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RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE SELF: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF MARGARET  
ATWOOD'S *THE JOURNALS OF SUSANNA MOODIE*

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism, originated in a bio-social context of excessive exploitation of nature and environmental hazard and focuses on the link between literature and nature. The Ecofeminist paradigm stands at the intersection of feminist and ecological thought. Perhaps the most important approach within Ecocriticism and ecological activism is that of the Ecofeminists that works on the binary that nature is feminine and culture masculine. Nature is imagined as a woman whose basic task is reproduction and nurture, where men dominate both women and nature. The goal of this paper is to concentrate on the correlation between the systematic domination and abuse of women, nature and native Canadian aboriginals, under the social activist umbrella of Ecofeminism. It focuses on Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, contextualizing the identity of a woman, struggling to adapt the harsh Canadian climate which is coupled with diverse skeletons of dissolution of natural order, when her family has shifted to Upper Canada in 1832. Perhaps her finest collection of poems, this cult text of Atwood describes Susanna Moodie, a unnoteworthy English born Canadian author and the disintegration of her identity from the English lady she was and becoming something else, something closer to the landscape and ultimately a part of it. Thus, this paper proposes to draw attention to Atwood's work as a reconstruction of identity, which shows a protagonist as a manifestation of national Schizophrenia, whose vision of both life and nature has been destroyed.

Keywords:- Nature, wilderness, ecology, feminine psyche.

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Ecocriticism, which has been influenced by insights from sociology, ecology, feminism and other similar disciplines, originated in a bio-social context of excessive exploitation of nature and environmental hazard and focuses on the link between literature and nature. The Ecofeminist paradigm stands at the intersection of feminist and ecological thought. Perhaps the most important approach within Ecocriticism and

ecological activism is that of the Ecofeminists that works on the binary that nature is feminine and culture masculine. Nature is imagined as a woman whose basic task is reproduction and nurture. All branches of ecofeminism have the fundamental realisation that it is women and nature's shared oppression within male-dominated Western culture rather than biology or essential identity that constructs a special closeness between them. The unearthing of the diverse characteristics of both woman and nature and the various ways in which women relate with nature save ecofeminism from the critique of essentialism and help the fostering of a democratic ecological ethic that prioritizes the preservation of diversity among humans and nature in a non-hierarchical and non-dualistic manner.

Woman-nature identifications are engraved in a variety of ways in literature from the ancient times. A feminine conceptualization of nature most often becomes significant through almost all geographical features like mountains, forests, trees, rivers, oceans and rain as potent symbols of feminine power inherent in nature. The goal of this paper is to concentrate on the correlation between the systematic domination and abuse of women, nature and native Canadian aboriginals. It focuses on Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, contextualizing the identity of a woman, struggling to adapt the harsh Canadian climate which is coupled with diverse skeletons of dissolution of natural order, when her family has shifted to Upper Canada in 1832. Perhaps her finest collection of poems, this cult text of Atwood describes Susanna Moodie, an un-noteworthy English born Canadian author and the disintegration of her identity from the English lady she was and becoming something else, something closer to the landscape and ultimately a part of it. Thus, this paper proposes to draw attention to Atwood's work as a reconstruction of identity, which shows the protagonist as a manifestation of national Schizophrenia, whose vision of both life and nature has been destroyed.

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is Margaret Atwood's one of the finest collections of poetry. The book derives its shapes and cohesiveness, from the persona of Moodie herself as Atwood traces the change – the growth and development – in Moodie's response to the land. This group of poems, organized like a novel, focuses on a central character and is tied to a chronological sequence showing the protagonist's growth. Atwood adopts the voice of Susanna Moodie, a noted early Canadian writer and attempts to imagine and convey Moodie's feelings about life in the Canada of her era. Mrs. Moodie's best known settler narrative was *Roughing it in the Bush*, based on her experiences of the 1830's when she accompanied her husband, J.W.D Moodie, himself a man of literary pretensions, to settle with half-pay on uncleared ground. The book separates into three journals, which cover her arrival in 1832. Journal one is from 1832-1840. Journal two encompasses 1841-1870, journal three continues on until 1969, wherein a dead Susanna Moodie comments on the 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada.

Journal one, covering Mrs. Moodie's years on the bushes takes us through the beginning of her transformation. The opening poem, 'Disembarking at Quebec', portrays the possibility of her disharmony with the land. She is taking her tentative steps towards coming to terms with the new land, towards greater self-understanding. The image of "planting", emphasized in the poem 'The Planters', recounts Moodie watching her husband and their neighbour attempting to plant the garden, an obvious attempt to tame and humanize the wilderness. 'The Two Fires' is the brilliant example of destruction of the protagonist. Moodie has established a new relation to the land and to herself, and the destruction of her old values and morals symbolizes her total alienation from her old self, in accordance with the new social order. In 'Looking in A Mirror', Mrs. Moodie realizes that her civilized self has been destroyed completely as the land is destroyed by the new comers.

