

**Spatial Identity and Cultural Consciousness in Anita Nair's
*Idris: Keeper of the Light***

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Abstract

Spatial identity and cultural consciousness are related to territories and lived spaces. In Anita Nair's novels, individuals have inviolable attachment with their geo-space of their native lands, and they are trying to assert their identity which has been evolved by interaction of diverse elements of cultural formations and significations. The main characters of *Idris: Keeper of the Light* are always rooted in their familiar spaces and they are reluctant to part their bond with the locations of culture and identity. Moreover, they are disinclined to transplant themselves from their homelands to any other place which unravels the geographical reality of human existence. The issues of rootedness and displacement recur in her novels and assert itself predominantly in the real and imagined realms of her fiction.

Keywords: Anita Nair, *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, spatial identity, cultural consciousness, rootedness, displacement.

Literature reveals spatial identity and cultural consciousness in its varied manifestations and verbalizes the attachment of individuals to various places and spaces. Besides, it brings out how the latitudes and longitudes of lived zones act upon individuals visualising both the spatial and temporal realms of human imagination and representation. Yi Fu Tuan in his influential work *Space and Place* has pointed out that, "All thinking is necessarily tied to space, to territory and to earth" (Tuan 136). Territories influence individuals throughout their life as spatial bases of cultural productions and representations. Anita Nair explores attachment of individuals to various locations in her novels in which spatial identity and cultural consciousness determine interactions and ethos of characters. The fundamental conflict in such novels is between those who live in homelands which are rendered as narrative place and those who wander around the world as they do not have any such native land.

Anita Nair as a writer focuses on the spatial reality of human existence and she is always in romance with the past and present of her native place. Spatial consciousness is a preponderant element in Nair's writings in which the writer portrays the local myths and legends, reinvents rituals and customs, and narrates the ancient chronicles of her native land along with the sociocultural

displacements occurred in the lost and longed spaces. Nair explores varied themes, from jubilation in nostalgic memories to celebration of ancient past of Kerala, by re-imagining of geo-spaces and of human spatial relations in her novels. The fluidity of place and space demarcation of the geo-cultural landscapes recurs in her novels as a writer obsessed with her homeland. Yi Fu Tuan in his much acclaimed critical work *Space and Place* observes, “Attachment to the homeland is a common human emotion” (Tuan 158). The influence of geographical organization and disruptions of the native place vividly colours the reconstructed historical narratives in her novels. *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, a novel which probes some imaginary historical events of Malabar in seventeenth century, is a product of scholarly research and an enthusiastic cultural expedition through the early modern history of Kerala. This novel is an attempt to reconstruct spatial relations and perceptions of one of the darkest periods of Kerala history. Moreover, it tries to map the multifarious cross-cultural movements emanated in the 17th century, which formed and were formed by new configurations and constructs of various socio political mobilities and geographic practices in Malabar. However, the writer rejects the linear perspective in historical narratives as individuals are situated in floating arrays of social and spatial relations dynamically altering experience of space and place of the past.

Idris: Keeper of the Light can also be read as a travelogue which blends the representation of local narratives with the heterogeneous discourses of foreign travellers. Idris, the protagonist of this novel, is a Somalian native who lost the vision of one of his eyes in his childhood as a camel bone pierced into it. Even though his spatial cognition is always limited by it, he tries to overcome the handicap through various experimentations as well as adventurous activities. He, the eternal traveller, who is always on the move has arrived at Kozhikode in the seventeenth century. The period mentioned in the novel is very significant, for, it was the beginning of the modern era in Kerala history and the distinct cultural identity of Kerala also began to be evolved. The amalgamation and appropriation of many features of early modernism are very much apparent in the temporal continuum of that territory which becomes the background of this novel.

Idris is a man without roots. As an individual who does not like to anchor his life permanently anywhere, he introduces himself as “I am Idris. Idris Mayamoon Samataar Guleed. Previously of Dikhil. Now an eternal traveller seeking the measure of earth and man” (Nair 49). Being a trader and merchant adventurer, he has travelled far and wide, studied various languages including Malayalam, acquired professional skills in many areas, ventured on diverse business interests, learned customs and conventions of many lands, acquainted with a number of great persons, and tried to relish his life with all its variety and splendour. During his first visit to Kerala, he had a brief affair with Kuttimalu, a woman of a well-known Nair family of Malabar, and had a son, Vattoli Kandavar Menavan. In his second visit to Kozhikode, he happens to meet his son for first time. When he sees the boy, he feels unfathomed tender affection towards him, which has been quite unfamiliar in the perpetual traveller's heart till then. Meantime, thinking about the warrior blood in him and enamoured with the heroic deeds of *chavers*, the members of the suicidal squads of the local ruler, Kandavar has dreamt of being part of it and gaining fame and honour as a great warrior. He decides to join in it after completing his training in *kalari*, the centre of training in martial arts and use of weapons. When his mother and other family members fail to change his

mind, they turn to Idris as they think that as a man of great experience and worldly wisdom, he can help them in saving the boy from the clutches of unwanted death. None of them, except Kuttimalu, know that he was the father of the child, and the true cause of his excessive fondness towards the boy. She believed that Idris can restrain their son and to protect him.

