
**The Paradox of Belonging: Atwood's Poetic Negotiation of Cultural Conflict in
*The Journals of Susanna Moodie***

***Dr. Denny Joseph**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College Mananthavady, Kerala.

Email: denniesjos@gmail.com

***Dr. Sini Jose**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College Kasaragod, Kerala.

Email: sinijose2@gmail.com

Article Received: 02/04/2025

Article Accepted: 04/05/2025

Published Online: 06/05/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.05.09

Abstract: Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* explores the cultural and psychological conflicts of the 19th-century settler Susanna Moodie as reinterpreted through Atwood's 20th-century poetic lens. This meta-literary work delves into Moodie's paradoxical relationship with Canada, torn between her British identity and the demands of adaptation to a foreign land. Atwood's selected poems—"Disembarking at Quebec," "First Neighbours," "Two Fires," and "Departure from the Bush"—reveal Moodie's alienation, self-consciousness, and shifting perspectives. The poetic persona oscillates between blaming the land and acknowledging her own inadequacies, embodying a "doubleness of vision." While Moodie strives for belonging, her efforts are thwarted by cultural dissonance and survival instincts. Atwood's portrayal captures the immigrant's existential struggle, where neither complete assimilation nor rejection is possible. The analysis highlights Atwood's psychological insight into Moodie's divided self, framed by contemporary critiques, such as Laura Groening's caution against over-pathologizing Moodie's experiences.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Susanna Moodie, cultural conflict, doubleness of vision, immigrant experience, Canadian literature.

Introduction: Atwood and Canadian Literature

The works of Margaret Atwood provide a single window of access to what Canadian literature is all about. A towering figure among Canadian writers, Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) underlines survival, both physical and cultural, as the defining motif of all Canadian writings. Dystopian writings like *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which is the first of her *MaddaAddam*

Trilogy, deliberate the societal anxieties of survival under oppressive regimes and post-apocalyptic scenarios. She explores human survival in times of ecological collapse, reiterating Canada's obsession with wild nature and human resilience. Putting gender norms on trial, her works like *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Robber Bride* (1993) assert the female agency in patriarchal systems and suggest the feminist awakening. Through a dexterous blend of personal and collective chronicles, Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) examines Canadian identity, indigenous displacement, and settler experience. Her *Blind Assassin* (2000) portrays immigrant life against Canada's cultural diversity.

The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970)

Susanna Moodie (1803-1885), the British-born Canadian writer, is known for her unflinching accounts of settler life in present-day Ontario, known as Upper Canada. Her emigration to Canada with her husband in 1832, seeking financial stability, marked a starting point in her encounter with the harsh experiences that she recounted in her *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852). Margaret Atwood's collection of poetry entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is a meta-literary work that originated from her recognition of an inescapable ambivalence inherent in Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853). Atwood identified Susanna Moodie's struggles in acclimatizing to the Canadian cultural landscape as characterizing the experiences of any settler in the cultural mosaic of Canada. Moodie is simultaneously attracted to Canada and is repulsed by it thanks to cultural nostalgia and survival imperatives. Atwood's interest in Moodie is triggered by the deep layers of struggle portrayed in Moodie's works, with which Atwood could relate the experiences of settlers in any foreign locale.

Atwood locates in Moodie an effort to find her identity in Canada, her space in the cultural tension between the sophisticated white civilization and the indigenous people of the reserves. Moodie's works reveal her penchant for belongingness and an inbuilt resistance which prevents her from such identification. It is Moodie's dichotomous attitude to and against adaptation encapsulated in Atwood's selected poems that this paper attempts to explore. Atwood slips herself into the shoes of Moodie and recaptures her perspectives through her poems in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

Atwood's poems under consideration here are "Disembarking at Quebec," "First Neighbours," "Two Fires," and "Departure from the Bush," as they crystallize changing phases in Moodie's fractured identity. Each of these poems unveils the settler's consciousness of alienation as well as the ardent longing to create an identity in the land of Canada. The poem "Disembarking at Quebec" reveals the extreme self-consciousness of an alien and the painful recognition of the poetic Moodie's own position in Canada. The whole series of

Atwood's poetry is about the self of the settler in relation to the land and its people and also the settler's homeland. Susanna Moodie, British by birth, struggles to settle in Canada, but she has to encounter unwelcome experiences in the process of belonging. The poem begins with the lines:

It is my clothes, my way of walking
 The things I carry in my hand
 a book, a bag with knitting
 The incongruous pink of my shawl!

Moodie suffers from severe self-consciousness, and it arises from her feeling or rather self-knowledge that she does not belong to the land. She presents herself using words that someone else would use to describe her. Atwood, like a psychoanalyst, diagnoses the case of Moodie and states:

Mrs. Moodie is divided down the middle: she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her; she dislikes the people already in Canada but finds in people her only refuge from the land itself; she preaches progress and the march of civilization while brooding elegiacally upon the destruction of the wilderness; she delivers optimistic sermons while showing herself to be fascinated with deaths, murders, the criminals in Kingston Penitentiary and the incurably insane in the Toronto lunatic asylum. She claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot, but all the time, she stands back from the country and criticizes it as though she were a detached observer or a stranger. (Afterword, *The Journals* 62)

She quickly finds fault with the land: "This space cannot hear ."But this blame game does not prolong. She finds herself responsible for the alienation she feels:

Or is it my own lack
 Of conviction, which makes
 These vistas of desolation.

