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Precarious Landscapes: Climate Anxiety andthe Anthropocene in Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow*

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Abstract : Architecture and interior influence the inhabitant's consciousness and conduct. This article looks into the spatio-cognitive factors affecting the inhabitants through a close reading of Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* (2020). In so doing, it applies the 'prospect-refuge theory' in analysing the affective aspect of the interiors, developed by J. Appleton (1975) wherein he delineates the proclivity for certain landscapes which furthers the feelings of safety and pleasure from inhabiting environments that offer both views and a sense of enclosure. The veranda is one such space wherein a sense of prospect and refuge can be traced simultaneously. Hence, reading the space of the verandah as the threshold bears a crucial role in the lives of the protagonists, Loya and Torun. Taking cue from Gaston Bachelard, this article also probes into the phenomenology of interiors through a reading of the houses as described in the novel.

Keywords: Architecture, Bachelard, Interior, Jahnavi Barua, Prospect-refuge theory, Veranda

Introduction

Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* (2020) is a novel about homes, both in its physical and abstract sense. The novel highlights and intertwines both personal and the political unrest around the lives of Torun, Loya and Rukmini. As Usha K.R. notes, a "vivid sense of place" interweaves with history, in this "deeply emphatic story of the ways of the human heart and the consequences of its unpredictability (n.p.). While Torun and Usha's daughter, Dr. Rukmini, leaves her parental home in Guwahati to marry Alex, "the wrong man…a man who was not of her religion remotely near hers, and a man whose skin was dark" as Usha calls him (Barua 5). Her marital bliss is soon ended after her divorce and she shifts from Glenburn (Alex's home) to Ashraya with her daughter Loya. The story begins when Loya comes to Guwahati with the ostensible purpose of her research work on elephants, says "she was just passing through" (48). The yellow house welcomes her; Usha, now dead, Loya stays with her grandfather Torun. The story develops as the personal is conflicted with the political and Loya is caught in the nexus of the turmoil.

Research methodology:

This paper uses the theoretical approach and close reading of the text taken into consideration. The theories of J. Appleton, Gaston Bachelard, and Kris Pint are used in this paper to make an analysis of the homes mentioned in Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* (2020). A literature review of the works on interior spaces and threshold precedes the application of the theories into the text.

Analysis:

This paper attempts to read the yellow house and the space of the veranda in the novel. In so doing, it applies Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of interiors, along with J. Appleton's the 'prospect-refuge theory' in analysing the affective aspect of the interiors. Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (1958) describes the role of home and its importance in human experience. He basically traces the way the house shapes memories of the dwellers. In his analysis, Bachelard examines the different parts of the house which elicit different kinds of sensations; however, the sense of security that the house provides is in fact an illusion which the dweller creates. The subjectivity on the part of the dweller is based on the sense of protection or fear which they feel towards their homes.

Similarly, J. Appleton in his *The Experience of Landscape* (1975), states that while choosing an environment, both prospect and refuge is taken into consideration. By prospect, he means "how far one can see" and by refuge, he means "how protected one is against possible enemies" (Stamps 643). Appleton's prospect-refuge theory delineates the proclivity for certain landscapes which furthers the feelings of safety and pleasure from inhabiting environments that offer both views and a sense of enclosure. This is in keeping in view the distance that one might gauge to detect any possible danger. The prospect and refuge theory has been mainly concerned with landscapes, but this paper follows Hildebrand's assertion that the prospect and refuge theory could also be applied to architecture and interiors: "Refuge and prospect are opposites: refuge is small and dark; prospect is expansive and bright. It follows that they cannot exist in the same space. They can occur contiguously, however, and must, because we need them both, and we need them together. From the refuge we must be able to survey the prospect; from the prospect we must be able to retreat to the refuge" (qtd. in Stamps 644).

Hildebrand also proposed that the comfort level depended on environmental factors and the size of the spaces; wide spaces increase comfort, or the view of water or nature from inside the premises of the house provides the desired relaxation. The Yellow house for Rukmini was a space of solace, but the day of her wedding changes witness shift in her feelings:

From the window seat in her room, Rukmini had a spectacular view, one that she had grown accustomed to…but this morning she looked at it with a pressing sense of loss….The yellow house Torun built in 1960, the year Rukmini was born, had the advantage of being situated on the edge of a hill that while not exactly overhanging the river did overlook it as closely as possible…The panoramic view was unobstructed on three sides (Barua 7)

For Rukmini, the prospect is wide where she can view the river, which lays beyond the interior of her house. Interior refuge, as Hildebrand sees, is "created by darkness, solid walls rather than windows" while interior prospect is created "conversely, by bright light, large horizontal" dimensions (qtd. in Stamps 644). So the refuge and the prospect is determined by the movement from one to the other. Safety and comfort is seen in the movement from the refuge to the prospect as one can pass without being seen and hence can make oneself aware of the possible danger outside the premises of the house.

