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THE CONFLICTS OF CANADIAN IDENTITY REPRESENTED IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
POEM "THE ANIMALS IN THAT COUNTRY"

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, an internationally acclaimed novelist, poet and short story writer is widely considered as a major figure in Canadian literature. In her works, she focuses on the themes of alienation and self-identity. As a poet, her works concentrate on the question of identity with as much passion as Neruda and Walcott. There is a style and force in her writing. The major themes of Atwood's poetry include the inconsistencies of self-perception, the Canadian identity and experience, the paradoxical nature of language and the conflicts between human kind and nature. Her poems are intensely personal and lyrical. Through her poems, she performs mental transformations of identity as she looks at the life of Canadian pioneers. She is of the view that the country stands as a metaphor for such people. As a Canadian writer, Atwood deals with the issues of victimization and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience.

The poem "The Animals in that Country" contrasts nature and history with the way man has recognized them. The opposition metaphorically addresses the difference between the attitudes of Americans and Canadians and the differences and complexities in their identities. Atwood captures this with much elegance and also in a little ironical manner.

Key Words: Canadian identity and experience, victimization, oppression

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"Literature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind" wrote Margaret Atwood in her critical study *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. As a writer, Atwood's main focus is on relationships and attitudes whether it be between human beings and nature or between people. While she is best known as a novelist, she has also published fifteen books of poetry. Many of her poems have been inspired by myths and fairy tales, which are unique to Canadian culture. Atwood's contributions to the theorizing of Canadian identity have gained attention both in Canada and at international levels. According to her theories in works such as *Survival* and her exploration of similar themes in her fiction, Atwood considers Canadian literature as the expression of Canadian identity. She believes a writer must consciously work within his or her nation's literary tradition and her own works closely parallels the themes common to the Canadian literary tradition.

Atwood's poetry focusses on the question of identity with as much passion as Neruda and Walcott. A major recurring pattern one identifies in Atwood's poems is the setting up of a series of binary oppositions. For example, "The Circle Game" sets up an antithesis between the planned world of the city and the natural life of the indigenous people. Atwood is precise in delineating her subject matter. Atwood is deeply moved by nationalism and the rise of cultural values in Canada. She is a passionate observer of Canadian life. Her poetry is at once personal, political and lyrical. She says, "I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's right as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture." (<https://books.google.co.in/books>)

The Animals in that Country is Atwood's collection of poems in 1968. This collection introduces many of the observations that sheds light on later works of Atwood. The themes like the contrast between the familiar and the unknown, the gulf between civilization and wilderness and the differences between societies and cultures where 'the animals have faces of people' and where 'the animals have the faces of animals' can be seen in almost all poems in this collection. Notable poems in this collection are "The Animals in that Country", "At the Tourist Centre in Boston", "The Landlay", "More and More" etc.

The title poem in this collection, "The Animals in that Country" contrasts nature and history with the way man has recognized them. The poem records the contrast between the static European tradition and the dynamic vibrant Canadian life. The opposition metaphorically addresses the difference between the attitudes of the Americans and Canadians and the differences and complexities in their identities. Atwood captures this with much elegance and also in a little ironical manner.

"The Animals in that Country" is a poem in which the literal and the metaphorical functions as complementary halves that reflect the physical and mental states of a person making her/him a complete human being. Self awareness and issues of identity are well explored in the poem. The poem at its onset refers to 'that country' which is not at all a mythical one. It is the country from where the white people came, or perhaps the colony they established. It is a place where oppression have been rampant for years. The people living there are animal like but pretending to be like humans. The negative, beastly characteristics suggesting cruelty are demonstrated in the lines, 'the ceremonial /cats possessing the streets'. These are people in power, the very same ones who exploit the natives in seemingly benevolent ways. Here Atwood introduces an image from hunting, a feudal sport in England where 'the fox run / politely to earth'. If the native people of Canada are the fox, then colonial benevolence has entrapped them in locations marked out for them. Their only option is to enter the mainstream white society on the white man's terms. The 'hunters' who are mentioned in this poem are motionless 'in their tapestry of manners'. Here Atwood hints how colonization has affected native Canadian life.

