

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 8 August 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

**Theme of Isolation in the Select Works of
Canadian Women Playwrights**

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Struggle for Identity

Women's sense of isolation and the need for self-recognition relate to both the national struggle for identity in the post-colonial age and female struggle for identity in the tradition of patriarchy. The paper discusses on how women playwrights explore the association of national identity and female identity on many levels. The portrayal of the immigrant is used to further emphasize the female sense of isolation and marginality.

Feminist Movement and Women Playwrights

With the burgeoning of the feminist movement in the past two decades, women playwrights in many countries have begun articulating a new voice in theatre. But in Canada, the pursuit of a female vision is unique in that it examines the notion of gender and female identity through the lens of cultural mythology. Writers such as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence have probed the relationship between female and national identity in fiction, and have been the topic of research by critics like Marian Fowler and Coral Ann Howells.

Focus of This Study

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 8 August 2010

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Theme of Isolation in the Select Works of Canadian Women Playwrights

This study offers a critical attempt to place women playwrights in a Canadian literary context in which “myths and legends of landscape” symbolize self-discovery and the quest for an aesthetic as well as a socio-political feminized space.

This paper explores the creative contribution to dramatic literature of Margaret Hollingsworth, Aviva Ravel, Antonine Maillet, Betty Jane Wylie and Cindy Cowan, and focuses on six plays which dramatize Canadian cultural mythology from the standpoint of the female imagination: Ever Loving and Islands by Margaret Hollingsworth; The Twisted Loaf by Aviva Ravel; La Sagouine by Antonine Maillet; A Place on Earth by Betty Jane Wylie, and A Woman From the Sea by Cindy Cowan.

Why These Plays?

The six plays are selected because they create a synthesized vision which reflects both a feminist aesthetic and a national consciousness. In their search for identity, these playwrights have transformed the literary myth of wilderness, the struggle for survival as immigrant, and the dominance of colonialism into a dramatic female mythology. By identifying ‘wilderness’ as the metaphorical female psyche, the ‘immigrant’ as a symbol of women’s sense of marginality, and the ‘colonial’, ‘imperial’ mentality as suppression through patriarchal tradition, these playwrights add a new dimension to modern Canadian drama in the context of the search for national identity.

The plays, written in the 1970s and 1980s, represent the emergence of women playwrights on the Canadian dramatic scene at a period when the feminist movement was a potent influence on the awareness of women writers. The selected plays exemplify the creative consciousness of Canadian women playwrights and stress the need for a critical study that places their work in both a literary and feminist framework.

The Purpose

It will be demonstrated that although the exploration of regional characteristics has occurred frequently in Canadian drama, these five playwrights use regionalism to represent a female consciousness. Regional tendencies in Canadian drama have become symbolic representations of cultural myths, the “unchartered ‘iconography of the imagination’”. Thus, regionalism to these women playwrights is related to female identity, as the setting becomes a metaphor for the unexplored territory of the female imagination.

The Inner Psyche and the External Setting

The discovery of the inner psyche is the focus, and the external setting becomes a backdrop for the internal landscape and the realization of a female sense of place. In addition, while these six plays are realistic on many levels, they also experiment with

dramatic structure in their depiction of the fragmented, changing consciousness of many of their female protagonists.

The characters in the plays express the psychological and emotional struggle of their search for self-identity through the use of monologue, flashbacks and the breakdown of time and space. Fragmented and experimental techniques are applied as a metaphor for the inner emotional and psychological state of flux.

Sense of Isolation, the Need for Self-Recognition and the National Identity

Ever Loving and Islands explore the female inner self in connection with the inherited colonial tradition and the inherited patriarchal tradition. Women's sense of isolation and the need for self-recognition relate to both the national struggle for identity in the post-colonial age and the female struggle for identity in the traditions of patriarchy.

These plays reveal how women playwrights explore the association of national identity and female identity on many levels. The portrayal of the immigrant is used to further emphasize the female sense of isolation and marginality. As foreigners, the female immigrants in Ever Loving are severed from their roots and must struggle in an unfamiliar setting. They are shown to be marginalized in two ways: as immigrants and as women.

In Islands, the protagonist withdraws to a secluded island in British Columbia. Escaping from social expectations, she isolates herself from human companionship and must battle alone with the incertitude of her existence as a woman and the uncertainties of the wilderness upon which she projects her process of self-discovery.

The immigrant concept is portrayed in The Twisted Loaf where an old Russian-Jewish woman, on the verge of death, reflects upon her life of struggle and self-sacrifice for her family in a new and foreign country. In solitude, the old woman achieves a meaningful connection with her past and a deeper understanding of her difficult responsibilities as a Russian Jewish immigrant, wife and mother.

In A Place on Earth, the dramatic use of monologue is used to express the process of self-discovery, as an elderly rape victim strives for survival in an urban wilderness. The woman's sense of exclusion and oppression is symbolized by her lonely rooming house and her only source of contact—a puppet she talks to. The struggle for autonomy is portrayed as her decision to press charges on her attacker, thus confronting her external environment.

In La Sangouine, a poor washer woman becomes an expression of dignity and pride in the middle of hardship and oppression. Set in Acadia, the play adds a further dimension to women's quest for integration by incorporating language and religion into the

experience of isolation and exclusion. As a French Canadian, the protagonist's struggle for meaning is magnified by her subservient position in a predominantly English society.

In A Woman From the Sea, mythology and ritual are used to connect the protagonist in the play with women's creative past, thus expressing the female playwright's search for her own dramatic roots. The ancient imagery of woman as a symbol of the life process is revealed, in conjunction with the dramatic use of fertility rituals, "the origins of drama", when women created dramatic rituals and played the part of the Mother Goddess.

Writing Themselves into Existence

Canadian women playwrights are in the process of "writing themselves into existence," a term used by Robert Wallace to describe the artistic consciousness of Canadian dramatists.

When applied to women, this term has special significance, as women are only beginning to dramatize their personal visions in theatre. By writing themselves into existence, Canadian women playwrights are charting out new territory in the realm of drama and feminist thought. By creating this map, they are developing the "tools of analysis" that will enable women to recognize a female consciousness from within an aesthetic and national framework.

References

1. Howells, Coral Ann. *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, London and New York Methuen, 1987.
2. Wagner, Anton. Quoting James Reaney in "Introduction" to *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions*, ed. Anton Wagner, Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1985.
3. Malpede, Karen, ed. *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope*, New York: Drama Books Publishers, 1983.
4. Wallace, Robert. "Writing the Land Alive: The Playwrights' Vision in English Canada", *Contemporary Canadian Theatre*, ed. Conolly.
5. Lushington, Date. "Fear of Feminism", *Canadian Theatre Review*, 43, (Summer 1985).

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 8 August 2010

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Theme of Isolation in the Select Works of Canadian Women Playwrights

Department of English
Anna University Tiruchirappalli
Dindigul Campus
Dindigul- 624 622
Tamilnadu, India
gunakundhavai@yahoo.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 8 August 2010

S. Gunasekaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Theme of Isolation in the Select Works of Canadian Women Playwrights