

**TRAUMA AND SELF IDENTIFICATION: THE JOURNALS OF SUSANNA**

**MOODIE BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

Research Scholar: G.Sheeba

Research Guide: Dr. N.Bindu  
Assistant Professor; Presidency  
College; Chennai-600005

Identity is a complex question and psychological and philosophical theories deliberates vastly on this term. Identity can be associated with several factors and circumstances respective of gender, age, nationality to a special group, to a specific purpose and so on... social identity can be defined as belonging to particular community, race, nationality, and political association and gender roles. The journals of Susanna moodie reflects and deals with the social identity, of immigrant and the traumatic experience of the feminine gender which can be universally related to first generation immigrants, people who are immigrating and the difficulties and the hardships an immigrant can encounter in the future too is also dealt..

Stephen Chesley considers “The Journals of Susanna Moodie One long, tight, unified poem and its power is greater because all the physical reality ,atwood uses so well is organically present” The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970), Margaret Atwood’s, one of the most successful poetic works, is an imitation of a personal journal. It is Atwood’s first-person account of Susanna Moodie’s encounter with Canada in the early part of the nineteenth century. Susanna Moodie's two books, *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853), are transformed into three brief journals, each nine poems long. Moodie was born Susanna Strickland on December 6, 1803, in Bungay, Suffolk, England. She was the daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Homer Strickland and had five older sisters and one brother. Moodie's father had been the manager of Greenland Dock but retired soon after Moodie's birth. In 1831 Moodie married Lt. John Dunbar Moodie, an officer on half-pay and

a minor writer. The couple immigrated to Canada in the summer of 1832, with hopes of a better life and more stable income as reported by many early settlers. The Moodies experienced much hardship in their first years in Canada.

The emigrants identity and the trauma of the settlers is brought well by Margaret Atwood reminiscing the experience of the settlers and Atwood being a Canadian writer throws light on the emigrants pain and the mental agony which is dominantly reflected in the poetic lines, nature and the landscape poignantly plays a greater role in the representation of the mental agony, despair, chaos and, solitary traumatic pain.

Atwood begins the volume by the brief epigraph poem

“I take this picture of myself  
and with my sewing scissors  
cut out the face.

Now it is more accurate:

where my eyes were,

every-

thing appears”

The whole volume is about the eyes. how it perceived the unknown land and what was in store for her and the circumstances and the people who made her look desolate, a byword, pathetic and the whole landscape lingers her in the mind how she is tossed upon between the two places England which was her birth place and the new place the Canadian identity; The island seems to her “Vistas of desolation”

Journal I, covering Mrs. Moodie’s years in the bush (1832-1840) takes us through the beginnings of her traumatic encounters “Disembarking at Quebec”, the opening poem, portrays her total alienation from the land. She sees only “the glare / of sun”, “the moon

alien” and that: “The rocks ignore”. A sense of extreme sadness caused by loss or loneliness, she was unknown and felt orphan the trauma made her to realise that she says “I am a word in a foreign language” her identity as an immigrant was questioned and the basic dignity was taken off, the lines

“On the first island

The immigrants threw off their clothes

And danced like sand flies”

The social fabric of the immigrant experience also poses a sense of trauma and though she tried to survive in the island, She faced ridicule ” Though I tried to adapt / got used to being / a minor invalid, expected to make / inept remarks / futile and spastic gestures”. The mental trauma of the immigrant takes a toll on her physical being that she says the agony and pain the mind suffers reflects on her physical appearance “ Finally I grew a Chapped tarpaulin / skin:”the gentle and the warm soul transformed into a roughened crack by the action of wind and cold.

Susanna Moodie is deprived of social identity too, and she becomes a warning voice for immigrants; another social identical groups,

The lines express her agony in the settled land

“I am watched like an invader

Who knows hostility but

Not where”

After a prolonged fight in her inner mind she tries to come out of the clutches of pain and solitude and utter desolation but caught in a dilemma. A traumatic mind is always at the cross roads and wavering kind of feeling pervades throughout.

“Two fires in-  
Formed me,  
(each refuge fails  
Us; each danger becomes a haven)  
Left charred marks  
Now around which I  
Try to grow”

In “Further Arrivals” the land is seen as “a large darkness”, her greater response to the land, and to her unknown inner self, is one of fear which creeps out of the mind “My brain gropes nervous / tentacles in the night, sends out/ fears hairy as bears, / demands lamps.” The use of “tentacles”, suggests she is made to be insensitive to the surroundings and reduced to an animal’s organs for sensing its way, she will also need “wolf’s eyes to see / the truth”. She will have to come to terms with the darkness, and made to accept things as they are and not to question as rational human being but see with the eyes of an animal, being passive to the sufferings and the pain.

The natural environment haunts her mind and in order to submit herself to it, she urges to change this process on a mental level, too. So her experiences caused by senses are always transformed into an intellectual means

like: "Whether the wilderness is /real or not/ depends on who lives there" (ibid., 23-25).

