

The concept of Home in Elizabeth Bishop's “North & South”

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study Bishop's concept of home with the help of a few poetic oeuvre from her first book of poetry “North & South” published in the year 1946. This paper explores the complex concept of home in the autobiographical light. There is an attempt to unfold the deeper recesses of Bishop's mind attempting to create enclosures resembling home in her poetry. Home, for Bishop, is a peaceful place filled with love and security but unaware she tends to create places which are no better than prisons which essentially are due to the pressure of loss of home in her life and the stress to achieve it in her poetry. While creating such enclosures, Bishop's poetry transcends from the world of reality to the world of unknown, the mystic, the surrealistic world.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bishop; enclosure; home; North & South; Nova Scotia; surrealism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop, a twentieth-century writer, is a relatively less explored writer though quite a bit has been done after her death giving her the well-acclaimed place she deserved. Elizabeth Bishop's life was a catalogue of losses- beginning with the loss of her father, loss of a mother to insanity and the most intimate spaces on the geography of the earth, her much loved Nova Scotian home - leading to a lifetime restlessness which got reflected in her search for regularity, intimacy and privacy of domestic life in her work. Unaware about the ways to compensate her various losses and to achieve her dream house, Bishop took to writing poetry, in order to soothe her mind and keep her search ongoing. With such an irretrievable journey of losses, life would have been unbearable for Bishop had art not come to her rescue. Art for Bishop is a way to make life comprehensible and meaningful than it normally seems. Bishop intensified her search for home through her art and realises how unfathomable is the loss! Art for Bishop is a medication for her wounds, a kind of catharsis, not an escape. To Bishop, art is a kind of home¹.

2. CONCEPT OF HOME IN “NORTH & SOUTH”

In Bishop's first volume of poetry, “North & South”, the concept of home is projected with the use of descriptive and surrealistic method. The first poem of her first volume “The Map,” reflects the concept that the surrounding is an immediate home for Bishop. Bishop strove to provide perfect representations of the physical world but her emotions are seen exceeding too far as she creates enclosure reflecting home in this poem:

“Is the land tugging at the sea from under?”²

Bishop was in love with sea and islands as these were the special places from her childhood; they were closely associated to her home in Nova Scotia. In this poem, Bishop's powerful emotions for home overpower her sense as a creator, as if trying to create a home by building an enclosure of land around the sea. Implicitly, there is a confinement of mapmakers' framed plain which keeps the frame of reference of the poem expanding to the actual realities that are at once homely and surreal. These enclosures symbolising home can be experienced through imagination hence they are surreal.

Bishop creates literary boundaries and walls in her poems and builds a home for herself assuming the role of poet-architect without making her presence felt.² Bishop creates different kinds of enclosures like that of scene, tone, language, setting, etc. in her poems. In the poem “The Imaginary Iceberg”,

“We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship,

Although it meant the end of travel.”³

In these lines, Bishop surrenders movement for the sake of stability and finds an abode in the form of an iceberg. She seems to be tired of her homelessness and of search for a home, hence momentarily surrenders her travel in this poem. Bishop personifies the iceberg into a living being; yet she emphasises the illusionary and rhetoric nature of this iceberg through the metaphor of theatre:

“This is a scene where he who treads the boards

is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain

is light enough to rise on finest ropes”³

She places the image of the iceberg between the sea and the sky as a scene on a stage and creates a theatrical enclosure similar to that of a home in this poem.

Bishop’s love for home in the midst of nature, as a directed search for “a beautiful villa,” is apparent in another poem “The Miracle for Breakfast”:

“A beautiful villa stood in the sun

And from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.”³

Bishop associates the “crumbs,” the basic necessity of life with “mansion” which is also an ardent necessity of her life. For Bishop, home remains unfulfilled desire from her childhood due to an early disintegration of her family. Hence, her poems are seen haunted with the concept of home and to achieve them is a form of miracle for her.

