
Feminist Consciousness in the Fictions of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro: A Study

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Article Received: 22/10/2024

Article Accepted: 03/12/2024

Published Online: 04/12/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.11.155

Abstract:

The term feminist perspective will have to be considered from the viewpoint of one particular milieu alone. It must also be recognised in terms of variations occurring in the differing perspectives of their propagators, individually in that milieu. Thus, for one to comprehend “Exploring Feminist Perspectives in Canadian Literature with Special Reference to the Fiction of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro” it becomes necessary to review briefly the effect of History and the strong elements of isolation on the Canadian people. Such review is essential to appreciate the thought pattern and literary traditions of the maturing Canadian Nation and, for the purpose of this paper.

Keywords: Feminism, women writers, gender bias

Introduction:

The physical geography of the Canadian Nation is such that the inhabitants of Canada tend to be rewarded more by the elements of cruelty in nature than by the elements of grace, by which their neighbour, the United States of America, is blessed. Furthermore, the physical area of Canada is greater than that of its neighbour. That is, while the present population of Canada remains at thirty million, that of the United States of America exceeds two hundred and seventy million, who live under more fortunate conditions of nature. Therefore the people of Canada have the misfortune of leading their lives in small isolated communities in a nation which assumes the size of a continent if compared to a continent like Australia.

A further difficulty in identifying the Canadian literary tradition lies in determining what exactly is Canadian and what is not. There are problems of identity in the Canadian Nation. During the 17th century there was a clash between the aggressive English and French settlements, to be followed by the “Loyalists” of England at the time of the American Revolution in 1776. Later, large number of Britons migrated to Canada, soon after the Napoleonic wars. In addition to these complexities of nationhood, there arose a conflict between Upper and Lower Canada

in the form of a rebellion. In view of these occurrences, it was only in 1867 that Canada was able to attain the status of a Dominion.

It is because of these geographical, historical and sociological bearings of the Canadian Nation that Margaret Atwood writes: “This great Land of Ours. I’m talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It’s this kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.”¹ Having said so, Atwood’s immediate move is to state:

What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (Atwood 18-19)

It is in this context that Anisur Rahman elaborates when he writes: “Although the Canadian tradition has emerged out of the English – French – American trinity, it should not always be assessed in terms of these literatures and their canons. Just as the three literary traditions represent their own sensibilities Canadian literature also reflects its own modes of apprehension and it must therefore, be appreciated for its individual merit. Readings of Leonard Cohen, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, Irving Layton, Alice Munro, Al Pourdy and Rudy Weibe, for example would make greater critical sense in relation to their own predecessors, rather than with Philip Roth, Nadine Gordimer, Graham Greene, William Gold, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Toni Morrison. Canadian literature, like every other literature must sound relevant in its own context before it may be compared and contrasted with other literatures. In fact, its situational relevance alone would give it extra-territorial relevance and appeal” (13-14).

The relevance of Anisur Rahman’s observation lies in how the situational relevance alone would give Canadian literature extra-territorial relevance and appeal. This certainly suggests the rightness of gauging a nation’s literature in keeping with its milieu, however complex it may be. An outstanding example of a writer who realizes this much is the Indian writer R.K. Narayan. In many ways, therefore, the challenges faced by noted Indian writers in English and Canadian writers appear similar. A vision such as this suggests that a fine understanding of regional literatures contributes to the unity of either a nation or a community of nations. Likewise, a study, such as this, should be of relevance not only to what might appear to be, a limited or regional feminist perspective but also to women everywhere.

Therefore, some mention has to be made about the development of the

Canadian novel, Alice Munro and two other equally noteworthy writers Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence are paid greater attention for the purpose of comparison of Alice Munro's feminist perspective. In this regard the importance of the first known Canadian novel is *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) by Frances Brook, lies in the fact that it encourages a desire in future Canadian writers to express themselves through the genre of the novel. The next noteworthy novelist was Julia Catherine Beckwith Hart and her contribution was: *St Ursulas Convent*; or, *The Nun of Canada* (1824). The publication of this novel is in no way indicative of the popularity of publishing novels in Canada. The next two novels of Canada, Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bushes*; or *Life in Canada* and Catherine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* were initially published in London and later elsewhere.

