

Mapping knowledge, power and space in anita nair's *living next door to alise*

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Abstract

Anita Nair is an Indian English writer whose contribution to children's literature has procured her the Central Sahitya Akademi Award. She has also published mythical stories from India and the World. Her recent works for children are on animal characters like the squirrel Nonu, Jaan, the camel and Meuzza, the cat. The book Living Next Door to Alise is about a nine-year-old boy named Siddharth and his intimate relation with a baby elephant Aishwarya alias Alise. This paper attempts to study Nair's maiden work in children's literature from the concept of intersubjectivity through the psychoanalytic perspective.

Keywords: Friendship, talking, objects, cognitive, facts.

Introduction

Children's literature can be derived as books that are "good for children, and most particularly good in terms of emotional and moral values" (Hunt 15). These books are mainly focused by critics using theories of education, psychology, sociology, history, art or literature. The "didactic and literary spirit" of the children's literature pose a lot of complexities on its critics. The general inference that can be made is that a reading child should find pleasure from the book. The authors of children's literature write for the pleasure of children and these books are critically analyzed by children's literature critics.

Children's books in India have found their beginnings with Panchatantra tales, tales from the Epics, to the recent audio books. Many contemporary mainstream writers are now establishing their story-telling skills in this form. Anita Nair is one such writer who tried her hand in children's books and received the Central Sahitya Award for her contribution to it. Her books include *Muezza and Baby Jaan*, *Who Let Nonu Out?*, *The Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths*, *The Puffin Books of World Myths*, *Adventures of Nonu*, *the Skating Squirrel*, *The Ghost in the Forest*, *The Girl and the Monkey*, *The Jackal and the Tiger*, *The Half-Thief and the Three-Quarters-Thief*, *Appu*, *the Foolish Boy* etc.

Living Next Door to Alise written in 2007 is a novel about the friendship between a nine-year-old boy Siddharth and a baby elephant, Aishwarya who calls herself as Alise. Their adventure of trapping the Bearded Bandit who poaches the tusks of the elephants is successful and gets popularity. The conflicts of human and non-human, good and evil, civilization and wilderness, children and parents, individuals and society are inferred from this novel. This paper attempts to study Anita Nair's narration of the friendship of the two characters Siddharth and Alise through the psychoanalytic concept, intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity has given rise to new studies on human relations. The human cognition is studied in relation to the action of man in recent times. Intersubjectivity with respect to the discipline of Sociology is defined in simple terms as "shared perception of reality among two or more individuals" (Ryan 330). In psychology its simple definition is "the sharing of subjective experience between two or more people. Intersubjectivity is seen as essential to language and the production of social meaning" (APA Dictionary of Psychology). Intersubjectivity is multidisciplinary and it was first adopted by Colin Trevarthen to focus on mother and infant relationship (Krishner 9). Phenomenological use of the term

intersubjectivity shifts the first person viewpoint to “subject-to-subject perspective” (11) leading to study in psychoanalysis. Lacan and Bion are the major figures in giving intersubjectivity a psychological approach (5).

Peter L Berge and Thomas Luckman in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* refers to this intersubjectivity that has a fundamental role in communication and social interaction. Alfred Schutz, the leading philosopher of Social Science who bridged phenomenology and sociology, is of the view that a child learns to communicate not stage by stage but the influence of the environment on it. He addresses the social nature of knowledge. He uses terms like “the common-sense world,” “world of daily life,” “every-day world” to refer to the “intersubjective world experienced by man within” and Husserl refers to the “natural attitude” (Natanson xxvii). He further adds in introduction that “common-sense reality is given to us all in historical and cultural forms of universal validity, but the way in which these forms are translated in an individual life depends on the totality of the experience a person builds up in the course of his concrete existence”(xxviii). Dr Schutz’s “stock of knowledge at hand” is the basis for the first part of the study on Anita Nair’s characters Siddharth and Alise. These two individuals do “stockpiling” of ordinary, familiar things and therefore are ready for the common-sense world.

Siddharth’s father is a zoologist and has always insisted about “keeping an open mind” (Nair 15). Siddharth speaks of the trap-jaw ant *Odontomachus bauri* to explain why he bit his PT master. He adds how that “hunter ant’s mandibles can clamp shut 78-145 miles per hour” (6). He also thinks of his parents as “reasonable human beings. They have less hair on their bodies than animals. They use their thumbs” (3). This gives him the confidence to argue. But his parents think him to be “rude” when he states a fact and “argumentative when I [he] defended what I[he] said” (14). He understands how their minds are “barricaded like a fortress door” (15).

His opinion on Alise is that she is “an intellectual” (60). “She taught me great many things. There wasn’t anything that Alise didn’t know, including fractions and where Estonia was and the meaning of words like troglodyte” (16). The intersubjective experience with Alise adds to his stock of ideas and therefore Siddharth takes the initiative to track the Bearded Bandit. It is Siddharth who says that the map of the forest is important and they both plan to get the map from the Forest office. Though Siddharth could not procure the map as the door is locked, Alise gets the map through the window. “You forget that I have what is called an elephant’s intelligence” (77).

