



ATWOOD'S VOICE TO A BRITISH EMIGRANT

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ABSTRACT

Canada is a multiracial and attracts people from many parts of the world. The immigrant community cut off from its native culture and settled in Canada has to face the problem of adjustment to a new environment and culture. It has been noticed that there were changes in natural environment involving ecological changes and also changes in social and political climates. The reaction against colonial domination and the French-English conflict have generated a great deal of changes in the socio-cultural climates of the country. The impact of the great world has already caused many great changes in social environment. Racial discrimination is found in Canada, a country which adopts multiculturalism. People realize that life in an alien land is not smooth and pleasant. The dilemma of assimilation and assertion leads to much complications.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a prism through which that artist projects the various aspects of the social structure in terms of the fictional characters. It reflects norms, attitudes and values in the sense of the artist's own intention. The socio-cultural factors that influence human behaviour are the primary material for any writer. Women started exploring their own myth, memory and inner space to fulfill their creative instinct. The stream of consciousness technique offered them a voice to speak out their hearts and rendered their nursing, emotional vicissitudes in their writings and installed them on high cultural pedestal.

Margaret Atwood has been regarded one of the prominent pioneers in the history of Canadian literature. As a versatile genius, Atwood explores the various interrelated physical, psychological and social anxieties of the people who invariably belong to the land of Canada.

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In a similar spirit, in her poems, she finds out an understanding of the present through the mirror of the past, transforming a historical pioneer into an icon of Canadian consciousness:

*'We are all immigrants to this place,
even if we were born here'*

As a consequence, these complex pressures add to the psychic burden of the nation and make Canadian conscious of their marginality to the centre.

Margaret Atwood has attempted to create a prototype of Canadian existential experience in her "The Journals of Susanna Moodie". 'Susanna Moodie', a British emigrant to Canada, situated at a given point of time when migration to Canada was widespread phenomenon. She was the author of 'Roughing it in the Bush', widely acknowledged as a classic account of the pioneering in Canada.

For Susanna one world was dead and another yet to be born. Being uprooted, she has suffered dislocation as an identity, - a person left without past and with uncertain future. The experiences of migrancy vary from person to person, depending upon the levels of education, age, background and point of entry. Neither dislocation nor absorption can be total, there has to be an ongoing involvement with reality.

Technically, migration is a geographic process by which persons born in one country move to another, permanent or temporarily. Psychologically, it demands movement from one state of minds to another. There is something common to each emigrant, what they carried from the land of their birth to the land of settlement were not simply a few portable things. Each item carried was emblematic of a culture left behind and of the desire to plant that culture on the alien but chosen soil:

*They carry their carpet bags and trunks
With clothes, dishes, the family pictures;
They think they will make an order
Like old one, sow miniature orchards,
Carve children and flocks out of woods.*

(Atwood, 'The Immigrants')

The idealized vision of life while migrating towards Canada and the perception of hostile condition of existence after settling, the poems of basic structure of experience of emigrant – settlers in Canada. One of the factors was the indifference of Nature in Canada to human life:



*The moving water will not show me
My reflection
The rocks ignore.
I am a word
In a foreign language.*

(Atwood, 'Disembarking at Quebec')

It was the first generations encounter with a vast strange blankness. There was no traditional heritage of a settled community to support them through this ordeal. Susanna remembers her bitter exasperation:

*When I first reached this country
I hated it
And I hated it more each year.*

(JSM)

But she had no choice; she knows that England was unreachable, has sunk into the sea. Since she had lost her grip over an earlier tradition, there was no ancient knowledge now to help her through the present into the future. Even those already settled in Canada felt unsettled:

*Country is too big for anyone to
Inhabit completely, and in the
Parts unknown to us, we move in
Fear, exiles and invader.*

Whether an emigrant, or a born-native, one is made to feel by the land an alien who cannot strike roots fresh or deep.

When Susanna Moodie, born and brought up in a well-established and long-surviving culture, chooses or is made to move over to Canada, she feels violently displaced. Where the old identity and every cultural constituent that constructed it are inappropriate or rendered void, and where a new configuration of constituents that could shape one's identity is their or absent, one caught between the inescapable sense of alienation and the imperative to cultivate a new identity. It might be that memories to the past lose their assurance and become a shackle, thus resulting in one's feeling alienated from one's past and present.

Susanna Moodie cannot find the anchor of the past in those who had come to Canada earlier but belonged to the same cultural background. They treat her as an intruder and alien and



show their contempt by exaggerated display of old custom and behaviour. The new behaviour code is to Susanna Moodie what a distorted dialect is to ears unaccustomed to it:

*The people I live among, unforgivingly
Previous to me, grudging
The way I breathe their
Property, the air,
Speaking to trusted dialert to my differently
Shaped ears.*

(Atwood, 'First Neighbours')

The brave woman's initial confusion slowly yielded to the realization that she would have to set up her own frame of reference and the wilderness slowly began to assume for her a new reality. Atwood locates this as a turning point in Susanna's lonely struggle, when she started learning the meanings of her new place.

As Susanna had no past to cling to and no illusions about future; she allowed herself to be 'broken in' by the present; this present was, for her, epitomized only by the forest: by 'branches, roots, tendrils'. Sometimes, she had mystic apprehension about merger with the forest and metamorphosis into its creatures. She longed for 'that union' which would ultimately signify her complete acceptance within this environment. One may even try to love what one has hated:

*And I felt I ought to love
this country
I said I loved it.
And my mind saw double*

(Atwood, 'Thoughts from Underground')

Susanna Moodie's 'love' for the chosen land is not a spontaneous feeling, but a studied effort to persuade her. This experience of Susanna Moodie is the typical Dilemma of life in Canada at the time of settlements.

Her son's death was another turn. Susanna began to feel a sense of belonging to and possession of this land because her dead son had been buried here:

*I implanted him in this country
like a flag*



(JSM)

This was the only past possible here, one's own remembered past, all the more painful and dear because of personal involvement. She admitted:

*Anything planted here
Would come up blood*

(JSM)

It was the memory of one's blood and sweat being spent over enriching an unfriendly soil. Thus, while on the one hand, Susanna Moodie does all she can to keep her children safe against Nature, on the other, she seems to admit that suffering caused by personal loss has to be accepted in the battle against Nature. Consistence and acceptance occupy opposing positions in the conflicting at the very centre of such a conflict, Susanna Moodie appears to find a means out of it. Thus, by turning Susanna Moodie into a time-defying, change enduring figure, Atwood makes her some one who is beyond the history of colonial and post-colonial Canada. She is the primordial Canadian force that had been there before colonization and all the conflicts that accompanied it.

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