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Theorising Canadian Literature: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Survival*

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Margaret Atwood

Courtesy: particle.physics.ucdavis.edu

Distinctive Canadian Multiculturalism

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Canada's emergence as an independent nation took place during the last century. In spite of the fact that it became literally independent even before that, for long Canada was overshadowed by the United States. Only during the second half of the twentieth century, Canada started establishing its identity. Canada consists of three major ethnic groups, namely, various aboriginal peoples of Canada, called First Nations, and French Canadians and English Canadians who are the successors of immigrants from France and England respectively. In addition to this, there are a good number of expatriates from other nations around the world too. All these lead to a multicultural scenario.

The term multi-culturalism is common in the American continent. But the multicultural aspect of Canada has certain uniqueness. Its neighbouring USA is often called as a melting pot where people representing various cultural groups mingle together which result in acculturation and inter-marriages creating uniformity. Canadian society prefers to be called as a mosaic community. Unlike the members of the melting pot, members of the mosaic community manage to preserve their own cultural traits in the midst of the mingling.

Canadian Literature

It is difficult to define Canadian Literature as the term encompasses French writing in Canada, English writing in Canada, Canadian Native writing and many such literary endeavour. Hence Canadian Literature is often roughly defined as literature produced in Canada or writings of Canadians. Canadian literature did not gain any academic importance for many years, as the intelligentsia's concern was only with American and European Literature.



Susanna Moodie (1803-1885)

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna_Moodie

Susanna Moodie's travelogue can be considered as the first piece of writing (in English) in Canada in a literary sense. Her *Roughing it Around the Bush* threw light on life of English settlers in Canada. Many writers followed her foot trails. People like Stephen Leacock and AJM Smith managed to capture the attention of the literati abroad too. In spite of all their achievements, Canadian literature seemed to lack its individual identity. It is during this time Margaret Atwood brought out her *Survival*. As the later part of the title suggests it is a thematic guide to the Canadian Literature. Atwood thought that it was essential to trace out a single string of theme that would connect all the major Canadian works. Literature of any country would be meaningful only if its central theme is understood.

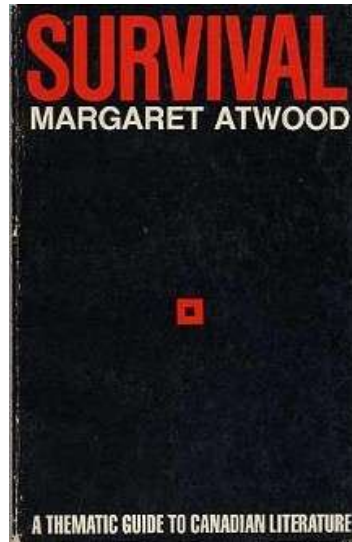
Focus of This Paper

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This paper is an attempt to establish *Survival* as a pioneer text in theorising Canadian Literature. The paper is primarily expository in nature. It takes an argumentative turn towards the end to establish Atwood as a cardinal critic of Canadian Literature.

Finding out the ‘theme’ of all the major works is neither a difficult nor a novel idea. As Jung points out (quoted in Nevid and Rathus 45), collective unconsciousness is common to all human beings. For example human beings are afraid of darkness irrespective of their nationality. This is due to the fact that early man found nights insecure to him. This insecurity is carved in the unconscious mind of all human beings and hence it becomes a part of the collective unconsciousness.

Margaret Atwood attempted to trace the collective unconscious of the Canadian writers and by that she succeeds in finding the central theme of all the major works. Her *Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* presents such consists of pattern based studies.

Atwood's Introduction

Atwood begins her work with an introduction entitled, "What, why, and where is here?" The very title puts forward questions such as, "What is Canadian Literature" and "Why it is called Canadian Literature?" She disapproves of the concept that whatever written in Canada is Canadian Literature. Then she moves on to explain the objective of the book. She makes use of the classical rhetorical tools, negation and assertion, to position her work in the literary sphere. She asks the reader two questions. "What is Canadian about Canadian Literature, and why should we be bothered?" (*Survival* 11). Then she lists out what the book is not. To begin with, Atwood says that the "... book is not an exhaustive or extensive or all inclusive treatise on Canadian Literature" (11). She adds, "... this is a book of patterns, most of authors or individual work" (11). Then she makes it clear that *Survival* is not a historical study or evaluative appreciation or a biographical reading. Another important thing is that, "it is not particularly original" (12) as she has just organized the ideas which existed for long. The book is primarily based on "pattern".

