

Chapter Five

Summation

In this study Aritha van Herk's views have been explored, examined and analysed under the title ‘Fact, Fiction and the Feminine - A Study of Aritha Van Herk’s Novels’. In the male produced literature, natural female shape is shaped on highlighting their remarkable manner, physical attractiveness, the goal, stereotypes and their position in society and their traditional roles as house wives. In addition to this notion in Western or Eastern Literary tradition, women have a fixed image. They are presented as stereotypes. Female stereotypes symbolise spirituality, materialism, virtues and vices. Many twentieth century women writers have questioned the stereotypical depiction of women as they strongly believe that gender is culturally constructed. Significantly, the Canadian female discourse especially the fiction of Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Aritha van Herk and a host of other feminist authors consciously break the feminine reductiveness and take out their heroines from the four walls of houses and their men. Patriarchy has controlled all domains – familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic – and conditioned women to internalize patriarchal ideology. Aritha van Herk is absolutely conscious of this state of affairs. She knows that women-readers have consumed enough and more of female produced literature wherein women are presented as stereotypes and obsolete characters. An essential feature of feminist writing is that women are supposed to be seats of consciousness, self-identity and empowerment. Aritha van Herk’s novels represent a simultaneous challenge of certain images of femininity, concept of maps, quest for travel and fiction itself. She has proved through her writings that as a feminist

writer she could produce textual meaning with history, themes, genres and structure of literature. In other words, she has brought out the female creativity without restraints. Her fictions begin to not only with the rejection of traditional roles but also with the reconstruction of new roles for women. She re-writes history in her story. At this junction van Herk attempts to re-write the past and transform the future. Robert Kroetsch's quest moves into the past, but van Herk's into an unknown future. Kroetsch deconstructs a legend and van Herk invents a new.

The researcher, has taken up an intensive examination of the novels of Aritha van Herk, namely, *Judith*, *The Tent Peg*, *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*, *Places Far from Ellesmere: A Geografictione* and *Restlessness*. The key terms fact, fiction and the feminine are related to the thematic preoccupation of van Herk in her novels. She has profusely made use of myths, histories and biblical references in her novels where myth and reality permeate each other. She has successfully blended mythical stories with the contemporary condition of women on deconstructing the traditional images of women presented in the patriarchal tradition. It is no coincidence that geographical representation and the representation of women, especially in literature, have been correlated in connection in feminist discussions. As a feminist, Aritha van Herk has chosen the landscapes she depicts in her novels with care. Her women-protagonists embark on the journeys of quest in search of their own identity by trying to conquer male space. As detailed in the chapter two journeys, myth, history, Biblical stories and all forms of existing knowledge provide the author with the fund of facts.

A quest is a journey; it has a purpose. A real quest is measured by the journey of the quester. It is an excellent plot device. In olden days many medieval romances sent knights out on quests. At present the quest continues but it appears in the shape of fantasy literature. The precise nature of this alien realm varies widely from one quest to another. The quest narrative reproduces the pattern of the rites of passage performed in many societies. The knowledge heroes gain through their experiences during the journey is always pleasant as well as important. The protagonists gain insight into vital areas of their own nature for psychological journey where they meet struggles. For this reason the journey is the ultimate revelation test of a character's heroic potential or failure. Through history, the story of the quest has provided the writers with a vehicle for their original insight and vision. The ultimate goal of the journey takes innumerable forms. Every version of the quest in myth, fairy tale and fantasy revolves around them. The desire and the ability to take those changes distinguish the hero from the rest of the human kind.

For most of the people, travelling is a possibility to escape into an alternative reality to escape to somewhere else. This attitude is reflected in much of Canadian literature. In their imagination of landscape, they have conquered a vast space of literary imagination. van Herk is also influenced by the landscape. So, many literary critics and writers take up this argument that this is not only a geographical feature but a state of mind. Next, the attribution of vastness and confinement is found in the novels of Aritha van Herk. Both the Canadians as well as other settlers prefer living in North for achievements, profession, financial advancement and stability in addition to escaping from the boredom of modernity and gaining new experiences. They pin this

hope on North as they believe it as an apt place for their harmonious existence. This typical Canadian attitude is reflected in all her novels. In short, female identity is closely allied with the landscape and a person's quest for self with the physical landscape.

In *Judith*, the protagonist embarks on the journey of self-discovery. Her quest is for her own self. When she feels restless she undertakes a journey with her parents. She enjoys and experiences the contrast in driving of the cars. Judith leaves the supposedly secure life in city which imposed on her various duties to her partner, office work, marriage relationship and the classic feminine career as a secretary to a life on her own farmer and pig breeder. Judith seems to have found her place in the world but still refuses to give a fixed address in the Delivery Office. There is a subtle suggestion that Judith may still continue her journey as she won't fix herself or fit into any of the social structures of her society.

