

Identifying Self in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie*

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Abstract

The basic Self and Other binary make sense in which one can see another person and recognizes that individual is separated both physically and mentally, then one can understand that the separate person is not the Self, is the Other. Susanna Moodie, an English settler, walks self-consciously and diffidently into the new place where she seems to be in out of place: "I am a word / in a foreign language". Every immigrant becomes as Other in their new land. This paper focusses on Moodie 's physical and mental experience in her new land discussed by Atwood in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. She is entangled with the Canadian wilderness, civilization, language and culture. Though she creates her "self", she fails in that and become as Other to her new land. The Other is a state of being different from and alien to the social identity of the self. According to Atwood, Moodie's doubleness persists in all Canadians who came as immigrants to Canada (a marginalised country). In short, this paper attempts to convey how Mrs. Moodie identifies her "self" in Other.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie*, identification of self, other, immigrants, identity.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a prolific Canadian Writer is a leading Canadian Poet, Short Story Writer, Novelist and Critic. Her contribution in Canadian literature is enormous. She is the recipient of President's Award, Governor General Award, won the first prize at the Centennial Commission Poetry, Union Poetry Prize and Booker Prize in 2000 for her novel, *The Blind Assassin* and again her name is on the longlist of this year's 2019 Booker Prize for the work *The Testaments*.

In Atwood's writing one can witness the experience of victimization, belittlement and subordination which bring forth in their wake, concomitant reaction of pain, rage and rebellion. The women in Atwood's poetry are very articulate than the women in her fiction. This Paper articulates the journey of 'Self' through the character Mrs. Moodie, a European immigrant.

Atwood through her characterisation of Susanna Moodie focusses the reader attention on the double alienation of woman from her own self and society. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

is divided into three journals. *The First Journal* (1832-1840) describes Mrs. Moodie's arrival at Quebec and her life in the wilderness. The Second Journal (1840-1871) gives an account of Mrs. Moodie's Psychological degeneration and bereavement. The Third Journal (1871-1969) encounter her descent into old age, her enfeeblement and her visit to the Toronto lunatic asylum and her solipsist fantasies as a dying woman.

Discussion and Interpretation

The poem "Disembarking at Quebec" illustrates Mrs. Moodie's hardship experiences after her disembarkation at Quebec, a French speaking province in eastern Canada. She finds herself as an inappropriate person who is standing in Canada like her "incongruous pink" of her shawl. She finds desolated in that place where the environment and weather look wilderness to her. "It is my own lack/ of conviction which makes these visitors of desolation/ long hills, the swamps, the barren sand, the glare/ of sun on the bone-white drift logs, omens of winter/ the moon alien daytime a thin refusal". (54). K.S Vaishali in her *Prisoning Rhythms: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Poetry*, "Wrinkled as a pickled Baby": In search of the Alternative self," reiterates that, If 'self' can be conceived as a construction of language (42), the woman is "a word in a foreign language." (DQ 54). August Fry in his comparison of Canadian and American literature, he states that the meaning aspects of native in "...Canada was more extreme, more inimical to man and to settlement..." (qtd. in Dick Harrison 72).

Moodie says that they have entered into the "darkness of their own ignorance." She adds that "We left behind one by one/ the cities rotting with cholera, / one by one our civilized/ distinctions//and entered a large darkness. // It was our own/ ignorance we entered." She herself admits that she has not "come out yet" of her inner darkness. She groups in the night and "demands lamps" the artificial light of society to see her way but she is aware of that she needs, "Wolf's eyes to see the truth." "My brain gropes nervous/ tentacles in the night sends out/ fears hairy as bears, / demands lamps; or waiting/ for my shadowy husband, bears/ malice in the trees' whispers/ I need Wolf's eyes to see/ the truth." She realises that "Whether the wilderness is/ real or not/depends on who lives there." (FA 55). Susanna finds uncertain of her place and also refuses to look into her inner self.

