
CHAPTER - II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CANADIAN FICTION AND ETHEL WILSON

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The detailed study of Ethel Wilson's narrative technique requires a brief survey of Canadian fiction in order to locate her historical context as a Canadian novelist.

In 1867, Canada attained the self-governing status by the Durham report (1839).¹

The Beginning (1880-1920) -

The first phase of Canadian fiction, during 1880 to 1920, shows predominance of - local colour story; the historical romance; the action or adventure story; the animal story; the mystery, detective or crime story; novels of ideas or of social criticism and sentimental society story.²

Historical Romances and Regional Idylls, (1920-1940):

Among the writers of the historical romances, the most prolific is Lily Adams Beck writing under names 'E. Barrington' and 'Louise Morley'. She has written thirty novels. Frederick Niven traces in his trilogy the historical development of prairies - The Flying Years (1935),

Mine Inheritance (1940) and The Transplanted (1944).
 Laura Goodman Salverson has written many novels
 along with the authentic record of her own
 development in Confessions of an Immigrant's
 Daughter (1939).

The historical romances were rivalled by
 Regional Idylls. They aimed at portraying life of a
 rural or semi-rural Canada stressing its beauty, its
 peculiar customs, its traditions and its aspirations.
 Mazo de la Roche (1879-1961), the remarkable among
 them, has written novels such as - Explorers of the
 Dawn (1922), Possession (1923), Delight (1926) and
Jalna (1929).

Transition : From Romances to Realistic Fiction-

The prairie writers like, Robert J.C. Stead
 (1880-1959), Martha Ostenso (b.1900) and Frederic
 Philip Grove (1871-1948), began the systematic
 transformation of Canadian fiction from romance to
 realism.

As the effect of Second World War came
 depression. It encouraged the poets and prose-writers
 to turn away from the technical experimentation of
 the twenties towards the exploration of social and
 economic themes. The novel as usual lagged behind.
 First novels by Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchel, Hugh

Garner, Earle Birney, Joyce Marshall, Henry Kreisel, Malcolm Lowry and Ethel Wilson provided evidence, however that even in fiction a new era of creativity was beginning.³

Realistic Fiction (1940 - 1960) -

Between 1940 and 1960, Canadian fiction is supposed to arrive at the period of maturity. The novelists confronted their insights with a new subtlety and technical power. There is the new independence and articulateness in such writers as MacLennan and Richler, Davies and Wilson.

Hugh MacLennan (b. 1907) pioneers the period of maturity in Canadian fiction through his transformation of popular romance form into an instrument of social analysis and criticism as is evidenced by his Barometer Rising (1941). He searches for a new means of realism and symbolic treatment in Two Solitudes (1945). The introduction of a first person narrator in The Watch That Ends The Night (1959) gives the action of the novel a new immediacy, although the novelist appears to prefer didactic commentary to fictional dramatization in it.

Morley Callaghan (b.1903) is in some sense a bridge between the earlier era of fiction (1920-

1940) and the one that followed it (1940-1960). He uses Canadian settings as backgrounds for his spiritual quest. He was the first novelist to give expression to urban problems and urban mores in his novels like Strange Fugitive (1928), Such is my Beloved (1934), The Loved and The Lost (1951), The Many Colored Coat (1960), A Passion in Rome (1961) and The Enchanted Pimp (1978). He is basically a religious novelist who studies the contradictions between temporal and eternal values. As the most prolific and technically gifted of the writers of his generation, his style shows influence of the American group of the twenties as well as of writers like James Joyce.

Gabrielle Roy's (b. 1909) translated fiction reflects her vision of the growth of Canada from a pastoral childhood to the anguish of the urban present which is associated with the progress of the race and the individual from innocence to experience. Her deep social awareness informs her novels like The Tin Flute (1945) which is both about the French Canadian urban poor, and the human condition in general. Her second novel, Where Nests the Water Hen (1950) presents an idyllic natural world while in The Cashier (1955) the novelist

returns to the grim realism of Montreal. Her works profess faith in the rich possibilities of the spirit even in oppressive circumstances and through their urban setting, they create the pastoral of more complex design.

Robertson Davies (b. 1913) wrote Tempest-Tost (1951), Leaven of Malice (1954), A Mixture of Frailties (1958). In first two novels the characters do not come fully to life despite their comic invention, wit and satiric observation. But in the third novel, he uses new psychological focus, his imaginative insight into the problems and prospects of his culture along with technical control, to achieve the effect.

Sinclair Ross (b. 1908) has written As for ^{me} Me and My House (1941) in a diary form and The Well (1958). His works reveal the meaning and mood with the help of a limited point of view and the rhythmic use of repetition. Davies and Ross look at society with a similar clarity and intensity and offer fresh evidence of stylistic eclecticism.

W. O. Mitchell's writing accounts for his activities in fiction, radio, editorial work and television. He produced Who Has Seen the Wind (1947), The Alien (1953), Jake and the Kid (1961),

The Black Bonspiel of Wullie Mac Crimmon, The Kite (1962) and The Vanishing Point (1973). Mitchell skilfully sketches the minor characters; the protagonist he keeps unknown as if ~~is~~ → unwilling to probe; and the style ^{is} inclined 'towards a more picturesque language.'

Mordecai Richler's (b. 1931) spirit resembles that of the "angry" young Englishman. He produced The Acrobats (1954), Son of a Smaller Hero (1955), A Choice of Enemies (1957), The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1959). His writing shows forced symbolism and his narrative method flickers uncertainly because the narrator is not sufficiently distinct from his hero. His exuberant style and intellectual toughness make him the exciting and promising of Canada's novelists.

