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IDENTITY AND VICTIMHOOD IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

In her *Survival: Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood observes that those who suddenly find themselves teaching Canadian literature, something they never studied before, are encountered with two essential questions: “What’s Canadian about Canadian literature, and why should we be bothered?”. In countries other than Canada, these questions become even more important, since many students who study English language and literature are exposed through much of their education mainly to the world-wide famous British and American works and authors, and never think of *Canadian* literature as a separate entity. Due to this, it is imperative to answer Atwood’s questions, and show that in teaching and studying Canadian literature, its national and cultural aspect should also be taken into consideration. The paper argues that much of Canadian literature relies on the quest for an identity which is distinctly different from the American, English, or French. Selected examples from the literary works of some of the most famous Canadian authors² serve to illustrate that the quest itself is often hindered by the symbolic gap between Canada’s colonial past and its modern present, as well as between Canadian wilderness and Canadian urban territories. Consequently, Canadian literature abounds with literary figures who are represented as victims, whose victimhood should be perceived as an essential part of Canadian identity.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Identity, Victim, Wilderness, Atwood, Munro, Ryga

1. INTRODUCTION

In the comedy series *Talking to Americans*, Rick Mercer, Canada’s biggest TV star, visits American cities and asks the locals simple questions with made-up Canadian facts, in order to prove their ignorance and disregard of Canada (McCullough n.d.). In 2000, the US Vice President under Bill Clinton, Al Gore, was asked when he would visit Toronto, “the capital city of Canada”

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(YouTube), to which he replied that he was focused only on the upcoming elections, completely disregarding the wrong fact in Mercer's question. Famously, even George Bush fell for Mercer's trick question during the US presidential campaign, when he was asked to comment on the "endorsement by Canadian Prime Minister Poutine". Bush expressed his thanks for Poutine's endorsement, not acknowledging the fact that the real name of the Canadian Prime Minister was Jean Chretien, and that "poutine" was the name of a Quebecois dish of French fries and gravy (ABC News). The same episode features various Americans congratulating Canada on reaching a population of one million (over 35 million people live in Canada), on getting a second area code (Canada uses 36 area codes all in all, whereas Ontario alone uses 13 area codes (Area Code Help)), on legalizing VCRs and staplers, on getting electric light in parliament, on allowing dogs as house-pets, etc. Mercer even succeeded in persuading some people that in Canada one hour lasts 65 minutes, and that Canadians use a 20-hour clock. Upon being informed that Canada had finally switched to the US system of measuring time, Tom Vilsack, the former Governor of Iowa (1999-2007) and a highly educated lawyer, heartily congratulated Canada on the wise decision of keeping pace with the rest of the world.

These and similar deep-seated prejudices about the Canadian way of life have made Canadians sensitive about their own identity as different from the American, French or British. In 2000, a commercial for Molson Canadian beer, known as "The Rant", addressed this nationalistic concern. It features "Joe", an average Canadian, who rants about the common prejudices against Canadians, saying, among other things, that he is *not* a lumberjack, or a fur trader, that he does not speak American, but English or French, and does not live in an igloo. A Canadian believes in peace keeping, not policing, in diversity, not assimilation. Finally, Canada is "the second largest landmass" and "the first nation of hockey" (Canada Web Developer). In short, Joe is proud to be Canadian. The commercial has become so popular that many Canadians view it as the appropriate anthem of Canada.

But despite being the second largest country in the world, territorially smaller only than Russia, Canada remains a mystery not only for the Americans, but for many Europeans as well. Canada is likewise a mystery for many Canadians, who struggle to grasp the vastness of its wilderness and to survive in it. Its unique geography—the massive evergreen forests and wildlife in the Canadian Rockies in the west, the flat landforms of Alberta Prairies, the barren and rocky parts of the northern part of Laurentian Shield, and the snowy tundra and frozen glaciers of the Canadian North— is often hostile to humans, so that ninety percent of the country is still uninhabited, making the population of Canada only one-fifth of Russia's (BBC News). Canada is a young country whose cities are rarely more than two hundred years old, yet its history is rich and extremely relevant for the overall understanding of Canadian anti-American sentiments and the endeavour of Canadians to define their own identity.