In *The Tent Peg* during summer season, J.L. makes her own travel to Yukon with the destination of finding solutions to her problems in the city. She is waiting for the best opportunity to escape from the mundane existence which is highly loathsome. This escape is not only from urban life but from a life which she finds more and more demanding and complicated. She hides her true identity behind a boyish appearance. She is getting positive experience only through her real friend Deborah. In her travel she faces a critical situation and meets a number of obstacles and hindrances. When the crew members are ready to leave the Werneck Mountains for finding the valuable mineral, she hopes her expectations of both the physical and the mental isolation will be

fulfilled. All the main characters in *Tent Peg* support J.L. in her journey to help her reach her destination. Other crew members are flown in, J.L. starts to set up her cook tent to prepare their food in the middle of the camp. Therefore, she has chosen the isolation of geologists camp in Canada to regain her mental poise from her relationships. Now, she is ready to face any hurdles and problems because the camp is full of men with different characters and different attitudes. Deborah is the only female friend of J.L. who is ever present during her whole journey. Deborah and the she-bear are the sources of strength to J.L. on her journey. She is empowered both physically and mentally, which provides her with additional stamina throughout her journey.

In No Fixed Address, the protagonist named Arachne starts out as an underwear saleswoman who travels through the small prairie towns of Alberta collecting orders from stores. At the age of three she climbed the fence. At the age of fifteen she liked to roam the streets with her friends. A socially acceptable life is the worst thing she can even imagine. She never allows getting someone else's idea as her own. As a consequence, she is always on the move, both literally and physically. She uses men like a toilet tissue. In addition to this, she considers them as a bunch of useless assholes. The novel shows that her desire for sex is closely connected to her desire for travelling. She does not fail to have a ready supply of willing men to still her seemingly insatiable quest for independence. Now, Arachne meets Josef who is a 90 year old Serbian immigrant. At first he opposes Arachne while both of them are visiting the graveyard. Later, both of them silently reconcile with one another. There are no signs of protest from both the individuals. Another character named Dougall Mckay is highly important for Arachne's mental growth and the progress of her travel too. But

Arachne is not really interested in Mckay. But he shapes her life as her violent tendencies undergo a radical change after her meeting with him. Her best female friend Thena also is very important for the progress of Arachne's travel. Thomas functions as Arachne's anchor in the world. So Arachne falls in love with maps as well as with Thomas. Maps symbolically convey the love relationship between Thomas and Arachne. Arachne always loves to drive but she learns travel through Thomas's maps.

Places Far From Ellesmere may be called experimental writing as it brings together many genres, not totally belonging to anyone, autobiography, geography, fiction and cartography. There is a fusion of fact and fiction in the feminine representation of places. It describes the protagonist's journey to the North Island of Ellesmere. The journey is both physical and mental. It covers four specific exploration sites. These sites include the author's hometown of Edberg, the city of Edmonton, her residential place in Calgary and finally Ellesmere Island. Here, Edberg is a typical Canadian town from where Anna tries to escape. In Edmonton one who seeks to fulfil her desire cannot satisfy her entertainment. Calgary is a growing graveyard; after visiting Calgary, Aritha van Herk says that death is an act of freedom. Hence, she attaches a biblical reference with her own life. Finally, the place of Ellesmere refers to a woman as island. It may be the North. North symbolises a convenient place to escape to. Ellesmere becomes a state of meaningful existence and the concept of North is associated with Canadian identity.

Restlessness is a self-reflexive novel. Dorcas is a narrator as well as an international courier who has visited many countries and cities in the course of her

career. The whole narrative is a journey through the mind of the narrator Dorcas. She makes some specific reflections on travel. However, she is ultimately disillusioned with life and decides to end her life. Moreover, she is unable to withstand this pang of her restlessness. So she hires an assassin Derick Atman, whom she chooses for her friend as well as her end. While Dorcas is making a journey or trip, she tells Atman that she never takes a camera. She believes that travelling without a camera would help her to travel erratically. She recounts her travels around the world and describes the school trip and the cities she has visited as an international courier around the world. She has a gold card and so she has access to special reservations in line. So Dorcas reflects on the cities which are cultured and political centres. All these trips are always memorable to her.

In short, Aritha van Herk's novels exemplify the inherent process of identity finding in a country highly influenced by its vastness and geographical realities connected to it. Every journey has a purpose. Judith takes a journey of self-discovery and discovers that her real place is in pig-farm though her restlessness does not end there. Like Judith, J.L. of *Tent Peg* is actually trying to escape from her life in Edmonton as well as from others. However, her journey into isolation results in a confrontation with her own problems as well as the problems of her fellow crew members. So, she sets out on a physical and spiritual journey that has brought a great change in the lives of the other camp members and her life. Though her travel to the north is an attempt to escape both her life and problems in the city, it develops into a journey towards her inner self and self-discovery.

No Fixed Address is a woman's travel of romance through the prairie space and the Arctic space in her quest for freedom and her own desires and longings into the fictional spaces of imagination. Aritha's character has the possibility of a positive development. In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, which is part geography and part fiction, the novel makes an exploration of the self through the exploration of the land. Ellesmere becomes a place of meaningful existence for all the female victims who have suffered at the hands of male chauvinists. The organic development of her plan takes several twists and turns in the due course leading to fruition in the North Island of Ellesmere which is the final destination, an island in the world, which stands as a metaphor for escape and fulfillment. North is a prime point of significance in Canadian national identity. In *Restlessness*, the protagonist is a restless, a wandering woman whose purpose as well as target is nothing but incessant journey. She sees travelling as a version of self-punishment, and wonders if death is a happy ending to her journey. In one way, her journey of self-discovery is like Judith's, and like Judith she is not sure whether she has reached her destination or not. Like travel, myths also offer facts and beliefs of people. The knowledge of myth enables the writer to assess the position of women in earlier ages and relocate them further in her vision.

