

## Quest to Reclaim Self-Identity in the Face of Calamity in Margaret Atwood's Poem *The Animals in that Country*

S. Selvakumar

M.Phil. English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

Margaret Atwood as a prolific writer encompasses with in herself versatile character and multifarious dimension of being a renowned scholar, a prodigious poet, an accomplished novelist, acclaimed short story writer, a literary critic and an environmental activist. As a deep core Canadian, in all her writings either directly or indirectly she has invariably delved into matters that deal with the Canadian society and its well being at large and in particular the natural environment, species, animals and the original inhabitants of the country. She is the custodian of many medallions and honorary titles.

The term "Identity" according to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* refers to "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual". Identity discloses belief systems, culture, food habits, uniqueness and way of life of an individual and community at large. Hence, Identity marks out the distinctiveness and turns out to be the hallmark of any ethnic community, race, tribe or a nation. It is a binding force that connects human with the society and the natural world to which he or she belongs.

The poem "The Animals in that Country" is taken from Margaret Atwood's collection *The Circle Game*. The author of the poem deserves our compliments for courageously disclosing the callousness, the indifferences and the cruel acts of her own ancestors to the natives of the Canada through this poem. The term "that country" refers to England from where people flooded into Canada and established their colony. The so called invaders who intruded into the heart of Canada did not enrich the culture, traditions, rituals and the identity of the natives rather they were determined to abolish all that belonged to the natives. It was a heart breaking scenario. The sons and daughters of the mother land become homeless; their pain and predicament is excruciating; they have become victims of injustice. The poem prompts to raise numerous questions in the mind of the readers while reading the text. Who will stand by them? Who will wipe away their tears? Who will be there to narrate their glorious history? Who will feel their pain and who will make their darkness bright?

Invariably every human person desires to reiterate his or her cultural identity because it is that which marks out his or her uniqueness. Thus the centrality of any ethnic community is to keep alive their identity and culture. When a community is entrapped by a dominant force its life, identity, traditions and culture ceases to exist. A community which has long tradition and history and which has the will power to withstand the tempest of the times will survive. The author as a witness to the colonial power explicates systematically the

impending danger that is posed to the animals and natives of Canada through her poem. Margaret Atwood is concerned about prominence of self-awareness, self-consciousness and self-assertion of the natives. She voices the concern of the natives and their quest for identity. Shakti Batra emphasizes this in her analysis about the poem in *Neruda, Walcott and Atwood Three Contemporary Poets: A Critical Study* as, “Self awareness and issues of identity are explored in a manner that could make the descendants of the white settlers extremely restless, even uncomfortable” (127).

The author has arranged her poem into eleven stanzas, employing free verse, poetic devices like metaphor, personification, repetition, irony, alliteration and indented the last four stanzas. The purpose is to present the matter vividly and capture the attention of the readers to every line and explore the intricacies embedded in it. Atwood uses the images of several animals in her poems like cats, fox, bull and wolves in order to explain the importance of their existence and the qualities inherent in them and aptly apply their nature and qualities to the oppressive forces and natives of the country respectively. The English settlers in Canada oppressed or sprang upon the natives and made them to become victims like “the ceremonial/cats possessing the streets”.

The term ‘cats’ refer to the supremacy and the royalty of the English while the term ‘fox’ refers to the victim, the oppressed native. The author gradually unfolds the selfish attitude of the settlers and their sadist approach in settling scores with the natives. Like predators and huntsmen they look to eliminate the animals and the natives. The author compares them to ‘hunting’ which was a royal, feudal sport in England and ‘bull fight’ which is a bloody sport in Spain. The hunters never realize the pain and the agony of the hunted creatures rather they are interested only in killing and experiencing euphoria in taking away lives. Their cruel nature is further exposed where they do not stop relishing the pain of an animal personally but invite the spectators to watch the bull die joyously.

Whom does this bull refer to? Although conspicuously, it refers to the animals that become prey to the greed of the English, it also makes reference to natives as well. Their attitude of ‘might is right’ renders our hearts bleed at the atrocities and the brutality meted out to the natives. It raises numerous questions and leaves us out to look for answers. Can human take the life of a fellow human? Is killing justifiable? Is killing the act of civility? If so, how do we call and label the so called civilized nation that invaded Canada and aimed at destroying the flora and fauna and the natives? One can only become just speechless and mute spectator at the enormous horrors and pain inflicted upon the natives.

The author employs an oxymoron while referring the horrific phenomenon called ‘death’. She calls death as ‘an elegant death.’ According to Batra, “Even if she had not confirmed that the murdered animal ‘is really a man’, it would be instinctual to know that she wants to assert that the human beings are so brutal,

they kill their own kind for pleasure”(127). Could it be perhaps she wants the native not to suffer again in the hands of the oppressor rather get relieved from the pain once and for all? Could it be perhaps she wants to offer glorious tributes to dead who have been suffering for years? While using the term ‘wolves’ the author compares it with native Indians who had lived in the forest for years and who have been stripped of their natural habitat by the invaders.

In the first half of the poem she fixes her attention on the Indian tribes who become the victims of invaders and stripped of their natural habitat. It also spells out the maliciousness of colonizers who were determined to erase the cultural identity and value systems of the nature. At the outset the author used the word ‘that country’ and towards the end of the poem she uses the word ‘this country’. The word ‘this country’ refers to the country called Canada which had its natural beauty, wonders in all its radiance, richness in bounty and inhabited by the animals and native people. The word ‘that’ refers to the pretentiousness and artificiality of the invaders while the word ‘this’ refers to the originality and uniqueness of the original inhabitants.

The author claims that the thick forest and all the species with its variety including the ‘deer’ that dwell in their natural home have been wiped away mercilessly by the self proclaimed ‘civilized’ colonizers. As an environmentalist Margaret Atwood is able to augur the alarming consequences that will occur due to the invaders’ disruption of natural habitat of flora and fauna and the aborigines whose livelihood depends on nature. She echoes her concern for the importance of the natural world and turns out to be unforgiving on those who cause destruction. The description of their death as not being elegant spells out the volumes of torments, the haunting nightmare and the unbearable pain they faced. Their dead bodies remain unsung and unwept. They have lost their faces and their identity is gone. What else can narrate their conditions? It bleeds our heart profusely to listen to their pathos. The tragedy and the irony that unfolded at the end was that the native became an alien; the freed became a slave; the victor became a victim.

Though the author ends the poem with the note of death, we are able to infer from the text the anguish of the author and her longing to regain the identity of the natives in Canada. In spite of chaos and pandemonium, the agonizing ambience of doom and death, there is an insatiable thirst and quest to reclaim the identity and the history of the past among the natives. In *Post Colonial Literature: An Introduction* Pramod K. Nayar and asks, “Is native cultural identity is reclaimable? Is it possible to return to an authentic pre-colonial past?” (83) Is it unlawful to have the nostalgic experience? The journey continues amidst the oppressive forces and hope that one day they will reach their home land, reclaim their identity and be able to return to an authentic pre-colonial past.

## References

1. Batra, Shakti. Neruda, Walcott And Atwood Three Contemporary Poets: A Critical Study. Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2013. Print.
2. Fraser, Iliana. "The animals in that country." Prezi.com. Prezi, <<https://prezi.com/tdranpxpdea/the-animals-in-that-country/>> 27 Jan. 2016. Web.
3. "Identity." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam - Webster, n.d. <[http:// www. Merriam - webster. com/ dictionary/identity](http://www.Merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity)>.27 Jan. 2016. Web.
4. Nayar, Pramod K. Post Colonial Literature: An Introduction. Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008. Print.

---