2. CANADA AS A VICTIM: “WHERE IS HERE?”

Canadians pride themselves on believing in diversity, *not* assimilation. Yet the once-sorry state of Canadian Aboriginals tells a different story. The indigenous peoples who migrated from east Asia to western North America sometime between 40,000 and 10,000 B.C. and spread across today’s territories of the United States and Canada in the next following centuries, had always had a specific style of life, which revolved mostly around hunting, living in cone-shaped teepees, respecting nature, having deep spiritual beliefs, and preserving their tradition and spoken language. For the Europeans who reached the North-American continent in the 16th century, these superstitious and in many ways naïve peoples were an easy prey. They were cheap labour and soldiers, as well as pliable and submissive converts to Christianity. But the new way of life which was imposed on them by the whites took away not only their land, but their dignity and health as well. Most of the Aboriginals in Canada died of European diseases, such as small pox, or influenza, to which they had neither immunity nor cure. “Residential schools”, another Christian invention, which operated until the 1970s, proved deadly to many Aboriginal children, who were raised there in abysmal conditions—abused, neglected, sick, their spirits finally broken. Although today the Canadian government is making amends to the natives by granting them special rights and privileges that other Canadians do not have, the fact remains that by the close of the 19th century alone, “Canada’s aboriginal population had declined by more than 90 per cent”, so that today their population number is down to approximately 1,400,000 (Statistics Canada).

The trials and tribulations of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada did not go unnoticed by Canadian authors, some of whom committed themselves to defending the native rights and restoring their human dignity through literature. One of them was George Ryga (1932-1987), a playwright who “made a career of tearing at sensitive wounds, stirring up controversy and often making himself unpopular in the process” (Wasserman 2011: 23). His most popular play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), explores the life of a young Aboriginal woman who struggles to become assimilated into the white urban society, and is considered the most popular and best-known Canadian English-language play. The pathos of Rita Joe, reminiscent of Dostoyevsky and Kafka (24), is not reserved only for her tragic end, but is felt throughout. Rita’s constant arrests on different charges—vagrancy, prostitution, theft—impose inexplicable guilt on her by the system that cannot and will not understand and allow her to be different. The Magistrate, who symbolically represents the law of the whites, suggests that the obstacles to Rita’s life are in her head, in her thoughts, possibly even in her culture. “You should fix your hair”, he advises her, “perhaps even change your name”, because “[t]here is no peace in being extraordinary!” (38). Rita’s broken-spirited boyfriend, Jaimie Paul, complains about his loss of dignity to no avail, but he understands that their stolen identities are at the core of the problem. “Gimme back my truth!”, he rants, “Teach me who I really am! You’ve taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man!” (55). Since

their identities are erased, both Rita and Jamie can only hope to find freedom in death. Thus, for Rita, the heinous crime of repeated rape which leads to her untimely death turns out to be the only means of escape, and Rita becomes one of the best-known literary victims in Canadian literature.

Five years after the first performance of Ryga's play, Margaret Atwood published her thematic guide to Canadian literature, in which she claimed that "Canada as a whole is a victim" (Atwood 1972: 35), so that the central symbol for Canada and the recurrent trope in Canadian literature is *survival*. Whether they want to find a way of staying alive, or their obsession with surviving becomes "the will *not* to survive", Canadian literary characters, almost without exception, assume one of four "basic victim positions", from which they cope with their "colonial mentality" (36) and the wilderness that surrounds them. In Position One, characters or countries deny the fact that they are victims, suppress their anger and turn away from certain visible facts (Ibid). Position Two is reserved for those who acknowledge the fact that they are victims, but "explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God", the necessity of History, Economics, or the Unconscious (37). Position Three is more active and dynamic, since the acknowledged victims "refuse to accept the assumption that the role [*of the victim*] is inevitable" (Ibid) and at least endeavour to change their objective experience. Finally, once victims are able to move from Position Three by releasing their anger and stop being victims, they assume Position Four and become creative non-victims (38), with imaginative activities of all kinds at their disposal. Both life and literature demonstrate how countries, women, men, literary characters shift around these four positions most of the time.

Atwood's claim that if you "stick a pin in Canadian literature at random ... nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim" (39) is not exaggerated since her model of victims has proven to be a very helpful approach to Canadian literature, especially when attempting to trace the search for identity back to the ominous Canadian wilderness. Atwood herself has used the wilderness motif repeatedly in her work, primarily "as geographical location marker, as spatial metaphor, and as Canada's most popular cultural myth" (Howells 1996: 21). In "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer", a poem from her collection *The Animals in That Country*, Atwood outlines the journey to madness of an early pioneer, who is trying to keep nature *out* by building borders around himself. In the opening lines, the pioneer is overwhelmed with the vastness of the open space around him, which paradoxically makes him feel trapped instead of free:

He stood, a point
on a sheet of green paper
proclaiming
himself the centre,
with no walls, no borders
anywhere; the sky no height
above him, totally un-
enclosed

and shouted:

Let me out! (Atwood 1976: 60)

The only way the pioneer could have survived was by keeping *with* nature, instead of shutting it out. All his attempts to do without nature proved futile, so that eventually Atwood's pioneer went insane, devoured by the very dream he believed was going to lead him to a better life.

