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Exploring Ecological Sensibility in Canadian Women`s Poetry

Abstract: The portrayal of Canadian landscape in Canadian Literature, its vast grassy fields, freezing winter and soothing summer are scintillating and impressive. Canadian women poets like Isabella Valancy Crawford, Margret Atwood, Anne Marriott, Catherine Owen, Margret Avison, Dorothy Livesey and P. K. Page have beautifully portrayed the beauty of Canada. Their poetry is quite in tune with the country`s climatic surroundings. Its ambience and scene of the land commingles with the creative urges of these poets before shaping the contours of their literature this paper examines how the women poets in Canada have from the time to time returned to the landscape for the soul of their poetry.

Keywords: Canadian landscape, grassy fields, seasons, winter, humanity, wilderness, river, animal, beauty.

Introduction: Literature is a great link for human life. It is bonding factor, which helps people to identify themselves by presenting similar experiences in dissimilar climatic and living conditions. 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 its poetry. Canada, the land of prairie and grasslands, with extremity witnessed in winter and summer has always inspired poets let their poetic thought run wild. From the year 1867 when Canada became a nation, many poets emulated British and American models of poetry but still evolved a style and attitudes which marked the beginning of new Canadian poetry.

Canada: The Rhetoric of Pioneering: Isabella Valancy Crawford Irish born Canadian writer and poet was one of the first Canadians to have received certain attention for ‘eternal spring gushing forth’ and ‘dancing out in the luxury of jubilation’. Her poem “Old Spookses Pass” is set in the Rocky Mountains, regarding a visualization of a night-time cattle stampede towards a black abyss that is still by whirling lariat. Crawford adapted Malcom’s Katie: ‘A Love Story’ the setting of pioneer Canada the domestic idyll as she learned it from Tennyson. Prominent and original, however, is Crawford’s location of Max and Katie’s “conventional love story within a text of Native legends—Indian summer and the battle of North and South Winds” (Fyre147). She beautifully presents the longing and yearning, “If hearts are flow’rs, I know that flow’rs can root—Bud, blossom die—all in the same loved soil/ They do in my garden.” Her love is portrayed as if she was a rose plant,” My root strike deep and torn from that dear soil/ “Would shriek like mandrakes—those which things I read Of in your quaint old books.” (1, 37-47)

In the long passage in Pt II of the Poem “Malcom’s Katie: A Love Story” Isabella Crawford depicts how “The South Wind laid his moccasins aside,” as she is first taming the landscape imaginatively. She then in Pt VI depicts another face of nature:

“The Land had put his ruddy gauntlet on,
Of harvest gold, to dash in famine’s face
And like a vintage wain, deep dyed with juice.
Even the great moon falter’d upto the ripe, blue sky,
Drawn by silver stars- like oxen white And horn’d with rays of light.” (VI.19-25)

There is lifeless scene with hope, “the rich land of Malcom’s small valley is filled with grain and “when on the moonlight falls it looks as if wine-kiss of its ruddy light” (III). And also integrating the literary tradition of the country: A cusp’d, dark wood caught in its black embrace,

“The valleys and the hill, and from its wilds, /Spic’d with dark cedars, cried the whip-poor will. /A crane, belated, sail’d across the moon. /On the bright, small, close-link’d lakes green islets lay, Dusk knots of tangl’d vines, or maple boughs, /Ortuft’d cedars, boss’d upon the waves.” (VI, 28-34)

The portrayal of the glittering moon, lonely valleys and hills, the lustrous green cedar forest with rich scenic lakes are all sketched by the poet quite in tune with the country’s beautiful natural surroundings.

I. Canadian Sensibility: Seasons Reflects in new Poetry

Dorothy Livesay, another well-known Canadian poet, critic, editor, scriptwriter and journalist witnesses the passage of the season in rural society and one can see the beauty even when she says in her poem “On looking into Henry Moore”. Her literary anxieties very from the

political to the intensely personal and psychological, and echo her years as a social worker, and the strong influence of T.S Eliot and the imagists. Her verse is lyrical and sensuous; characteristically perspective, musical, and rhythmically inventive like that of Canadian nature.

