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MARGARETE RUBIK

**NATIONAL IDENTITY, INTERNATIONAL LIFE-STYLES AND
COSMOPOLITAN CULTURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
'SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF MY MOTHER',
'HURRICANE HAZEL' AND 'UNEARTHING SUITE'**

Margaret Atwood, the grande dame of contemporary Canadian literature, is a writer that can hardly be pigeonholed.

Reviewers of Atwood's work have attempted to place her in many different categories: she has been called a feminist writer...; a religious writer...; a gothic writer...; a writer of the Canadian wilderness; a nationalist writer; a regionalist. (Rosenberg 1984:15)

Although in her fiction she has struck a responsive chord in readers all over the world and has expressed feelings, frustrations and anxieties shared by a multi-cultural public, Atwood sees herself first of all as a Canadian, and, like most of her compatriots, is concerned with defining, in one way or another, a national identity. In interviews she tends to be acerbic in distancing herself from U.S. culture, refusing to be subsumed in the faceless international literary community. Such unthinking cosmopolitanism to her carries a profound threat of rootlessness and loss of identity.

Refusing to acknowledge where you come from ... is an act of amputation: you may become free-floating, a citizen of the world ... but only at the cost of arms, legs and heart. (Rosenberg 1984:148)

Yet her attitude towards her native country's quest for identity is ambiguous, and she vacillates between sympathy for her countrymen's 'groping for their identities' and annoyance with their obsession.

The absence of a Canadian identity has always seemed nonsense to me, and the search for it a case of the dog chasing its own tail. (Atwood 1982: 87 and 385)

In her work, she protests against narrow-mindedness and anti-liberalism, yet at the same time understands herself as a mouthpiece and representative of Canadian culture, while critics have accused her of driving underground entire regions and movements within Canadian writing – ‘those who haven’t expressed the “right ideas” to make the Atwood canon’¹ (Davey 1973:84). Her ethnic affiliation is clear-cut: for all her undoubted liberalism, her stories are Eurocentric in that she largely leaves out of the picture the indigenous populations, i.e., the Indians and Inuits, although there can be no doubt that she was profoundly influenced by indigenous cultures in her poetry. Indeed, she writes almost exclusively about the Anglo-Canadian community. In the short-story collection *Bluebeard’s Egg* a French-Canadian figure appears only once, as a drunkard and wife-beater in the story ‘Betty’.

The three largely autobiographical stories in the collection, viz. ‘Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother’, ‘Hurricane Hazel’ and ‘Unearthing Suite’, in particular, seem to foreground a specifically ‘Canadian’ experience. Yet, quite typically, they at the same time view this quest for national identity ironically by revealing what seems to be a genuine sense of place as mere nostalgia and personal idiosyncrasy.

All three stories, although set at different periods, present the ‘pioneer’ lives of the parents, unconventional lives full of adventure and frontier hardship. The story about the life of the mother goes back to the early decades of the century and the youth of the narrator’s mother, presenting the now old lady as a tomboy on runaway horses, falling off barns, playing with discarded urine samples in her tree-house, or as a young woman riding a horse to the school she taught in and living with her husband in remote cabins in the Northern wilderness. ‘Hurricane Hazel’ is set in the narrator’s teens in the fifties² and tells of holidays spent in log cabins without running water, electricity or indoor toilets, where old parachutes served as partitions, where meals were cooked outdoors or on an old primus stove, and where the girl had to walk miles to the nearest store. ‘Unearthing Suite’ starts in the present, but includes extensive flashbacks to the parents’ courtship and early married life, again evoking a romantic vision of canoe trips into the Canadian wilderness, wild nature trails, and primitive log cabins without any amenities far in the north of the country. Yet what, to an outsider, might seem the ingredients of true Canadian identity, namely a pioneer spirit inextricably mingled with an immersion in European culture (an aspect I will come back to later), is, in fact, a mere eccentricity on the part of the cranky old couple. Their life of log cabins and camp fires, which gives such a strong ‘Canadian’ flavour to the stories, is, after all, hopelessly outdated because the very elements of the frontier spirit have been undermined from within. The wilderness, in which many Canadian writers seem to find their national roots, is doomed in the *Bluebeard* stories. The bullfrogs are dying out (‘Spring Song of the Frogs’), there are hardly any fisher-martens left (‘Unearthing Suite’), even

1 Mathews attacked her neo-colonial evaluation of Canadian literature.

2 Hurricane Hazel struck Toronto in 1954.

remote places can be reached by car, the lakes are polluted ('Hurricane Hazel'), the trails in the forests are no longer blazed, but nowadays marked with fluorescent tape ('Unearthing Suite', 320). So the basis of the frontier ideology is disappearing. No wonder that the family's life-style is regarded as highly bizarre by their neighbours. The parents' 'refusal to buy a television set and sit in front of it eating their dinner off fold-up trays, and their failure to acquire an indoor clothes dryer' ('Hurricane Hazel', 42) brand them as hopeless outsiders. Their aversion to the featureless, 'Americanized' way of life the people around them lead, in fact, links the family much more with radical 'Green' ideologies than with their Canadian compatriots, thus establishing an international connection rather than a national awareness.³

But the international dimension, too, is highly ambiguous, both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, this internationalized culture creates a world of junk food, drive-in supermarkets and standardized behaviour, against which the nostalgic old ways are an antidote, albeit a doomed one. But the Americanized way of life, on the other hand, also entails a certain amount of ease and comfort, which the grown-up narrator of 'Unearthing Suite' confesses she enjoys, whether in the form of take-away pizzas or that of roadside motels. Acquiescence in this conformist culture also ensures the social acceptance the young narrator in 'Hurricane Hazel' covets. Once she learns how to imitate the dating manners of her peers and manages to hide the 'embarrassing' eccentricities of her parents, she is accepted by the school community, until she herself rejects their unintellectual vacuity and provincial goals.