Moodie's contradicting perspectives regarding the idea of settlement are vivid in the poem as she is trapped in the vortex of shifting ideals. She switches from being self-conscious to finding fault with the land. She quickly revises her vision in the reverse. The rest of the poem is in a strain that confirms her sense of otherness. The objects of the external world of nature are portrayed as having no communion with her. They suggest only 'a thin refusal.'

The people are also against her. The class she represents to the natives is unacceptable to them: "The others leap, shout/Freedom!" The natives demand freedom from the outsider's intrusion when, ironically enough, the poet herself has no freedom of movement without feeling self-conscious. Her isolation is now complete. She realizes:

The moving water will not show me

My reflection

The rocks ignore

I am a word

In a foreign language.

The disillusionment on being rejected is explicit in these lines. Her desire to mix and mingle with the people and the nature of Canada is shattered. At this juncture, the longing to be with the land and its people gives way to a painful recognition of her own lack of self-sufficiency.

Divide Consciousness: Moodie's Psychological Conflict

"First Neighbours" is a contemplation of the repeatedly failed efforts at adaptation which leads her to the realization of her situation in Canada. She feels herself to be sharply divided from the people of Canada.

The people I live among, unforgivingly

Previous to me, grudging

The way I breathe their

Property, the air.

The persona of the poem and the natives never constitute a single community; instead, they are two. Even the air is politicized. The narrative voice accuses the natives of her miseries. They speak 'a twisted dialect'. Her disdain for the 'twisted dialect' reveals not just alienation but also the classist biases of colonial settlers. But these experiences do not put an end to her efforts at adaptation. She gives burned bread to a native girl in a red-tattered petticoat, but the girl glares at her. The girl also shouts at her, "Go back where you come from ."At this moment, the poet's castigating eyes are turned towards her own motherland.

I tightened my lips, knew that England

Was now unreachable, had sunk down into the sea

Without ever teaching me about washtubs.

Laura Groening approaches Atwood's treatment of Moodie as a paranoid schizophrenic with caution and believes that Moodie's case is different. It may just be "the results of a twentieth-century consciousness looking back on a nineteenth-century life." She adds:

Atwood is primarily interested in the psychological dimension of the immigrant experience in Canada, the ways in which the encounter with the unexplained wilderness precipitates a psychological reaction that is irrational and symptomatic of something larger than the reality at hand. While not denying the possible validity of Atwood's approach, one cannot help noticing that the dichotomies that she identifies are largely illusory, the results of a twentieth-century consciousness looking back on a nineteenth-century life. Any divisions in Mrs. Moodie's perceptions can be explained in concrete, objective terms that have nothing at all to do with paranoid schizophrenia. (*"The Journals of Susanna Moodie: A Twentieth-Century Look at a Nineteenth-Century Life"*)

The conflicting attitudes Atwood traces in Moodie are reckoned largely as psychological, but Groening situates them in the historical realities of the 19th century. She tries her luck at adaptation not because of her admiration for Canada but because of the need for survival. When she fails in this, she reproves Britain, which fashioned her sensibilities to be different from those of the natives of Canada. She employs certain strategies of adaptation learned from her motherland, and she is proud of them until they evince negative results. We find antithetical perspectives here. At one moment, she expresses self-pity:

Got used to being

A minor invalid, expected to make

Inept remarks

Futile and spastic gestures.

But in spite of that, her proud self remains. Her superiority complex, which has its roots in her British background, prompts her to envision the thing the native man cooks to be a toad. But the man shatters her preconceptions and prejudices. She tells her that he cooks a deer liver. Consequently, she 'grew a chapped tarpaulin skin' and identifies her position as "Something to be endured/But not surprised by." Laura Groening cites McDougall's

judicious choice of examples (in Editor's introduction to *Life in the Clearings*, pp. xvii-xviii), which makes clear that "Mrs. Moodie's ideas of progress are informed by a combination of her pride in personal, unprecedented achievement and a very real appreciation of the ways in which technology can alleviate the physical hardships that have surrounded her since her arrival in Canada ."But even her resolution for stoic endurance is revised immediately after a moment of epiphany when she is drawing birds:

Resolved: to be both tentative and hard to startle

(though clumsiness and Fright are inevitable)

In this area where my damaged

Knowing the language means prediction is forever impossible.

The two resolutions again bring to our attention her irreconcilable perspectives; one favoring stoic submission while the other favors resistance.