For Bishop, dwellings were not to be created in cities burning “guilt” of progressive life but in the provincial places near to sea, where life is experienced to its utmost naturalness. Bishop never relished city life as the urbanised living in New York while working at the Congress library was the most frustrating time in her life. This trauma of city life is reflected in her poem “The Man- Moth.” After failing to investigate the moon, the man-moth returns to his abode:

“Then he returns

to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. . . .”³

Home is the place which is supposed to give solace to the man-moth, but it fails to do so as it is just a cement structure with no love or warmth in it. Home is symbolic of beauty, warmth, security and love similar to Bishop’s Nova Scotian home. The man-moth partakes the human fear of the urban environment and a moth-like compulsion to leave his cocoon to investigate the light reflecting the terrible fear of city living. Bishop’s life to some extent is like the man-moth because they both are lonely, love is missing in their life and leaving their home is painful for both of them.

In the poem “Love Lies Sleeping,” Bishop begins to reveal threatening facts of city life through the loud “Boom!” sound. The sleeping city workers felt a jolt of fear in their slumber, reflecting the mechanised pattern and captivity of their life. The sudden disruption of the spiritual morning time and the peaceful nature of their houses, fall apart with the sounds of urban ever growing industrial life. The urban houses are filled with noise and the smoke emitted by the growing industries, at the cost of its employees:

“(And all the employees who in plants

where such a sound say “Danger,” or once said “Death,” ”³

The activities in the city, which is mandatory for its development, fill house and life with “the cloud of smoke,” and makes man lifeless- a machine or a puppet- so Bishop is a staunch critic of city living. Helen Vendler sees in Bishop’s poems not only the poignancy, but also strangeness and mystery, the “threat of death,” within her adumbration of familiar,

domestic scene.⁴ The city dwellers awake in their “iron beds” in their houses made up of not love and warmth but of “stony walls.” The description of the urban home in the poem is similar to a cage or a prison. David Lehman sees in Bishop’s poetry the “desire of confinement.”⁴ Bishop creates prison in her poems as a temporary refuge from troubles, a resting place where preparations for the next imaginative search for home could be carried out.

Bishop’s endeavours were, in her lifetime as well as in her poetry, to create enclosures symbolising homes, but her homes are controversial for their very nature seems to be fragile. In her poem “Jeronimo’s House”, Bishop projects her own reality and fascination of a place called “Home.” The poem is written in the form of dramatic monologue where Bishop assumes a role, so this poem is a poetry of experience. The opening lines of the poem are Bishop’s own expressions of a “fairy palace”. Bishop in her interview to Ashley Brown said, “I was crazy about fairy tales.”⁴ Since her childhood days, Bishop’s life was overshadowed with losses and isolation, so she preferred living in a world of fairy tales. This poem is Bishop’s notion of home described in abundance of details.

*“My home, my lovely nest,
is endowed
With a veranda
of wooden lace,
adorned with ferns
planted in sponges,
and the front room
with red and green”³*

Bishop paints her house with all the beautiful and vibrant colours: “the front room with red and green,” “centre table...painted blue,” “four pink tissue-paper roses” and “old French-horn repainted with aluminium paint”. There reds, greens, blues, pinks and silver that she uses are colours of life, energy, nature and beauty- all summoned to elevate and make the house enticing. With such beautiful descriptions and decorations to her house, she is aware that for Jeronimo, this beautiful and precious little house is invulnerable refuge from chaos whose nature she fears and whose power she refuses to think about. Bishop apparently becomes one with Jeronimo in a penultimate paragraph, abruptly making the reader realise that it is a writer who stays in this house. Jeronimo’s house is an absurd, impermanent, precarious, bastion against, not the inhuman but far worse, the unhuman forces of nature.⁵ Bishop contrasts the first line of the poem with the last line:

*“ My house, my fairy
Palace, . . .
. . . my shelter from
the hurricane.”³*

The forces of nature, hurricane in this poem, can reduce all human shelters against them to a level of absurdity. Bishop poses the question of our security in this poem. Are we in our cement and rock houses more secure than Jeronimo’s house made up of paper and “glued with spit” is the question implied in the poem. And, the answer being negative makes the “Jeronimo’s House” truly terrifying. Bishop’s love of her life, her “home” is presented with a very debilitating character.

