



Alice in Wonderland: Weaving a Diaspora Dream

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Abstract

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll is a dense text open to multiple interpretations – symbolic, Freudian, political, feminist, but that this children's classic can also be a study in diaspora, is adding another feather to its cap; this is precisely what the present paper attempts to do.

First, the paper sees Alice as a migrant migrating from the realm of alert wakefulness to slumber and explains her stay and return in the foreign realm under the lesser known Indian Ocean/ the Bay of Bengal template of migration as opposed to the well-established trans-Atlantic model. Next, the paper reads her journey through the wonderland as nothing short of an exotic diaspora experience, related in a fanciful and regaling way, where through new theories of language (language as presentation), conviviality and an enchanting ecology, Alice explores the spectrum of her personhood.

The Alice story, the paper argues, is a rarity in being a complex conglomeration of Travel Literature, Diaspora Studies and bildungsroman all draped in a veneer of fantasy. It thereby seeks to highlight the natural affinity and salience these fields, somewhat artificially kept apart in the Academy, have for one another. The paper at last explains why such proximity needs both to be celebrated and be chary of.

Keywords: Topo-Poetics, bildungsroman, language as presentation, Poesis, Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Little Alice migrated. She emigrated from the real adult world of wakefulness and reason into a world of sleep and dreams. Though mundane, this was not a simple migration. It is one fraught with nuances of hegemony and assertion. The dichotomy of sleep and wakefulness is seldom accorded much salience, except in some terms of cultural metaphors where sleep implies all that is dark or unwanted and wakefulness is synonymous with *Agalia*. Seldom still is this diurnal feature of our lives seen in terms of migration from one state of consciousness to another. Fluctuating between the worlds of slumber and wakefulness makes migrants of all of us, however the questions that such a migration raises are seldom raised.

The project of Enlightenment extolled reason as the choicest of all human virtues. Such was the zeal with which this project was embraced that rationality rose to the detriment of other faculties of the mind, and wakeful, alert, reason driven mind of the adult (often male) came to be regarded as the default, or the desired, normal place of primacy as a state of consciousness. All other states of consciousness were regarded as wanderings away from home and often denounced as unwanted aberrations.

In this light, it is interesting to see how Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* fares as a dream and a fantasy.

2. Material and Methods

I venture to approach the Alice story from a non – discursive or a least discursive standpoint trying to see it in the light of an alternative theory of topo-poetic under the aegis of Continental philosophy which highlights place, language and the body (Moslund, 2014, 17-21) [8]. Besides being about the non/least discursive aspects of place, language and body, topo poetics is about place and space

boundaries. And geography and political geographical boundaries are essential to diaspora. In fact the term diaspora, ever since the explosion of postcolonial studies has come to signify so much that at times it seems too complex to convey anything. The essence of diaspora, are three: dispersion or migration, boundary formation and home wardness. In a manner of speaking, diaspora can be read as the difference between the notions of space and place.

3. Results and Discussion

The sensory aspects of place have taken a backseat under the dominance of the supra-sensory discursive order. The discourse of the temporal order, which in turn under the glare of the historical perspective (a product of the Enlightenment that equated rationality driven temporal march of history with progress), values plot and character the most in works of literary fiction at the cost of setting as place. The question of space, place and place-making are at the core of diaspora studies. The adult colonisation of the world discursively creates sequestered spaces for adults and children using language. Dichotomous construal of space, through ideologically driven discourse, signifies linguistic representations of adult centric and child centric spaces like nursery, playground, office and kitchen. Is there an alternative to place making as an ideologically driven political project? Concepts of Indexicality and deixis are examples of spatial relations being built into a language. However, the physical-materiality of a place becoming an abettor in character - place relations and also "producing a degree of spatial presence in language" sans the "monological domination" of the central character centred deixis, is the alternative approach to studying place. It is called the topo-poetic reading (West-Pavlov qtd in Moslund 20, 2015) [8].