In the three stories cosmopolitanism has, of course, also another face, i.e., the link to European culture and tradition. Not all the cultural inheritances referred to in the stories are as 'oppressive' as Davey (13) claims, but again, their evaluation is two-sided. For the narrator this European legacy is mainly symbolized by a reading of the English classics, which open up a world of romance and escape from various unpleasant ancillary household-tasks, but also a realm of learning and intellectualism. Thus the teenage girl of 'Hurricane Hazel' climbs up a tree to read *Wuthering Heights* undisturbed, and is very conscious of the gulf between the schoolgirl studying *The Mill on the Floss* and her dull date, who is a mere garage-hand. As is shown in 'Unearthing Suite', her father is equally steeped in European learning, as he is an expert on the fine points of history. The family's education, involving, as it does, higher aspirations and a wider horizon, again distinguishes them from their neighbours, who aspire to more mundane aims and domestic joys, which the narrator of 'Hurricane Hazel' despises as blinkered and confining.

3 The comparison between her parents' obsession with sowing and planting and archetypal fertility rites – 'What matters, is the immersion of hands in the earth' ('Unearthing Suite', 317) – is rather a red herring on the part of the over-erudite narrator; the new trend 'back to nature' à la Rousseau seems more appropriate an association.

But European culture also carries implicitly negative connotations of restrictive social norms and conventional gender roles. The parents' marriage may seem deceptively unconventional when we read that, to the mother,

her marriage was an escape from its alternatives. Instead of becoming the wife of some local small-town professional and settling down, in skirts and proper surroundings, to do charity work for the church as would befit her status, she married my father and took off down the St. John's river in a canoe... Some of [her friends] thought of her as having been kidnapped and dragged off to the wilderness, where she was imprisoned and forced to contend with no electricity, no indoor plumbing, and hordes of ravening bears. She on the other hand must have felt that she had been rescued from a fate worse than death: antimassacars on the chairs. ('Unearthing Suite', 312).

Yet, as critics have not failed to point out, for all their adventurous life the respective roles of the sexes are never questioned by either parent. Indeed, 'Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother' and 'Unearthing Suite' have been read as stories about the different gender roles, self-images, behavioural patterns and languages of men and women, and about the mother's trivializing emotional response to the iconic moments of her life (Davey 1986:12).⁴ In 'Unearthing Suite' the father is the intellectual, the 'doer', the rational creature, whereas the mother is content to embody the soul, intuition and practical understanding. In 'Hurricane Hazel' the father and brother take off to do jobs in the wild, the mother and daughter have to contend with the makeshift log cabin and the baby. As becomes especially clear in the first story, 'Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother', both mother and father orient themselves by semi-Victorian norms as regards their behaviour and speech patterns vis-à-vis members of the other sex. Certain conventions have to be observed; there are topics and expressions not fit for discussion in front of a lady, just as women have their own subjects of conversation considered inappropriate for a man.

'I only heard your father swear once,' says my mother. ... 'It was when he smashed his thumb'... for [my father], there are two worlds: one containing ladies, in which you do not use certain expressions, and another one – consisting of logging camps and other haunts of his youth, and of gatherings of acceptable sorts of men – in which you do. To let the men's world slip over verbally in the ladies' would reveal you as a mannerless boor, but to carry the ladies' world over into the men's brands you as a prig and maybe a pansy. This is the word for it. All of

4 In *Feminist Poetics*, 145 Davey calls her 'a good-humoured trivializer of life and death' who 're-writes her family's history into charming but superficial stories of amusing misbehaviour.'

this is well understood between them. ('Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother', 12f.)⁵

Although the narrator, referring to the 'wicked' gleam in her mother's eyes, asserts that she 'avoids being a sweet old lady'(8), she realizes, on the other hand, that her mother has been willing to pay, as a 'trade-off ... to the Devil, for this limpid tranquillity' ('Unearthing Suite', 311), with deliberate ignorance and an unquestioning acceptance of conventional social role models.⁶ The younger woman's feelings about all this are ambiguous; on the one hand, she understands, loves and condones; on the other, she is both unable and unwilling to become like her mother. Her mother's sentimentalizing of her daughter's youthful innocence irritates her. When she goes to university, she starts wearing black stockings and pulling her hair back into a bun, appearing singularly unattractive to the narrow-minded community both as regards her clothes and her intellectual pretensions.

'If she would only *do* something about herself ... she could be *quite attractive*.' ('Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother', 22)

Her 'angst' is incomprehensible to her own mother as well, whose cheerful acceptance of social conventions is implicitly reproached by her daughter's intellectual questioning.

I wasn't allowed much angst around the house. I had to indulge it in the cellar, where my mother wouldn't come upon me brooding and suggest I should go out for a walk, to improve my circulation. ('Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother', 22)

However, the young woman, who reads 'modern poetry and histories of Nazi atrocities,' has become afflicted by the '*zeitgeist*' ('Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother', 22), and in her anxieties, tastes and conduct is just as conditioned by international élitist culture as her mother was by the old Victorian norms.

Although each family member in his or her own way exhibits the characteristic mixture of frontier dynamism and erudition, their different responses to these twin influences not only set them off as intellectual outsiders, but also range father against mother, brother against sister, daughter against mother. Identity, ultimately, is seen as something intensely personal, not national.

5 Note that the very wording has a very English and nineteenth-century flavour.

6 Davey 1984:144f., severely criticizes the mother for her conformity. When, e.g., she hoodwinks her autocratic father into letting her have a hair-cut, she is merely 'playing' with the roles she has been given, but she never rebels against the system, which she perceives as basically 'benign'.

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