The twelve chapters attempt to answer the questions, what is Canadian about Canadian Literature? Why do Canadians write about Canada? And where Canada stands in comparison to other nations?

Exploration of the Theme of Canadian Literature

Following this, Margaret Atwood begins to explore the theme of Canadian Literature in the first chapter, "Survival". Atwood says that the symbol for England is 'The Island' and for America it is 'The Frontier.' Invariably literature produced in England and United States of America reflect their symbols in them. The evolution of these symbols has its base in the historical geographical and

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cultural phenomenon of these countries coming to Canada. Atwood says, “The Central symbol for Canada ... is undoubtedly survival, la survience” (32).

The Concept of Survival – Seeing Oneself as a Victim

As stated above, the concept of survival too has its base in the cultural, historical and geographical aspects of Canada. Canada was (and is) a thinly populated territory with snow and bushes. The early settlers came to Canada hoping that it was their promised land. Their initial encounter with the territory changed their attitude. Even nature was hostile to them. In spite of the fact they belonged to the Continent, they could not bear the freezing winter. Canada was not a land of temperate weather like United States.

Timber and fish were alone available. The early settlers had to struggle a lot to set a firm foot. All these experiences are reflected in the Canadian literature. Most of the Canadian writers see themselves as victims.

According to Atwood there are four basic victim positions. In the first position, the victim will deny that he is a victim. The argument would be, “I made it, therefore it’s obvious we aren’t victims. The rest are just lazy (or neurotic or stupid)” (36). The anger will be directed towards fellow victims who claim victimhood. In the second position the victim will accept that he or she is a victim, but will explain that victimisation is fate or will of God. In the third position the acceptance remains, but the victim will refuse to “. . . accept the assumption that the role is inevitable” (37). The fourth and final position will be to be a creative non-victim. Atwood says that this position “. . . is not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all or for ex-victims” (38). Most of the creative artists are in this position.

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Sections of *Survival*

Survival is classified into four sections. The first group consists of first four chapters and it concern is with the patterns in Canadian literature. The next three chapters can be classified into second group which defines the ‘figures’ of representations in Canadian Literature. Chapters nine and ten deal with male and female Canadian artists respectively. The last two chapters throw some light on the insights of the artists.

The first chapter “Survival” puts forward the theme of survival in Canadian Literature. Chapter two is entitled, “Nature, the Monster’. As stated elsewhere in this paper, nature is rather hostile to Canadians. This aspect is reflected in Canadian literature. The chapter entitled “Nature, The Monster” explores this aspect.

Consider the following lines from Alden Nowlan’s “April in New Brunswick”: “Spring is distrusted here / for it deceives snow melts upon the lawns: . . .” (quoted in *Survival* 49). The above lines throw light on the fact that the Canadians cannot enjoy even spring which is considered to be the queen of seasons. Canadians are always fighting against nature’s wrath. Critics like Northrop Frye equate winter with death. Canadians are forced to live with such death like coldness. This aspect finds a prominent place in their literature. Atwood points out that the fault is not with the nature but with the man. She concludes this chapter by saying, “Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them” (66). Atwood suggests the reading of Earls Birney’s *David* to trace the influence of nature in Canadian literature.

“Animal Victims” is the third chapter of the book. Canada was once the heaven of animals that lived in snow, but now many of them are extinct. This chapter deals with the theme of human’s taking over of the land and displacement of animals. Consider the following lines from Purdy’s “The Death of Animals”: “Fox in deep frown suddenly imagined/a naked woman inside his rubric fur” (quoted in *Survival* 77). These lines reflect the cruelties borne by the animals. Margaret Atwood prescribes the reading of works such as Farley Mowat’s *Never Cry Wolf* to understand this aspect.

“First People” comes as the fourth chapter. As the name suggests it deals with the works of non-Inuit aboriginals and Inuits (Eskimos) who were the natives of the land. Native Literature was not given due importance for decades. Only in early seventies of the twentieth century it regained its positions. Atwood quotes a few lines from Joseph Howe’s “Song of the Micnac”: “Free sons of the forest, then peal forth the song / With triumph smile on spots they fell” (93).