On Rukmini's wedding day, while she was waiting, she "there was silence from her parents' bedroom", and the "silence was amplified by the absolute stillness inside the house and outside it too—up and down the hill and on the river" (Barua 6). Rukmini's interior experience was in parallel to the outside world, for Rukmini, the yellow house is not an isolated entity, but one which is amalgamated with the world outside. But when she returns home after twenty five years, "she could not bear to look at it" (180), as Bachelard observes "if we return to the old house as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy" (Bachelard 100). Through this line, what Bachelard does is he gives "felicitous space" a name, which he regards as a space of nostalgia. The "felicitous space" evokes an intimate space that is lost forever. Kris Pint compares Bachelard's view with Heynen's whose emphasis on home as a space of the past to which the dweller clings to makes him unable to face the challenges of complex dwelling. This is evident when Rukmini still thinks about her home after she is shifted to a flat. This is also the case of Torun who lingers about the yellow house as it holds nostalgia. Loya also goes to the yellow house hesitating to find answers about her past, to know about her mother's roots.

When Loya first enters the yellow house, she notices the silence that grips it, just like her mother Rukmini felt on her last day in the house:

> A pair of wooden double doors—the front door—was shut. The house was shrouded in silence. Windows were open, but curtained; there was no hint of human presence: no gush of water from a tap, or the scrape of a chair or even a cough. Only the bulbul was brave enough to sing out into the hush (Barua 42).

While entering the yellow house, Loya instantly makes a comparative analysis of the room with that of Glenburn (her father's house) in Bangalore. The first thing she notices is the furniture which were "pieces in mellow golden teak, the fabrics in refreshing green and cream colours" while Gleburn's rooms were dark and gloomy and heavily decorated (Barua 45). The kitchen also demarcates Loya's life in the yellow house and in Ashraya and Glenburn. The kitchen in the yellow house with its gleaming white cabinets "hummed with an energy" is in stark contradiction to the ones in her mother's houses. Food holds a special place in the yellow house, unlike those in Rukmini's place, "if food was the measure of life, Loya and Rukmini had led a frugal life indeed" (84).

Torun takes Loya to her mother's room. Rukmini's room is sparsely furnished. Loya notices the spacious and airy interior and the window provides a view of the river. The interior-exterior is always mingled "a breeze blew in from the open window…the wide windows looking out west across the river were open. And through the fretwork of the mosquito mesh she could see the night sky" (Barua 53). The Yellow House turns out to be a place for Loya where she starts to understand herself. But the yellow house had made changes in Loya's temperament. She had felt "stabs—sometimes rushes—of an anger she had never allowed herself before. Her speech had been reckless, her conduct uncharacteristic, and remarkably she had enjoyed it, in a peculiar bitter way" (Barua 65). The dystopian image of architecture is evident in the modern day house designs. Anthony Vidler's *Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992) talks about the modern architectural imagination which is shaped by the negative and uncanny images of dwelling. The negative effect of a space leaves a deep impact upon the psyche of the dweller. Certain places of the house, or nooks and corners are filled with dread based on a bad experience in a different house. The strange spell of the uncanny, which Freud

discusses in his "Das Unheimliche" (1919), points to the fearful images when something familiar becomes strange. The nook and the corner can similarly become spaces of brooding.

The room allowed to Loya is actually her mother's room, but she found "no trace of her mother. It had been emptied and wiped clean of every last memory of her" (70). The room acts as a catalyst for Loya's feeling towards her mother: "the anger Loya frequently felt towards Rukmini, the blame she apportioned her submissive mother, diminished. A robust anger towards Torun took root" (71). Loya starts to question the narratives of her mother and her portrayal of Torun as "innocent in the unhappy business" (72). Loya characterises Torun as "weak", and realises how he acted as a mute spectator when Usha excised Rukmini from their lives (72).

Subjective Analysis and the faculty of imagination helps analyse a house. Bachelard's topoanalyiss is crucial in employing imagination: "how many dreams told objectively, have become nothing but aneurysm reduced to dust! In the present of an image that dreams, it must be taken as an invitation to continue the daydream that created it" (Bachelard 152). Similarly, Chris Pint observes:

> The process of deformation becomes a critical and valid tool to understand why these images attract us in the first place and what they reveal about our relationship with the places in which we dwell. Works of imagination confront us with the problems, fears, and fantasies of domesticity that haunt the modern interior and provide us with alternative views on dwelling, challenging the spatial paradigms and cultural scripts that shape our interior spaces (Pint 121)

Beatriz Colomina in her "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism" (1992) talks about the phantasmic gaze which is intrusive and may involve someone else becoming the subject of a "daydream" as Bachelard calls the "felicitous space". Kris Pint notes the absence of other people in Bachelard's homely reverie. The solitary image of an individual living in a space of his own is the crux of Bachelard's felicitous space. Pint explains this absence as "the presence of the Other is always a form of violence" which seldom finds place in Bachelard's daydream (115). But this lack of another person is a gap in Bachelard's analysis of the interior. The interior space is a culmination of the interactions between the dwellers; which is not only restricted to the furniture or other objects present in the room. Specific domestic setting makes some interaction impossible as it sets the gendered and class demarcation within the domestic space. The demarcation recalls nineteenth century British architect Robert Kerr's theory of architecture which is marked by a strict division on the basis of class and gender. Certain rooms are allowed to be accessed by the female inhabitants, while certain rooms are strictly restricted to the men of the house. While the servants are the threshold creatures, they do move among the spaces, while fully aware of the demarcations which allows them only a limited access to those areas at certain times.

