
CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

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Ethel Wilson (1888 - 1980) belongs to the early 20th century Canadian literary scene, to which the writers like Morley Callaghan, Gabrielle Roy, Sinclair Ross, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, W.O. Mitchell and Brian Moore also belong . Historically ,it was a period during which the writers rejected adolescent fascination for the regional and the romantic, and evidenced stamina in undertaking self-discovery through courageous encounter with the contemporary Canadian social conditions. Hugo Macpherson describes Ethel Wilson as ' the most serene and mature '1 of that group of writers, 'whose first purpose is to discover the meaning of their own experience, but who - because their centre of consciousness is Canadian - also reveal pattern and shape in the snow-covered expanses of their community'2. John Moss describes her as ' a major figure in Canadian literature if not a particularly major influence '3 Wilson is also the first major woman novelist who pioneers the age in the history of Canadian fiction dominated

by women novelists like Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood.

Ethel Wilson's novels may be described as her attempts to come to terms with herself by overcoming the dilemma of the choice between freedom and responsibility, non-involvement and involvement. The conflict between individual's right to live freely and the compulsions to live as responsible member within the circle of social relationships, represents for her on the metaphysical level, the problem of man's relation with the external world. For Ethel Wilson, narrative technique is an exclusive means of communicating her existentialist obsession with the ambivalent nature of man's relationship with the external world.

The metaphysical conviction of the novelist about the unity between the world the Man and the World of Nature clashes against the instinctual need for freedom. The unity between the Human and the Natural world implies the need on the part of the individual to accept involvement or responsibility as a condition of existence. The urge for freedom, on the other hand, leads to the individual's choice of isolated or lonely existence which is free from any kind of involvemant. Novel becomes an exclusive

means of self-discovery for Ethel Wilson as it fulfils the vital need of resolving the conflict between the social and individual self.

The two novels of Ethel Wilson, The Innocent Traveller and Swamp Angel in particular, may be regarded as two stages of the novelist's journey toward self-realization - the first embodies existence in terms of non-involvement; the second, in terms of involvement. Miss Topaz Edgeworth, the heroine of The Innocent Traveller, is a study in non-involvement or non-responsibility, while Mrs. Maggie Lloyd, the heroine of Swamp Angel, is a study in involvement or responsibility. Maggie's mature realization at the end of the novel, that existence is involvement, is Ethel Wilson's too.

A number of critics have discussed Ethel Wilson's narrative skills in the two novels. For instance, Mary-Ann Stouck⁴ offers a brilliant analysis of the structure of The Innocent Traveller. But the critic feels to justify the novelist's use of irony which achieves an extraordinary effect of self-interrogation of the theme of non-involvement as embodied in the heroine. According to Mary-Ann Stouck, the novelist trivializes the theme - 'Any epic expectations that may be aroused are thus

frustrated by the ironic view-point, by deliberate trivializations of theme, and by a form which eludes strict classification'.⁵ - But, the technique shows that Ethel Wilson does not trivialize but searches for the possibilities to make the trivial significant through experimentation with a variety of narrative devices. Jeannette Urbas's assessment that in The Innocent Traveller, 'Ethel Wilson is a realist in her approach'⁶, is not supported by any systematic or detailed discussion of its narrative technique. Frank Birbalsingh thinks that in The Innocent Traveller, 'the trivial, spinsterish events... touched by Mrs. Wilson's humour provide a narrative that is far from dull'⁷, but there are not sufficient attempts to justify the view. David Stouck rightly calls The Innocent Traveller Ethel Wilson's 'the most artful novel'.⁸ But his approach is general rather than novel specific.

The narrative technique of Swamp Angel has also received some critical attention. David Stouck's introduction⁹ to Swamp Angel analyses the novel with a thematic focus supplementing it by a detailed analysis of the symbolic significance of the Swamp Angel. (pp. 5-10). Frank Birbalsingh's essay 'Ethel Wilson : Innocent Traveller'¹⁰ includes

some remarks on Swamp Angel especially in relation to Maggie and Nell Severance relationship. (pp. 39-40) Brent Thompson approaches, the novel as a study of Ethel Wilson as a 'Wary Mythologist'.¹¹ (pp. 20-32) R. D. MacDonald, while exploring Wilson's first novel, Hetty Dorval, thematically, comments on similarities of natural force in both Hetty Dorval and Swamp Angel by underlining the introduction of 'an almost Freudian metaphor of swimming'¹² in Swamp Angel. (p.45) Shyamal Bagchee¹³ concentrates on the treatment of the symbol of Swamp Angel, in particular, in his comparison between Callaghan's Such is my Beloved and Swamp Angel. (pp.175-92) However, the treatment of narrative technique in these studies is either marginal, partial or isolative - emphasizing especially the symbolic aspect to the neglect of other important aspects of Ethel Wilson's technique.

In spite of the fact that critics have offered independent studies of the themes and techniques of the two novels, there has been no attempt, so far, to explore fully the potentialities of their narrative techniques. Hence, it is proposed to study the narrative technique of the two novels - The Innocent Traveller and Swamp Angel, to show how the novelist achieves maximum communication of

meaning through her multifaceted experimentation in them. The study also includes comparison of the narrative techniques in the two novels because, it is believed that the two novels together represent the two stages of evolution of Wilson's theme - man's relationship with the external world.

The chapter division is as follows :

The second chapter reviews the history of Canadian Fiction in brief, in order to locate the historical context of Ethel Wilson. Canadian fiction passes through the major phases of evolution that are specified as (1) The beginning (up to 1920); (2) The Historical Romances and Regional Idylls (1920-40); (3) Transition from Romances to Realistic Fiction ; (4) Realistic Fiction I (1940-60) ; (5) Realistic Fiction II (1960-80). Ethel Wilson belongs to the group of Canadian novelists who pioneer the beginning of the age of Realistic Fiction. The chapter offers a brief outline of Ethel Wilson's life and career as a novelist.

The third chapter offers exhaustive analysis of the narrative technique of Ethel Wilson's The Innocent Traveller. It discusses, in particular, the elements of characterization, the choice of narrator, the management of time, irony followed by use of

brackets, italicized words, epistles, dialogue and use of tense. Further, the discussion covers use of literary references, symbolization and setting.

The fourth chapter studies the narrative technique of Wilson's Swamp Angel. The study takes into consideration, in particular, characterization, narrative structure, choice of narrator and also narrativization of the interior, symbolization, Nature as theme and structure, and irony : structural and stylistic.

The last chapter summarizes conclusions which emerge from the foregoing study of the narrative technique in the two novels.

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