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Search for Self: An Analysis of Modern Canadian Poetry

Abstract

Canada's identity has always been a question either with multiple answers or without any. Canada is known for its mosaic existence that is Canada as a multi-cultural landscape and symbolizes a national ideology of inclusion and diversity. That is to say, Canada as a melting pot is made of English, French, Native, Irish, Scottish, Germans, and Ukrainian, etc. ethno-cultural communities. For the first time Canada was represented in the writings of visitors, explorers, travelers, and British officers and their wives, which reflected their impressions on Canada, thus it failed to address the true self of Canada.

It was modern poets who attempted to search and establish Canadian self. They had to struggle to locate the self of Canada as there were no historical records on Canada's culture

and tradition except some minute details on the indigenous people in Canada who were categorized into three: Inuit, Metis and First Nations, because, while welcoming various cultures Canada let its own identity to fade away. It made difficult for the poets to locate their roots. Modern Canadian poetry is characterized with the search for an authentic self, crave for noble culture and heritage that they believe to be lost in the past and a space in the world as their own. The proposed paper tries to trace the identity of Canada as represented in Modern Canadian Poems of Al Purdy, Eli Mandel, Margaret Atwood, Irving Layton, and Connie Fife. Selected poems of the above mentioned authors are taken into account to locate Canadian Self.

Key words: Self, Al Purdy, Eli Mandel, Margaret Atwood, Irving Layton, Connie Fife.

Canada is a country in the northern part of North America. “Canada is a developed country and one of the wealthiest in the world, with the eighth highest per capita income globally, and the eleventh highest ranking in the human development Index. It runs among the highest in international measurements of education, government transparency, civil liberties, quality of life, and economic freedom.” (Rawat 2). Yet Canada does not possess an identity of its own.

Canadian history begins with the arrival of Paleo-Indian thousands of years ago. Then the Indigenous people formed complex social, political, economical, and cultural system before the arrival of Europeans. The indigenous people in Canada are categorized into three: Inuit, Metis and First Nations. The first to invade Canada was Britain and French. This invasion was followed by other European countries and Canada became one of the world’s main immigrants receiving society after World War II. It resulted in creating the Canadian mosaic that is Canada as a multi cultural landscape and symbolizes a national ideology of

inclusion and diversity. That is to say, Canada is made of English, French, Native, Irish, Scottish, Germans, and Ukrainian, etc. ethno-cultural communities. By welcoming the various cultures Canada let its own identity to fade away.

Currently, Canada is home for more than 100 ethnic groups, who speak 85 different languages with diverse cultural origin and ethnic lineage, physical characteristics, religious beliefs and way of life. Even though Canada has the identity of a multicultural nation the dominant position is taken place by the Anglo phones and Franco phones.

The Canadian identity crisis turned up in First World War. The British Canadians defended the war whereas the French Canadians opposed the idea. Thus the world heard the voice of Canada through French and English while the natives were engulfed in the fear of existence that it took their voice away. Canadian identity is influenced by each and every immigrant group settled in Canada. Beside French and British, Canada began to accommodate large number of people from around the world. It is evident that the mild approach towards the housing of immigrants has made the national identity of Canada fragile. Richard Gwyn, a famous columnist and author has stated his fear that Canada's sense of self may become so weak that it might vanish altogether. Gwyn also suggested that tolerance has replaced loyalty as the touchstone of Canadian Identity. Thus the issue of Canadian identity has always been a question either with multiple answers or without any. According to journalist Andrew Cohen "The Canadian Identity, as it has come to be known, is as elusive as the Sasquatch and Ogopogo. It has animated—and frustrated—generations of statesmen, historians, writers, artists, philosophers, and the National Film Board... Canada resists easy definitions" (Rawat 18). Canadians tend to position multiculturalism as an aspect of Canadian identity with dignity which in turn failed them to pay heed to their own history. In the words of Cohen,

