

**EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY IN MODERN CANADIAN POETRY: A STUDY OF
SELECTED POEMS**

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Abstract:

In the post-colonial period Canada has adopted a conscious policy of multiculturalism. The modern Canadian poems, while trying to express universal values, also reflect the tradition in which they are located. The poems by these Canadian poets from different cultural backgrounds also share a common Canadian experience. They may be studied for the struggles to find a place, above all, in Canadian literary tradition. Al Purdy, Anna Marriott, Margaret Atwood, A K Page, Joan Crate and Lakshmi Gill are some of the well-known modern Canadian poets. Some of their poems are vocal about the issue of identity, though they are not limited to this issue alone.

This article analyses some of the representative poems of these writers and traces the shared identity in the poems at the thematic level.

Methodology and Objective:

The essay makes use of interpretive and analytical methodology in dealing with the poems. The objective of the study is to arrive at a better understanding of common/ shared themes in modern Canadian poetry.

Keywords: Canadian Poetry, postcolonial identity, multiculturalism, shared-identity

Canada is said to stand for inclusion and plurality. In the post-colonial period, Canada adopted the policy of multiculturalism. The history of Canada shows that the modern identity of Canada is heralded by the settlers. The settlers had completely ignored the rights of the Aborigines and the indigenous people. The prominent settlers were the French and English. For a long time Literature of Canada was understood as the writings by these people in French and English. However, the fight for liberation from colonialism and the struggles of other ethno-cultural communities to represent themselves in the political and cultural spaces in Canada was reflected in the poetry of the period. Along with these, the voice of the aborigines came to be heard in poetry too. In other words, modern English poetry in Canada developed as a collective of writings by the generations of the Japanese, German, Ukrainian, Indian, Sinhalese, and other communities in Canada whose parents were migrants. More importantly, this collective also included writings of the Canadian indigenous people - Inuit, Métis and First Nations- who were educated in English or French.

Assertion of identity is a natural and inevitable course for the poets who respond to the existing tradition of poetry. In the post-colonial and multicultural context, the poems are read concerning these two issues of colonialism and cultural differences. Identity, though not a fixed entity, is derived from the works that manipulate the existing styles of writing, use of metaphors and the privileging of the experiences of certain kinds. The present study analyses the representative poems by a few modern Canadian poets to understand the shared identity, despite their remarkably different cultural roots.

Therefore, the poems by the poets from different cultural backgrounds, but, which also share a common Canadian experience, may be studied for the struggles to find a place in Canadian literary tradition. These poems respond to the land called Canada, which many of the poets have made their homeland. Along with the description of the landscape, they also deal with the historical changes - pains and gains - of living with other cultures. There may also be a self-conscious assertion to occupy some space in the already established colonial poetic tradition. Therefore, it may be said that the question of identity and its exploration is central to Canadian literature in general and poetry in particular. Al Purdy, Anna Marriott, Margaret Atwood, A K Page, Joan Crate and Lakshmi Gill are some of the well-known modern Canadian poets. Some of their poems are vocal about the issue of

identity, though they are not limited to this issue alone. The following section traces the significance of a few representative poems by the poets mentioned above.

II

Modern Canadian poets write about various subjects including their own subjective experiences. Though it is not possible to brand a poem to one theme or a subject, the variety of their writing may be illustrated by picking on the dominant subject in the poem. They write about nationality (“I am a Canadian” by Duke Redbird), man and nature (“Planet Earth” by P K Page), farming and civilization in the wilderness (“Wind Our Enemy” by Anne Marriott), death and survival in a wild place (“Death of Young Son by Drowning” by Margaret Atwood), an assertion of invisible woman’s identity under the dominant (“This is the Photograph of Me” Margaret Atwood) or ethnic rights of aborigines or immigrants (“I am a Prophet” by Joan Crate and “Paki, Go Back” by Lakshmi Gill). However, it must be repeated that these poems are NOT singular in subject or theme. Each of the poems mentioned above has a complex relationship with a wide range of other subjects and themes. Therefore, it is not possible to bracket them inside any category that deals with a single subject or theme. However, there are certain commonalities among them. We may see that, all these poets negotiate with the memories of the past, degradations due to oppression by Nature or by men, and assert themselves in the present. Another common element in them is their hope to survive in the face of struggle. A reading of these poems shows that in modern Canadian poetry, the earlier concerns relating to settlement, alienation, and solitude have given way to the exploration of issues of multicultural existence. The poems can be regarded as an exploration of the self in the context of differing cultures and the imposition of modern consumerist attitudes.

The poems are informed by a unique sense of conflict between cultures and history. For example, even a simple poem dealing with the cultural identity of Canada, “I am a Canadian”, raises the complex issues of the relationship between the conflicting parts of the Canadian self. The narrator says that the hardworking agriculturists and the Americanized City dweller who revels in music and dance are but a part of his identity, just like the silently suffering aborigine. Canadian identity is an amalgamation of conflicting yet inevitable cultural forces that confront the Canadian present. The present is looked at as a natural but inevitable condition growing out of the pains and conflicts of the past. A deliberate attempt to overcome the communal sense of victimhood, earlier seen as Garrison Mentality, marks this poem which shows open heartedness to accept all contradictions. In modern times, Canadian literature acknowledges its past, a past that has unconsciously become a part of its being.