Aritha van Herk is a writer who has devoted much creative and critical energy to the making and remaking of myths. van Herk established herself as a postmodern novelist by challenging that classic myths and mythology, on invalidating the accepted notions of both gender and genre and experimenting with humour and magic realism. van Herk's fiction is concerned not only with the rejection of traditional roles and the deconstruction of established mythology but also with the creation of new roles for

women. She rewrites history to her history. Transformation and multiplicity are very essential to this theme.

In *Judith*, rewriting of the Circe myth and the mysterious nature of the relationship between Judith and the pigs are clearly drawn. Parallel with the life story of Judith is the myth of Circe – the traditional sinister image of the female power. Circe is the daughter of Perse and Helios, and she is a sister of Aega. Circe has significant control of sexual forces. She uses sex to create a connection of mutual trust and intimate bonding and unman a man. Circe has the power to unman or desex Odysseus and make him a weakling in her bed. Circe is a metaphor for Judith as Circe transformed humans into pigs. The act of castration is not only an act meant to avenge patriarchy but is also an inevitable act meant to wrench herself free from the invading power of men. Only after the scene of castration she feels herself truly liberated and relaxed. Next the story of Judith runs parallel to the story of Judith and Holophernes in *The Apocrypha*. Judith decapitates Holophernes. The story of Judith and her triumph over Holophernes can be found in *The Apocrypha*. Judith has been a controversial figure among critics. Aritha van Herk reconstructs women's memories by recreating women's mythology. Aritha van Herk's reappropriation of myth makes the idea not only traditional myth in *Odyssey* but a romantic myth explained from a feminist perspective.

In *The Tent Peg*, the protagonist Deborah is the only female friend of J.L. and the she-bear is a source of strength to J.L. on her journey. The she-bear is a figure which appears and reappears and it renews J.L.'s resolution to endure the summer and give her new strength. In the *Book of Judges* in the Bible, Deborah is a prophetess and

judge sitting under a palm tree in the mountains. She commands the Israelite Barak to go out and destroy Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army of King Jabin of Hazor. Now Barak's troops rout Sisera's large army and Sisera flees on foot and atleast reaches the tent of Jael, Haber's wife. Sisera is invited in to Jael's tent, as is the custom, where he is given food and drink, then he falls asleep. Jael nails a hammer in to his temples. Immediately after the murder, Deborah and J.L. celebrate feminist victory through Deborah's song which recalls the song from the Old Testament. A deed of cruelty in the Old Testament story is transformed into a redemptive act in the story of J.L. The mythological layer of the text becomes meta-fictional. Then J.L. tells the legend of Io beloved by Zeus and transformed into a heifer. Here, the myth becomes a parable of the way men perceive women merely as animals to mate with. In contrast to Io, the grizzly bear in van Herk's novel represents a kind of female power.

In *No Fixed Address*, van Herk recreates an image that can be found in many cultures and myths: the image of woman as a weaver. The name of Arachne Manteia carries the connection with the Greek mythology. Arachne was a Lydian weaver who acquired such great skill in her craft, the goddess Athena (Zeus's daughter) grew jealous of her. In the weaving contest between Athena and Arachne, Arachne tried to hang herself but Athena prevented her from putting an end to her life by transforming her into a spider, condemning her to go on weaving forever. The result is that she gets changed into a spider for her unwarranted protests against Athena. The mythological Arachne is an expert in weaving, the textual Arachne is a successful sales woman. The textual Arachne does not challenge anyone directly, but knowing her plight, she silently flees from the scene. At the same time, the mythological Arachne's web is marked by a

characteristic coherence. While Aritha van Herk's Arachne never allows herself for any demarcation. Arachne Manteia at the age of fifteen is the leader of a street gang named Black Widows named after the spider with the lethal poisonous bite that eats its male mate after intercourse. The name is eponymous. Later, she behaves like other arachnids. Arachne's car, on the mythological level, is part of her body with numerous references in the text. Sitting inside her car and looking at the map for driving, instead of a weaver's shuttle, she handles her shiny black car. The black hull of Arachne's car resembles the body of the spider.

Interpreting Biblical stories in the light of her vision to suit the context of her novels fulfils her agenda regarding women. Aritha van Herk also revises the Biblical myth through the story of Arachne. The characters of *No Fixed Address* allude to the Christian figures. Gabriel, the predominant character resembles the archangel Gabriel in the Bible. Here using Biblical myth, Lanie is pictured in the role of Mary and Toto in the figure of Joseph. Another contrast between the spider's web and the endless travelling of Arachne throughout Canada with the use of her black Mercedes car symbolizes the mobility of the American society.