According to Victoria Rosner, certain spaces within the home resist categorisation, particularly, the transitional or in-between spaces, and "such spaces are architecturally embodied in the threshold, the space that forms a bridge between two discrete rooms" (Rosner 61-2). However, in the yellow house, there is no demarcation within rooms, except that the unseen boundary around Torun's bedroom, that Loya never crosses; otherwise, the rooms within the Yellow House merge among each other; it is the veranda that acts as a threshold space between the yellow house and the world outside.

Mary Ann Caws in her *The Metapoetics of the Passage* (1981) characterises the threshold as a liminal space which is "an otherwise mundane space" and sets it apart by "hallowing" it, "as in a game whose rules oppose what happens therein to the normal customs of day-to-day work" (Caws 14). For Torun and Loya, in different ways, the veranda becomes that threshold space which

links their lives together. The space of the veranda comes to embody a set of ideas about Torun and Loya's lives. The veranda has always been the space for Torun. He stands on the front veranda and waves his daughter goodbye: "The image of Torun sitting on the veranda" is embedded in Rukmini's mind as she would later recall (Barua 33). The front veranda is a long space and a connecting link of the outside world to the inside. However, the veranda has been screened in by wired mesh to keep insects out. The verandah acts as both an interior refuge and interior prospect. Refuge as it provides a layer of protection from being seen from the outside. Prospect, as it allows the dweller to get a glimpse of the river, as "the veranda was bathed in a refreshing breeze from the river" (Barua 63).

The narrator uses architecture to express the underlying tensions of the house. The veranda is not only an architectural aspect, but it is also a space which provides Torun the emotional confidence which he otherwise is too scared to exercise. As already seen, while bidding farewell to his daughter, he stood in the veranda and gave her his blessings. Within the house, he dare not even look at her, fearing the reaction from his wife. Similarly, when his granddaughter, Loya, first visited the yellow house, Torun rarely asked her questions. But it is the veranda that gave him the confidence and the strength to utter his long-lost daughter's name for the first time. But he does not directly utter Rukmini's name, he addresses her without her name. The following conversation between Loya and Torun is interesting and it is set in the front veranda:

> Tarun called out for Romen and then launched into the real talk.
>
> 'Does your mother know you are here?'
>
> 'She does now'.
>
> Torun smiled. A dim bulb swung above him and the light from it fashioned a shimmering halo around his bald head.
>
> 'Did she know before you set off from Bangalore?' He asked.
>
> 'No'.
>
> 'What did she have to say now?'
>
> Torun nodded.
>
> 'How is she?'
>
> 'How do you expect? Sad, lonely, angry sometimes.'
>
> Before Torun could respond, Romen brought in a loaded tray. (Barua 63)

For Torun, as already stated the veranda becomes a space of his own. He is always shown as sitting in the armchair in the veranda and "pretending to read the morning paper, while he tagged the girl's movements inside the house" (Barua 66). The veranda becomes crucial in Torun's narrativisation of the self and the house. The refuge becomes the prospect here when he can see the movement from the open space into the dark interior while properly making his view inside. The house provides solace to Torun but at the same time, he comes out of the house when he has "unaccountable apprehension" (Barua 68).

The veranda also became a space for Loya where she "made sure to install herself after breakfast every morning…and eagerly wait for the day to begin" (Barua 84). While Torun tries to maintain his ties with the outside world within the threshold of the veranda. Similarly, when Rukmini was about to leave her parents' house, the yellow house, her father Torun was sitting in the

drawing-room, waiting to bless her. He bids his daughter farewell discreetly, lest his wife might know. During Torun and Rukmini's interchange, a cold breeze blew in from the veranda. The breeze from the veranda reminded Rukmini to leave the space and she hurried, almost anxious, to leave her house behind. Here, the narrator highlights the veranda's anthropomorphic aspect as it acts as a mediator and escorts Rukmini out of her parental home, playing her mother's role.

Torun and the veranda were a part of each other's ritual, but sometime, even in odd times, the veranda provides the much needed solace: "sometime after midnight, Torun abandoned his bed and made his careful way to the veranda" (Barua 129). It was always a space that Torun held on to. The veranda as a threshold space for Torun is crucial for it allows him to escape from the realities that burdens him. However, the prospect that the veranda is supposed to provide is hindered by the mosquito mesh that girded the veranda. The breeze would never find a way through it, which reminds Torun of Usha and how she had "insisted on the fine mesh to keep out the swarm of mosquitoes at dusk, but it also shut everything else out—like the wind. It sealed him completely" (129). The function of the veranda as a prospect-refuge is somehow curtailed through its inability, in Torun' s case, to give the full view of the outside world. Just like Usha protected him from the "little devils", despite himself, he was left alone to live without his daughter (129). In the narrative, the veranda's role as the threshold and the interiors highlight the importance of architecture in shaping the lives of the protagonists.

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