The best illustration of passionate literary nationalism is found in Irving Layton. His poem ‘Search’ speaks about the struggle of a Jew to find an identity in the world. His agony of alienation compelled by the colonizer’s attitude is also suggestive of the pain of the native Canadians whose life was undone by the immigrants. In Purdy’s “The Country North of Belleville”, there are two generations of Canadians. The younger generation is not tied to the land they are born to. But their previous generation worked and filled their mind with the thoughts of their land. The farmer who “plowing and plowing a ten acre field until / the convolutions run parallel with his own brain”, suggests the close relationship between the men of the previous generation with land and soil. Therefore, the poet says, ‘the country of our defeat’, referring to the youngster’s lack of empathy with the toil and struggle of the forefathers. The kinds of sufferings of the past and the present merge in such poems. The true self of Canada is proclaimed through poetry.

Some poets like Margaret Atwood see victimization and death as noble. In “Death of a Young Son by Drowning” finally the Canadian flag, with maple leaf derives its identity because of the adventurous young sons who die facing the indifferent Nature. “My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails/ collapsed, ragged./I planted him in this country/ like a flag./” These few lines from the poem bring out the concrete relationship between human struggle, Nature, religion and National identity. The rock of faith is turned from religion to nationality. The poem visualizes death in such a way that the maple leaf on the flag cannot hide the vivid description- “They retrieved the swamped body./ cairn of my plans and future chart/ with pole and hooks/ from among the hedging logs./” The hoisting of the dead body of the young son from the waters is juxtaposed with the hoisting of the flag on the grave.

The huge sense of loss and grief is presented in a cold tone because the present of Canada is built upon the suffering and sacrifice of the persons who were embodiments of hard work, adventurism and struggle. They were, sometimes, the victims of the wilderness, but the challenges never subjugated the will of others to live and continue the fight of those victims. Canada's national symbols are influenced by natural, historical, and Aboriginal sources. The maple leaf on Canada's current and previous flags is a symbol of Spring. But it also hides the grief of the loss of a charted future and shattered dreams as the "sails collapsed, ragged". But there is a determined acceptance of the present – "I planted him in this country/ like a flag". The word "planted" with its suggestiveness lends force to the commitment to live with the present and go on to the future.

This theme of hope for new birth in the face of victimization and death is also suggestive of Resurrection- a religious theme. A. W. Purdy in "Trees at the Arctic Circle" begins like an outsider with contempt for 'bending', 'crawling', and 'hiding' trees spotted on the Canadian landscape. They are quite unlike the straight and strong firs, oaks, and maples which are often seen in America. But this notion, characteristic of an immigrant to the Canadian landscape is qualified at the end of the poem. In the poem the narrator sees the 'seeds glowing'. The poet hopes that one day Canadian heritage will also glow like the seed. Then, the poem goes on to say "They (the trees) hide not to be harmed. They bend not to be broken." So according to Purdy the silence of Canada is a survival technique. "They use death to remain alive"

The metaphor of seed is suggestive of the ambiguity between destruction and new birth. The desire to grow even in the face of destruction is characteristic of many Canadian poems. 'The Wind Our Enemy' is the best example of Hope to rebuild in the face of annihilating draught. There is abundant and strong faith- undying Hope – despite adversities and a strong sense of loss. As in Ann Marriott's 'The Wind our Enemy', in poems like Purdy's "The Country North of Belleville", Hope for liberation from the untold misery of the past is vivid and in the open. Though Belleville is a place in Canada the country that represents the past, north Belville created by the poet is a mythological land that suggests the ideal for the future.

A wide range of issues including women's victimization and the spirit of resistance is evident in many poets like Margaret Atwood, the most well-known Canadian poet and novelist. Atwood's Departure from the Bush is a response to a poem Susanna Moodie which provides the readers with a different tale about the same incidents. One of Atwood's foremost concerns in many of her poems is to explore the wasteland of the self. For Atwood, the women and Canada are similar in the sense that the self of each is not recognized, sometimes ignored. Atwood's poetry assimilates the different conflicting identities of the self and the nation called Canada. The very first line of the poem Departure from the Bush, "I, who had been erased by fire," indicates how the self of Canada had been wiped away by the colonizers. The pain of Canada being strange to itself is evident in the line "at night I could not see without lanterns".

