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## 'WHERE IS HERE'? ECO-POETICS IN THE CANADIAN PSYCHE: NORTHROP FRYE AND MARGARET ATWOOD

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to analyze the issues of history, identity and culture deeply interwoven in the ecological framework of the works of two eminent twentieth century Canadian writers, Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood. Ecology, the relation between individuals and natural world also encompasses a deep sense of belonging to a society, culture and community, being indispensable to one's existence. In the early 1970s Canadian cultural nationalism positioned wilderness as mark of difference as well as an object of ecological faith. Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) a work of literary criticism reflects this engrossment with wilderness. Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* and *Divisions on a Ground* also focus on Frygian vision of locale and landscape rooted in the region and culture of Canada.

In the writings of both Frye and Atwood the theme of Canadian identity is widely explored. The conditioning of the natives as the citizens of a country of uncertain identity, a confusing past and a hazardous future is reflected powerfully in phrases such as "garrison mentality", "the bush garden" and the question "where is here?" My paper seeks to examine the notion that Culture is not something that exists outside us but becomes vocal through us. In this sense Canadian landscape and culture too speak through Frye and Atwood. Nature, the area of the land and its geographical location – all these elements are highly significant in studying the "Canadianism" of Canada which is the product of a specific environment with a specific kind of historical background.

Key words: ecology, Canadian identity, history, culture, environment.

The sweeping statements about nature and Canadian identity made by critics in the era of Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden*(1971) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) will probably strike readers today as naive, but contemporary ecocritical approaches to Canadian literature and culture are not wholly separate from earlier critical and cultural fascinations with nature. If Frye and Atwood are not strictly ecological thinkers, their works nonetheless helped

establish a context for later ecological criticism. (xvi)

This remark by Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley in their 'Introduction' to *Greening the 'Maple': Canadian Ecocriticism in Context* (2015) definitely sets a ground to explore the 'context' that was there in Canadian literature long before the advent of ecocriticism and discuss both the continuities and ruptures in Canadian studies that reveal "nature" to

be a seminal yet shifting and unstable concept and site of investigation.

Ecology, the relation between individuals and the physical environment also encompasses a deep sense of belonging to a society, a land, a culture and community, being indispensable to one's existence. In the early 1970s Canadian cultural nationalism positioned wilderness as mark of difference as well as an object of ecological faith. Atwood's seminal work on Canadian history and culture, *Survival* reflects this engrossment with wilderness whereas, *The Bush Garden* focuses on Frygian vision of locale and identity deeply rooted in the region and culture of Canada. Culture is not something that exists outside us but becomes vocal through us. In this sense, Canadian landscape and culture too speak through Frye and Atwood. For both the teacher and the student, Canadian literature is characterized by a disharmony between its inherited European culture and its North American environment. More than anyone else, they put into perspective the question of Canadian cultural identity and provide us perceptions into the diverse ways of Canadian themes, images and patterns - the realm that both includes and exceeds that the human are interrelated and conceptualized.

When we begin to probe into a Canadian context per se, we need to remind ourselves that nature, the area of the land and its geographical location - all these elements are highly suggestive in discussing the 'Canadianism' of Canada. Canada has a distinct environment, with dimensions both in time and space, that is, in both history and geography, it does possess certain unique qualities. The most distinguishing one about the land is that there is so much of it; secondly to one's surprise its emptiness - which renders the country as largely unknown to rest of the world, even to most Canadians. The third fact is its rugged, character - forming climate solely determined by its geographical location. The nuances of ecocriticism or ecology namely, 'nature', 'wilderness' and 'environment' and their cognates powerfully illumine the way Canada has been a country with a specific environment and a specific kind of historical background.