Hence, the starting point for shaping a distinctive Canadian identity should be making peace with the menacing environment. Northrop Frye (1965: 220) defined this by saying: "It seems to me that Canadian sensibility ... is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some riddle as 'Where is here?'" Following Frye's line of thought, Atwood (1972: 18) maintains that "Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it", stressing that self-knowledge can be achieved only once you discover who *you* are (16). To do that, a Canadian must first meet the *here*, use his literature as "a map, a geography of the mind" (18-19), become acquainted with the geographical, historical, cultural, political, and social aspects of his own country, compare those to the same aspects of *there*—other countries and societies. Only then will he be able to feel his country as having "distinct existence of its own" (29).

The best illustration of Atwood's claim is found in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), her fictional portrayal of life and thoughts of Susanna Moodie (1803-1885), a nineteenth-century British settler in Canada, who struggled hard to accept the new country as her own. Moodie was an accomplished author herself and wrote a significant body of literature about her experiences as a settler, achieving the greatest success with her book *Roughing it in the Bush*, first published in London in 1852, and subsequently in Toronto, in 1871. Adopting Moodie's voice, Atwood traces the gradual change in her attitude towards Canada and her inner fight to accept Canada as her new home, so that eventually, "Susanne Moodie has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated" (Atwood 1970: 164). This is most clearly seen in "Thoughts from Underground", a poem from *Journal Three*, which features Susanna's voice from beyond the grave. She readily admits hating the country when she first reached it, since it was incredibly difficult to adapt to the life in the bush. But then they "were made successful / and I felt I ought to love / this country" (Atwood 1976: 111). Success notwithstanding, Moodie could not escape the feeling of alienation—"I said I loved it / and my mind saw double" (Ibid). She was still drawn to her British past despite her constructing "desperate paragraphs of praise" of Canada, but eventually learned to accept it and appreciate it.

The poem is followed by "Alternate Thoughts from Underground", which is not another reminiscence of Moodie's difficult life in the bush, but rather portrays a disturbing image of a modern society which was being built above Moodie's grave sometime during the 1960s. She has now long been "down" and "shovelled", but can still faintly hear "the shrill of glass and steel", coming from "the invaders of those for whom / shelter was wood, / fire was terror and sacred" (112). Whether the invaded ones are Native Canadians or the pioneers

is not of much relevance, since the lines can easily apply to both (Hammill 2007: 147). However, “the invaders” are doubtless the modern people who destroy Nature in order to build “glib superstructures” (Atwood 1976: 112). She prays to her “wooden fossil God” in vain: “Mrs. Moodie is done under by modern civilization, for which she feels ‘scorn but also pity’; scorn because of the shallowness of the present, pity because she knows it too will pass away” (Bilan 1978), leaving her extinct under the piles of glass and steel. According to Hammill (2007: 148), in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood shows that the “colonial ways of seeing, inscribed into nineteenth-century literature as well as many later narratives, are the dangerous inheritance which the pioneer past bequeaths to modern Canadians”. But Canada needs such an ancestry in order to “discover its own literary and historical origins which gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s”.

Both “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” and “Alternate Thoughts from Underground” fundamentally stress people’s need to fence themselves in and keep Nature out, but ultimately expose this need as counterproductive. In the latter, Moodie openly shows her disgust for mankind, which has severed all ties with Nature. Alden Nowlan (1933-1983), an eminent Canadian poet, playwright, and novelist, expresses the same kind of revulsion for mankind in his superb poem “The Bull Moose”, published in *What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread* (1993). The old, dying moose of the title comes “down from the purple mist of trees on the mountain” (Nowlan 2011) straight into a populated parish and mingles with the cattle, who hold the moose in awe and carefully move to the other side of the field, frightened by the very sight of the moose’s “great head / like the ritual mask of a blood god”. But no such fear and respect for the old king of the forest is shown by the people of the parish, who try to pour beer down the moose’s throat, “pry open his jaws with bottles”, and finally “plant a little purple cap / of thistles on his head”. Admirably patient and dignified, the moose stoically endures the mockery. But what the neighbours see as “shaggy and cuddlesome”, soon regains its wild streak: the “scaffolded king” releases a thunderous roar, making all the young men lean on their automobile horns, whose sound is too puny against the roar of humiliated Nature. Thus, Nowlan’s moose becomes the “wooden fossil god” (Atwood 1976: 112) of Atwood’s poem—the god who is able to topple the glass pride of modern civilization.