Among the other novels of the 19 century are: John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832), James D Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888) and Gilbert Parker's novel *Pierre and His People: Tales of the Far North*. While these novels were published in Britain, Canada remained their subject-concern. However it must be noted that these novelists were influenced by Sir Walter Scott, James Fennimore Cooper, Honore de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain.

The leading novels of the early 20 century were Jean McIlwraith's *A Diana of Quebec* (1912), Gilbert Parker's *The Money Master* (1915), and Basil King's *The High Heart* (1917) and *In the Garden of Charity* (1903). These novelists are important from the point of view of their perspective. Their approach was that of a definite departure from that of earlier novelists. They along with others like Norman Duncan, Robert E. Knowles and W.A. Fraser asserted themselves in their effort to bring identity to the Canadian novel. It is during this period that Canadian literature developed sufficient force to sort out the differences between the French and the English citizens of Canada. Canadian literature of this period was such that it brought about closer relationships between various regions of Canada. The stress in these novels was on action rather than on imitation and this stress was supported by a strong element of optimism in the Canadian novel of this period.

The other popular novels, which followed the ones cited, were Arthur Stringer's *The Prairie Wife* (1915), *The Prairie Mother* (1920) and *The Prairie Child* (1922). These three novels are based on the fundamental questions of rights of a family in progression. Similarly, J.C. Stead's *The Smoking Flax* (1924) and *Grain* (1929) and L. Durkin's *Marie* are novels which treat the Prairie as a place which provided peace and, therefore, worth retreating to, while the novel *Grain*, is a critical contemplation of the Prairie.

Likewise, there were several novelists in the 1930s of whom the women novelists were Martha Ostenso, Ethel Grayson, Jessie L. Beattie, Ethel Chapman and Irene Baird. However, the most significant novelist of that period was Bertram Brooker, whose *Think of the Earth* (1936) won for him the very first Governor

General's Award for fiction. This was also a period when the Canadian novelists introduced psychological problems, moral issues and a variety of social issues into their novels.

In this regard, it must be stressed that the Literature of Canada, tended to be somewhat slow in movement but never static. Considering the infusion of moral, social, psychological and spiritual values into the Canadian novel of the 1930s, it can be said that the period of modernism in Canadian fiction had arrived. It can also be said that the motivating force for the flowering of modern curriculum fiction was the economic depression of the late 1920's and the early 1930s. In the meantime, the Second World War (1939-1945) took place, with all its miseries, only to further confirm the stability of Modernism. In addition to these two propellants, the after effects of World War II and the Cold War which followed it, led to the continuation of the modernistic wave to keep moving beyond the end of the 20th Century. As to whether the Feminist Movement is a part of the flotsam and jetsam picked up by this fast moving wave or whether it is something of permanence can only be confirmed after the crashing of the wave, unless such a movement does happen to be a light-house surrounded by the waves of post-modern fiction.

During the Second World War itself, Sinclair Rose produced his *As for Me and My House* (1941), to be followed by the post-war novels *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), *The Double Hook* (1959), and *The Watch That Ends the Night* (1959) by Earnest Buckler, Speile Watson and Hugh MacLennan respectively. To this list of Canadian novelists must be added the name of later national novelists like Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, George Woodcock, Ken Mitchell, W.H. New, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro. The last three of these writers assert themselves, according to their varied perspectives, which are very much part of Modernism—Perspectives relative to their experience in their life as individuals.

The problem common to all the Canadian women writers is covered well in the statement. The novelist Erika Jong States: "Women who are torn, as most of us are torn, between the past and the future, between our mothers frustrations and extravagant hopes we have for our daughters" (175). Thus, it is evident that the basic conflict in the minds of Canadian women writers of fiction is essentially their struggle to penetrate the female's search to discover the self as the means of confirming self-fulfilment. Moving further, the novels of the post 1960s Canadian women writers have the purpose of making women critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structure, thereby infusing in humanity the need to recognize the claims of women for their rightful place in any social structure, not only in Canada but also in other parts of the world. To achieve their aim, Canadian women writers "tow the storyline of traditional patriarchal structures open to question" by raising "disagreements which demand new judgments and solutions" (Moi 25).