Most of the nature writings are based upon the sufferings of natives in the hands of aliens. Atwood feels that George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and Margaret Lawrence’s *A Bird in the House* portrays natives as a social victims. “Nature as Monster” and “Animal Victims” provide excellent frameworks to eco-critical theory and subaltern studies.

Heritage of Explorers and Settlers

The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters namely “Ancestral Totems,” “Family Portrait” and “Failed Sacrifice” explore the symbols of Canadian Literature. “Ancestral Totems” deals about the representations of explorers and settlers in literature. The explorers and settlers played an important role in shaping or rather carving Canada. They had to face a lot of hardships to do this. Atwood says, “Exploration” is a recurring motif in Canadian literature” (114). The exploration here cannot be

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equated with its Romantic parts. As Gwen MacEwen points out in his “The Shadow Makers”, “. . . do not imagine that the exploration/ends, that she has yielded all her mystery” (quoted in *Survival*, 115), exploration was rather a tough job.

Family Portrait

Sixth chapter entitled “Family Portrait: Marks of the Bear” analyses the works which have family relationships and inheritance as their themes. Canada being a thinly populated country has a little scope for socialising. Hence the warmth in the family alone can give a sense of security to the Canadians. Canadian writers have looked into the positive and negative aspects of the concept of family. As Atwood says, “. . . this chapter (family portrait) looks at what our writers have made of the society which came into being after exploration and settlement” (131). In Canada family is often considered to be a trap. Unlike England, “. . . in Canada it is a trap in which you are caught” (131). The characters try to escape but they do not succeed in the attempt whereas their American counterparts succeed in it. Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House* seems to be a good illustration for these kinds of works. As the title of the above mentioned work suggests most of the Canadians consider themselves as free birds caught in a cage called ‘house’.

The Reluctant Immigrant

Chapter seven is entitled as “Failed Sacrifices – The Reluctant Immigrant”. The established norm is that sacrifices lead to great achievements. In the Canadian scenario, things are inverted. The first set of immigrants had to face a lot of adversaries. They had to sacrifice their wealth, social life, health and at times their life too. One of the questions asked through Canadian literature is “Where those sacrifices rewarded?” Often Canadian literature portrays situations which show fruitless

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sacrifices. Adel Wiseman's novel *The Sacrifices* throws light on all these aspects. This book can be viewed as a religious allegory or a realistic family novel or as a saga of disaster. Abraham, the protagonist ends up in mental asylum after doing a sacrifice both in literal and allegorical sense.

Bad Ends

The eighth chapter is "The Casual Incident of Death: Futile Heroes, Unconvincing Martyrs and Other Bad Ends". Death in Canadian sense is not an extraordinary event. It is rather a 'casual incident'. This attitude crept into the minds of Canadians due to the century long hardships faced by them in carving out Canada. As Atwood points out in *Survival* (first chapter), Canadian stories often have an 'unhappy ending'. Whether it be captured animals or heroes, death is inevitable. One of the representative Canadian literary figures is a loser. Canadian novels often question the traditional concept of a victorious hero. The tendency can be seen in plays and poems too. Carol Bolt's "Buffalo Jump" stands as a representative work in this aspect.

Paralyzed Artists

"The Paralyzed Artist", ninth among the chapters is unique. Till now, the focus was on writings. Now Atwood shifts the focus on writers. The mindscape of the artists is reflected in their works. Margaret Atwood finds a sort of literary and intellectual paralysis among the creative artists. This chapter throws light on the struggle of artists to establish themselves. The mentality of existence with escapism is portrayed in Pratt's poem, "Permanent Tourists". Atwood recommends reading of Grace Gibson's "Five Legs" to know more about this tendency.'