The consumption of fugu or Japanese blowfish in *No Fixed Address* signifies Arachne's oscillation between life and death. Fugu is a dangerous fish which contains poison. Arachne eats a fugu in a Japanese restaurant later on she realizes that she is still alive. The fugu has not killed her. After some hesitation Arachne, eats the fugu for committing suicide like the classical Arachne. At this juncture, she is transformed by magic into a spider.

Apart from rewriting or reworking of traditional myths, Aritha van Herk also rewrites traditional literary traditions and stereotypes. She subverts the picaresque mode in *No Fixed Address*, the prairie fiction mode in *Judith* and the historical, journalistic mode in *The Tent Peg*.

The picaresque mode developed out of a rich Spanish tradition. It is episodic in structure and contains elements of romance, satire and tragedy. The picaresque novel originated in Spain and became the true prototype of the genre and helped to establish realism as the dominant trend in the Spanish novel. The story of the female picaro was told as early as 1605. The female picaro occupied a different position compared to the male picaro as she has did not experienced the same liberties. The early picaras were usually prostitutes who repented and remained socially helpless. Peter Dunn notes that the kind of realism evident in the original picaresque necessitated that the female picara take on different roles from the male picaro. Since these roles limited in the society of the past, occupied only a limited space in the picaresque novels of the time. van Herk continues to note the limitations of the traditional picaras.

Aritha van Herk subverts the picaresque tradition in *No Fixed Address*. The new picara shares some of the traits of her traditional picara ancestors. Arachne uses her sexuality to her own advantage but she does not fall prey to it. She moves beyond the roles open to the male picaro. She is the repentant rogue who plays an ambiguous part as subverter of power structures. For example, she is a successful saleswoman who drives a Mercedes. Unlike the traditional picaras, she never becomes a victim to her sexuality. Instead she manipulates it to get what she wants. Her role as a trickster

depends largely upon her ability to use her femaleness to achieve her goal. This discontent is the beginning of the picara's urge to better herself to rise out of the squalor into which she is born and become a member of the social structure which excludes her. Here van Herk makes a significant departure from the picaresque tradition. Arachne is no Moll Flanders manipulated by men in her effort to climb the social ladder. Arachne is the one in control of her transformation and Thomas serves as her guide.

Aritha van Herk reworks the tradition of prairie fiction in *Judith*. She constructs a new and different prairie where many of the established traditions of prairie fiction are challenged. The prairie world of van Herk is a female world, unlike the flat land and straight lines in the male prairie fiction. Woman on the prairie is given new status and new shape in *Judith*. The masculinity prairie life, as traditionally portrayed in regional mythologies, is constructed. She differentiates between the prairie landscape of men and that of women. In *Judith* the protagonist Judith has a barn. The barn becomes an exclusive female space which celebrates motion and pleasure and excludes male. Judith creates a real home for herself in the barn. While she enters the barn she feels that a swift sense of proprietorship occupies her mind. van Herk's prairie is the enclosed space between the house and the barn. In *Judith*, the house is unused and generally unlivied in. It is important to note that the barn and the house are not the disconnected places and they are created by, owned by, and connected by Judith. The imprint of the protagonist's footsteps on the snow connects the house and the barn. Judith moves freely from inside to outside and in the process of gaining motion, she enters the landscape itself. She is allowed the motion which is normally reserved for the male domain. Judith is empowered as she creates and defines her world. Judith creates the

barn that makes its greatest challenge to the literary tradition of prairie realism. With the creation of the barn as a female haven, she transcends the boundaries of the realist novel. Through the barn and the pigs, Judith goes beyond the deconstruction of the grammatical pairs of prairie literature and creates a space for woman to enter.

In *The Tent Peg*, van Herk indirectly challenges the history and myths that have been created and reinforced through documentary journalism. She challenges the standard mythologies of the North by recalling the names of Northern explorers. She connects some of the personal characteristics of the historical figures of Canadian frontier history which that of her fictional characters. She uses the names of actual historical personages for her fictional creations. In *The Tent Peg* van Herk transforms the North as depicted in the journals of Alexander Mackenzie. She reclaims it as a feminine space, unlike the harsh landscapes of the journals of the explorers. In *The Tent Peg* it is necessary to examine the literary form and the historical mythologies which the novel is sabotaging. van Herk challenges the notion that the journal form serves as an individualistic and accurate account of experience. Specifically Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, Samuel Herene, John Franklin and Henry Hudson are the actual historical figures of Canadian history. It is interesting to compare the actual historical journals of the explorers with van Herk's fictional constructions to show how her characters differ from those mythologised figures of the North. The two male figures in *The Tent Peg* Mackenzie and Thompson recall the explorers Alexander Mackenzie and David Thompson of van Herk. Historically, Alexander Mackenzie and David Thompson covered similar ground in their explorations. Later on the historical Thompson glorified the land and became fascinated by its spirit and its people. He is