Journal two covers the years 1840-1871. It began with Moodie achieving a new relation to the land. The old order cannot be re-created in the new land. 'The Bush Garden' portrays the surrealistic image of vegetables turning into animals which is grotesque and indicates the feminine identity is going to get trashed by the carnivorous animals. In the third Journal, Moodie's transformation finally occurs. The opening poem shows her out of place in the civilized world. She is totally alienated from the land and distanced from the society around her. By the end of 'Visit To Toronto', the separation is total. Finally, she rejects the existing nature. She is committed to destroying the walls and to herself. The land was destroyed by the Newcomers; her identity was destroyed by the land and the society.

The protagonist is on the border between England and Canada- a manifestation of a national Schizophrenia. As men destroy women in the protagonist's vision of the world, so groups and nations destroy and oppress the other groups and nations. Men are the oppressors of Canada and the invaders of the wilderness. The protagonist is dead somewhere in the journals, but she must somehow be reborn, psychologically. Susanna Moodie is a stranger in her own world, divided and half insane, torn between love and hate for the wilderness in which she find herself immersed. She has lost herself; she refuses to look in mirrors, even *the moving water will not show me/ my reflection*. She is doubled and divided, perceiving her world and dominated by terrible polarities. She transforms herself as well as others: her husband walks into the forest in 'The Wereman' as he disappears from sight, she asks, *what does he change into/ what other shape/ blends with the under growth//*. Susanna Moodie is a failed artist, a writer frustrated by her own inability to define herself as an artist. The speaker in the poems remain divided, herself symbolic of the violent duality with which Atwood characterises Canada and wilderness. The best that can be construed is that she ultimately accepts the reality of the country she is in, and she has to accept the inescapable doubleness of her own vision. In the last poem, 'A Bus Along St. Clair: December', Susanna Moodie has transcended her death and, witch-like, has returned to curse the very civilisation she once longed for. She transforms the city back into the wilderness.

The landscape is changing her husband into something else. She wonders, he is changing into something else, at the same time she also realizes she is also changing. In looking in a mirror, she can't even recognize herself anymore. Susanna realises, she is no longer the English lady who arrived seven years ago. When she and her husband finally leave for the city of Belleville, Susanna is no longer sure she can re-adapt to city life, since the forest now seems to inhabit her. Susanna's son drowned at the beginning of Journal two, and he seems to become part of the landscape that was once foreign to her. She is haunted by the Canadian wilderness. Poems like, 'The Double Voice' reveals Susanna's double vision or double identity: the Susanna who now lives in a city and has regained the comforts of life as she had in England, and the Susanna who has gained an understanding of a rough life of survival in the wilderness.

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is a map to the psyche of the heroine. In the Afterword to the poems, Atwood compares Susanna Moodie's doubleness to the 'paranoid Schizophrenia' that is Canada. Susanna Moodie is in fact the landscape and the female tradition. The depiction of Moodie's husband and neighbour planting trees in the wilderness symbolizes the men in power and they are intrinsically more evil than men, because they are in control of nature and women. What greets Moodie in Canada is something else, something which confounds her inherited notions of the appropriate order of the phenomenal world.

The poems are tied by a number of key images, trees, fire, light and darkness. The opening journal reveals Mrs Moodie's state in the new land – she is artificially stuck into the wilderness and lacks any initial connection with the land. The image of *planting* which persists throughout the book is of course an attempt to portray the female identity being planted in the wilderness by the male members. This leads to the development of a power relationship between the active male subject and the passive female object, where the former imposes limits on the latter. The aesthetics of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain required the objectification of landscape in the gaze of the human subject. Thus the identity of both feminine and nature is constructed and re-structured by the determined realm of patriarchy. Man becomes a law giver to both women and nature, victimizing both.

Atwood, as a Canadian presents an obvious interest in the psychological dimension of the immigrant experience in Canada, the ways in which the encounter with the unexplained wilderness precipitates a psychological reaction which is irrational and symptomatic of something larger than the reality at hand. Ecofeminists speak of the woman's role in harnessing the indigenous, traditional knowledges, which are revived to foster an ecologically sustainable way of life. But here, burned with a disruptive sense of dislocation, Moodie estranges herself with the strange nature. She is identified with the nature both in suffering and in being the victims of patriarchy. The suffering earth is compared to the protagonist by describing the different stages of life's cycle undergone by both. Poems like, 'The Planters' and 'The Two Fires' portray the suffering and exploitation of nature which act as the visionary poet's warning against the threats that may occur.

Women are considered embodiments of tolerance and forgiveness. The biological reproductive function has given greater emotional capacity for patience and preservation, which is instinctual for the rearing of the offspring. Ecofeminists consider this character of women as supportive to their aptitudes for preservation and conservation of nature. The ruined forest is symbolic of women, which is destroyed but trying to nurture itself with greenery. Beneath the surface level of suffering, tolerance and companionship can be perceived. As Atwood writes in the Afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* in all its traditional symbolism of virgin wilderness and pristine innocence, Canada is a kind of Eden of the imagination, a 'green world' with its very nature, is subject to invasion and oppression by its stronger enemies. Canada represents victimisation, which Atwood presents as essentially feminine. Atwood's heroine, like Canada as a whole, refute the illusion of their own innocence, recognize their complicity in the destructive cycle of power and victimization, and thus confront their own reality, divided and schizophrenic as that reality may be. Just as Atwood's heroine move from innocence to confrontation, so is Canadian wilderness.

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