



Narratives of Multiculturalism in The Canadian literature

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Abstract

Canada as a prominent country has gained importance from beginning of the 20th century and it is more in the context of its attempt to make a mark of its own apart from the already established American poetry. The vast prairies, the freezing winter and the fierce summer portrayal of Canadian landscape in Canadian literature are scintillating and impressive. In Canada, multilingual situations, transnational experiences and syncretism literary genre prevail which seem to be the strong fountainhead providing an atmosphere of natural ethos of multiculturalism.

The paper explores the Canadian poets like, A.J.M. Smith, Duncan Campbell Scott, Wilfred Campbell and P.K. Page, their poetry is quite in tune with the country's climatic surroundings . There is ambience and milieu of the land commingles with the creative urge of these people before shaping the contours of their literature.

The contention of this paper is also to study the individual and the social dimensions reflected in Canadian literature, with each dimension mutually reinforcing the other in the right social and cultural milieu in context to Canadian novelists like Margaret Lawrence and Margaret Atwood, who portray the aspects of human life, which transcend the specificities of Canadian culture and attain the height of universality.



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Canada, as a country of complex physical environment with its concomitant consequences frames a society, where men are in concord and fascinated by nature. Canada has gained importance from beginning of the 20th century and it is more in the context of its attempt to make a mark of its own apart from the already established American poetry. The vast prairies, the freezing winter and the fierce summer portrayal of Canadian landscape in Canadian literature are scintillating and impressive. In Canada, multilingual situations, transnational experiences and syncretic literary genre prevail, which seem to be the strong fountainhead providing an atmosphere of natural ethos of multiculturalism.

Canada's colonial inheritance of English and French language and culture is simply complicated by the multiple origins of the Canadian population as a result of multiethnic patterns of immigration and settlement. Canadian literature follows the usual colonial pattern. There have been two home cultures: French and English, which exist side by side. Multiculturalism is often seen as involving an analysis that ignores political disparities and has often been linked to view everyone equal without having to grapple with historical, political and economic injustices.

Literature is a great link for human life. It is a bonding factor, which helps people to identify themselves by presenting similar experiences in dissimilar climatic and living conditions. Canadian literature, which is an amalgamation of different cultures and different sentiments, is replete with the values of life, individual qualities of independence, fortitude and egalitarian,



representation of place and people and stamp of individual minds confronting experience, which is characteristic of rare blends.

If geography acts as an inspiration for the poetic imagination, it is certainly true of Canada as the landscape and climate have played a pivotal role in shaping the poetry. Canada, the land of prairies, with extremity witnessed in winter and summer have always inspired poets to run their poetic thought wild. Famous Canadian poet, Wilfred Campbell, in his poem '*The Winter Lakes*', through the dreary and dark landscape presents his inner bleakness. He feels bitter and is perturbed from the turbulences of nature. He believes that it is a world of no hope:

“Never a bud of spring, never a laugh of summer,
never a dream of love, never a song of bird:
But only the silence and white,”(171).

He sketches a visual image of a world of death. “Waste and white stretch the great lakes away”. The picture of the moon glimmering its whiteness, changing the surrounding too, the water surface with white color and making the atmosphere looming and ghost like. As the ice winds blow, the grief of winter is heard. The shadowy shapes, the lonely hidden bays, the rocky lands looms like spectres with its utter blackness.

Another Canadian poet A.J.M. Smith is also fascinated with nature representing Death, but also with the vitality, energy, force and the dynamic action of nature. In his poem '*Ode on the Death of William Butter Yeats*' he never fails to mention the movements in the world of nature befitting the Canadian landscape. On the onset 'an old thorn tree in a strong place' is sketched wherein the stream running from the mountains has gone dry and white sky is described as



‘icicle-sharp kaleidoscopic’ which burst into forever bloom. The nature accompanies hope with the stream on the Ben Bulben running with clear water, the twisted tree bursting with flowers, the swan leaping into the air signifying the everlasting glory of songs:

‘Over the Galway shore
The white bird is flying
Forever,’(177)

The poet’s artistic blending of thoughts and emotions with symbolic imagery can be witnessed with a wild swan spreading its fantastic wing, connotes the songs of W.B.Yeats.

“Over the edge of shining Europe
Over the chalk front of Kent, over Eire...”
(178)

Smith’s poems are colloquial and have a sharp and ironic insight into a simple situation that expands in the mind with an existence of its own. His poems emanate hope, from the magnitude folds of the dark concretes hope emerges thus echoing everything into a state of glory.

However, the stormy climate described by Duncan Campbell Scott in the poem ‘*The Forsaken*’. He portrays the hard life of the Indians living in close contact with the wilderness of Canada:

‘Of a great storm.
frozen and hungry,
She fished through the ice’(34)



The poet vividly portrays the hardship experienced due to its geographical placement, where the climate is quite chilly and the maxim of survival of the fittest rules the life.

“Left her alone forever,
Without a word of farewell,
Because she was old and useless...”(35)

Canadians as perceived by Duncan Scott have perforce to engage the environment, the outer storm, simply to survive; they endured hardship and displayed courage and tenacity.