depicted as physically enormous, a man of intense stamina, self-control and ambition. His avoidance of landscape is exemplified in his factual analysis of immense natural beauties. van Herk's fictional Mackenzie seems to counteract with this historical personage. van Herk's Mackenzie is a stooped, quiet and undemanding character. However, like the historical personage, he is also ambitious and hard working with incredible stamina. His endurance for work does not arise out of a noble pursuit knowledge. He is unlike the historical Mackenzie, the super-human, mythological figure who haunts Canadian consciousness. Aritha van Herk's Mackenzie also has a significantly different relationship with the land than did the historical Mackenzie. In *The Tent Peg* van Herk also focuses on the fictional relationship between Mackenzie and Thompson. In Alexander Mackenzie's journal there is little mention of the people who travelled with him and there is a strong and sensitive relationship between Thompson, a crew member, and Mackenzie, his boss. Thompson's sense of wonder and awe at the northern landscape is shared by Mackenzie. Her characters celebrate the North unlike the majority of historical explorers who merely documented it. The presentation of their journal entries juxtaposes their perspectives and emphasize subjectivity in interpretation.

Many twentieth century women writers have questioned the stereotypical depiction of women as they strongly believe that gender discrimination is culturally constructed. Patriarchy has controlled all the domains – familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic – and conditioned women to internalize and comply with patriarchal ideology. It is no coincidence that geographical representation and the representation of women, especially in literature, have been brought in connection with

feminist discussions. Aritha van Herk has chosen the landscapes she depicts in her novels with care and also with a feminist in approach. There is an urge to find one's own voice in constructing the feminine discourse. Virginia Woolf, leading the first wave of feminism, voiced the patriarchal social order that hindered or prevented women from realising their creative possibilities. As women have been considered as mother-figures and sexual objects, they are denied access to the literary domain, as the patriarchal society views them capable of mothering and caring. This worldview was challenged and male assumptions were deconstructed while women started musing, philosophizing and articulating themselves. Patricia Waugh noted that the dominant theme of contemporary women's fiction in Canada is to write a history that is gender conscious and one that articulates feminine space as a means of resisting patriarchal domination. The fragmented national reality, the female reality is pushed to the margins in Canada. Hence, the feminist writing is characterised by the singular objective of articulating resistance. Their writing has become a self-conscious, self-propelled and motivated activity for a female writer. Self-referentiality and self-reflexivity become the defining metaphors for women's writing.

Real historical women figures of courage and freedom give the author an impetus to project her protagonists as heroines. Contemporary Canadian women writers present strong and powerful women as descendants of their nineteenth century pioneers. These women writers have presented complex images of women as powerful. The traditional images of women were attributed to their costume and hairstyles, witchcraft, and children while the men's power was related to guns, knives, success in occupations, sexual freedom and masculine vocabulary. Gender essentialism assumes that gender

roles are natural, that men should undertake and render the duty chosen by him. On the contrary, the women writers articulate fresh images of women's power including androgyny, freedom of choice, expressing their strong suppressed emotions, and voicing one's own vision of the world. Here Aritha van Herk has made use of these images to show that femininity asserts itself by subverting the traditional gender pattern and their relationship with men and other women. In many respects, Aritha van Herk's novels, through her characters try to uproot the boundary between the world of men that of women. She crosses the boundaries of conventional expectations also.

In the novel *Judith*, Aritha van Herk presents a woman who achieves power beyond the demarcation of female tradition. van Herk depicts a valiant woman who uses all her knowledge, bravery, wisdom, and charm to free her from the dominations of men in order to attain her individuality. She gives up her secretarial job, sexy wardrobe and fashionable hairstyles in order to fulfil her dead father's dream of running a pig farm. At the beginning, she starts doing the works of men as she wants play the role of a man. She equips herself with mechanical knowledge as well as fortitude. She shows her indomitable courage converting a barn into a pig farm and breeding pigs there. As she prefers to play the role of man, she is very much pleased to take in charge of the pig farm. Her absolute contempt for men makes her replace them with pigs in her farm. Judith spends most of her time to spend with pigs and takes care of them dearly. She brings them up as her pets as equates them with men. She weighs on pan with the pigs as she sense some similarities between them particularly in the matter of sexual intercourse. Aritha van Herk symbolises that castration of pigs as castration of male domination. Pig farming is considered as men's work and pigs are a bit difficult to

handle. Generally pig farm can be handled only by men. But Judith prefers the choice of a pig farmer. She wants to bring men under her feet. Generally, castration is considered as a work of men. Her lover Jim wrongly castrates the pigs and causes them shed blood. But, Judith voluntarily takes up that job and castrates the pigs very perfectly by taking a knife, a traditional symbol of male power. It exhibits her courage and strength. She gradually elevates herself from a meek woman to a valiant woman.

Judith is very happy to see the tremendous growth of her pig farm. The ultimate aim of Judith is to expand her father's pig farm and therefore, she takes care of them all alone. She finds solace and comforts by being close with the pigs and their growth. Then van Herk presents the hazardous works of women through Judith. First of all, she works in office and subsequently she carries out many jobs like secretary, administrative secretary, clerk and secretarial duty as a supervisor as well as compiler and finally she has become the owner of her pig farm.