Bishop is gifted with a mysterious ability to empower the most commonplace into something extraordinary, repeatedly transforming images and bringing them into another dimension and realm. “I am very object-struck.... I simply try to see things afresh,” Elizabeth Bishop said about herself in an interview. “I have a great interest and respect...for what people call ordinary things.”⁶ In the poem “The Monument”, Bishop projects the monument in the form of box transforming it into an enclosure; it can also be associated with a house, her Worcester home where her parents’ resided which was no better than a monument without them.

“Now can you see the monument? It is of wood built somewhat like a box. . .”³

Like the monument, human memory and imagination seems to be made of perishable stuff, and are mysterious, indecipherable, and somehow evolving. Bishop tries to assert that if past is undesirable then it can be eradicated from one's memory. Like monuments, houses also vanish as Bishop's home disintegrated into the winds of ruthless destiny. For Bishop, conditions for existence can't be forged by superficial applications, be it monument or a human; they have to be nurtured by the nature and feels homelier than ever. Her search for home takes her to the more natural destinations near to the sea like the Nova Scotia of her childhood.

*"The monument is one-third set against a sea; two third against a sky."*³

For Bishop, nothing is much homelier than sea; sea is associated with Bishop's memories of her mother, the only treasure of her life. "I remember my mother taking me for a ride on the swan boats here in Boston. I think I was three then."⁷ Bishop transfers the pain and the trauma of losing mother to the sea in this poem by calling it "a driftwood sea." The "sky" which is symbolic of limitless freedom and roof to the universal home is also given a wooden quality. The poem presents a unique case with regards to enclosure, for the subject matter of the poem is in itself a limited entity, a monument. The monument has the capacity to shelter what lies within it and accommodate everything into itself like a home.

Bishop's past is symbolically presented in the poem "Paris 7 A.M" in the form of reference to "house." Bishop in this poem is seen going anxiously from clock to clock within her "apartment," going to the window and looks down at the courtyard and up at the sky, but there is no leaving the apartment or any other action in this poem. In the second stanza of the poem, Bishop extensively refers to the metaphor of "house," while "Look down into the courtyard. All the houses / are built that way, with ornamental urns." After looking down into the lifeless courtyard where pigeons take walk, Bishop reflects upon a childhood memory. Bishop had summarized events from her childhood into her autobiographical prose poem "In the Village", where she narrates her experience of her mother drifting to insanity:

"First, she had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister, and now she was home again."⁸

The memory of house is a captive memory for Bishop filled with her mother's insanity and the trauma of gradually losing her. The captivity of time is the captivity of Bishop in the memories of "home," a square with four walls where everything freezes, "this hollow square could easily have been there."³ This image of a square in the poem reflects Bishop's complex image of home, for it is hollow but still very much desired. Her search for home in "Paris 7A.M" makes her nostalgic and there is recollection of the childhood memories in the form of "The childish snow-forts, built in flashier winters,"³ and "the mighty snow-forts, four, five, stories high."³ Bishop's love for sea is reflected when she compares the "snow-forts" with "the sand-forts" built at the beach with the assumption of permanence due to childhood innocence. The "snow-forts" hardened due to ice, shrink in the spring, their walls become "overlapping" and, like the "sand-forts" which resists the tide, they resist until they "dissolve and die" due to warmth. There is an irony suggesting the destructiveness of permanent structures and strength of delicate or frail thing in life. Probably, the forts or castles from the childhood world may be fragile but they make permanent traces on the impressionable memory which gets fixated and the burden of it is carried throughout the life.

