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Exploring Different Dimensions of the Canadian Prairie: Community And the Individual in Sheila Watson's "The Double Hook" And Robert Kroetsch's "What the Crow Said"

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EXPLORING DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE: COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN SHEILA WATSON'S *THE DOUBLE HOOK* AND ROBERT KROETSCH'S *WHAT THE CROW SAID*

Résumé : L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner les tensions dans la représentation du caractère individuel, souvent périphérique, de la communauté des Prairies, supposée être cohérente et centralisée. Les œuvres littéraires sont étudiées afin de mettre en évidence le changement de l'idéal pastoral dans un cadre moderniste, pourtant par rapport à des influences postmodernes dans des textes canadiens postérieurs en prose. Ainsi l'auteur examine le degré d'implication des romans en question : une performativité sociale en tant que source de trouble intérieur, une sexualité genrée en tant que résultat direct de la force sociale, et enfin des connotations homoérotiques ajoutant encore un autre aspect à la reception des personnages étudiés. L'article se veut une tentative de démontrer certaines erreurs dans la vision illusoire des prairies considérées comme un espace paisible, presque arcadien, mais en réalité profondément déchiré par des émotions ambivalentes, par une sexualité ambiguë et transgressive ainsi que par les conflits personnels nourris d'apparences et des limites physiques dans leur acception la plus singulière qui soit.

The multilayered space of the West, as depicted in the 20th century Canadian literature, has long been the subject of literary criticism, with a special regard to the construction and then deconstruction of the myth of the prairie reality in contrast to that typical of the American tradition, as proposed by literary critics. What is especially significant for the discussion of the issue is the conception of the land, which constitutes the background for the unfolding plot of a prairie novel as such. Such an approach may serve, therefore, as a starting point for the analysis of any work of fiction dealing with the concept of the West also due to the fact that "the land itself moulded an individual's character" (Francis and Palmer 727), and so, the prairie landscape seems inevitably adjacent to the unfathomable vastness both of the characters' homelands and their inner

struggles. Even more importantly, the land and the ancestral lineage associated with it, may well serve as a point of departure for a more in-depth discussion of prairie community, built upon a ground marked by the presence of ample ethnicities, which in turn delineates a rather complex structure of a local community. The myth of the Canadian West, understood in terms of the prairie-locale (New 118), may be further realized within the vision of Canada as a "Peaceable Kingdom", as it encapsulates unifying forces underlying the formation of settler societies on the Canadian prairie.

Although the first half of the 20th century is marked by a clear shift from the previously romantic visions of the prairie produced by the outsiders and gives ground to more realistic images on the part of Martha Ostenso, Robert Stead and Philip Grove, it should definitely be emphasized that the accounts provided by early settlers presented somewhat gruesome reality of prairie reality and the lifestyle the newcomers had to adopt in order to survive on desolate lands. It comes as no surprise that, in fact, this significant transition from idealization of landscape to more upfront depictions serves as a benchmark for the development of prairie fiction as known today. The aforementioned shift in the literary perception of the West also marked a gradual withdrawal not only from the purely pastoral and idyllic depictions of the prairie landscape but also, to a large extent, focused on more psychological understanding of the characters presented in prairie novels. The resulting tension behind the concepts of land and landscape proves to be, therefore, a valid point of departure when discussing the prairie in its multidimensional capacity, while at the same time, the psychological internalization of the landscape and quest for identity appear to be the most prominent trends in Canadian regional literature, which at the same time, as Simpson-Houseley and Norcliffe (2) posit, seems far from edenic in its tension between hostility and hidden beauty of natural surroundings.

The sense of place serves also as one of the leitmotifs in describing the nature of human experience and its complexity, which influenced further renderings of the issue within the modernist and postmodernist framework. Hence, the characters depicted in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* may be discussed in relation to their role in the community, their relationship with nature and broadly understood sexuality. Referring to the written accounts by Sir William F. Butler, Dick Harrison explains the significance of graphic descriptions of the hostile and unwelcoming land for the future renderings of the issue in Canadian prairie literature, which continues the poetics of survival, haunting and ambivalence. Harrison points out, however, to the shift that occurred with respect to the attitude towards the Canadian West, and its growing economic prosperity and popularity among settlers (Harrison 30). Paradoxically, this more propitious vision of the West was not mirrored in realistic attempts to evoke prairie

reality, especially in the first half of the 20th century, when the emphasis on hostility and alienation of the prairie environment (Harrison 32) and their effect on the community prevailed. Finally, as Watson and McLuhan (40) contend, the question of prairie topography ceased to act as a focal point of the discussion and gave ground to the reality understood as "the image in the mind" (McLuhan and Watson 40). This inevitably contributed to the emergence of yet another aspect of the regional approach in Canadian literature, namely, the inevitable and perennial attachment of the individual to the land and consequently, to the community – the key construct of any prairie novel. Interestingly enough, early depictions of the prairie landscape prepared solid ground for an extended perspective and multidimensional visions of the prairie operating within both physical and metaphorical contexts.