Sheila Watson's The Double Hook (1959), is an artful but nakedly direct book. It is an idiosyncratic masterpiece.

Realistic Fiction (1960-1980):- W.H. New says that.

→ 'By 1970s, simple linear narrative gave way to complex artifice, 'realism' was losing ground to improvisational modes; to science fiction, to the surreal, the absurd and the cultural nationalism.'

He also accepts that → 'Much Canadian fiction

between 1960 and 1973 demonstrated a continuity with the past'.⁵ One of the most noticeable features of recent Canadian fiction has been the number of accomplished women writers who include Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood.

Perhaps the most impressive novelist of the 1960s and 1970s was Margaret Laurence. She explored the essential differences between middle-class expectations and other values, articulated a female perspective, and offered evidence to many younger writers through her fiction. She is famous for her 'Manawaka' novels - This Side Jordan (1960), The Stone Angel (1964), A Jest of God (1966), The Fire Dwellers (1969) and A Bird in the House (1970). She uses deliberately fragmentation of style, colloquial dialogues. Throughout her narrative, realism is interspersed with a vivid subtext of fantasy.

Alice Munro (b. 1931) wrote Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), a short story collection; a novel Lives of Girls and Women (1971). Due to her manipulation of logical perspective and deceptive casualness about individual observations, she confirms her being the most gifted of modern Canadian prose stylists.

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) is a poet, critic and novelist. Her famous novels are The Edible Woman (1969), Surfacing (1972), Lady Oracle (1976), Bodily Harm (1981) and Handmaid's Tale (1985). Her books have some drawbacks like lack of compassion for human foibles, over-reliance on the means and substance of behavioural analysis, artificiality of plot and stylistic self-indulgence. But her work, that voices current ideas about alienation, women's liberation, ecology, commercialism, makes her an artist responding to interpretation between literature and life.

Ethel Wilson: -

As the historical survey shows, Ethel Wilson belongs to the group of those writers including Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, W. O. Mitchell, Hugh Garner, Gabrielle Roy, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler and Brian Moore, who pioneer the movement in Canadian Fiction from romances to realistic fiction.

Ethel Wilson (1888-1980) was born in Port Elizabeth in South Africa where her father, Davis Bryant, was a methodist missionary. She moved to England at the age of two, following her mother's death, and to Vancouver, Canada, at the age of ten,

after the death of her father. Wilson was raised in Vancouver by her grandmother, educated there and in England, graduated from a teacher's college in 1907, and taught school until in her early thirties. She married Dr. Wallace Wilson. She did not begin publishing until middle age, when a few short stories appeared in the 'New Statesman' and 'Nation'. She was almost sixty years old, when she published her first novel, Hetty Dorval (1947). It was followed by four novels and a collection of short stories. The novels she wrote are - The Innocent Traveller (1949), The Equations of Love (1952), Swamp Angel (1954), Love and Salt Water (1956) and Mrs. Golightly and other Stories (1961), a short story collection.

Her first novel - Hetty Dorval (1947) is the 1st person narration of the life of Hetty Dorval, a coquette, through the eyes of Frankie Burnaby, the narrator. Hetty is a spoiled, attractive woman who islands herself in a world of selfish comforts and amusements. In Lytton, Frankie, through Hetty's various images, forms a romantic picture of sophistication and freedom. Hetty Dorval who becomes the idol of a warm-hearted British Columbia girl seems to be a kind of anti-heroine.

In the end, she betrays the last chance for genuine friendship and disappears.

Ethel Wilson's second novel- The Innocent Traveller (1949) covers a century long life of Miss Topaz Edgeworth, from childhood days to her death in Vancouver. It is narrated in two parts. In the first part, her first fifty years' life in Victorian England and in the second part, her remaining life till the death in Vancouver, Canada, is narrated. First fifty years' life is narrated in connection with Book meetings, her family members, education at Mrs. Porter's boarding School, love affair with William Sandbach and next fifty years in company of Annie, Rachel and Rose. Topaz links four generations of Edgeworth family and after death vanishes from memory.

Wilson's The Equations of Love (1952) is a book comprising two novellas- Tuesday and Wednesday and Lilly's Story. Tuesday and Wednesday gives centripetal view of the nature of love, fate and human inadequacy in presentation of Mort and Myrt and the waitress Lilly. In Lilly's Story, we get a linear view of the forms which love takes in a single life. The waitress, Lilly lies and deceives to bring up her illegitimate daughter. These

equations certainly do not exhaust the subject, but within their compass they are at once sensitive and profound.

The fifth novel- Swamp Angel (1954) by Wilson is a quest-romance. As is common with her novels, the heroine, Maggie Lloyd, sets on a self-discovery, leaving her husband, Edward Vardoe. Then she goes to a fishing resort to be a cook for her remaining life. Another important character is Mrs. Nell Severance, who is an ex-circus performer. She performs with a small revolver 'Swamp Angel'. She hands over this revolver to Maggie after an accident. Maggie throws it into lake after Nell's death as per Nell's wish.

Her last novel- Love and Salt Water (1956) deals with domestic relations, family visits and humdrum social intercourse true to form. After her mother's death, Ellen Cuppy and her father leave Canada for a holiday abroad. The father remarries and Ellen returns to work in Saskatchewan.

The themes of the last work Mrs Golightly and Other Stories (1961) show a wide range of moods. They are set in Vancouver, London, Munich or on the banks of Nile; and are cosmopolitan.

The analysis of the narrative technique of the two novels of Ethel Wilson, in particular- The Innocent Traveller and Swamp Angel- uncovers the potentialities of the novelist- considerably neglected in the Canadian fictional criticism- as one who marks the beginning of the age of full maturity in Canadian fiction.

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