In this regard, the feminist perspective of Margaret Laurence is considered the most noteworthy among the living Canadian women novelists of today. The most prominent of her works are known as the Manawaka novels. The Manawaka series are four in number: *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire Dwellers* and *The Diviners*, published between 1964 and 1974. The salient feature of the Manawaka series lies in Laurence's exploration of the lives of several generations of men and women who had come to build the town of Manawaka to settle in it. In this context, the fictional town of Manawaka signifies the private substance of Margaret Laurence's mind. Hence, the real location of Manawaka lies beyond physical and geographical considerations. The strength of the four novels lies in Laurence's presentation of the psychic-social conflict of the women protagonists Hagar, Rachels, Stacey and Morag, whose pilgrimage through life is a quest for justice, liberty and equality, projected through the medium of sexual politics. The Manawaka novels, therefore, present: "Unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives" (Bailey 306).

Considering Laurence's probes into Human character, M. Prabhakar writes that the women characters in Manawaka fiction: "... are all humanized and individuated women while the male characters are marginalized, inferiorized, and dehumanized" (17). Be that as it may, but to state that Laurence "marginalized, inferiorized and dehumanized" the male character points towards defective exploration of the male personality by Margaret Laurence. In this context, Laurence herself states:

I'm 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. But I think we have to be careful here. For instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be reeducated with minimum damage to them. They are our husbands, our sons, our lovers... We can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well. (Atwood 1983, 23)

Here, the statement of Laurence is as much in keeping with that of a liberal feminist as it is with one of the unique features of Canadian thought. Whether a Canadian writer writes about men, women, or animals, he/she has the humility to make his or her complaint more of a plea than a demand. In this regard, in her critical analysis of animal stories Margaret Atwood writes:

English animal stories are about "social relations," American ones are about people killing animals; Canadian ones are about animals being killed, as felt emotionally from inside the fur and feathers. As you can see, *Moby Dick* as told by the White Whale would be quite different. ("Why is that strange man chasing me around with a harpoon?"). (Atwood, 1972; 18)

Margaret Atwood's critical remark on the Canadian view-point on animal literature is an important revelation of the Canadian psyche, which is altogether different from the general psyche of either the Americans or the British. As Margaret Laurence's own statement shows, her feminist perspective is more of an appeal or a plea that what could be an aggressive demand from the pen of an American feminist writer—male or female. There is a gentleness about Canadian literature in general.

Last, the universal aspect of Margaret Laurence's novels is stated by the author herself. She says: "I think that human society wherever it is, any where in the whole world, needs fiction and poetry in the same way that human cultures forever have needed their story-tellers and their poets and their singers of songs...There really is room for an unlimited number of different points of view" (Gibson 4).

Margaret Atwood has been the subject of greater critical attention than any other Canadian writer. Her poetry and novels cover a very wide area of Canadian Tradition and power politics. Atwood's *The Circle Game*, *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* and *Power Politics* show the author's awareness of international traditions, as seen by her. However, the concern here is show the feminist perspective in Atwood's novels in their relationship to that of Alice Munro's. In his work, Prabhakar writes: there is a genuine need for an intensive study of Atwood's works from her feminist perspective which is 'holistic', 'anti-militaristic', 'positivist' and 'moralistic' in character. Atwood's feminist thought, which is positively pro-woman and not anti-man, seeks to offer a "life-affirming; 'survivalist', 'human-right' approach for placing woman on equal footing with her male counterpart. The basic premise of Atwood's feminist thought is survival which shows to women the ways of struggle and the means of survival in an antagonistic, male chauvinistic, sexist society. (25) Furthermore, Prabhakar refers to Atwood's critical work, *Survival*, to detect four "Basic Victim Positions" in Atwood. They read:

1. To deny a factory that you are a victim.
2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics or the unconscious, or any other large general power or idea.
3. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.
4. To be a creative non-victim. (Atwood 36)

The importance of Atwood's work lies in her insight into the various aspects of her feminist perspective, leading to the elimination of "Position Four", from the list cited, in her novels. This position is not a position taken by Atwood's victims. It is for this reason that Atwood: "... moves beyond the boundaries of Canada and proposes a model of gender victimization corresponding to the Canadian paradigm, *Survival*: first three Basic Victim Positions. It works as a helpful method of

approaching woman's grievances and it is also useful to explore victim-victimizer syndrome in Atwood's fiction" (26).