“The message of the tree is this, aloneness is the only bliss
Self-adoration is not in it
(Narcissus tried, but could not win it) Rather, to extend the root Tombwards, be at
home with death
But in the upper branches know. A green eternity of fire and snow.”
(II, 11- 16)

She points out the briskness of the solitary rustic life “And now the chill/ raw sun/Goes greener still-The sky”, cracks like an icicle: but vividness of landscape is worth mentioning ‘a cry lashes the sky-these dreams abound’, through her poems ‘Prelude for spring’:

“Frozen, foot-locked
Heart choked and chafed
Wing-bettered and unsafe,
Grovel to ground!”(91-94)

II. Canadian Grasslands: A Mental and Emotional Landscape

Canadian grassy landscape became the subject of the poems of Anne Marriott. In the 1930s, during the years of drought and economic depression on the grassy field, she lives on a farm about a hundred miles of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and saw what people suffered when there was “no rain, no crop, no feed, no faith, only wind.” “Prairie Graveyard” reflects the same sense of melancholy and the elegiac tone. The drought picture is so intense, “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.” She brings alive the emptiness and desolate surroundings.

“Empty prairie slides away
On all sides, rush towards a wide
Expressionless horizon, joined
To a vast black sky.” (6-9)

when “Wind raises death curls of dust, and whines/ under its harsh breathe on the limp dragged wires,/ Then leaves the graveyard stiff with silence, lone/ In the centre of hugh lone land and sky of death. Again one can see there is serenity and desolation all around.

Her poem “The Wind Our Enemy” starts with rapture at the visitation of spring season, “The wheat in spring was like a giant’s bolt of silk unrolled over the earth.” And how spring with it eternal hope and glee.

“When the wind sprang,
It ripped as if a great board snake,
Moved under a green sheet,
Seeking its outward way to light.”(II, 18-21)

Later moments of despair in the morning when the air is peppered “thick with dust, and all the the night’s happiness/ Seems far away, Unreal like a lying mirage, Or the icy white glare/of the alkali slought” (VII) “will it never rain again? Whataboutthose clouds out west? Find the answers, “No that just dust, as thick/ and stifling now as winter underwear./No rain, no crop, no feed, no faith, only wind”(VIII). Thus, this poem indeed expressed inarticulate sufferings of the prairie farmer who saw his land and hopes blowing away in a cloud of dust.

III. Canadian Neo-romanticism: A Journey for Humanity

P.K. Page rightly analysis in her poems, how nature unfolds her treasures to human search, unseals her eyes, illuminates her mind, and purifies her heart; an influence her breathes from all the sights and sounds of her existence. Page's poems are truly a vehicle for that inner reservoir of a deeper emotional and intellectual exploration that enlarges in another way the sense of life in open space. In her poems '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)

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 an undisturbed time in "spring," known as the archetypal, when the playful "love they" enjoyed took place in the "park."

Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses autumn as if it were a person. In the first stanza, he notes that autumn and the sun are like best friends plotting how to make fruit grow and hoe to ripen crops before the harvest. The ripening will lead to the dropping of seeds, which sets the stage for spring flowers and the whole process starting over again. The poet tells us about the bees that think summer can last forever as they buzz around the flowers. But the speaker knows better.

The period describe how after the harvest, autumn just hangs out around the granary where harvested grains are kept. Most of the hard work has already been done, and autumn can just take a nap in the fields, walk across brooks, or watch the making of cider.

Finally the speaker notes that the music of spring is a distant memory, but then autumn's music is pretty cool, too. This music includes images of clouds and harvested fields at sunset, gnats flying around a river, lambs bleating, crickets singing and birds whistling and

twittering. All of the sights and sounds produce a veritable symphony of beauty. 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 optimistic 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 teastained air” As it 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 can still trick me; (Narasimhaiah 181)

It is like a malevolent face flickering over her shoulder. She tries her best to take the clue from the ‘chapped tarpaulin skin’. She learns that things have got to be endured and escape from reality was 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 become obvious and it becomes hard to decide between certainties and uncertainties, ‘the branches quivered 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 damage knowing of the knowledge means Prediction is forever impossible.”(Narasimhaish, 181: 37-39)

IV. Worlds Lost in Words: Atwood's Poetry

The famous Canadian poet and novelist Margret Atwood, in her poetry 'Journey to the Interior' through the dark landscape reveals her inner bleakness. She feels bitter and is perturbed by the turbulences of wilderness. She seems lost in a world of no hope; "...that the hills/Which the eyes make flat as a wall, welded/Togather, open as I move/ To let me through; become/ Endless as prairies; that the tree/ Grow spindly, have their roots/ Often in swamps;..." (Narasimhaish, 184)

She draws a visual image of a world of directionless. The picture of the erratic movement of the sun, changing the surroundings too, the solitude and loneliness making the atmosphere looming and ghost like, As the poet moves ahead she feels "Whatever I do I must/ keep my head" (185). The landscape looms like visions with its utter bleakness of being lost.