“It isn’t just the schools, the museums and the government that fail us. It is also the professional historians, their books, and periodicals. As J L. Granatstein and Michael Bliss have argued, academic historians in Canada have stopped writing political and national history. They prefer to write labor history, women’s history, ethnic history, and regional history, among others, often freighted with a sense of grievance or victimhood. This kind of history has become so specialized, so segmented, and so narrow that we are missing the national story in a country that has one and needs to hear it.” (Rawat 29)

The Indian tribes throughout the temperate regions and the Inuit of the Arctic coast and islands had an oral tradition. Many of the Inuit songs are prayers, words to cure sickness, to stop bleeding, to bring animals on which the people must live and were passed from one generation to another through spoken words. A very small portion of it has been preserved and translated into English in the twentieth century. The literature of a country is not merely the author’s intellectual experiences but also the record of the country’s progression. Thus the loss of those oral literatures created a void in the universe on the Canadian history before the arrival of the Europeans- the lives of the natives, their culture, and language. The first people to write about Canada were of British officers, their wives and explorers who criticized Canada for its hostile nature without making any attempt to understand the country. Susanna Moodie in her *Roughing in the Bush* expresses her first impressions on Canada. Moodie with her European eyes, thoughts, and theories fall short of appropriating the true self of Canada but view it from the surface as an observer which made it difficult for her to make a comfortable living in Canada. For someone like her from a luxurious country it was impossible to think of living in harmony with the rocks, mountains, and thick forest. But other writers like her sister Catharine Parr Traill represented Canada in a positive way.

Until the late 1960s native Canadians were merely an object to be pointed towards as the 'other' of the colonizers. Since the world senses Canada through the works of immigrants it lacks the essence of Canadian self which demanded the natives to write for themselves. With the works of Canadian writers the world tasted the true nature of Canada. Canadian literature becomes more like an indication of acknowledging with a living past, a past that has unconsciously become a part of their being. Past and present merge in their writing.

According to Blattberg Canada not only includes ethnic, civic, regional, and religious communities but also national communities which make it a multinational country. So the literature of Canada also contains the country's multiplicities within bilingual framework. The major themes and features of Canadian literature are multiculturalism, nature, satire, self-criticism, and search for self. For writers from a country like Canada with vast landscape and unique geographical features, it was impossible not having/making it as a major ingredient of their literature. Among these the search for self is prominent in the modern poetry of Canada. The socio-political contexts, the geographical and historical conditions, the dominant cultures of Canada namely British, French, and aboriginal, have influenced Canadian literature. The true self of Canada is proclaimed through poetry. It rarely happens that a nation reveals as much through poetry as Canada does. Canadian poetry is associated with several activities in society and the poets have become its cultural heroes and counter-cultural leaders. They have become the voices of cultural nationalism in Canada.

Canada's national symbols are influenced by natural, historical, and aboriginal sources. The use of maple leaves as a Canadian symbol dates to the early 18th century. The maple leaf is depicted on Canada's current and previous flags, on the penny, and on the arms of Canada. Other prominent symbols include the beaver, goose, common loon, the crown, the royal Canadian mounted police and more recently the totem pole and inuksuk.

Canadian poetry has flourished only during the last fifty years. Earlier concerns and issues relating to settlement, alienation, and solitude have given way to neo socio-political and economic problems of an emerging multicultural nation. But still search for the self-the uniqueness of one, stands as a major theme. After 1960 inspired by passionate literary nationalism, Irving Layton, contemporary Canadian Jewish poet, published 48 volumes of poetry. His poem 'Search' speaks about the struggle of a Jew to find an identity in the world. Wherever he goes he is treated the same. The symbol of Jew can be taken as Canada who struggles to find an identity of its own but stuck in between the stereotypical attitudes of the colonizers. The Jew can also be the native Canadians who lost themselves to the immigrants. Layton inhales the problems of him, his community, and the land he lives, and exhales it as poems.