Aritha van Herk portrays Judith as a powerful and domineering character. Her protagonists show that women are not inferior to men. She proclaims that women are not independent and they do not want to be exploited by men in this world. She doesn't like the company of men and so, she goes to the extent of manipulating and exploiting her lovers to extract happiness of their sufferings. She has sex with her city lover and gets an M.G. car from him. It is quite discernible that she is a woman of resilience. She dares to do something that is equivalent to the risk taken by men. From her childhood, her personal dealings with her father, her ex-lover from the city, her present preoccupations as a pig farmer are quite different from the experiences of this women.

Anyhow, Judith finally proves that she possess even greater power than the power of men.

Judith's intellectual power is clearly seen as she never wants he pitied and pampered as she believes it as an act of oppression. She is a modern woman and represents the feminine revolt against male domination. Economically, she wants to be equal and independent. Even in sex, the matters of pleasure and emotions both are equal. She considers that petting and pampering by her father is also a kind of male chauvinism. Her father is under the assumption that she is young and incapable of maintaining the pig farm. She is aware of her age, but she can handle any kind of Herculean task. This resilience attitude and boldness make her face any situation. As she treats her pigs like human beings, one can understand her closeness and contempt for men. It really shows that she has even greater power over men and she also possesses concrete articulation and assertiveness to prove that she is superior to men. The novel shows that women's power lies in her success over masculine occupations, insisting on equality, claiming her sexual freedom and intellectual growth.

Next in *The Tent Peg* the protagonists J.L. wants to spend her summer as a bush cook. Bush cooking is normally the profession of the male but she disguises herself as a boy with short hair and fedora hat. She is capable of any amount of hard work as that of any man. While in summer camp, it looks she has even more courage and strength than her crew members. She solves all the personal problems of the crew members as well as her own problems. Once in summer, Jerome wants to take revenge on J.L. He takes his gun, enters J.L's tent at night and unbuttons his jeans to rape her. Now, she

gets hold of the gun and reverses the roles. She disarms and over powers him. It is a clear reversal of gender roles as J.L. is able to overpower a man who is physically stronger than her. In traditional patriarchy, men have an inborn right to feel superior to women. Aritha van Herk challenges this concept through the main characters.

In the novel *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*, the protagonist Arachne Manteia, who spends her leisure time exploring the roads of Alberta and picking up road-jockeys along the way to appease her insatiable sexual hunger, is a model for the subversion of the traditional gender pattern. From her childhood, Arachne's behavior is different from all other girls as she possesses some dominating qualities. Even in her childhood, her friends were all boys and she grows up wild and unrestrained showing a great interest in bad habits, criminal behavior and violence.

The social structure in which the female character lives is not the relevant dimension for defining the identity of the character. The construction of female identity cannot be placed on the same level as male identity, as it follows different rules. Male identities are generally perceived as more or less stable and are hardly influenced either by love or tragedy. Her behaviour is full of criminal acts and violence. Arachne's behaviour is quite different from that of a normal woman. She despises dressing up, shaving her legs and she holds jobs that normally do not appeal to women. She starts delivering newspapers while still a child, works at a gas station and then a bus driver before she becomes an under wear representative. Once when Dougal cheats Arachne, she becomes highly furious and she attacks him. Then she flees in her Mercedes car to Vancouver. In a fit of fury and anxiety, she visits the sushi bar. Unexpectedly a man

grabs her and molests her but she stabs him in return. Later, she kidnaps an eighty year old man from a nursing home.

Generally, women stay at home on the farm in their settlement. The traditional role takes a different form and assumes greater meaning. Arachne is not an entirely likeable character. In van Herk's revisionist novel, she reverses the gendered pattern of the plot. It is not the male hero who sets off into the sunset but Arachne who lights out for the territory to fulfil. The subversion of patriarchal power claimed for woman is the theme of the novel. She goes against the conventional rule of the society and disguises herself to reap the target she has aimed at. Aritha van Herk depicts the concept of subverting the conventional image of womanhood through the character of Arachne Manteia in *No Fixed Address*.

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Ellesmere, the uninhabited island symbolically stands for a woman and the novel interrogates Anna Karenina. Anna, the important character in the novel subverts the longstanding belief and arrogance of the male writers who believe that North or the specific space is a male territory, strictly it is no woman's zone. She recreates the character of Anna Karenina from a woman's point of view and relocates her in the twentieth century literary arena granting her much freedom. Aritha van Herk deconstructs the stereotypical portrayal of women characters of the male text. She invites Anna to be a co-traveler to the Arctic Island not only to subvert the male view of place, territory and domain but also to rediscover herself as an autonomous and authoritative human being. While preparing for the journey into Arctic land she deliberately takes with her Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. She feels that this one book is

much more difficult than packing the clothes. The enormous weight of this single book indicates the depth of women's burden of centuries. The challenge is to dismantle the male text and recontextualise it in rereading it. van Herk takes the opportunity to attack Tolstoy for the impartial treatment meted out to Anna.