Survival and Adaptation: The Settler's Struggle

The poem "Two Fires" recounts how her house was destroyed by fire and her resolve to grow out of the consequent insecurity. In the summer, her house was destroyed by fire. To a settler, a house is his/her haven and refuge. When it is lost, the very security of life is in question. In the winter season, her second house was also destroyed by fire from a Franklin stove. The poem concentrates on the climatic severities of Canada and how it destroys her dreams of adaptation. But we find her accepting the fires as both formative and informative.

Two fires informed me.

(each refuge fails us, and each danger becomes a haven).

She is crushed by the havocs caused by fire, but her need of survival keeps her in harness. She tries to grow amongst the ruins. Both the spirit of survival and defeatism are visible in the poem. The fires embody both destruction and renewal, mirroring Moodie's cyclical hope and despair. In "Departure from the Bush", the bifurcated perspective of Moodie is most perceptible. It speaks of her departure from the bushland. The poem begins with a note of affirmation.

I, who had been erased

By fire, was crept in

Upon by green.

These lines reveal that her efforts at adaptation had slowly been rewarding. She identifies herself with the nature. As spring galvanizes dormant nature, the self-destroyed by fire is refreshed by time.

In time, the animals

Arrived to inhabit in me.

First one

By one, stealthily.

She has almost identified herself with the land. Animals can now settle in her. She who came to settle in the land has come to be settled upon by the objects of the land. A sort of coexistence with the native is now possible for her. But all of a sudden, another vision storms in:

But restless: I was not ready

Altogether, to be moved into

They could tell I was

Too heavy: I might

Capsize.

She is pulled in two directions by two visions. One vision prompts her to conform to the land, and the other prompts her to be her real self. The sense of artificiality the feats of adaptation has generated in her are resented by her genuine self. Her continual encounter with the outside elements has made her 'heavy,' and she might 'capsize.' The two visions are at loggerheads. Moodie's partial adaptation, embracing the land yet fearing its demands, mirrors the immigrant's liminal state, where belonging is always provisional. Besides,

I was frightened

by their eyes (green or

ember) glowing out from inside me

I was not complete at night

I could not see without lanterns.

These lines show that Moodie's identification with the forest was not complete. A complete union is something impossible for her. Her visions are antithetical. She is afraid of animals, though they are inhabitants of her body. At night, she is not able to see things like the animals without a lantern. When she is told by her husband to get ready to move to the city, the desire to be one with the land once again dominates her.

"I have no clothes/Left I can wear."

She thinks that she has shed everything that was British. But 'the sleigh was a relief' to her. She evinces a desire to continue living in the foreign land and also to be free of all the fetters it causes her.

Rounding the first hill, I was (instantaneous)
 Unlived in, they had gone
 There was something they almost taught me
 I came away not having learned.

As soon as she moves off the land she is 'unlived in'. The animals that inhabited in her were gone. It shows that her adaptation was not deep or complete. The other vision dominated her. Her knowledge of Canada was never complete. As soon as she leaves the land, her vision prompting her to conform to the land was also gone.

Conclusion

Atwood's Moodie transcends her historical moment, emblematic of all immigrants caught between assimilation and cultural fidelity. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* portrays Moodie as torn between two opposing visions. Moodie's desire for adaptation is challenged by her desire for continuity, and her longing for cultural acclimatization is thwarted by her penchant for the heritage of her own culture and lifestyle. It masterfully captures the profound cultural and psychological conflicts inherent in the immigrant experience, as seen through the lens of Susanna Moodie's 19th-century settler narrative. Atwood's poetic reinterpretation highlights Moodie's paradoxical relationship with Canada—a tension between her British identity and the demands of adaptation to an unfamiliar land. Through poems like "Disembarking at Quebec," "First Neighbours," "Two Fires," and "Departure from the Bush," Atwood reveals Moodie's oscillating perspectives, where self-conscious alienation clashes with a desperate longing for belonging. The "doubleness of vision" that defines Moodie's experience reflects a broader existential struggle, where neither complete assimilation nor outright rejection is possible. Atwood's portrayal underscores the settler's fraught negotiation with identity, place, and survival, while contemporary critiques, such as

Laura Groening's, caution against oversimplifying Moodie's conflicts as purely psychological, emphasizing instead the tangible realities of 19th-century life.

The Journals of Susanna Moodie serves as a poignant exploration of the enduring tension between identity and displacement in Canadian literature. Atwood's work not only reanimates Moodie's historical voice but also universalizes her struggles, offering insights into the immigrant's perpetual state of in-betweenness. The collection resonates with themes of resilience, cultural dissonance, and the elusive quest for belonging, reinforcing Atwood's broader literary preoccupation with survival and self-definition. By weaving Moodie's personal narrative into a larger tapestry of settler experiences, Atwood affirms the complexity of cultural adaptation and the indelible mark it leaves on the individual psyche. The poems stand as a testament to the unresolved contradictions of the immigrant journey, where the land remains both a refuge and a battleground, and the self is forever fragmented yet striving for wholeness.

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Citation:

Joseph, Denny, and Sini Jose. "The Paradox of Belonging: Atwood's Poetic Negotiation of Cultural Conflict in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*." *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2025, pp. 1–9. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.05.09.