Bishop's search for home gets at time frustrating for they are imprisoned in dream visions. She finds herself feeble in front of "the armoured cars of dream"³ where her house appears and disappears "all camouflaged" making her do all the "dangerous things" she would normally not dare to do:

". . . we saw the crumbs or pebbles that lay

below the riveted flanks

on the green forest floor,

like those the clever children placed by day

and followed to their door

*one night, at least; and in the ugly tanks"*³

Bishop's obsession with the concept of home is clearly felt in this poem. The children are seen paving a "crumbs or pebbles" pathway towards their house. She tries to excavate her past, a dangerous thing to do but within the enclosure of dream. Unable to find the way home, Bishop is utterly dejected. Past remains dead, the former home seems to be unreachable. Bishop reflects her own plight to discover her home out of the flux of history and geography of Nova Scotia. The poem expresses doubt about the central surrealistic doctrine that the unconscious, once trapped, will lead one towards the essential home. There is an ambiguity of experience derived not from the non-existence of reality, but from the utter impossibility of knowing it. A dream world becomes the reason for Bishop's frustration in this poem:

*“ . . . How stupidly we steered
until the night was past
and never found out where the cottage was.”³*

The feeling of loss, annoyance of having missed something is not defined as in philosophy or psychology, but it is suggested in poetry by the recurring images or frustrating search of “the cottage.” “The armour cars of dream” not only blindly fail in their mission to rescue the children but annihilate any traces that might have pointed to their cottage.

Bishop, in the wake of searching a home for self, reaches to the original existential resting place the mother's womb which is the safest place ever in the journey of life. In the poem ‘The Fish,’ Bishop creates versions of womb spaces not just as imagined retreats, or resting places from the difficulties of her life as woman and poet, but as actual spaces that becomes spaces of transformation and revelation. This poem in a way is about capture and captivity. The poet caught a huge fish and is looking at him as he hangs helplessly outside her boat. Bishop tries to hold the fish within the framework of her poetic psyche, to contain his alien being within imagery borrowed from home that as Helen Vendler has shown, is her way of “domesticating the strange.”⁴ She begins almost sentimentally by describing him as “battered and venerable and homely”. In the last stanza of the poem, Bishop transforms the boat into a womb space:

*“where oil had spread a rainbow
Around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
. . . –until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.”³*

It is visually witty that Bishop literally creates the rainbow sheen through an oil film. But in the sudden linguistic slippage by which ‘victory’ becomes identified with the oil, there is also a sense of it operating on a level that is half unconscious, of Bishop sliding giddily off into the unknown. Bishop gets displaced to a mystic world. The hollow interior of the boat - one of Freud's dream symbols of the uterus, literally a ‘vessel’ - becomes a fluid womb space where the oil from the bilge, normally in the context of boats, a substance with negative associations, is sanctified by its association with rainbow. Her letting the fish go indicate an ejection of baby from the mother's womb. She does not wish to kill the fish indicates that the poem is one about sympathy and survival and the triumph of love. Bishop's boat is transformed into a womb where the only possibility is to “let the fish go.”

3. CONCLUSION

The loss of home was a significant loss of Bishop's life which is synonymous to loss of mother in her poems. Bishop spent her entire career thinking about how best to dramatise and frame her investigation of different abodes in her art. Her distinction as a poet is her making of the home within the framework of language through the routes of memory lanes, travelling, describing and loving it. Bishop has four volumes of poetry to her credit which explore the concept of home in different perspective but the present investigation of Bishop's volume of poetry “North & South” reflects that Home for Bishop is not only the places which can be boarded but they are also spaces which are enclosures reflecting the captivity of writers mind expressed in art. The present paper establishes Bishop's fixation of the concept of home in her childhood

and its relation to the mother image which is not directly referred to in Bishop's poetry. The study of this volume of poetry reflects Bishop drifting to the world of unknown though not completely relying on it. Bishop does not face her personal trauma directly in the poems though touches upon them indirectly. Bishop especially in her later volume of poetry presents her urgency and intimacy of establishing home in a more apparent and autobiographical way. Still much work has to be done on her individual volumes of poetry with reference to specificity of her writing.

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