3.1 Human space relations

Alice's wonderland is an exercise in place creation and place is not just a subjective space. Place is characterised by a heightened involvement and life experience in a human – space relation. Human space relations can best be understood in terms of Edward Soja's three orders of spaces – first, second and third. First space is the actual, hard material, tangible world, both natural and manmade. It is accessed by perception. Second space is the interpretation of first space through "imagined representations of reality"; it is conceived and not perceived and is a discursive/cultural apparatus of the first place (Soja, 1996, 6, 10, 78, 79). It is a "a world of rationally interpretable signification," in which "the imagined geography tends to become the 'real' geography, with the image or representation coming to define and order the reality" (Soja 1996, 68, 78, 79). The order of Second space is "constituted via control over knowledge, signs, and codes: over the means of deciphering spatial practice and hence over the production of spatial knowledge" (Soja, 1996, 67). It is the hegemonic space commanding the human space relation. This second space is "a storehouse of epistemological power," being "the dominant space in any society." However, its drawback is that it degrades or downplays the body in relation to space. It is totally:

A mental space, an 'encrypted reality' that is decipherable in thoughts and utterances, speech and writing, in literature and language, in discourses and texts, in logical and epistemological ideation — In its purest form, Second space is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies

Edward Soja qtd in Moslund, 2014, 25) [8]

The fullest way to approximate the human space relation is in the idea of the third space

Everything comes together in Third space: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable . . . mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending story.

(Soja, 1996, 56–57)

3.2 Wonderland: a home more than actual home

Alice's wonderland is one such third space, a picturesque pageant of sensuous fantastical imagined realm which is a place to her in being a receptacle and creator of her heightened life experiences. What place is a child's body accorded in an adult - centric discourse? It is a nascent state of being, preparing and awaiting its full fruition in adulthood, lacking independent autonomous agency while in the preparatory stage. It is a body lacking the ideology of reason. In the third space the body can have other relations besides its relations with socially/politically organised space. Alice's wonderland in being such a third space is her embodied self - asserting itself against the discursive second space which infantilises her and rips off her autonomy and agency. In this sense, the wonderland of the dream is more a home to her than her actual home.

3.3 Language a dream weaver

Fantasy worlds in literature are places produced entirely by language. Alice's wonderland albeit a dream is linguistically

produced. The Saussurean view of language as a closed system has dominated the study of Humanities for about a century. Under this view language is a discursive representation. However, Continental Philosophy sees language as Presentation or poesis and aisthesis (Moslund, 2014, 61-73). It is interesting to read Alice's surreal sojourn in this light.

3.4 Sleep and Literature

Whenever a phenomenon occurs in the mind, it is never a single or unitary image. It forms against or in the surroundings of numerous eddying currents of the affective. To tap into these amorphous and converging currents is the "sense – affect" or *sentir* (Moslund, 2014, 64). The view of literature or the poetic which goes from perception to emotion, bypassing or being least obfuscated by the intermediating conception (read the discursive) believes in tapping into the nebulous, inchoate affective surrounding the perceptory phenomenon is a view of the poetic as presence or poesis. This is what happens to Alice in her state of altered consciousness or of sleep.

Sleep is not a biological/ scientific and thereby apolitical thing as much of science is increasingly coming to the recognition of being not unaffected by the political (Williams, 2011, x-xxvii). Though sleep remains arcane to us till date, two features of it relevant to the present talk should be mentioned. First, that sleep, even REM sleep is not devoid of perceptions (MaNamara, 2017) and second, that the hold of the discursive abates during sleep (Williams, 2011, x-xxvii). Therefore, REM sleep is a perfect avenue for the realisation of literature as Presence (Moslund 2014, 61-63) [8].

REM sleep (dream sleep) can have perceptions. In the altered state of consciousness, ie during REM sleep, embodied perceptions are possible even in the absence of external stimuli (Casey cited in Moslund 2014, 64) [8]. Through such an embodied perception in the altered state of sleep, the self - presentation of Alice's place world occurs as her dream. In other words, Alice's dream is the "self-presentation" of her sense of a "place world," which is expressed in its own surreal expressions, instead of being expressed in suprasensory concepts which in as much as Alice is a child, have yet to crystallise in her (Moslund 2014, 64) [8].