Atwood's *Survivaland* essays by Frye like 'Sharing the Continent', and 'Haunted by lack of Ghosts' argue the point why nature has frequently been a troubled term in Canadian letters and how most significantly 'theory' in some form has rarely, if ever, been far removed from literary encounters with nature. Frye is of the view that virtually from the inception of the notion of a Canadian National literature; nature has occupied a central place in critical conversation. Atwood, in her work *Survival* echoes the same idea about the apparent distinctiveness of Canada in the form of 'Canadian Survivalism'. In this sense, Canadian literary studies, with their long-standing interest in nature, wilderness, and landscape might be said to have always been ecocritical.

Both Frye and Atwood illustrate the recurring, if not constant dread of nature and the reverence for it which is evident in Canadian literature and can be apprehended in terms of Canada's relations to Britain, France and the United States, and to a degree to other countries as well. In this case W.H. New suggests that 'the verbal trope' of 'land' enjoys a paradoxical quality in Canadian Culture functioning 'both as an icon of stability and as a medium of change' (37). In his essay 'Sharing the Continent' Frye observes that, "Canadians are conditioned from infancy to think of themselves as citizens of a country of uncertain identity, a confusing past, and a hazardous future" (186). Phrases such as "garrison mentality", "the bush garden" and Frye's fundamental question about the problem of Canadian identity is also concerned with locale as he wrote in his Conclusion to *The Literary History of Canada* "Where is Here" ? instead of "who am I ?" (220). Atwood aptly responds to this question in the *Survival* and explains that 'who am I' is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the "here" is already well-defined and where a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background.

"Where is Here" is a different kind of question that lies deep in the Canadian psyche. It is as Atwood suggests something that a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is this place

in relation to other places? How do I find my way around in it? Whether he survives or not will depend partly on what "here" really contains - whether it is too hot, too cold, too wet or too dry for him - and partly on his own desires and skills and so on. There may be other people "here" already, natives who are co-operative, indifferent or hostile. There may be also animals, to be tamed, killed and eaten or avoided. Thus, the impact of a 'terrifying climate' is noteworthy in the Canadian context. Even the feeling of Canada in huge, menacing and formidable physical setting is responsible for the writers to adopt a "garrison mentality" and they defend themselves against it, with the consequence that 'everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world' (*The Bush Garden* 225, 247).

For Frye, Canadian literature is characterized by a disharmony between its inherited European culture and its North American environment. This kind of 'topocentric criticism' is a stand in opposition to those who do not assume a mystical discontinuity between the Canadian imagination and its European roots (Surette 45). Frye shows the precise points where local creation becomes part of the civilized discourse which he speaks of criticism as creativity. Eli Mandel's remark is noteworthy here: "Frye's writings on the Canadian culture take us through history and literature - wedding a Laurentian theory of Canadian history with a romantic myth of a descent to the interior, through cultural history - ranging across the folk-culture theories of nation to modernist internationalism" (289). The fact is that Atwood and Frye, more than anyone else, have together put into perspective the question of Canadian cultural identity. Their approach is unique and wide in the sense that they understand the difficulties that confront such environment and conditioning. In their opinion, the Canadian question rises not only to the question of the social relevance of art, but to questions about the religious and mythic reach of art. Works such as *The Bush Garden* (1971) which includes Frye's "Conclusion" to the first edition of *The Literary History of Canada, The Modern Century* (1967) and *Divisions on a Ground* (1982) by Frye and poetry, fiction and non-fiction canon by Atwood have

been among the clearest expositions of their theories about Canadian literature and cultural origin. Frye had a gift for combining profound thought and quotable aphorism as in his remark that "Americans like to make money: Canadians like to audit it." Phrases such as the "garrison mentality", "the bush garden", and the question "where is here?" have become part of the national consciousness. Atwood weaves very subtly and effortlessly the landscape within tales of individual characters lending each one of them personal as well as universal character at the same time. Even her fictional protagonists seem to speak through the background, the extreme cold boundaries and the dark wintry weather to complete Canada as it really exists on the map of the world.

