

**THE CALAMITY OF SELF-EXILE AND WILLING DISPLACEMENT
EXPERIENCED BY THE CANADIAN YOUTH**

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Abstract:

An analysis of the selected stories from the collection 'Canadians Abroad' suggests that the central theme that Mavis Gallant has tried to project in each of the stories is that Canadian youths leave Canada and travel to European countries with the hope that they will have better life in these destinations and the career will experience a remarkable boost. Nonetheless, in reality, nothing like that happens because the prosperity and professional solidarity that they receive in these countries are short lived. With time they fail to identify with the culture, perspectives, and lifestyle of their destination countries and realize the uselessness of their decision to relocate away from their homeland. They also realize that the decision only makes them sad and lonely, and wish to return to Canada where they can achieve prosperity and growth in a permanent manner.

Keywords: Canadian Youth – Exile – Displacement – Relocation – Emptiness – Sense of Loss.

'Canadians Abroad' is the series of short stories that appeared in The New Yorker right after the 'At Home' or 'Home Abroad' series. In this collection of short stories, Mavis Gallant introduces the readers to the fundamental theme of young Canadians who wander around the European continent. However, the predominant interest of the author is to reveal 'North American varieties of innocence over against European versions of experience' in this series (Kustec, pp.84). Thus, in order to explore and analyze the specific themes of this series, stories such as In the Tunnel, The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street, Bonaventure and Virus X are studied.

In the Tunnel is the first story of the series that expresses the key theme of displacement. It centers on a child Sarah who has been sent to Grenoble by her father to learn about French civilization. Actually, the major intention of this was that Sarah's father wished to get away from a man he always pretended to think was called Professor Downcast (Kustec, pp.84). In the story, Sarah's father is portrayed as the only man who is an antagonist and has not touched her self-confidence. On the other hand, readers are also introduced to another man named Roy Cooper who is an inspector of prisons in Asia and twice her age and is Sarah's love interest. The bitterness associated with the experience of displacement from roots is presented by the author in this story in the form of Sarah's realization of the bitterness of love with Roy as she finds him as a man characterized by the typical selfishness of men and readily available to young women. It is evident from the lines:

"They seemed to Sarah to be moving toward each other without ever quite touching; then she thought they were traveling in the same direction, but still apart. (Gallant 76-77)

Further, Sarah's acquaintance with two English expatriates in Roy's cottage and the realization that English people carefully shut themselves off from any real contact with the world or with others to live peacefully in a hypothetical dreamy world presents another negative experience associated with Sarah's displacement from source (Kustec). This is represented in the lines:

The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street is another story in the series Canadians Abroad. Through third-person narrator, the author tells the story of two Canadian youths, their expatriates and their unpleasant experiences in Europe (Kustec). The core theme of this short story is that is typical of most of the works of Gallant is the unwillingness to grow by recognizing the need of adaptation as prompted by the passage of time. Thus, in the story the readers can find that that characters such as Peter and Sheilah Frazier have got trapped in their self-images endangered by their past and refuse to accept the fact that time has moved on and so do they need to move on too (Franklin).

The Frazier family spent parts of their life in Paris, Geneva, Sri Lanka, and Hong Kong, and are currently residing in Toronto, Canada, and reminiscing about the times living abroad (Kustec). Specifically speaking, in the story, it could be found that these two central characters live in Toronto with their realistic sister Lucille and console themselves on Sunday mornings by trying to remember the people they met during the decade when they lived an enamored life abroad.

They are so pathetically trapped in their past life full of charm that they do not have any future plans. In their attempt to remain captivated in their dreamy past, these Canadian youths spend their Sundays recalling their glorious days spent in Europe (Franklin). Peter, after returning to Toronto, could not find a decent job befitting his caliber. However, when Lucille finds him a lowly job as a filing clerk, Peter rationalizes with the situation by thinking that it is the scheme of Canadian diplomats and business class people to punish him with such a menial job. Nevertheless, he maintains his self-esteem by convincing himself that a job befitting his social position will invariably come his way in the future.

Sheila is also portrayed as a character that is entrapped in the past because she tries to adapt to the harsh reality of the present by pretending that if they were in Paris life would still have been the same. Similarly, readers are introduced to the character Agnes Brusen who is professionally very successful and ambitious but hides the fact that her personal life is immensely unsatisfactory (Kustec). By means of witty characterization, Gallant also wishes to present the theme of alienation (Verongos). This can be justified by Peter's realization about Agnes' perspective on the society:

"She said, "I'm from a big family. I'm not used to being alone. I'm not a suicidal person, but I could have done something after that party, just not to see any more, or think or listen or expect anything. All my life I heard, educated people don't do this, educated people don't do that. And now I'm here, and you're all educated people, and you're nothing but pigs."(Gallant 131-132)

Peter's realization about the emptiness of life abroad is also expressed through these lines:

"We pay everything twice."(Gallant 128)

Thus, in the story, the author clearly focuses on the theme of estrangement of people from each other as they are completely lost in their respective worlds and have created an inverted perception of loneliness. The author further emphasizes Living abroad in England has made them totally alienated. Hence, the Canadian youths tend to vegetate on their past memories of contentment and intentionally to avoid the harsh reality of the present in the futile pursuit of living a peaceful life. Thus, it can be said that it is a story of ambiguousness where all the

characters tend to shield themselves in the cocoon of a self-protective lifestyle to cope up with the harsh realities of a present (Kustec).