Ice Women

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If chapter nine dealt with male artists, then chapter ten “Ice Women Vs Earth Mothers: The Stone Angel and the Absent Venus” deals with female artists and representation of women in Canadian literature. As the sub-title of the chapter suggests Canada and Canadian literature had no erotic Venus but toiling stone angels. Atwood points out that most of the powerful female characters are old women like Hagar. She asks, “Why are there no Molly Blooms in Canadian Literature?” (199). In order to answer this question, she makes a psychological study of Canadians. Canadians are more realistic. They needed a ‘soul-mate’ or a co-worker more than a Venus. Atwood adds that the portrayal of women in Canadian literature can be called no ‘normal’ than realistic. Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* explains this idea.

French Canadian Literature

The eleventh chapter, “Quebec: Burning Mansions” contains Atwood’s reflections on French Canadian literature. French Canadian writers share several key patterns with their English Canadian counterparts. These include negative use of religious imagery and survivalism. Theme of thwarted incest and theme of failed entrepreneur is also seen. In addition to this fire acts as a leitmotif in French Canadian literature. As Atwood says, “Quebec authors love having their characters start them [fire] or die in them” (228). This may be due to the influences of the teachings about ‘purgational fire.’ At this point it should be noted that most of the French Canadian authors have Catholic roots. Atwood points out, “Quebec authors may have trouble imagining the world after the fire, English Canadian ones are just beginning to imagine the fires itself” (230).

Re-creations

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The final chapter is “Jail-Breaks and Re-creations”. The title of this chapter comes from the poem of Margaret Avison which reads:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes

The optic heart must venture a jail break

and re-creation (quoted in *Survival*, 246)

In the opening of this chapter, Atwood says, “It came as a shock to me to discover that my country’s literature was not just British literature imported or American literature with something missing that instead it had a distinct tradition and shape of its own. The shock was partly exhilarating, partly depressing” (237). She points out that the Canadian writers can break the jails made of rules and try their hand in political writings and experimental writing. She analyses the position of the readers too. She says, “. . . a reader must face the fact that Canadian literature is undoubtedly sombre and negative . . .” (245). In spite of this the reader must learn to observe the contrast. She concludes by saying that jail breaks is an escape from old habits of looking things and re-creating is a new way of looking things. She concludes the book with two thought provoking questions: “Have we survived? If so what happens after survival (246)

Rediscovering Canadian Literature Identity

Survival can be considered as a re-discovery of Canadian Literature and identity. The terms ‘discovery’ refers to an act of finding something which was hitherto hidden. Here *Survival* is a re-discovery in the sense that it collected the elements of Canadian-ness which was scattered around though volumes. There were quite a number of discoverers but Atwood is a re-discoverer who pulled out facts from stacks of papers.

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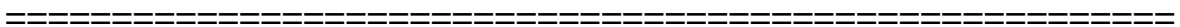
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In spite of this fact *Survival* has been strongly attacked by several Canadian critics. Davey, in his “Surviving the Paraphrase” attacks *Survival* and refuses to accept it as seminal text in Canadian criticism. Davis “. . . accused thematic critics of lacking confidence in Canadian Literature, of being ‘anti-evaluative’, looking towards alleged cultural influences and determines instead of working to explain and illuminate the work on its own terms” (qtd. in Tolan 220). Davis attacked the “. . . vulgar sociology of Frye, Jones, Atwood and Moss, which stereotypes Canadian consciousness” (qtd. in Tolan, 220). Further Davey’s prime concern was that “. . . the thematic criticism subsumed the individual identity into a humanistic cultural whole” (Tolan 220).

To Conclude

The above criticism cannot be accepted. *Survival* is more than a paraphrase. As stated earlier, chapters such as “Nature the Monster” and “Animal Victims” give priority to the eco-critical issues. Similarly, “First People” records the concerns and representations of Natives.”Failed sacrifices: The Reluctant Immigrant” traces the psyche of expatriates. “The Paralysed Artist” throws light on how the mindscape of artist is connected with landscape portrayed in their work. “Ice Women Vs Earth Mothers” has feminist concerns. Further in the conclusion, she asks the writers to break the traditional writing and explore new areas. Due to these reasons *Survival* cannot be neglected or ignored as a mere paraphrase. However, it is true that Atwood had ignored issues such as ‘English-Canadian Post-colonialism’ which was later theorised by critics like Cynthia Conchite Sugars (xiii). In spite of such short-comings, there is no doubt in the fact that *Survival* was the first cardinal text to theorise Canadian Literature.



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