Over the years, Canadian poetic imagination has made tremendous efforts to rouse itself and create a reborn mythology, an effort still not ripe and perhaps collapsing before its fulfilment, but indicating that something new is on the way. In the essay titled 'Haunted by Lack of Ghosts', Frye quotes Douglas Lapan's poem significantly called "A Country without a Mythology" :

No monuments or landmarks guide the stranger

Going among this savage people....

And not a sign, no emblem in the sky

Or boughs to friend him as he goes; for who

Will stop where, clumsily contrived, daubed

With war-paint teeters some lust-red manitou? (28)

The idea seems to convey the structure of a nation of contradictions floating helplessly in a sea of confusion with no framework for living, with no proper definition of justice and without a single philosophical clue as to how a nation of civilized men interacts and sustains itself. All Canadian artists – painters as well as poets seem to experience this trauma of otherness to their own land in one way or the other. Margaret Atwood in the Afterword to her *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), too reflects upon this duality :

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in parts unknown to us, we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen – it is so easy to leave – and if we do choose it, we are still choosing a violent duality. (62)

Through *Survival*, a thematic study in Canadian history, locale, and literature, Atwood identifies patterns that predate, coincide with, participate in and follow the subtleties of ecocriticism. She attempts to grasp the nature of nature - the constitution and character of wilderness and countryside - as well as to represent its effects, harmful or otherwise, on people. She also discusses the trauma of bewilderment and otherness that all Canadian artists - painters as well as poets seem to experience. Canadian literature is amorphous - multilingual, multicultural, multiregional and Atwood and Frye's ideas also concentrate on the representation and discursive production of natural environments in a panoramic way. In fact, both of them are doubtlessly, the forerunners of a narrative of the emergence of Canadian ecocritical discourse.

In his 'Conclusion' to the *Literary History of Canada*, Frye notes that a characteristic feature of Canadian poetry is a predominant "tone of deep terror in regard to nature." This hypothesis about Canadian writings epitomizes the centrality of ecology in Canadian cultural studies. The idea of a 'garrison mentality' likewise captures the sense of hostility to the environment that ostensibly defines the Canadian mind. The purported "topocentrism" of Canadian literature and the unmistakable emphasis on wilderness as displayed by Atwood in her writings portray the myriad representations of nature manifested vividly and vibrantly in Canadian arts, letters, politics and other envisioning of the nation through Canadian iconography. This has encouraged and influenced very strongly environmental studies in Canadian writings.

Canada's geographical situation and its historical background become significant in order to examine if any of these 'unique qualities' are shared by Atwood's writings and Frye's studies. Canada is

best understood when we look for a strange kind of combination of certain features it presents. Frye himself was largely an urban person but the impact on him of what he has named Canada's 'terrifying climate' is noteworthy:

When all the intelligence, morality, reverence and sinian cunning of man confronts a sphinx – like riddle of the indefinite like the Canadian winter, the man seems as helpless as a trapped mink and as lonely as a loon. His thrifty little heaps of civilized values look pitiful beside nature's apparently meaningless power to waste and destroy on a superhuman scale, and such a nature suggests an equally ruthless and subconscious God, or else no God. (*The Bush Garden* 138)

Frye feels that Canada appears alien due to its vastness, emptiness and so much cold in winters, that there is a lurking feeling in addition to it that 'if anything did speak to the poet from nature it would speak only to condemn' ('Haunted' 29). In Atwood's *Survival*, the land of Canada suggests its characteristic feeling of withdrawal tinged with futility rather than commitment and this can be one reason that heroic action or revolutionary element though remains possible for Canada but shifts towards images of denial and defeat than those of fulfilment and victory. It seems that Canada finds the environment less impressive than oppressive. Hence, the feeling that human life have no harmony with nature on this earth. Frye echoes the idea:

It is a country in which nature makes a direct impression on the artist's mind, an impression of its primeval lawlessness and moral nihilism, its indifference to the supreme value placed on life within human society, its faceless, mindless, unconsciousness, which fosters life without benevolence and destroys it without malice (*The Bush Garden* 146).