“All the lake-surface
Streamed with the hissing
Of millions of iceflakes.”(34)

Duncan Campbell Scott’s poem ‘*The Height of Land*’ gives a glimpse of wild lake country of north:

“Here there is peace in the lofty air,
And something comes by flashes
Deeper than peace---
The spruces have retired a little space
And left a field of sky in violet shadow
With stars like marigolds in the water-meadow.”(46)

One finds a unique continuity of sublime thoughts and untainted emotions throughout his poem. Immortality of nature, and his dream regarding hope and promise which echos and re echos in his poem:



“O’ life is intuition the measure of knowledge

And do I stand with heart entranced and burning

At the zenith of our wisdom...”(47)

Canadian poet P.K. Page’s poems are truly a vehicle for that inner weather of a deeper emotional and intellectual exploration that enlarges in another way the sense of life in open space. In her poem ‘*Adolescence*’ the poet pictures the teenage atmosphere of nervousness and uncertainty as :

“In the park she fed the swans and he

whittled nervously with his strange hands.”(77)

And even the movements of lovers are called “savage and swift as gulls”. One can see the empty and dreamy relationship, avenues in the dark, partly sculptured stone, etc. all exhibiting the diminishing aspects of nature getting reflected naturally upon human life in general, the modern man aspiring more than his capability. He creates or destroys and lives in accordance with his relative emotions. In ‘*Autumn*’ Page brings back alive the trick of Autumn season. It’s like nature has to be endured and predicted:

‘Once-glycerined green leaves

Burned by a summer sun

Are brittle and ochre

Night enters day like a thief”(22)

But the poet is full of hope as she feels that only those who strive to work hard can look for future as God helps those who help themselves.



‘Even though there is bounty, a full harvest
That sharp sweetness in the tea-stained air
Is reserved for those who have made a straw
Fine as a hair to suck it through-
Fine as a golden hair.
Wearing a smile or a frown
God’s face is always there.’(23)

In ‘*The First Neighbour*’ Page brings the language of life through the nature’s dark forest:

‘The forest can still trick me.’ (29)

It is like a malevolent face flickering over her shoulder. She tries her best to take clue from the ‘chapped tarpaulin skin’. She learns that things have got to be endured and prediction impossible. She draws image of birds which symbolize her ardent hope for a life of acceptance and adaptability amidst the land unknown yet hers. Her dilemma and conflict becomes obvious and it becomes hard to decide between certainties and uncertainties.

‘the branches quivered.’ (33)

reflect her fear and fright in this alien home. This alienation from culture and language makes her situation even worse.

In this area where my damaged
knowing of the language means
prediction is forever impossible. (37-39)

Tom Marshall in his critical study of the four stages of Canadian poetry, significantly titled ‘*Harsh and Lonely Land*’ writes:

“Canadians began as cultural half-breeds,... They had perforce to engage the environment, the outer storm, simply in order to survive... They have looked on openness while passing through



the outer as well as inner storm and perceived that the void is really a Heraclitean flux in which the glory and darkness co-exist and balance one another...”

Most of the writers have grappled to identify themselves with a multicultural ethnic mosaic. Canada, has invariably made men succumbed to the abundance of nature. They have to reconcile with the surroundings to find a compensation for the unavoidable exposures of the absolute nature.

Margret Atwood and Margaret Lawrence, in their novels have attempted to provide both a cultural antiquity with nature and a past on which lies the growth and evolution of literary identity. These writers in their novels respond to people living in specific geographical boundaries articulate sharable socio-political, historical and cultural conditions of the land along with human concerns and situations.

In the novels of Atwood like *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the images of nature and aspects of the natural environment as well as the atrocities inflicted on women and on the nature have been dealt with great dexterity. One can very clearly perceive Atwood's prime concerns as she narrates the stories woven with human culture and its relationship with nature.

The nameless, the powerless protagonist of *Surfacing* ruminates over her past. She has left behind the city, the city of concrete and steel, a symbol of rigidity and atrocities. Her visit to her past gives her opportunity to probe the existing situation. The familiar road and the home have undergone a sea change.

“I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire”(p.3)

The Americans have crossed the borders, invaded the Canadian landscape, spread the epidemic of greed, violence, diseases and destruction of human values. She identifies herself with the lifeless logged woods, the hanged heron and the frog used for bait in fishing. The narrator longs for the past and her quest for identity raises questions of gender and nature.



The protagonist felt the feeling of displacement and disconnectedness throughout the novel due to her experience of patriarchy, cultural imperialism and geographical colonialization. Being sensitized to the issues of exploitation, domination, interference and seduction she could very well perceive the ravages wrought on her native land by colonizers. While brooding on the binaries like man/woman, colonizer/colonized she felt great affinity between her and her land. As “the history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities” on women, the history of colonialism violates the sanctity and freshness of wilderness of Canada. Just as men subjugate women, the lands are reshaped and reconstructed according to the needs of the imperialistic colonizer. Atwood thus makes her protagonist born at the savage imperialism over Canada. The US invasion steals the natural beauty of the locations by filtering into the fresh rivers, lakes, deep jungles and vegetated lands. She condemns the fresh catch and tourist’s movements of the Americans. The construction of the tourist cabins and entertainments make her gape not in wonder but out of fear and disgust. The trees are axed, birds are killed and resources of the land are plundered as though they own them while the owners shrink in shame and shiver in fear.