In the poem 'First Neighbours' Moodie tries to adjust herself in the new land and gets used to be a "minor invalid." The language and the dialect sound strange to her ears, but still she manages to communicate with useless features to express herself:

The people I live among, unforgivingly
previous to me, grudging
the way I breathe their
property, the air,

speaking a twisted dialect to my differently –
shaped ears
though I tried to adapt. (56).

Moodie “got used to being/ a minor invalid, expected to make/ inept remarks/ futile and spastic gestures”. She is eventually successfully to find out from a Red Indian that the “... Squat thing on a stick/ drying by the fire: Is that a toad?” Later she finds it is a deer liver. Moodie's psychic entrapment in fear is the outcome of her “loss of subjectivity.” In due course of time Moodie grew a “Chapped tarpaulin skin” which acts as a protective layer for both physical and her psyche. These lines state her loss of self in other. She is also aware that “the forest can still trick” her and so she also records this as a problem of language with its strange meaning to negotiate: “in this area where my damaged/ knowing of the language means/ prediction is forever impossible.” (56, 57). She feels as if she is entrapped into the darkness which represents her loss of self. She is “... surrounded, stormed, broken/ in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark/ side of light/ as I am.” (TP 58). Even though, Moodie tries hard to fit into her new land she fails in her attempt because of the sense of alienation, displacement and her mental agony which torments her about losing her “self”.

Atwood tries to defend the mind and body of Mrs. Moodie from alienation and oppression. But Moodie utters that, “I am watched like an invader.” (PT 60). Though she longs for the rebirth into wholeness she finds that, “... (bits / of surface broken by my foot/ step) will without moving move/ around me/ into its place. She develops a fear that her own identity seems to be alienated than her husband with whom, “she walks in the frosted field/ and, a concept/ defined against a blank;/ he swerves, enters the forest/ is blotted out”. (W 58).

Moodie feels that her ‘shadowy’ husband may change into a German. She finds very difficult to exist for herself. Her “self” makes her to feel even more alienated and experience the sense of self-disintegration. She thinks about her husband. Later, Moodie questions herself after the arrival of her husband whether, “He may change me also/ with the fox eye, the owl/eye, the eightfold / eye of the spider. Moodie unable to predict anything sits with fear about her transformation: I can't think/ what he will see/ when he opens the door.” (W 58, 59). She finds that she is alienated whereas her husband has changed as a man. Dick Harrison, says that Mrs. Moodie finds her hardship aggravated because of “the discontinuity of accepted civilized patterns of life.” Moodie finds her skin thickened/ with bark.” She also utters that her, “heirloom face” has become a “crushed eggshell.” She is unable to reconcile herself to her body which is badly disfigured:

Hands grown stiff, the fingers
brittle as twigs
eyes bewildered after

seven years,
.....
only the wind
the mouth cracking
open like a rock in fire. (LM 62).

Moodie has made an attempt to the transformation which was alien to her. She changed her heirloom face, language and form but still she feels alienated and losing her self. She concludes her sense of pain by stating:

(you find only
the shape you already are
but what
if you have forgotten that
or discover you
have never known. (63)

Though she tries to fuse with her encounters she feels that her “self” has been consumed by other but, “There was something they almost taught me/ I came away not having learned”. She couldn't learn anything from that land because she is unwilling to transform her ‘self’ to the new land. Immigrants finds very difficult to adjust themselves in the new land because of their unwillingness to change their order in the new land. They expect that land to change its nature which is impossible. Likewise, Moodie who is unwilling to change recognizes “...each danger/becomes a haven.” (TW 61). The danger has compelled her to accept the wilderness and the fires have left charred marks/now around which I/try to grow". (61)

Moodie understands that her transformation is partial because she still has the fear of the land and of the animals; “I was frightened/by their eyes (green or/amber) glowing out from inside me”. She has not “come out yet” of the darkness and also, she acclaims that: “I was not completed; at night/ I could not see without lanterns” (DB 64).