3. RECONCILING WILDERNESS AND CIVILIZATION

In “Thoughts from Underground”, Atwood’s persona of Moodie complains about the harsh weather conditions in Canada, which often made life unbearable and dull:

In winter our teeth were brittle
with cold. We fed on squirrels.
At night the house cracked.
In the mornings, we thawed
the bad bread over the stove. (Atwood 1976: 111)

Unpredictable weather and inhospitable climate are probably the most prominent features of Canadian wilderness, which haunts the imagination of many Canadians. Robert Arthur Douglas Ford describes the oppressive atmosphere of Canadian winters in his poem "Twenty Below". The household of the poem sinks into deep melancholy as the northern cold outside smothers the world and "an impossible sleep / and silence" fall from "a sky of slate" (Ford 1956: 4). The husband, the children, the mongrel, all doze, "half living only through the frozen days". And the woman weeps, "her life stopped dead and motionless in the hoar and drifted week". Again, one cannot keep Nature out, despite the thick walls and the cosy fire—" [t]he cold presses into the room / from every side through the logs and stones and chinks / between the logs". The wife can only take her sadness and thaw it before the flames, but her heart will stay oppressive within her during the deadly stillness of this Canadian winter.

Evidently, if one wishes to survive in Canadian wilderness, one has to reunite with it, not fight it. The theme of reconciliation with Nature is recurrent in Canadian literature. But when one tries to sever the ties with civilization and go back to Nature, the attempt often ends in some form of madness. Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* features an unnamed heroine who is deeply troubled by the ghosts of her invented past. Since she cannot cope with the terrible psychological aftermath of her abortion, the narrator invents suitable versions of that event in order to calm her psyche. Soon it becomes obvious that she has lost her true identity because of the self-imposed lies about her past. Hence, "the unnamed heroine of the novel has to learn to go back to her roots so as to rediscover her Self" (Vlašковиć 2011: 102)—back to the wilderness of the Quebec bush, where she used to live as a child. Once there, she searches for her missing father, but ends her quest by finding her Self in the wilderness, which functions as her Other. Atwood uses the motif of wilderness "as geographical location marker, as spatial metaphor ... as Canada's most popular cultural myth", and as the Canadians' "own distinctive national space" (Howells 1996: 21). In that space, however, the narrator first has to go insane and become a childlike human animal only to become a sane woman in the end of her quest for identity. She "becomes an animal wandering around naked, living in different lairs, eating raw plants, and dreaming about having a child that will be raised in the wild and not taught to speak human language" (Vlašковиć 2011: 105). In her reflection in the mirror, she can now see "a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves" (Atwood 1982a: 643). The narrator embraces the form of a monster in order to cure herself in the same manner as Atwood's imaginative symbolism transforms Canadian wilderness into the figures of the wendigo and Coyote, "the monsters that originally appear in native Indian and Eskimo myths" (Vlašковиć 2011: 106). They serve as Other, "forces outside and ... opposed to the human protagonist" (Atwood 1982b: 233). The wilderness of the Quebec bush from *Surfacing* can thus be seen as the Monster-as-Other, "against which the human characters measure themselves" (235).

The same idea is made manifest in Alice Munro's short story "A Wilderness Station", from her 1994 collection *Open Secrets*. The story combines mystery, murder, and romance in an attempt to describe Canadian pioneer history (Howells 1998: 121). The epistolary form of the story—eleven personal letters written over a hundred-year period (1852-1959)—gives the impression of "hearing the authentic voices out of which colonial history has been made" (125). Munro's main female character, Annie McKillop, a young Canadian girl of Scottish parents from the Orphanage Home in Toronto, abides in this historical setting. At the age of eighteen, Annie becomes the wife of Simon Herron, a strict and uptight Canadian pioneer, who is clearing the bush in the Huron tract, the rural part of Ontario during the 1850s, with his brother George, in order to make a shanty and start a better life. Only three months into the marriage, while Simon and George are clearing the land one day, a branch falls from a tree and accidentally kills Simon. After George and Annie bury Simon, George soon finds his place in a neighbouring family, while Annie refuses any assistance whatsoever and seems "to develop an aversion to everyone who would help her", especially so "towards her brother-in-law" (Munro 1995: 198). Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Annie isolates herself from civilization and starts living like a wild animal. The Reverend Walter McBain, who tried to help Annie, is appalled by what he finds when he visits her shanty:

[T]he deterioration of her property showed the state of her mind and spirit. She would not plant peas and potatoes though they were given to her to grow among the stumps. She did not chop down the wild vines around her door. Most often she did not light a fire so she could have oat-cake or porridge. Her brother-in-law being removed, there was no order imposed on her days. When I visited her the door was open and it was evident that animals came and went in her house. If she was there she hid herself, to mock me. Those who caught sight of her said that her clothing was filthy and torn from scrambling about in the bushes, and she was scratched by thorns and bitten by the mosquito insects and let her hair go uncombed or plaited. I believe she lived on salt fish and bannock that the neighbours or her brother-in-law left for her. (198-199)

Eventually, Annie realizes that she cannot live a human life and behave like an animal. She needs the help of other people, so she decides to confess to killing her husband with a rock and spend the rest of her days in the Walley Gaol. The mystery of Munro's story begins to develop from this point, since it is highly unlikely that the feeble Annie could have killed a man as robust as Simon. She is released from prison and sent to work as a sewing-woman in the household of James Mullen, the clerk of Walley. In her confessional letter, which is the crucial part of the story, Annie claims that George killed his brother Simon in a fit of rage. But it is the wilderness narrative that is relevant for the argument that Canadians have to make peace with wilderness in order to survive. According to Howells (1998: 126), there are two kinds of wilderness narratives: "stories of death and disaster or stories of survival ... accompanied by new freedom and prosperity". Simon's is the first kind; Annie's is the latter. She manages to survive primarily because she feels "quite at home in the wilderness, but ironically lives a long life of freedom and safety by choosing to

go to gaol" (Ibid). Finally, both Annie and the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* realize that the only way to reconcile Man with Nature is to live in its midst for a while, even at the expense of going insane. Only then will one be able to return to the modern society and still appreciate and cherish Nature, as both these women do.

4. CONCLUSION

Canadian literature draws heavily on the national, cultural, political, and historical aspects of life in Canada. Canadian writers skilfully tackle both ancestral and contemporary problems in their works, and by proposing their artistic solutions they attempt to delineate what 'Canadian' is. The most pertinent issue is that of a distinct Canadian identity, which is difficult to grasp and accept because of Canada's colonial past. Canadian literature survives on the notion that those who inhabit Canada view themselves as victims who strive to achieve freedom by being different from other English and French-speaking countries. They do this by continually and fervently fighting the prejudices against their nation, by acknowledging their own wrongdoings in dealing with the Aborigines, and by highlighting both the beautiful and the challenging features of life in Canada. Their quest for identity is, however, hindered by the symbolic gap between the colonial past and the modern present, as well as between Canadian wilderness and Canadian urban territories. The selected literary examples have shown that this gap can be bridged if Canadians accept their past and incorporate it into their present, and if they acknowledge Canadian wilderness as that Other which makes their Self whole.

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IDENTITET I ŽRTVOVANJE U KANADSKOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Rezime

U knjizi *Opstanak, tematski vodič kroz kanadsku književnost* Margaret Etvud piše da se oni koji predaju kanadsku književnost, predmet koji ni sami nisu studirali, susreću sa dva ključna pitanja: „Šta je to kanadsko u pojmu kanadska književnost, i zašto bi trebalo da marimo?”. U zemljama izvan Kanade na ova pitanja je još bitnije odgovoriti, budući da su studenti engleskog jezika i književnosti tokom studija uglavnom izloženi najpoznatijim delima britanskih i američkih autora, te nikada ne razmišljaju o „kanadskoj” književnosti kao o zasebnoj oblasti u okviru književnosti napisane na engleskom jeziku. Iz tog razloga rad odgovara na pitanja koja je postavila Margaret Etvud i pokazuje da je za pravilno shvatanje kanadske književnosti kao zasebnog entiteta u proces učenja neophodno uključiti i njen nacionalni i kulturni aspekt. Rad zastupa tezu da je kanadska književnost većim delom zasnovana na potrazi za identitetom koji se jasno razlikuje od američkog, engleskog ili francuskog identiteta. Odabrani primeri iz književnih dela nekih od najpoznatijih kanadskih autora pokazaće da simbolički jaz koji stoji između kolonijalne prošlosti i moderne sadašnjosti Kanadana, kao i između kanadske divljine i kanadskih urbanih teritorija, često ometa potragu za kanadskim identitetom. Stoga kanadska književnost obiluje književnim likovima koji su predstavljeni kao žrtve, čije patnje postaju sastavni deo kanadskog identiteta.

Ključne reči: kanadska književnost, identitet, žrtva, divljina, Etvud, Manro, Riga

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