3.5 Discursive destruction of Dream

The Alice story is the story of two altered states of consciousness – a dream and a reverie like meditation on the dream, both distant from the dominant and taken for granted adult and alert mode of wakefulness. Alice's narration of her dream to her elder sister triggers a reverie in her while she is in a waking state. She being elder to Alice has greater exposure to the adult discursive apparatus in which she has been silently indoctrinated. Therefore, she gives discursive interpretation to Alice's dream, relegating it from a position of poesis and aisthesis to rather mundane mental reverberations in sleep of ordinary things:

So she sat with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality – the grass would only be rustling in the wind [and not with the White Rabbit's hurrying off], the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds [and not because of the frightened

mouse splashing away] – the rattling tea cups [of the March Hare’s tea party] would change to tinkling sheep bells, and the Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy – and the sneezes of the baby the shriek of the Gryphon, and all other queer noises would change (*she knew*) to the confused clamour of the busy farm yard – while the lowing of the cattle in the distance would take the place of the Mock Turtle’s heavy sobs.
(Carroll, 2006, 132. Emphasis my own)

3.6 The bildungsroman

The bildungsroman is a genre of writing as a coming of age story, is a genre steeped in the adult – centric discourse which denies autonomy, intentionality and agency to the child, infantilising every aspect of the child’s personhood. It is often criticised sequencing human life in terms of temporality. Under a Puritan adult gaze, ignoring the multitudinous rhythms of life, it values the quotidian time’s chronological march towards some idea of progress via deep personal crisis. The problems with such a template of human life are three. First it relegates childhood as simply a preparatory phase for the real adult life to come afterwards, thus emphasising inculcation of ideologically driven models of education. Two, it sees the child as bereft of the adult faculties of reason and thus subjects them to a regime of discipline and punishment. Third, the course of human lives are complex enough to neatly fit into these child-adult, ignorance – maturity dichotomies. Sören Kierkegaard is right when he says:

There cannot be a system of existence. (...) When we speak about system we speak about a closed world, yet existence is precisely the opposite. (...) To think about existence, systematic thought must think of it as suppressed, that is different from what it actually is
(quoted in Globan, 2018, 1)

The Alice story ends with a bildungsroman take of Alice’s dream by her elder sister, when she pictures Alice’s journey from childhood to adulthood, temporalizing time from the adult’s point of view:

Lastly she pictures to herself, how this same little sister of hers would in after –time be herself a grown woman, and how she would keep through all her *riper* years, the *simple and loving* heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps with even the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their *simple sorrows*, and find a pleasure in all their *simple joys*, remembering her own child-life, and *the happy summer days*.
(Carroll, 2006, 132. Emphasis my own) ^[3]

Alice’s sister’s visualisations of Alice’s dream was an instance of language as representation and not presentation; it is representation as she interpreted it in structures of the existing world - both sensory like the rustling grass, and the supra sensory picture of Alice as a grown woman. Her reverie is also discursive in the sense of time it envisages - a young Alice growing up and telling stories. Alice’s sister understood the setting to build an idea of Alice’s character according to supra-sensory discursive structures epitomised

in bildungsroman.

3.7 Alice’s diaspora like homelessness

It is said that home is where the heart is, signalling strong affective connotations with the idea of home. The affective expression of Alice’s sensations in the altered consciousness of her sleep/dream is a wonderland with the Mr. White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire cat, the King and Queen of Hearts. In as much as she finds affective resonance of her sensory inputs in a condition of deep sleep when the discursive slackens, in a fantasy – a wonderland – and not in her real home, in which perhaps the affective is obscured in being filtered through the discursive, to which she has to return, Alice’s condition is one of diasporic transcendental homelessness. It also implies the discursive – affective relation which is one of diffusion of the latter in the invisible ubiquitous concentration of the former. The Alice story can also be read as that of a child’s unstated need to find affective solace which in a discursively construed world.

4. Conclusion

Lastly, it is interesting to note that Alice in her journey to and from the wonderland follows the lesser known but increasingly gaining recognition Bay of Bengal template of migration which is circular, but the reader for whom the lasting memory of the work is the enchantment of the wonderland, it is a one way journey like the well – known trans - Atlantic template of migration. Therefore, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is a unique work in allowing for such different templates to both be in a single work.

5. References

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