In *Journal II* (1840-1871) Moodie finds hard to acquaint with her new insights in the new land, and, gradually she accepts the changes and moves on. Atwood tries to create a change within Moodie in the opening poem, “Death of a Young Son by Drowning”. Moodie losing her son looks bereaved. She reiterates that at first, she didn't have any connection with this land, but her son's death has made a link with this land. “... the land I floated on/but could not touch to claim.” But after the death of her son didn't feel slid on the bank/ the currents took him;/ he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water / and plunged into distant regions.” After he drowned, he made a

connection with this land, “he was hung in the river like a heart.” She “planted him in this country/like a flag”, (65, 66) which shows the acceptance and claiming of new land by Moodie.

Moodie changed her mind and ended her dream about returning to England. This drastic change occurred in Moodie after her son's death. She gradually realises that the idea of returning to her old country is shattered. She understands that old country's order cannot be implemented in the new land, instead it is from here she must find her own Self:

the old countries recede, become
perfect, thumbnail castles preserved
like gall stones in a glass bottle, the
towns dwindle upon the hillsides
in a light paperweight-clear.” (I 66)

She says that the memories in her old country should be forgotten: “I wish I could forget them/ and so forget myself.” (67).

Atwood signals Moodie’s acceptance of the reality is evident in the poem “Dream1: The Bush Garden”. Susanna starts to dream of the “potatoes curled/like pale grubs in the soil/ the radishes thrusting down/their fleshy snouts, the beets/pulsing like slow amphibian hearts”. She feels attracted by seeing the beauty of nature especially the vegetation she is surrounded with gives her happiness: “Around my feet/the strawberries were surging huge/ and shining” (DBG 68). In spite of understanding the power of nature Moodie slightly exists herself from it because of her “inescapable doubleness of her vision.”

In the third journal (1871-1969) Atwood focusses on complete transformation of Susanna Moodie. She says that she is not afraid of darkness instead she associates herself to the “granular moon.” She likes to “revolve among the vegetables” and like an “orbit” she spins around the “apple trees.” Moodie states that, “I am being /eaten away by light”, which reflects her state of mind that she has given way for understanding the nature and her “Self”. In the poem, “Wish: Metamorphosis to Heraldic Emblem,” Moodie states that for her the darkness is not terrifying instead she says:

I will prowl and slink
in crystal darkness
among the stalactite’s roots, with new
formed plumage
uncorroded
gold and
fiery green, my fingers

curving and scaled, my
opal
no
eyes glowing (77)

Atwood has separated the last words of the poem in order to enact Moodie's complete recognition. At first, she thinks that she sees her opal, which is gold, green and red, but, then realises that it is not the opal'- "no"- rather it is her own "eyes glowing." At the end of the journal I she says that she was frightened by "eyes (green or/amber) glowing out from inside me." Moodie in this section accept that she is away from the fear and now desires to be in this land and to hear its voice.

Moodie confesses in, "Visit to Toronto, with companions," Moodie steps into a "different kind of room" and encounters, "hill, with boulders, trees, no houses". She undergoes little confusion when she says that, "The landscape was saying something/ but I couldn't hear", because when she stepped into the land from her old country with her own reason and culture, she couldn't understand the order of nature in this land.

After the momentary of confusion disappears, she is prepared to respond to the landscape positively:

I shook my head. There were no clouds, the flowers
deep red and feathered, short from among
the dry stones,
the air
was about to tell me
all kinds of answers (78)

In the poem, "Solipsism while dying", she creates her 'self', "... lying in the bed/being regretted//added: what will they do now/that I, that all/depending on me disappears?".

She confesses in the poems, "Thoughts from underground", "A bus along St. Clair: December", that the country which she hated : "When I first reached this country/ I hated it", but later it has become as her kingdom, " It would take more than that to banish/ me: this is my kingdom still." (80, 83).

Conclusion

Susanna Moodie's life in Canada reveals that she was stuck on to the Canadian wilderness when she landed with her own reason and civilised culture, she lost the connectivity with the land. As a result, she undergoes alienation and geographical displacement. When she started to

transform her “Self”, she gained harmony both physically and psychologically. Atwood through this poem explores the self which is embedded within Susanna Moodie.

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