In her another poem "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" one can see how dexterously poet has expressed the visual image of nature "It was spring, the sun kept shining, the new grass/Leap to solidity; my hands glistened with details, "merging with her lamentation on the death of the young son, "After the long trip I was tired of waves/My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails/ collapsed, ragged. /I planted him in this country/like a flag."

Margret Avison is known for the beauty of her literary language and images in her poems. Reviewing Avison's posthumous collection, *Listening: Last Poems* (2007), poet Judith Fitzerland wrote of her: "An original, an authentic visionary..." Avison praises "Creation in all its transplendent awesome/aweful mutations. "She is so fascinated with nature that there are bountiful of imagery while presenting Death, along with the vitality, energy, force and the dynamic action of nature. In her poem "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" from the collection "Winter Sun". She never fails to mention the movements in the world of nature befitting the Canadian landscape. On the onset 'No beetle move/Nobirds pass over' is

sketched wherein the gardens here or fields are weedless and Sun is described as purifying, harsh, like sea salt” in the month of November:

“Sour unfructifying November gutters,

From winds that bore no fennel seeds.

Finally, from a sun purifying, harsh, likeSea-salt.” (15-18)

In every place her emotions are displayed denoting the timelessness of nature: Time has bleached out of the final character/ of a too-open Scripture/Under the staring day/This rabbinical gloss rustless it’s/Leaves of living darkness.”

In ‘Sunblue’ nature brings forth the thin thread of optimism with the stream running with clear water but at the onset we see the bleakness where Otter-smooth boulder lies under rolling back river-water stilled among frozen hills and the still not breathed blizzards aloft:

“Silently, icily, is probed Stone’s secret.” (7-8)

The poet’s artistic blending of thoughts and emotions with symbolic imagery can be witnessed with anticipation and confidence within words and peace will brim up in the end, “like a river and the/ glory...like a flowing stream. Some of all people will/ Wondering wait/ until this very stone/ utters. “Her 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.

Her poem ‘The Swimmer’s Movement’ emanates hope, from emanates hope from the magnitude folds of the dark concrete hop emerges thus echoing everything into a state of glory. She sings hopefully of better tomorrow with spread of knowledge, “Of those who dare the knowledge/ Many are whirled into the ominous centre/ That gaping vertical, seals up/ For them an eternal boon of privacy, /So that we turn away from their defeat/With a despair, not

for their deaths, but for Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret/Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth/ Where one or two have won (The silver reaches of the estuary).” (12-21)

VII. Canadian Gothic Experience: A Modernist Reading

Catherine Owen is one of the modernist poet with a romantic gothic dramatic bent, perhaps best expressed by the fact that she chooses the crow as her totem animal. She writes as a river dweller from an apartment above the Fraser River in the south Vancouver, thriving on the juxtapositions between destructive human activity and irrespressible drive of animal and vegetable life to flourish and continuously grow in the face of every effort of human civilization to contain and bury it:

“Thick winch of ripped rope at the base of a rusted bolt,

Beside it, a skimpy alder sapling,

All sprouting from a relic of fallen log,

Saw marks chunked with dirt and clover.

These the juxtapositions I live for....”

(Fraser River, Thanksgiving 201)

However, in the poem ‘Nature Writing 101’ Owen has used many forms of imagery and symbolism; Canadians as perceived by Catherine Owen have perforce to engage the environment, the outer storm, simply to survive. The poet vividly portrays the future hardship which shall be experienced due to its geographical displacement: “Our minds can assimilate all horrors./ Is the problem./ The animals will disappear and those small, strange invertebrates,/ the bees will vanish and in the well-oiled waters, fish will surge their deaths over the sand bags” (19-25). One finds a unique continuity of troubled thoughts and untainted

emotions throughout her poem. The immortality of nature, and her dreams regarding hope and promise echoes and reechoes in her poems.

VIII. Survival : A Reflection

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

“Canadian 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..”

IX. Conclusion:

One can see how all these women poets have encounters to verify themselves with the unique primitive mosaic of nature. They have reconciled with the surroundings and found settlement within the inevitableness of the absolute nature. A common ground in love of nature and its beauties belongs to all these poets. Having presented the different panoramic view of Canada as seen by representing poets, it is possible to conclude that poets are governed by the dichotomy of the glory and the darkness, the shining and diminishing aspects of nature getting reflected naturally upon human life in general. Canadian literature thus, with all its form and techniques reflects the affectations and the affected in its own panoramic style to insist on human endeavours. Nature pierces its root into the innermost recesses of the minds of people through nature and its geographical setting and also seeks a universal appeal through its literature.

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