Margaret Atwood is the most famous living Canadian poet, and novelist. Atwood's *Departure from the Bush* is a reply to the poem of Susanna Moodie providing the readers a different side of the incidents. To explore the wasteland of the self was and is one of Atwood's foremost concerns. For Atwood female and Canada stand hand in hand without self. Atwood's poetry is a medium through which you can assimilate the true nature of Canada. The very first line of the poem, / 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 clearly evident in the line /at night I could not see without lanterns/, that Canada could not identify its body without the assistance of others.

Alfred Wellington Purdy (1918-2000), popularly called Al Purdy, is a very distinctive poet in Canadian poetry. He held a mind that synthesizes the environment, seeking the connection and meaning. One of his famous poems *Cariboo Horses* restores the connection between the past and the present. Purdy uses the image of beavers, cowboys, and Cariboo horses which are very common, in the poem to retrieve the past. The changes occurred in the

past and present lifestyles are compared here. Purdy tries to give life to the past memories by placing 'the toy mountain' in the present. /Lost relatives of these/whose hooves were thunder./ denotes the culture and self of Canada which is lost in the past.

As far as Purdy is concerned the past lives in the present as the source of strength. His poems are potential enough to bring back the dead past into the present. There is always a spacious-temporal connection in his poems. "The Country North of Belleville", is a poem that is a good example of Purdy's enthrallment with places and history. Though Belleville is a place in Canada the country north Belville is a mythological land. Cashea Township, Wollaston, Elzevir McClure, and Dungannon are the townships that existed in the past Canada.

/The country North of Belville

Bush land scrub land-

Cashel Township and Wollaston

Elzevir McClure and Dungannon

green lands of Weslemkoon lake/ (1-5)

The townships are replaced by "Herschel Monteagle and Faraday" brand names today.

//And this is a country where the young

leave quickly

unwillingly to know what their fathers know

or think the words their mothers do not say.// (58-61)

The present generation is not aware of the intimacy their parents had with the land. They made the stony earth into a possible place for habitation by /plowing and plowing a ten-acre field until / the convolutions run parallel with his own brain/ (56-57). The youngsters have no concerns regarding the lifestyle of their previous generation as they were brought up in an entirely different environment produced by the multiculturalism. It made them incapable to appreciate their own cultural history and thereby converting the country into, as the poet says, 'the country of our defeat.'

Purdy talks about the present through the remnants of the past. In the poems of Al Purdy the past lives in the Canadians as the source of strength. Even after the arrival of French and English, they did not realize the threat they may encounter in the future thus they kept the doors open and let their identity decay. The 'laugh of Sisyphus' is the laugh of the poet towards the natives for destroying the self of their country as well as themselves. Though 'realization seeps slow in the mind' about the loss of their own identity and self, it came late. They have become strangers in their own land: 'we must enquire the way of strangers'.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" is a defense against the self of Canada which was falsely portrayed in the words of French and British immigrants and visitors. The poet is an exact replica of any immigrant who visits Canada for the first time.

// crawling under rocks

groveling among the lichens

bending and curling to escape

making themselves small

finding new ways to hide

coward trees.// (3-8)

This was the first impression the poet had on the trees. ‘bending’, ‘crawling’, and ‘hiding’ are not the ways of trees. Thus the poet develops contempt towards the trees as the immigrants to Canada. He compares them with firs, oaks, and maples which are often seen in America. Being the citizens of developed countries the immigrants had certain notions about what is called a country and Canada didn’t fit into their standards. Later the poet realizes the sense of their actions. He saw the ‘seeds glowing’-seed is generally the symbol of origin or source. Here it is connected to Canadian heritage and the poet hopes that one day Canadian heritage will also glow like the seed. /They use death to remain alive/ (42). Canada also uses their dead past to survive the present. / They hide not to be harmed. They bend not to be broken. Purdy defends the silence of Canada as a survival technique. Though the poet hopes that one day the immigrants will realize their ‘foolish judgments’, he does not think that they ‘will alter the poem’ and it will remain as the representation of Canada thereby losing its authentic self, as depicted in the last stanza;

//I see that I’ve been carried away

in my scorn of the dwarf trees

most foolish in my judgments.