The resistance to hardships and degradation is vividly pictured in the long poem "The Wind Our Enemy". Romantic poets like Shelly might have romanticized the destructive West wind as a harbinger of life. But the wind in Anne Marriott's poem does not give simple solace or respite from dryness. The apocalyptic wind brings death to the crops, horses, and animals. It also corrupts the people in their ways of life by imposing American culture. Along with the religious implications of crucifixion, there is also a long wait with Faith and hope. The poem presents visually powerful descriptions of overwhelming changes in the farming community, now filled with abandonments, moral depravations and degeneration to mercenary greed. Still, there is, in the dim moonlight, one can see the silhouette of a barn and a house, a couple with locked hands waits for deliverance.

The poems by Anne Marriott exhibit one of the remarkable themes of resistance to the external wilderness in Nature as well as the internal conflicts due to cultural conflicts in the community. The emotions of the individual poet and the community are merged in the visual description of Nature and animals. In "Prairie Graveyard", Marriott presents an emotional visualization of the suffering due to drought. The wind is the persistent destroyer which carries a dry hot taste of death and degeneration. The cinematic description of the incessant wind is auditory as well as visually effective. "Wind mutters thinly on sagging wire,/Binding the graveyard from the gouged dirt road,/"

Bends thick bristled Russian thistle,/ Sifts listless dust/Into cracks in hard grey ground.” The elegiac poem presents the desolation at the inner and outer levels of life of a person and the community. Further, the wind “... leaves the graveyard stiff with silence, lone/ In the centre of huge lone land and sky.” merges the feeling of loneliness and hollowness in the poet with that of the external world-Nature.

Another poem “The Wind Our Enemy” begins with the brilliance of Spring which later turns into an apocalyptic vision of indifference of Nature to human struggle. “The wheat in spring was like a giant’s bolt of silk unrolled over the earth.” But the wind overturns the pastoral beauty: “When the wind sprang, /It ripped as if a great board snake,/ Moved under a green sheet,/ Seeking its outward way to light” Later moments of despair are captured in: “no rain, no crop, no feed, no faith, only wind.” The vision of the beautiful fields filled with dancing golden crops is presented through the eyes of the woman in the kitchen of the house: “But sky like a new tin pan/Hot from the oven/Seemed soldered to the earth...” But soon, due to the wind, the merry farming community, the women first, face starvation. The farmer woman’s point of view is presented in the images that are drawn from her life. The poem depicts with loss of faith: “At last they thought/Even God and Christ were hidden/By the false clouds” The drought leads to degeneration of the community. In its struggle to escape from suffering, the community falls prey to mercenary consumer culture. They convert the school into a centre for revelry and nightlife.

In the face of poverty, the young flee the village to join the army, either to kill or to get killed. The cultural imperialism of America dominates this farming community life. But, these compelling adversities do not put an end to Hope. Two figures under the yellow sky are seen holding hands. There is a vision of a bent, yet gleaming sword- of indomitable hope, weak though: “As his strained voice says to her, ‘We’re not licked yet!/It must rain again – it will! Maybe – soon – .’” The poem ends with “No rain, no crop, no feed, no feed, no faith, only/wind.” The ending leaves the taste of dust in the dry mouth. But the powerful image of the couple hand in hand in the penultimate section, the symbol of hope for humanity, lingers on.

The native voice in Crate’s “I am a Prophet” lays bare the atrocities of genocide during the colonial past. The poem manipulates native and Christian myths to highlight the violations of the body and the land. The native perspective and the desperate tone bring to focus the important question of identity of the body and of Canada. Gill’s “Paki Go Home” is an expression of the terror of public gaze. The gaze is like a grenade that shatters the Indian woman’s body into pieces. The intimidation by the dominant culture, of the other cultures, leads to what can be called cultural terrorism. These poems assert their right to be treated with respect- as a woman as well as a Canadian.

The theme of resistance and hope for liberation is characteristic of Canadian poets in general. Connie Fife, the author who raises the voice for indigenous women in the book *The Colour of Resistance*, likens the country and its women. In this she resembles Atwood. In the poem ‘Resistance’ both- the women and the country- face the threat to self. The poem draws our attention to the unique strategy of resistance, that is, silence: the “resistance is the absent native woman /who died at the hands of/ a white artist/ who lives inside herself.” These lines suggest the complexity involved in representing the identity of the aborigine women in modern literature.

The poem challenges the encroachment of the native spaces, especially of women, by the modern singular euro-centric idea of literature and culture. At the same time, it privileges their right to represent themselves. The self of Canada cannot erase the native cultures or strangle them with “barbed wire”. Fife says of resistance that “while thriving inside of me/ resistance is a girl child who/ witnesses her mother’s death and/ swears to survive no matter”. Liberation is not the end but an endless struggle against death, oppression and misrepresentation.

Survival and resurfacing are the repetitive themes in the poems and literature from Canada. The aborigines, settlers or immigrants, each one of them, tries to explore the experiences by relating them to Nature and culture. They adapt, reinvent and resist the painful past, relive or relate them to the present conditions to reassert the wish to survive, and perhaps to see a better future. Canadian identity, like any other identity, is always in a state of flux. The modern Canadian poets have captured the experience of pain and gain as participants in the history of Canada.

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