'The bull in the ring' is an obvious reference to Spain and its blood thirsty sport in which the spectators watch the brutal killing of an animal with immense joy. Atwood uses an oxymoron, 'elegant death' to stress the cruelty of the event where violence transforms into honour, glory and victory. The image of the bull dying painfully in the ring is a thought-provoking one. The image of the 'ceremonial cats' represent those in power. These 'ceremonial cats' constantly oppress 'the foxes and the bulls', the natives who are being victimized. Atwood depicts the Canadian people as victims and the Americans as victimizers.

In the second section of the poem, Atwood is speaking about Canada before it was colonized where 'the animals have the faces of animals'. They were a group of people who do not dissimulate and pretend. They are what they are. The poet is highly symbolic when she claims that 'their eyes, flash once in car headlights and are gone.' Atwood hints the new developments happened as a result of colonization. High ways wind through what was once forest land and animals who wandered out there are so easily killed. No one sees their death and no one cares the fact that they are dead. The final lines of the poem are so sombre as a deathknell. The line 'they have faces of no one' emphasizes the fact that all forms of identity are gone from them.

Most of Atwood's poems make somekind of personal statement and she usually takes the side of the weak. The Canadian land with its regional diversity has been a central figure in Canadian literature and it has become a main theme in most of Atwood's poems. According to her it is when landscape becomes mindscape

that we find poetry indulging with individual, regional and national significance. This is what we find in “The Animals in that Country” too. The image of the bull dying painfully in the ring is emphasised in order to show the irony and Atwood says that as the bull fell to his death, ‘the teeth in his blue mouth were human’. Atwood describes it as ‘he is really a man’. She asserts the fact that human beings are so brutal that they kill their own kind for pleasure. It is a country where death is seen as ‘elegance’ where it is used as a means to suppress people.

Atwood’s next reference to ‘wolves’ seems to suggest strength but they are also subdued by the ‘cats of the streets’. The ‘resonant conversations’ of the ‘wolves’ bring to our minds the picture of the native Canadians who lived independently in the ‘forests’ until the new people arrived to steel their wilderness away from them.

It is important to note that in Canadian literature the animal stories hold their inevitable social significance. Atwood in her *Survival* describes that the animal stories are about social relations. The poem is based on anti-thesis between ‘ceremonial’, ‘elegant’ and ‘heraldic’. The animals giving up their beastly nature and acquiring human attributes is seen in contrast to humans playing the role of huntsmen. In contrast, when the animals are hunted mercilessly, the last gaze of the hunted animals convey the haunting sign that they are really human which is evident in the lines, ‘when he rolled on the sand, sword in his heart, the teeth in his blue mouth were human-he is really a man’. Here Atwood is highly critical of the attitudes of Americans in their relations with nature.

Mohit K. Ray and Rama Kundu in their *Studies In Women Writers in English* analysis Atwood’s poem. According to them, “The Animals in that Country” reflects the Canadian situation to a great extent. It is appropriate to observe that Canada was famous for fur trade and remains a hunting ground for Americans to quench their recreational fancies. ‘The Animals’ in the poem are Canadians and ‘that country’ metaphorically stands for Canada. In his work on Atwood’s poems, Paul Lee Thomas states that Atwood’s “The Animals in that Country” asks the reader to note the distinction between ‘that country’ and ‘this country’ suggesting a commentary by the speaker. The poem’s first twenty lines addresses the ‘ceremonial’ and the mythic through images such as fox hunt, bull fights and legends. These romanticized views of the destruction of animals in ‘that country’ where ‘animals have the faces of people’ is contrasted with ‘this country’ where ‘animals have the faces of animals,. But in ‘this country’ animals die mercilessly in the headlights of careless cars. But their deaths are not elegant. Thus Atwood can be described as a poet who always urged to depict the condition of alienated individuals through her works. She often dealt with political themes and issues like social injustice and maintained an autobiographical vein in her poems. These features can be traced in this particular poem too.

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