Birds which are to be considered as symbols of peace and freedom stand for doom and submission. Killed with a bullet and hanged by a nylon rope the dead heron speaks of violence and upsurge of unwanted technology. Burial is a ritual that indicates the last honour showered upon the dead. Since the dead bird is not buried but hanged, it is as though the dead is being dishonoured. It is a symbol of disgrace on the nature by the looters.

Margaret Atwood’s ‘*The Edible Woman*’ is set in Toronto. The city, though described realistically, often takes on mythic overtones and functions as a patent symbol of identity crisis in the world at large. In Atwood’s novel ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale*’ ecological treatises form a perfect ground for the study of the interconnectedness between nature and culture and of the negotiations between the human and the non-human. This dystopian novel gives us a clear photographic image of future wherein every aspect of environmental degradation and destruction and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace.



In the Republic of Gilead where this novel is set, due to nuclear accidents and repeated use of pesticides and chemicals has made men sterile and women barren. The protagonist, Offred, belongs to the class of handmaids, young fertile women selected out and assigned to commanders' (Fred) households to conceive and bear children while her fellow handmaids are objectified and reduced to the status "two-legged wombs" (page 76). But the fate of infertile women is worse as they were sent to the colonies to clear toxin waste, where they are sure to die, either of disease or of radiation. The abysmal world painted by Atwood makes us cognizant of the fact that in an age of machines, man has also become mechanized and utterly devoid of emotions – with neither love for humans nor for nature. Atwood's views are well reflected through Offred, where she craves for a world of love and beauty and her desperate words, 'I wish this story, were different. I wish it were more civilized... I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms or snow (Page 343).

Thus, she draws attention deliberately towards the issues of sufferings and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience. Atwood feels deeply concerned by the horrifying outcome of the capital intensive industrialism, exhaustion of the basic energy resources, general vulnerability of the non-industrial world and the deep deterioration in the living conditions of the people that all her novels is a culmination of her concern that reflect upon nature and nurture it needs.

Margaret Laurence's sense of being Canadian can be seen more obviously in her Manawaka fiction. The fictional geographical placement of Manawaka is modeled upon the southwestern part of Manitoba, Neepawa, Lawrence's home town. As Shirley Chews says, "Manawaka is a modest town of the mind". The series of four novels published between 1964 and 1974 capture the cultural awakening of Canada during the sixties and early seventies. They hold a mirror to the lives of several generations settled in and around the town of Manitoba. Laurence observes:



“For me fiction is primarily a matter of portraying individual, characters as faithfully as I am able to do. These characters, however, do not live in vacuum. They live in specific places, and any writing about them must of necessity include social commentary.”

Laurence has created Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* (1964), Rachel Cameron in *A Jest of Gold* (1966), Stacey in *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), Vanessa in *A Bird in the House* (1970), and Morag Gunn in *The Diviners* (1974) who present her Manawaka world from her own place and time through for generations of men and women in a Canadian western town. As her novels progressed from Hagar of *The Stone Angel* to Morag of *The Diviners*, Manawaka becomes a reality in our imaginations, with its interwoven families, its geographical landmarks and, above all, its climate of thought.

The novel *The Stone Angel* effectively captures the energy, enterprise, success stories and development that symbolize ‘Canada’. Hager, the 90 year old protagonist, is the descendent of a family that boasts of rich class connections and of self made success in pioneering Canada. Throughout the novel we can see, she is indifferent to the larger issues, is rebellious and has the qualities of order, decorum and respectability associated with Manawaka.

In her second novel *A Jest of God*, Lawrence projects Manawaka through Rachel, as a place illuminating different shades of perceptions within its people. In *The Fire Dwellers*, through Stacey, the protagonist Margerat Laurence wants to be free of the geographical constraints, Manawaka. Stacey undergoes horrifying experiences that even the building appears for her as “charred, open to the impersonal winds, glass and steel broken like vulnerable live bones...”(11). However, she adapts and changes herself. She surfaces her extraordinary qualities of love, fortitude and vitality. The novel subtly projects the inner strength of women amidst dilemmas and problems. Laurence in *The Diviners* befittingly describes her regional acumen of Canadian history. At the onset of the novel there is the description of the river “that flows both ways”(3) suggesting if one moves ahead than the way to return is through the understanding the past and avoiding the mistakes. Through Morag, Laurence exposes the sorrows and miseries of the oppressed and speaks for the outcasts and the half-breeds.



One can rightly say, Margaret Laurence's novels reveal the true Canadian place and people who when move out into the wider world, they still "carry Manawaka with them"(177).

Canadian literature thus, with all its form and techniques, reflects the affectations and the affected in its own panoramic style to insist on human endeavors. It is an expression of humanity which has emulated to empanel itself into the core of world literature. The basis of human nature pierces its root into the innermost recesses of the minds of the people through nature and its geographical setting and also seek a universal appeal through its literature.

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