Skills are acquired over time and the characters build their language skills in mutual exchange of views. Alise is a talking animal and Siddharth describes her voice to that of “a little girl’s voice. For a girl her size, it ought to have been louder and fuller perhaps. But Alise’s voice was thin and squeaky and I must confess I rather liked it. She sounded like a girl in a cartoon” (11). When they are chasing the Bearded bandit, Alise finds “a green signboard. ‘Elephant Crossing. How did they know I am coming this way? She asked in surprise. ‘Don’t be idiotic,’ I laughed. ‘Don’t you realize that it simply means elephants cross this way to some watering hole?’” (79). Sometimes common sense fails and the other person reiterates.

Both Siddharth and Alise read books. Siddharth’s parents were unhappy that he preferred books to chasing dragonflies. Alise has rich vocabulary and advises Siddharth that he works on it. Alise decides to spend the time by reading Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking till he returns from school (73). They too play guerilla tremble, hide and seek and stand on their heads (72). While corroborating the animal instinct and her intelligence, Alise protects Siddharth during their escapade to the forest.

Dealing with the feature of power in the intersubjective world, we find how the perception of the other changes. Siddharth finds a friend in Alise when his parents deliberately chase him outdoors. “For

the first time in my life, I had a friend: Alise” (13). The imaginary world of books now gives place to a non-human speaking animal. But when the intimacy grows, the influence of one over the other can be traced. Jessica Benjamin and Arnold Modell emphasize “the subject’s search (and need) for recognition from an intersubjective counterpart” (Krishner 12). When Alise plays with the wild baby elephant, Siddharth feels jealous and says, “Alise was *my* friend. Not *his*” (Nair 60). There is a conflict within and Siddharth understands that there is much worse to come. When the elephants leave, Siddharth tries to come out of his hide-out. But Alise warns, “Stay where you are, Siddharth. The elephants haven’t gone yet. When it is safe, I’ll come to you.” (61). Alise has an upper hand on him in the dense forest. When they run to the forest, Alise’s animal instinct predominates and influences Siddharth. Her instructions to him “Don’t make any sudden movements. You scared me! And I might hurt you in my fear!” reveal that Alise has more experience in the everyday world.

Power within one’s self, over the other and the society can be viewed with Siddharth’s hatred of school and Alise’s hatred on the Great Elephant march. Siddharth hates the school, an institution, as it is a place where teachers haunt and how other students humiliate him by calling him with nicknames Mummy’s baby, Scaredy cat, Ant Raja. He contradicts Alise for whom school is fun. “ ‘Don’t Alise,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to go to school and you think it is funny?’ ” (25). Alise detests the Great Elephant march equally. “If not for that silly elephant march, I wouldnt have a single worry in this world,” Alise said again (68).

According to Husserl, “intersubjective experience plays a fundamental role in our constitution of both ourselves as objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world” (Beyer). The two characters use their knowledge and expand each other’s experience through influence. Siddharth’s fear of ants is empathised by Alise and they become friends instantly. Siddharth’s fear of red ants is not approved by his parents and the PT master Gowda Sir. Alise too “detest them. Why, even looking at an ant makes my flesh crawl,” She exemplifies the nightmare as ‘ I think of an ant crawling up my trunk and getting lost inside my skull, then running madly between my brain cells...’ Alise shivered at the very thought.” (11)

At another instance they influence each other to act. At first, Alise had been unsure of perching on the wall. “‘I am going to look like Humpty Dumpty,’ she said frowning, ‘Let me just stand here!’” Siddharth gives the strength to perch, “‘Don’t be silly!’ I said. ‘It’s not the same as sitting on the wall. It gives you a different perspective... Unless you are too scared.’ I inserted shyly” (69). Generally speaking, feelings in intersubjectivity refers to sensation and emotions reflect the awareness of those feelings through cognition.

In conclusion, Anita Nair shows the difference between social interaction and intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity builds knowledge through sharing. It helps in understanding the power of one over the other and is governed by time, space and culture. This study is made using the language of both verbal and non-verbal indicators between the two characters. Anita Nair presents how there is a difference in how the two characters perceive things. The same object or a situation is perceived by them in different ways. For instance, Alise assumes it to be her responsibility to get hold of the Bearded Bandit. Siddharth tries to seek help from the Forest officers through his father. The culprit Bandit is looked at from two different perspectives but there is a social meaning that emerges.

Another aspect that leaves the readers to decide is whether Alise is in fact a talking animal. The fanciful imagination of Siddharth is rebuked in his father’s words, “The mind is a fascinating organ. It doesn’t exist but it can still make us believe in things we so want to believe” (Nair 75). The same can be recounted with respect to intersubjectivity. What we think as the interpretation need not be the same between any two individuals. This study has been limited to analyse the aspects of space and further research can be done on the temporal and cultural aspects.

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