the implication of spatial order on personae.

Discussions about power politics cannot be separated from *space* issues; a power to use space as a means to run its political system. The initially free space is designed in such a way as to accommodate the political goals of a power by creating borders in the space. The borders eventually make parts in space. Thus, space (which is chaotic) transforms into homogeneous places. The borders are made as natural as it is with *appropriation*. With *appropriation*, something constructed can generate to natural [5]. The result of appropriation of space is to accommodate political purposes such as colonial territory, administration, and resources. However, space itself cannot be completely and totally overcontrolled because nothing can total-overwrite the space. Space is just like a text, it is borderless and it must leave traces and ruptures. In Derrida's terms, these traces are not the fragments left behind in the past or will appear in the future, it has been there from the beginning, even before the beginning of a space [6]. Thus, the space is not able to be homogenized, like a text that cannot be understood in a single meaning, its traces attempt to escape from any power to totalize. Therefore, spatial politics explains that space is an important context for discussing issues such as power relations and identity negotiation [5].

The space has a diversity of cultures and traditions in it, the resistance to the dominance of power is possibly practiced by letting it be deconstructive whose condition is flexible and chaotic. *Chaos* is pure condition. It precisely purifies any manipulative construction from any political power. Thus, space is chaotic where diversity accommodates its meaning [5]. The problem is, the world is no longer space. Colonial history has overwritten it all; administrative system, geographical territory, and national mentally. Any attempt to total-control the colonized actually fails and it leaves chaos such as mimicry, hybrid, and other effects [7]. This effect

precisely empowers the colonized to deconstruct any discourse nailed to them. This deconstructive resistance manifests as post-space. Post-space is a consequence of the existence of diverse history [5]. This post-space also explains that the colonized can undo any perspective they have about the superiority of Western. They can also be them in a chaotic space.

Fiction is just a way to bring back these issues because fiction can reveal the traces and chaos in spatial politics [5]. It has the capacity to display the complexity of interests and ideological systems and at the same time be able to identify the interests and ideology [5]. Beyond the text, the author can also resist by offering critical deconstructive angle for the colonized to stay in the post-space because post-space is a space where their power beyond the colonial discourse [5]. Since place nails the ruptured imaginary borders and borders, the text can bring back the chaos from the ruptured borders. Text should interrogate and question the colonial offers. The way the writers present post-space is with the movement from place to post-space, either in wider or narrower scale [5] because post-space represents the global condition.

Some fictions also seem to fail to escape from colonial discourses such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* [8] and Nam Le's *The Boat* [9] whose core identically overexposes an *aporia* as colonial bias. Technically speaking, *The White Tiger* narrates a poor boy (Balram Halwai) who wants to leave the Darkness (poor side of India) and start new life as rich man while *The Boat* narrates a fictional-reflective character, named Nam Le, who traverse a wide range of locales (only the first and the last story deal with Vietnam) such as Colombia, New York City, Australia, Japan, and Iran. Mostly, it is about Le's pursue of identity. Adiga encourages to propose a *being-like-Western* as the novel identity and Le secretly questions Eastern and drags it bag to a colonial domestication as an Eastern. Somehow, this leads these guys to awards they achieve "in the capacity of their work to move through shifting, overlapping ... enables a powerful expression of personal and social transformation" [10]. If this becomes a way Asia-Australia style of writing enhance its minor position to major legitimation, it has no difference to utilize poorness and uncertainty of Eastern as the aesthetic and economical values. In someways, it may trap itself into the overexposure of the eastern as an "exotic location"[11]. Asian Australian writers, however, are bound to their cultural loyalty, "moving between home and host" countries[12]. Geographically, East travels globally but mentally, East is localized or placed in a domesticated. Politics spatial operates in this scale, postcolonial can slip at its bottom trap of colonial product and Australia seems to be a geographical space that accommodates this chaotic product.

II. METHODS

This article focuses on the major male and female characters, Ravi Mendis and Laura Fraser in Michelle de Kretser's novel, *The Questions of Travel* published by Allen and Unwin in 2013. The primary data are Michelle de Kretser's *The Questions of Travel* and Sara Upstone's *The Politics of Space in Postcolonial Novel* [5]. The data collection is

conducted through close reading on words and sentences of the novel supported by the quotation about postcolonial space.