At the heart of a prairie novel lies the abovementioned concept of community, which constitutes a source of and, more significantly, a vantage point for the observation of the individual. It may be argued, therefore, that both *The Double Hook* and *What the Crow Said* focus on the internal rift that instigates conflicts between the masculine and the feminine, rendering the opposition between matriarchy and patriarchy a source of that discord and its significance for the individual's quest and final resolution by means of reconciliation with the community and the symbolic meaning of rebirth. In *The Double Hook* the matriarchal supremacy is disintegrated after the main male character – James – commits matricide in an attempt to establish his position in the community, by defying a mean-spirited matriarchal figure and her disruptive agency. This deed, however, does not stop Old Lady's ghost from engaging in her acts of trespassing and fishing on somebody else's property:

> Still the old lady fished. If reeds had dried up and the banks folded and crumbled down she would have fished still. If God had come into the valley, come holding out the long finger of salvation, moaning in the darkness, thundering down the gap at the lake head, skimming across the water, drying up the blue signature like blotting-paper, asking where, asking why, defying an answer, she would have thrown her line against the rebuke; she would have caught a piece of mud and looked it over; she would have drawn a line with the barb when the fire of righteousness baked the bottom (Watson 11-12).

Interestingly, even though Mrs. Potter's body remains in the attic, her ghostly presence renders the community restless as all dwellers of Dog Creek witness her apparitions and, therefore, they seem to be more subject to the overpowering spiritual wasteland embodied in the sinister agency of Mrs. Potter's "transgressive body" (Muredda 11) and its supremacy over the community. It should be noted, however that "her [Mrs. Potter's] death is a fundamental necessity for the survival of the community" (Morriss 64), and

therefore, heralds further reconciliation between its members and continuity through the birth of James's and Lenchen's child. The matriarchal strand seems to be also mirrored in Greta who, being haunted by her mother's presence in the house, does not come to terms with the departure of James, to whom she feels nearly incestuous attachment, and hence does not approve of his relationship with Lenchen. Seemingly, Greta's attitude may be perceived as an extreme extension of Mrs. Potter's defiance (Morriss 64) and as such needs to be eradicated for the sake of the well-being of the community, which in order to sustain balance and avoid further disintegration, has to seek harmony. The disruptive presence of Greta leaves community hanging in the balance, and so the dynamics within the community has to be altered. Although the act of matricide initiated the process of the community's regeneration, one may argue that Greta's gradual alienation and subsequent self-immolation serves as an ultimate sacrifice giving ground to the new beginning. More importantly, this cleansing ritual brings Greta to the reconciliation with the Old Lady's ghostly presence, as they both find themselves voluntarily isolated in the house on fire. Hence, the community can only be restored after the matriarchal supremacy gives way to the rule of a male, albeit failed, patriarchal figure, who is willing to reclaim the land and provide integrity. It may be argued then that the initially fragmented community is reunited in the process of spiritual awakening and the recognition of moral responsibility (Downton 12), which brings the members together in the moment of final salvation. Furthermore, it should be noted that, even though the "spiritual aridity" (Lovesey 49) is seemingly resolved through the birth of an illegitimate child, the Coyote's supremacy still prevails, insofar as it is actually the Trickster who sets the newborn's "feet on the sloping shoulders of the world" (Watson 118) and, by extension, also participates in the community's renewal.