Anna is humiliated for her preference be different and making choices for her life that allegedly violates social norms as she is a married woman. The paradoxical truth is that a person is highly applauded for his involvement with a married woman. But the married woman is despised for the same involvement. A bourgeois respectability is imposed on women to repress or eliminate emotional and sexual needs. Self-denial and desperate efforts to control one's desires are considered as the virtues of women. Otherwise she becomes a fallen woman, who is to be pitied, despised or humiliated. Anna cannot enjoy her appetites as simply and enthusiastically as Stiva does. Stiva her brother an incorrigible womaniser having relationship with governesses, ballet dancers and other women is not condemned. To Tolstoy, women are sluts; but to van Herk Stiva is a slut. Both Vronsky and Stiva represent the masculine domination that seeks the free sexual gratification and the erotic pleasures without any respect for women. The conventional male attitude has been popularised and idealised to keep women fittered that would their duty to be virtuous, pious and duty-conscious to earn the respect and recognition of the society. Initially Anna is full of vitality and energy having an insatiable appetite for life. She is highly passionate and astonishes everyone by her daring attempt.

On the other hand, Stiva describes Vronsky indulges in the vile act of seducing the meeker section while he is on his journey. He as a man is haughty and so he never oscillates to undertake adventurous tasks. According to van Herk, it is the woman's turn and task to reverse the scenario. Aritha van Herk's *Ellesmere* is not Tolstoy's nineteenth century Petersburg or Moscow but a woman's own world. It is a Utopia that is different. There is no norm to be followed or violated, nobody sits in judgment there. It is free and vast. Anna is travelling to Ellesmere along with the author. The author starts questioning everything in order to change Anna's fateful course of life and eventual death. She likes to move to Ellesmere only to be set free from the pages of Tolstoy's work. The journey is altogether a different experience, a journey to rediscover a woman written by man who fails to justice to her. She thinks that the landscape provides pleasure. Anna has left everything behind relationships, institutions, norms, practices and finally she takes refuge in a perpetually frozen world to relive her life. Now van Herk feels Anna is set free and her intention in this work is essentially to emancipate Anna from Tolstoy's patriarchal bondage. She finally retrieves Anna's autonomy and restores honour to her.

The resistance to gender essentialism is seen in the way van Herk presents human relationships too. Human relationship, in general, plays a vital role in the progress and wellbeing of man and also in enriching and strengthening the bonds. Every individual is influenced by the social relationship established between man and woman. In fact, all human relationship plays a pivotal role in any civilized society. Thus, society comprises of various kinds of human interactions that spring from man-woman

relationship. This basic and common relationship has become a vital feature in any literature of any part of the world.

The relationship of van Herk's protagonists with the opposite sex is worth considering. In *Judith*, Judith's ties with her father are worth maintaining as the love between the two is very strong. Memories of her relationship with her father drift forth and back in her mind. As a child, she had a great attachment with her father. Her walk over the hill along with her father exposes that she had an enormous amount of love for him. In some places, the grain grew higher than her head and Judy's father carried her on his shoulders. She used to wait for her father outside of the pig farm until night. Her father trained her in pig farming and hoping that she would take over his pig business, but Judith prefers to venture out into the wide world in search of new opportunities. When the ownership of the pig-farm becomes a question, there arises a breach between the father and the daughter as the latter abruptly denies to own the farm. She learns through her bitter experiences, how to face disillusionments and disappointments in the world outside. Finally Judith finds self-fulfilment only when fulfilled the wishes of her father.

What Judith resents more in her life is that she is viewed only as a sex object by the men she meets in her life. She thinks that even Norman, her boyfriend wants to possess her and prefers to sexual copulation with her. As a secretary she has undergone sexual harassment under her boss. As she is fed up with this kind of encounters, to the pigs for solace she turns her attention. Anyhow the relationship of Judith with men is a mixture of aversion, hatred, resistance and allurement, sympathy and attraction.

Judith has a female friendship with Mina. She is witty and a woman of strong will, who manages to hold the household of a husband and three sons together. Mina and Judith visit them frequently and become closer together. They share the common issues that confide with the other woman. Mina manages to surprise Judith greatly a few times, mainly by her outright attitude and purity. Judith has had female friends she had earlier in the office where she worked earlier.

In *The Tent Peg*, the protagonist J.L. plays the role of confidante, confessor and counselor to the crew members. Her relationship with men is elevated to the high pedestal of life. At first, when they discover that J.L. is a woman, the sex-starved men in the desert, look at her with lustful eyes. Some of them really like her but others are not. But J.L. makes them realize that she is a powerful woman by maintaining a close contact with the powers of nature, not a mere sex-object to be toyed with.

J.L. has a close and loyal, and confidential friend Deborah. Deborah is an embodiment of J.L.'s dreams and goals in the life and she helps her to keep the head above water in difficult situation. J.L. talks so gently about her as if she is her lover. Deborah is also very sturdy and rigid like her friend. Hence, J.L. readily accepts Deborah's advice.