In analysing the data, this article applies several steps in accordance with Upstone. It identifies the events experienced by the characters into three significant points, space, place and post space. It will then explains how these three important notions influence the major characters.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

De Kretser's *The Questions of Travel* canvasses different countries as the travelling sites of the characters. It tells the people who "make voluntary and involuntary journeys" that involve traumatic and paradoxical process of leaving the homeland and rooting the host land [13]. The discussion specifically focuses on the Sydney part of the novel. However, several places may also be used as reference. Sydney, an urban city in Australia is the meeting point of Ravi and Laura. This city becomes their post-space. The novel, however, has a distinctive narrative pattern in which each chapter is subsequently named after the character, Ravi and Laura, followed with the year of the event happened. This narrative pattern significantly indicates the intertwine of temporal and spatial aspects in structuring the story.

Ravi and Laura have similar reasons of going to Sydney. Family lost more or less brings them to Sydney. Journeying to Sydney becomes the compensation of being 'abandoned' by the family. Unlike Laura, Ravi is an amateur traveller. In Bhabha's term, Ravi is "a newness [that] enters the world"[7]. Ravi's process of journeying is more complex than Laura. 'Journeying' is the word that may represent Ravi more than the word 'travelling'. The word 'travelling' suggests a 'gay' way of entering a country, "is grounded in materiality". In Ravi's case, his journey is not like the picturesque travelling brochure that offering a new dream. Sydney is his first overseas city that he goes to. His journey to Sydney is political. It refers to Ravi's purpose of saving his life. As a university academic, the chance of escaping from the chaotic Sri Lanka for Ravi may possibly be attained through applying scholarship and applying a visitor visa. A visitor visa grants Ravi a different life in Sydney, Australia. Nevertheless, coming into Sydney in a visitor visa foreshadows the future Ravi. Although a visitor visa enables Ravi to enter Sydney immediately, it does not expose him to the real life. He leads a secure and sterile life. His journey is not authentic as De Kretser underlines, "you're always travelling in a kind of bubble, a bubble of privilege, you're cut off from people because of the language you speak or don't speak, you're cut off from them because of the money you have"[14]. After the death of his family, Ravi seems to be surrounded by people who readily escorts him in Sri Lanka and Australia.

In order to collapse the 'colonial authority' of entering the new territory, Freda Hobson, a woman with power, Malini's best mate, becomes 'the bridge'. Freda, an English-Jaffna Tamil woman who is described as the one "who knew people in Sydney, in New York, in Ho Chi Minh City, was running the world again"[14] enables him to get the document things. It is by no coincidence that Ravi's helper is a woman who is

politically and economically more powerful than him. Their friendship is inadvertently built on the 'colonial' bases. Freda is the only person who is able to elevate Ravi out of his fugitive situation. Ravi's movement is arranged according to Freda's plan.

Meanwhile, Laura decides to travel to fulfill something she feels empty. She travels the world and search for meaningful experiences. She meets Theo in London, but Laura still has not found the sort of true connection. Unlike Laura who spends most of her time travelling overseas, Ravi stays in Sri Lanka and endures the unstable political situation of the nation. Ravi was born in Sri Lanka. His youth in Sri Lanka is full of terror and the threat of violence from Tamil extremists. However, Ravi upholds an optimism that the ferocity will soon be over, although he has lost his family members in a terrible slaughter. Malini, Ravi's wife is an activist. She joins in political activism to struggle for the human rights. She becomes the target of terrorist. Malini's friend, Freda, tries to help him. Freda keeps him from hotel to hotel and, finally, finds a way to escape him to Sydney.

The structural narrative, however, carries Ravi and Laura to Sydney. This city becomes the significant standpoint for them. New life seems good to them. Ravi and Laura emerge as two contrastive entities in terms of space and time. Their journeys represent the very definition of West and East. Laura questions herself through her borderless journeys around several countries in Asia and Europe. While Ravi is in constant political negotiation with the homeland. However, Ravi's moments of migrating to Sydney significantly marks his political momentum of post space. Sydney is obviously not Sri Lanka. They demand different state of bargaining. Ravi in Sri Lanka is not Ravi in Sydney. In Sydney he embarks into 'another' Ravi, physically the same Ravi but with different 'taste'. On the other side, Laura's returning to Sydney becomes her denouement point after Theo passed away. Her sweet surrender is initially ignited by the picture of Sydney Olympics that then leads her to "her laptop and googled London sydney one way"[15]. The words 'one way' and 'round' trip underpin significant meaning to Laura's travel.