Making Kandavar part of his frenzied pursuits both in land and sea, Idris takes him to various places of south India and, subsequently, he succeeds in precluding him from his life ambition of becoming a *chaver*. Though Kandavar realises who Idris is during the journey, he neither acknowledges it publicly nor willing to lead a life with him. He tells Idris “At first I was happy when I realized you are my father. How could I not be? You mean more to me than anyone else in this world. Aabo, I am afraid now. You cannot be here with me anymore” (Nair 373). He explains, “Everyone who sees us together will know us to be father and son. And you know the laws of our land. My mother and I will lose our caste. They will perform the funeral rites for us even when we are alive. We will be excommunicated. We will be nothing” (Nair 373). As a person who abides the cultural practices and conventions of the native land and follows it without any complaints, he is not ready to uproot his relationship with the land and its customs. He does not criticise the cultural and social practices of his native land whereas Idris always does. So, at the end, as an individual who has realised significance of culture and identity, he advises his father, the eternal traveller, to settle somewhere else than wandering throughout the world like a nomad.

Thilothamma, whom Idris met in Golkonda, also pleads him to live with her. Despite her ardent desire towards him, she is unwilling to part with her native place. When her former husband asked her to sell her land, she replied, “No. I will not sell this land. This the land my great-grand father lost his life for. This the land my father killed my great-grand father for. This is the land that robbed me of my youth and dreams. This is the land that defines me and my past. I will not sell it as long as I breathe. Please try to understand” (Nair 322). She does not wish to relocate from her lived spaces and familiar trajectories of her native land. The pain of moving away from one's own locations of culture and of severing the umbilical cord of social identity is unbearable to her. That is true to most of the characters in this novel. Whether they cannot experience all the pleasures of the world and do not have much knowledge about outside world, they are contented with what they have. While travelling around south India, Kandavar, still, cherishes his native place, longs to return to there and that is what he finally does.

Kuttimalu leads a contented life with her husband adhering all social norms. Even though she has a son by Idris, she is reluctant to continue her relationship with him when he comes again. When Idris tells her that he is willing to take her and their son to somewhere else, away from their native land with obsolete customs and conventions, she rejects it as she, like Thilothamma, cannot abandon her native place and lived spaces. Yet, she requests him to help her to change Kandavar's decision to be a *chaver* and insists him to return the boy to her.

It is very hard to think about a man without a native place. People are identified based on the place in which they were born and grown up or they have been living for a long time. The identity of a person relates closely to the space, place and locations of culture. Warren Kidd in his

Culture and Identity points out, “Identity means being able to 'fix' or 'figure out' who we are as people” (Kidd, 7). The space, region and the cultural practices season the man and they bear upon the character and actions. Idris tries to compare himself with his son, “For the first time, Idris senses the difference in the blood that courses through them. A trader knew when to cut his losses and leave. A warrior persisted, seeking triumph to the last breath. He may take the boy out of the *kalari*, but the warrior blood in him would show itself again and again” (Nair 181). He identifies manifestation of the heroic blood in Kandavar and the differences between them. The influence of life and environment is very much apparent there. Despite possessing same colour and physical features of his father, Kandavar's attachment to traditions and customs of his native land are stronger than his relationship with his father. Thilothamma and Kuttimalu also share the same attitude towards their native place and its culture.

Anita Nair's *Idris: Keeper of the Light* focuses on the issues of human attachment to livid spaces and native lands by augmenting one's sense of rootedness or displacement depicting new ways of perceiving the world. Most of her characters are rooted in the soil of their native land and those who are away from their roots always try to return to their native land to reclaim their spatial identity and cultural consciousness. Despite their fervid inclination to create new identity in foreign lands, characters like Idris, who have neither distinct spatial identity nor cultural affinity related to any geo-space or geographical region, cannot succeed in it. This failure has profound effects for the interpretation of reality which is shaped, and are shaped by, new configurations and conceptions of space with philosophical reverberations. Mobility and geographic anxiety always counteract and settle the matters of space, place, and mapping even in the most ordinary aspects of everyday life. This novel underlines the fact that spatial identity emanates from the structures of culture as well as from shared social values, and none can escape from the gravitational pull of their native places and livid realities in life.

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