In his article 'Northrop Frye and Canadian Literature', Om P. Juneja has pointed out that Northrop Frye discusses the question of Canadian sensibility in the second part of his 1965 essay.

Canadian sensibility, according to Frye is made up of three elements:

- a. A sense of probing into distance which is the direct result of the Canadian's probing into the open space with his eyes on the skyline;
- b. A sense of society as a continuum ;
- c. garrison mentality (7).

Since his childhood, Frye learned that it is only idolatrous to search for numinous presences in nature. Yet the Romantics who fascinated Frye first, through William Blake, exhibit a strong urge for communion with nature; and the fact is that their desire lies behind Frye's major critical interest in myth and metaphor in which the human and the non – human are identified. The Romantic poet's association with the garden that constitutes the English landscape was denied to Canadian writers; their otherness to their own environment posed the challenge to create an imaginative world constructed out of human concerns and anxieties as the only one with which they could identify. It also challenged Frye to show how this imaginative world can be taken as symbolic universe, a higher level of nature on which we aspire to live. He writes in *Divisions on a Ground*: "I have spent most of my professional life studying one aspect of the way man constructs the world he lives in; the aspect I call a mythology, the building of worlds out of words" (185).

The claim made by Frye in his article 'Criticism and Environment' that 'man never lives directly in nature: he lives inside the construct of culture or civilization' seems partly fallacious atleast for larger Canadians who are forced to live very directly in the lap of nature and not having any cultural constructs of the urban life (15). In noting the sense 'of probing into the distance' and 'of fixing the eyes on the skyline' (Denham 251) of the Canadian writers, Frye's views become very much identical to them. Prof. Hamilton puts it clearly:

What he finds characteristic of Canadian writers is characteristic of his own criticism, specifically, his persistent effort to gain perspective not just on a particular literary work, which has been the business of critics

since Aristotle, or on the literary works of a particular period or country, which has been the business of literary historians, but on nothing less than the whole of literature (316).

'There would be nothing distinctive in Canadian Culture at all', Frye remarks in *The Bush Garden*, 'if there were not some feeling for the immense searching distance, with the lines of communication extended to the absolute limit, which is a primary geographical fact about Canada and has no real counterpart elsewhere' (10). What Frye terms 'a primary geographical fact' echoes a primary critical fact about his criticism – his imaginative insight was stretched to the absolute limit by his effort, which is uniquely Canadian because no other critic of any country has attempted it, to map literature as a whole by demonstrating the way to organize all literary works into a total schematic order or one body of literature, what he calls 'an order of words'. Frye's inter-connected system is a Canadian reaction to a Canadian situation as Margaret Atwood has aptly pointed out in 'Northrop Frye Observed':

Stranded in the midst of a vast space which nobody has made sense out of for you, you settle down to map-making, charting the territory, the discovery of where things are in relation to each other, the extraction of meaning. The poets were doing it with their own times and spaces, Frye was doing it within literature as a whole (405).

The Canadian sensibility displayed in the desire to probe into the distance is very much evident in Frye's compulsive desire to communicate, not only by the usual way of writing and teaching but by lecturing to audiences around the world. In connection to the effect of the Canadian environment on writers, he added, 'I began to understand the extent to which this almost one-dimensional country has been preoccupied with communications of all kinds'. Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan too were interested in the totality of communication and the same is true of Frye as he notes that 'a similar sense of the unity of communication has affected me, and has had a good deal to do with what I have called my evangelical

attitude to the teaching of literature' (*Spiritus Mundi* 24). Hence, the Canadian environment motivated Frye not to revolve just around the towns near Monton but to enact his oppressive desire to spread the word by preaching the Bible and literature throughout the world with a difference.

In *The Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture*, Frye explores the Canadian literary imagination in three directions – imaginative terror, pastoral populism and garrison mentality. He does not look closely at the chosen texts but remains interested in isolating certain patterns to perform what Margaret Atwood calls the essential Canadian Critical act, that of saying, "This is where it fits into the entire universe" (quoted in Juneja 14).

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