In fact, Laura does not share the same status with Ravi in terms of entering the territory with Ravi. Ravi enters the new land, the Australian territory as an asylum seeker, while Laura, as a white Australian woman has more privileges. Ravi is in limbo, in in-between-ness. In Sri Lanka he becomes the target of the terrorist, the fugitive, while in Australia he is a seeker. As a seeker, he waits for the approval of Australian government regarding his status as an asylum seeker. In this position, Ravi has to succumb to the authoritative spatial order. Ravi is considered a winner if he is able to 'undo' the Western order. As an asylum seeker, Ravi is given a colonial 'privilege' not to stay in detention centre. This novel shows that this colonial privilege is granted by the territory order to draw a line between the refugee and the boat people as stated by Tyler, a friend of Ravi in Ramsay:

"Plane people like Ravi come in on a visa, so they live in the community while their applications are being processed. It's part of the government's strategy to distinguish between two groups. To boost their line that boat people can be treated like shit" [15].

Tyler's explanation on the border line of refugee and boat people represents a "colonial sandwich" [9], multilayers in migrancy life in Australia which placed boat people in the bottom. However, Ravi's heart remains in Sri Lanka, although he has made a friendship with Hana. On the other side, Laura is still looking for *something* else. Ravi works at the same company as Laura. The two scarcely have the chance to get to know each other until Laura knows that Ravi decides to return to Sri Lanka. Laura feels that she needs to visit Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, tsunami hits them.

Textually, this novel problematizes the *aporia* that leads them to travel. The problem is, Laura seems to represent the colonial travel and Ravi seems to represent the colonized travel. It is to imply that there is an empty space in them that drives them to travel. Laura experienced the loss when her mother died and it projects the lack she has to fill, but she attempts to fill it by covering many countries just to please what displeases her. It is a colonial travel that explains the distance between self and the other. Laura manifests her power to traverse all nations that exposes her borderless-ness. Her search for lack is colonial pursuit.

Ravi, on the other hand, experienced the loss from an unsecured place and it hijacks his *identity*. Ravi, differently, is *placed* (domesticated) from beginning (in Sri Lanka). He is oriented and the way he escapes is just to make gap between what he wants (the secured place) and what he is (his Sri Lanka identity). His identity is chaotic. Therefore, when he decides to go back to Sri Lanka (after finding a *safe haven* in Australia), it has already indicated that he is mentally *placed* to his nation (considerably, *self* should be much more important than anything, no exception for nation, if he is back, it just explains two things; his *Orientalized* self (see Said, 1978) and his suicide). Chandani Lokuge in *Mediating Literary Borders: Sri Lankan Writing in Australia* asserts it is Ravi's "ghettoized mentality" that prevents his full insertion into the Australian society [15]. If he just comes back to *masturbate* with his memory, nationality, and all things left behind, he just shows how deep colonial discourse has overwritten him. For sure, he should leave it and enhances his new identity that is unidentified; chaotic identity as the post-space.

It can be compared to Laura. She shows her transfinite power, her identity is not standing only to Australia, she finds and annexes identities to world (colonial space) and Ravi finds himself only in Sri Lanka. If one can annex the world, it will be easy to be unstayed in only a place. Post-space seems exists in everywhere, from trans-national to body. Nationality and body becomes the very problem of the main characters in Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, because behind the chaotic spatial identity of each, the text precisely brings them back into colonial territory; Ravi exiting his post-space and Laura existing her colonial space. Therefore, this novel can be investigated to the problem of its position to offer the power of colonial space explained by Ravi's decisions compared to Laura's. It sounds so political, but it is.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ravi and Laura, the two opposing characters in De Kretser's *The Questions of Travel*, exemplifies the consequences of living in borders. In fact, spatial order may benefit differently to these people. Ravi, a Sri Lankan, lives as a fugitive, an asylum seeker and first generation migrant. He represents the East, the peripheral and is always in a state of negotiating his identity and his existence either in Sri Lanka and Sydney. In the end of the story, Ravi keeps being 'the East' and failing to be fluid in order to mingle with the new environment. Upon his granting asylum, he decides to return to Sri Lanka. The other character, Laura is the west woman. She is naturally granted privileges of travelling around the world and in the end return to Sydney. Unlike Ravi, being a white Australian, Laura has more authority in passing the borders.

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