In *No Fixed Address*, the protagonist Arachne lives according to her own rules and concept of morality. She has sex at random with her acquaintances, road jockeys and men she picks up along the way. She hunts for unconventional men and she treats men like flies. She picks up different men during her travels, enjoys sex with them and then leaves them like a trash into the dustbin. She sees men only as sexual as she has

been looked at objects, and enjoys the erotic pleasures with them. But her relationship with Thomas Telfer is different. In the beginning, she has been enamoured of his appearance. But her obsession with her travel persuades her to sever her relationship with him. He is the only man with whom Arachne can be herself, and totally feel relaxed. Arachne loves him and at the same time she enjoys her sexual adventures on the road. Next, Gabriel Greenberg seems to have more influence on Arachne during her childhood life. So, Arachne has a genuine serious attachment with him and earnest interest in him. Then, she meets Dougall Mckay and she is angry with him and attacks him. Then she takes the money and flees in her Mercedes to Vancouver.

Thena is Arachne's only best friend. The broken relationship between Thena and her husband urges her to prefer a life of seclusion in which she has had no other goal except leading a happy life with her daughters. She does not want her daughters to repeat the mistakes that she has committed as a young girl. She also tries to instill in them a lot of confidence to pull on their survival amidst the chaotic situations of the society. In many ways, Thena is the complete opposite of Arachne. Even though she patiently listens to her stories, she also shows her that she does not approve of Arachne's life style, predicting a downfall of her at the end. Thena warns Arachne of the consequences of her bad behaviour. In spite of all the hardships and humiliating experiences that she has come across during her life journey and the physical journey on the roads with the help of the maps, she has complete trust on Thena. In short, Arachne appears to be an embodiment of intimidation to all other women. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy but also extends both moral and physical support to each other.

In *Restlessness*, the narrator Dorcas is an international courier; she has tried for a decade to commit suicide, and hence she hires an assassin to escape the pangs of restlessness at last. What is so surprising is that a woman of such in explainable, misery and betrayal attracted by the physical appearance of the assassin.

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, van Herk deconstructs the ideological position of Tolstoy in Anna Karenina from a female point of view. In Tolstoy's novel Anna is humiliated for daring to be different, making a choice for herself, and having an extramarital affair. Moreover, a kind of female bonding exists between the author and Anna also. In other words, Anna who has been condemned as a slut by the male literary tradition, is delivered from bondage in van Herk's novel, and given a new identity through female bonding.

To conclude, Aritha van Herk has redefined and refigured femininity in her novels, exploding the traditional and stereotypical roles that women are expected to play in the family and society. Her women characters subvert the traditional gender roles and take up professions like that of a pig farmer, bush cook, travelling salesperson and international courier, which are commonly preferred by men. It has been alleged that women cannot write about difficult subjects as they mostly write about their individual experiences of oppression which is considered to be absolutely trivial and insignificant. But van Herk has experimented with the new genres breaking the traditional expectations. She explores geo-feminism in all her novels by introducing female characters who have integrated a close-knit with the wilderness and the west. In *Judith*, she projects a revisionist geo-feminist retelling of the classical myth of Circe

through the protagonist Judith's quest for her essential selfhood. *The Tent Peg* is a novel about a young girl fighting a modern battle against the prejudices of male chauvinism in a mining camp in Yukon. In *No Fixed Address*, she appropriates two traditional domains of the male hegemony – driving and selling lingeries. She has experimented with a new genre, geografictione, in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, combining geography, fiction, autobiography and criticism in a new mode, making the readers a part of the narrative. She fights the patriarchal norms which try to fit women in a fixed state. Her women try to cross boundaries, to transgress and trespass. She has also redefined the relationship of women with men and other women. Finally the researcher hypothesises that Aritha van Herk has created a host of new women who are capable of serving the entire women folk as the role models who are not living caged and dumb but free as courageous warriors and vanguard of women. van Herk's own creations are the result of a logical synthesis of fact and fiction. Her life and her experiential realities cohere and coalesce with her imagination to give birth to new women characters. Hence, she blends fact and fiction together to mould and shape an aggressive, agile type of women who break traditional norms laid down by men.

Aritha van Herk's fictional women characters are rooted in reality while at the same time, appearing in another plane of unreality thus blending fact, fiction and the feminine. Travel, mapping, farming and driving serve as metaphors to unravel the boundaries of fact, truth and reality. van Herk, while fictionalizing her characters in the postmodern mode, challenges the classic myths and mythology by invalidating the accepted notions of both gender and genre as well as sabotages and subsequently

subverts the traditional literary traditions and stereotypes like the picaresque mode, the prairie mode, the journalistic mode and the autobiographical mode in her novels.

The postmodern blurring of boundaries occurs in Aritha van Herk's novels which cross and transgress genre boundaries while her woman characters cross the trespass gender boundaries. All the protagonists as well as the main characters of van Herk travel towards a destination of self-realisation which Judith finds in her pigs, J.L. finds in her understanding of other crew members, Arachne and the narrator in *Places Far from Ellesmere* find in the North, and Dorcas finds in death. Reconstruction and the existing knowledge of myths, Biblical stories and history gain new dimension in the hands of Aritha van Herk through her narrative skill.

Aritha van Herk subverts the patriarchal concept of gender essentialism in her novels by subverting the gender roles. She has redefined and refigured femininity in her novels foregoing the traditional and stereotypical roles that women are expected to play in the family and in society. Her women characters project their feminine qualities not synonymous to meekness and mildness but prowess and power.