The possible relationships between the psyche and the space outside are referred here. The external world is being internalized through a continuous images of senses, intellectual and spiritual exercise. Her mind body, and soul are integrated to work together to accept the new environment and to be accepted by it. Herby to acquire a new identity without which she is

doomed to fail. She knows she cannot stop nature from interfering with her, so she continuously interprets what is actually happening to her: "My brain gropes nervous / tentacles in the night ..." (ibid., 14-15). We see her in the process of learning: "Two fires in- / formed me" ('The Two Fires', 37-38). However, she resisted full identification with nature: "but restless: I was not ready / altogether to be moved into" ('Departure from the Bush', 17-18). The poem 'Looking in a Mirror' enables us to understand and also in illustrating the steps she takes in trying to come to terms with her new surroundings.

In "Looking in a Mirror" Mrs. Moodie realizes that her true self has been destroyed: "religious / black rotted / off by earth". The loss, in fact, the discarding of the values of the world from where she comes from is further implied in the lines: "the china plate shattered / on the forest road, the shawl / from India decayed." Her mortal being is as she perceives her "skin thickened / with bark and the white hair of roots." and her "fingers / brittle as twigs". She is not, it is true, yet accepting the change: "the sun here had stained / me its barbarous colour". The word "stained" and "barbarous", are kind of wild vision created as a process of living within society her eyes are "almost / blind / buds". And by the end of the poem she has attained the recognition that she has never fully known herself: "you find only / the shape you already are / but what / if you have forgotten that / or discover you / have never known." The utter sense of immigrant disintegration and the feeling of unknown identity can be conceived here.

Journal II covers the years 1840-1871, Moodie's years in Belleville; in fact, most of the poems return to her experience in the bush, the poems of the middle section, a sense of fear dominates. In the opening poem "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" Atwood turns Moodie's own note, in Life in the Clearings, about the death of her son in the Moira river, it is a key incident in Moodie's coming to accept her new land. At the beginning of the poem

Moodie refers to “the land I floated only not touch to claim”. Because of the terrible feeling of losing her son she refuses to claim her new land, the sentiments, the emotional trauma makes her disown the land which has taken away her identity as a mother and an immigrant, a sense of despair and pain prevails when she describes that when he drowns he is “hung in the river like a heart”; At his death, she feels;

“My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails  
collapsed, ragged.

I planted him in this country  
like a flag.”

Her dream and her future collapsed in the new land she tried to have an emotional attachment by symbolizing the place with flag which is important for a country identification. The dream of returning to England is ended, and her son’s death gives her new challenge to the pain she undergoes as the emotional and familial attachment is hanging, which needs to be protected by not falling down and get ruined

“The Immigrants” portrays a further growth in Moodie’s traumatic, pain. She now realizes not only that the dream of return to England has collapsed, but also that the immigrants falsify, idealize, their memories of the old country: “the old countries rod, become / perfect, thumbnail castles preserved / like gallstones in a glass bottle.” The actual details of life in the old country, the real pain and suffering — implied by “gallstones” — are forgotten. All that remains in memory is the clear happy world shown “in a light paperweight-clear.” But Moodie now realizes that if they do go back, “their ears / are filled with the sound of breaking glass.” Moodie further understands that the old moments cannot be re-created in the new land. Having come to the recognition that there is no going back, moodie’s mind, in the last

two stanzas of the poem, turns to the land, for it is here that she must now find her identity which is more painful in an unknown land.

In Journal III a sense of death and decay continue to echo , In the “Alternate Thoughts From Underground”, Mrs. Moodie, after dying, speaks out against the new order, “the inheritors, the raisers / of glib superstructures”, she is identified against the world moral and religious identity which is born out of a traumatic experiences. She sets herself against Natural laws ; her heart prays: “O topple this glass pride, tireless / riveted Babylon, prays / through subsoil / to my wooden fossil God.” she now prays to a “wooden fossil God” — decayed and rotten image is formed and raised due to the traumatic experience of Mrs. Moodie as an immigrant

“god is not

the voice in the whirlwind/ god is the whirlwind

at the last /judgment we will all be trees”

Though she rejects god’s existence she attributes to the nature and the whole creation plays an impact to the traumatic mind that people will be reduced to trees, stable but not in a position to react and be considerate to human’s suffering and pain, but looking away callously at immigrants or to a section of the people who long for a safe and a lovable atmosphere to live in the new found land.

In the final poem, “A Bus along St. Clair: December”, a tightly-structured Journals of Susanna Moodie is brought to a fitting conclusion. Now it is not the people, the neighbours, the landscape and the wilderness which is threatening, but the city — “an unexplored / wilderness of wires.” And Mrs. Moodie now is committed to “destroying. the walls, the ceiling”, the boundaries and order she once supported. She has at last, as Atwood remarks,

“become the spirit of the land she once hated.” The hate aroused of a traumatic and a punctured disoriented identity.

**Works cited**

Atwood Margaret, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970)

MoodieSusanna, *Life in The Clearings*, ed. Robert L. McDougall (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976)

Using what you are given: an interview with Margaret atwood on Jstor

<https://iproxy.inflibnet.ac.in:>

<http://community.ebooklibrary.org/Results?SearchEverything=margaret%20atwood%20journal%20of%20susanna%20moodie&EverythingType=0>

[https://www.macmillanihe.com/resources/sample-chapters/9781137365934\\_sample.pdf](https://www.macmillanihe.com/resources/sample-chapters/9781137365934_sample.pdf)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Journals\\_of\\_Susanna\\_Moodie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Journals_of_Susanna_Moodie)