Finally, what Atwood, wrote, said and did has invited the most voluminous critical commentaries than any of the other Canadian women novelists. Her major works of fiction, are only, eight in number. They are *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. The importance of Margaret Atwood in this study lies in her coverage of the female condition from so wide a perspective, that it is certainly an aid in understanding the feminist perspective of Alice Munro. Therefore, if Margaret Laurence's novels tend to stress sexual politics, then such a stress is also present in Margaret Atwood's theme is always one of Survival. It is for this reason that Atwood has called her major critical work *Survival*--survival from the overt and covert machinations of Man against Woman. It is for the same reason that many of the literary critics do see a supposedly non-violent assault on the patriarchal system of existence as can be seen in the books; *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Selected Fiction and Poetry* and *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*.

It is this very same patriarchal society which is an offence to Alice Munro's feminist perspective-which is once again a supposedly non-violent assault. The words "supposedly non-violent" are used in this paper as there can be no such expression of disagreement as non-violence, simply because physical violence is violence upon the body, whereas non-violence of the mind is the personification of physical violence directed upon other humans' mind and soul.

The author under consideration in this research paper is Alice Munro. She was born on July 10, 1931, in Wingham, Ontario. Her higher education was from the University of Western Ontario (1949-1951). Should her literary accomplishments be questioned, she received the Governor General's Literary Award in 1969 for *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Should her popularity as an author be questioned, she also received the Canadian Bookseller's Award in 1972 for her *Lives of Girls and Women*. Her feminist perspective in her personal life has led her to have three children by her first marriage and later, her catch is her second husband Gerald Fremlin. While *Dance of the Happy Shades* was Munro's first book, she has nevertheless been writing stories well before that. In many of her stories, the place of her birth, Wingham, is the prototype for Munro's fictional towns, like Jubilee in *Live of Girls and Women*. The fact is that Wingham:has unusual pertinence in the case of Munro's fiction, so accurately does she capture the speech and the patterns of living of her native region and town. Not all her fellow townspeople approve of the picture of Wingham that emerges from this talented daughter of a family which was hardly one of Wingham's best. (Ditsky 2)

Furthermore, Alice Munro's childhood, as in the case of many in Wingham, was one of great economic hardship in a largely farming community. Moreover, what is known as the "snow line" is severe in affecting a community, like Wingham and the Huron County, in which the town was situated, by isolating the community from communicating with others in both the county, the Province of Ontario and the Nation itself. Ditsky mentioned: "Isolation, and the attempt to surmount it by breaking through to another human being, is not surprisingly a major theme of Alice Munro's fiction" (2). Likewise, coming from the pen of Professor John Ditsky of the English Department of the University of Windsor in Ontario, the statement.

Moreover, the relative hardness of much of the life in Munro's remembered Wingham is aggravated in its effects upon the individual personality by that sort of narrowness which may be typical of small towns everywhere, but which in that part of Ontario may seem especially puritanical almost as it the true heritage of the Calvinist rigors of old New England were to be found there Ontario, as much as in the American South. Small wonder, then, that Munro in listing her formative reading for Geoff Hancock for an interview in Canadian Fiction Magazine, named four American women writers from the South Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers-before naming any men, and then named three more Southerners-William Faulkner, Peter Taylor and Reynold's Price. (Ditsky 2) However, when one refers to the phrase "Calvinist rigors" used by Ditsky, the following statement of M. Prabhakar.

Munro seeks to redress Christian mythos and restore female genesis through *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *The Progress of Love* (1986). In her first collected volume of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) Munro questions the challenges the dependency of women. In her feminist drama, "Day of the Butterfly" she lashes out at the social hegemony of the males who make the unjust rules and conditions to subjugate women. (19)

The significance of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) is a clear illustration of her ability to reveal the complex emotions of simple people who are trod upon by these emotions. Her tales of these people are a compliment to her storytelling genius, more so than Laurence and Atwood, especially in the context of her profound sympathy for these simple characters. Furthermore, what stands out in Munro is:

"She is also remarkable for her photographic portrayal of the people involved in the drama of life. "The ultimate success of *Who Do You Think You Are?*" lies in that it manages to uncover the process by which reality is necessarily imagined. By means of this largely interrogative method Munro parodies the comfortable narrative strategies and judgments of *Lives of Girls and Women* without denying the ultimate mystery of existence. (Rahman, 14)

Munro is a feminist writer perhaps only, or primarily in the sense that she is a writer who happens to be a woman. Her observation about the way in which women are put upon the world she writes about, or the world she inhabits, are not really different in pleasure from the one she makes about the lot of the poor, or lower classes generally.

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