Bonaventure is another story of the collection with its setting at Montreux in Switzerland. It focuses on the young Canadian Douglas Ramsay who is a musical prodigy and was born and raised in Montreal. Although he was awarded a fellowship and is studying music at present, the voice that he used to have at a child prodigy stopped being as amusing as it was when he relocated to Montreux. Hence, even though he is just twenty-one, people no longer appreciate his once enchanting vocal talent. Nevertheless, he is honored even then by being taken from his studies in Berlin to spend the summers at the lavish Swiss home of the legendary conductor Adrian Moser. Thus, an emptiness and feeling of lack of identity feature the life of Ramsay, which is evident through the lines:

"He was besieged, he was invaded, by his mother's account of the day he was conceived; and his father confirmed her version of history, telling him why. He had never been able to fling in their faces "Why did you have me?" He was their marvel."(Gallant 135)

His hostess, Katherine, is a widow whose intentions towards Douglas are not very clear. (Gibson). He also enters into heated conversation with Katherine while living with the Mosers and the central topic of these debates is Douglas' belief that with the help of art a person can easily keep away from his own unpleasant past. However, with ironical instances, Gallant shows how this can only be done for a temporary span and could never be permanently achieved. Basically, though this storyline the author intends to emphasize upon the futility of displacement of young Canadians from their own homeland in search of happiness and prosperity. The author emphasizes that prosperity could rather be achieved right within their homeland and that too for a permanent basis (Kustec).

Virus X is the last story of the collection Canadians Abroad. Gallant continues to explore her core theme of the futility of displacement of young Canadians in Virus X. Through this short story, the author further portrays the story of Canadians who left the continent after the war in search of prosperity and contentment only to find their aspirations getting shattered. In the story, Lottie Benz is the protagonist who is a student of sociology and takes pride in herself on being composed and rational even though she is actually overtly moody and meditative.

Lottie lives in Paris where she comes across Vera Rodna whom she finds to be a bit troublemaking character.

Vero is a Ukrainian Canadian who lives between Paris and Rome. While the Ukrainian background influences the life of Vero, it is found in the story that the career of Lottie was held back as her father was a German. This eventually made Lottie reluctant to settle down in

Germany. The experiences of displacement from Canada by two individuals, Lottie and Vero, reveal its aftermath from two dimensions.

On one hand, ardent love of Lottie for her home country, which is Canada, is reflected when the story presents that in spite of living in Paris she wishes to put up a show for her 'own country' Canada. On the other hand, Vero reveals to Lottie some typical Canadian complications related to his national identity. Through these contrasting experiences of Lottie and Vero, Gallant clearly presents the theme of the futility of displacement from the source by Canadian youths. The author repeatedly remarks that Lottie is fed up with her life in Paris. Her association with Vero appears like a virus to her and she is practically having no sense of what she is doing. Hence, she dearly wants to return to Canada due to the realization that Paris has nothing new to offer to her rather than intensifying her feeling of loneliness(Gibson; Kustec).

The theme of exile and eventual sadness is prevalent in the collection of stories by Mavis Gallant, Canada Abroad. Nonetheless, it is distinctively different from that of 'At Home' in the manner that it simultaneously stresses upon the theme of displacement in expressing the gloom of the central characters due to relocation away from their homeland where individuals willfully go out of their home country and break tie with their origin only to realize its futility at a later stage.

In this regard, the research of Saha needs to be mentioned which presents that displacement is often projected as the core factor behind themes like exile and alienation that characterize postmodern literary works. The scholar further remarks that the key attribute of postmodern literature is that it tries to project that displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Simultaneously, Saha has also opined that all forms of displacement have not been presented in the postmodern literature as negative. Rather, in some works like that of The Oxford Book of Exile by John Simpson, it has been stated that exile gives the scope to give physical expression to an inner fact that would have otherwise remained concealed. Likewise, some literary genres of a postmodern period such as post-Marxist, Brechtian literature propound that physical mobility due to displacement from source often heightens the spiritual or psychological might of an individual.

If the displacement and theme of alienation and exaltation in the works of Mavis Gallant are made based on this concept, the similar feature could be found. Analysis of the selected stories from the collection 'Canada Abroad' suggests that the central theme that Mavis Gallant has tried to project in each of the stories is that Canadian youths leave Canada and travel to European countries with the hope that they will have better life in these destinations and the career will experience a remarkable boost.

Nonetheless, in reality, nothing like that happens because the prosperity and professional solidarity that they receive in these countries are short lived. With time they fail to identify with the culture, perspectives, and lifestyle of their destination countries and realize the uselessness of their decision to relocate away from their homeland. They also realize that the decision only makes them sad and lonely, and wish to return to Canada where they can achieve prosperity and growth in a permanent manner.

For instance, in *Bonaventure*, the readers get to learn how once-popular voice of Ramsay ceases to be popular anymore after he shifts from his homeland to Paris as a child prodigy and grows up there in the hope that the relocated country will provide him great career growth. The similar idea has been presented in *The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street* where it is found that the family of Gerard tries to forget their own culture and becomes truly English as far as communicational language, etiquettes and habits are concerned. Nevertheless, they never get proper acceptance in the traditional English society and remain as outsiders. Thus, the story brings forward the themes of displacement and expatriates by portraying how pathetically the decision of displacement have ostracized them and made them remain as a community of displaced population.

So, it can be said that this collection of stories by Gallant in *Canada Abroad* brilliantly brings out the theme of displacement and eventual expatriates as prevalent in all the post-modern literary works on a similar issue. However, here the thrust of the author is to develop the realization that self-exile and willing displacement from the homeland as a means of attaining career growth actually turn out to be a negative decision.

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