.....

I have been stupid in a poem

I will not alter the poem

but let the stupidity remain permanent.// (43-55)

Eli Mandel is a powerful Canadian voice who has made significant contributions in Canadian literature. Mandel's poems carry themes that are universal and eternal in human. He digs out the inner concerns of human self and provides another meaning to the actions of people. The puppet man in 'The Ventriloquist' is a representative of present day Canada. The puppet man cherishes his puppet as Canada cherishes its past which is lifeless to others. Canadians' only companion is their past.

//As he sheds his tears,

One falls near his puppet's eye,

And as he is filled with his ever growing

fears.

Along with him his puppet does cry.// (42-46)

Canada's happy face is just like the laughing face of the ventriloquist. No one attempts to get into depths of his consciousness to know the realities behind the smile but believes the ventriloquist to be the happiest. Canada is viewed as a country with all pleasures and comforts because of its mosaic society. So the truth goes unnoticed. Ventriloquist is engulfed in many problems — 'heart cancer, eloped wife and huge bank debt' just like Canada whose heart is occupied by tumors in the form of immigrants, whose government, rules, regulations, identity etc which now belongs to someone else, who is now in a huge debt by losing its culture, heritage, and self. Thus Canada survives only with the assistance of French and British. Canada has turned into a body with the flesh and blood of another. Mandel sympathies the pathetic condition of Canadians who couldn't even express their self properly and pictures Canada as an 'abandoned orphan', who has no pedagogy to rely upon.

Connie Fife is a Cree Canadian poet and editor from Saskatchewan. Fife is known for her collection of writings, *The Colour of Resistance* in which she says “Their words... carry their own life having been birthed through the voices of indigenous women who have chosen to re-invent how we resist, how we refuse to be silenced, and how we use contemporary tools to express old beliefs in order to lay the seeds for future generations” (Fife 5). Even though Fife addresses the aboriginal women writings it also indicates the necessity of native Canadians to resist and speak for Canadian self and make the future generations aware of the rich heritage of Canada thereby creating an opportunity to cultivate the youth in the dreams of Al Purdy who are willing to know ‘what their fathers know/or think the words their mothers do not say.’ (59-61). As Atwood, Fife also links the country and its women in her poem ‘Resistance’ as both face the same threat to self. This left them no choice but to defend their selves as illustrated in the following lines;

//resistance is the absent native woman

who died at the hands of

a white artist

who lives inside herself.// (11-14)

The woman is suppressed by men as Canada was by the colonizers. Canada is strangled by ‘barbed wire’ which symbolizes the immigrants. She bears the suffocation and tries to survive yet she dies at the hands of white artist due to distorted representation of her ‘self’ by them. The essence of Canadian self, its culture and tradition faded away leaving behind some traces which the poets try to nourish in order to retain in the full grace of its mother.

//while thriving inside of me

resistance is a girl child who

witnesses her mother's death and

swears to survive no matter./ /

The past of Canada had died at their hands, now the present is trying to survive. The poems reveal the plight of Canada who has multiple identities but lacks a self.

The close ties between French and English and the influence of multiculturalism has always cropped up the question Canadian self and identity. The modern Canadian poets then set foot in the search for a self that promotes a Canadian identity, thereby providing themselves with authentic cultural heritage. In the words of Neeharika Rawat "even the search for an identity has become itself an object for self-criticism" (Rawat 18). Though Canadian identity still has not fully established the modern poets have succeeded in waking up the sense of need for self and acknowledging the past in the people of Canada today. Modern Canadian poets make use of the rich indigenous past to make the contemporary Canadians aware of cultural and environmental destruction.

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