In *What the Crow Said*, as Christine Jackman suggests, male characters seem to be more enslaved by the implications of binary oppositions and whilst trying to defy the matriarchal domination they go to great pains to struggle against "the self-imposed goal of perfection" (Jackman 1) of masculinity and attempt to escape the unavoidable supremacy of the Lang women. The opening scenes of the novel reveal the matriarch, Tiddy Lang, who is introduced as the actual head of the family: "And Tiddy must alone, as always, keep the farm in its thriving; a woman with six daughters when she needed one ambitious son, with an ordinary husband when she needed a paragon; she stood against the red bull, its savage pawing, its snorted breath" (Kroetsch 3). Unlike the odious and disempowered Old Lady — Mrs. Potter, Tiddy is portrayed as a mighty and potent mother figure, prepared to face any challenge. After becoming a widow she does not wallow in mourning, on the contrary, the moment the men of Big Indian learn about Martin Lang's

passing, the courting routine is resumed. Tiddy, however, seems to be quite particular about the right candidate. Liebhaber is not her first choice, even though during the period of his stay at the Lang house they developed a profound physical bond. At the same time, she does not reveal her motivations behind choosing John Skandl over the rest of the suitors, including Liebhaber. It may be argued that Skandl gained an advantage in the eyes of Tiddy due to the building of a lighthouse – a phallogocentric monument erected as an act of defiance and supremacy over Liebhaber and other men (Jackman 3) but, more importantly, a desperate attempt to justify his masculinity in the eyes of the community, rendering himself a seemingly virile figure, aiming at a perfect extension of his masculinity. It should be noted, nevertheless, that the tension between masculine and feminine agents in *What the Crow Said* is tinged with ambiguity which, as Jackman (1) notes, "undermines the absolute positions of [Kroetsch's] characters", rendering the ultimate matriarchal-patriarchal relationship problematic. In this light, Liebhaber's position in the community seems inherently complex – he may be perceived as a liminal character who does not stand out as a paragon of masculinity and assumes the role of a catalyst for Tiddy's determination in bringing him back to life. Thus, Liebhaber is also significant for the community in that he is the first male Tiddy is intimate with after Martin Lang's death. Also, once Liebhaber appears to be an inalienable member of the Lang house, he is not dismissed, on the contrary, even though Tiddy is married to Skandl, Liebhaber assumes the role of a patriarch in Skandl's absence. Notwithstanding his continuous presence as the story unfolds, it may be assumed that he is and is not a legitimate member of the community. At first, he appears to be a peripheral character, not adequate enough to earn his position as Tiddy's second husband and, simultaneously, his lot is determined by silent, albeit meaningful, waiting. The final union between Liebhaber and Tiddy serves, therefore, as a hallmark of the community's continuity beyond gender binaries and, consequently, both matriarchal and patriarchal supremacy do not hold. The community is restored in the communion of flesh between two equal entities, as both Tiddy and Liebhaber are "released from the gender roles – of male questing and female domestication" (Thieme 125) and thus, gender hierarchy in the novel does not seem definite and clear-cut.

Another theme permeating both novels is the concept of exile/journey. Although *What the Crow Said* oscillates around internal aspects of the notions, *The Double Hook* foregrounds individual's alienation and temporary isolation through the image of the journey to town, "from an isolated (...) community into unmapped country and the uncharted region of the self" (Lovesey 45) in an attempt to re-establish one's identity in spite of the internal flaw – the inability to redefine one's masculinity within matriarchal order. Interestingly, James's transgression against the Old Lady results, in his self-imposed exile

from the settlement to another reality, namely, a town, where he tries to escape the mundane of the prairie and acquaints himself with the treacherous joys of sexually and financially unimpeded life. Apparently, however, the town proves to be nothing but the source of the decay of the world, debauchery and sexual depravation, rendering James's attempt to redefine himself outside the community futile. The escape is, paradoxically, doomed to failure also because of the imposed imbalance of power between the members of community, the result of which is reflected in Kip's rebellion against James and the internal distress in the community. Indeed, the tension between the two men may be attributed to the unknown origin of Kip – one may only assume that he may be a Native, or at least a half-breed trying to gain an advantage over James, by making an unseemly pass at Lenchen and threatening James. The balance in the community, however, needs to be restored and in order to make that happen, the stronger one has to cleanse the place by ridding of the shady presence of Kip and his sinister deeds. More importantly, Kip seems to be the only one unrelated to the rest of community members and, therefore, his antagonistic attitude is not received well, which puts him in an inconvenient position. Finally, the conflict, resulting in James's blinding Kip, may be also partly due to James's fear of miscegenation, threatening the community, which may be read as an implicit message in Watson's text. Although the final redemption of the community is not dependent on a single figure only (Morriss 59), it should be noted that James's quest for identity delineates a new direction for the restoration of the community: passivity is replaced by "purposeful significance" (Morriss 62). The exile does not, however, provide the community with the sense of security. The ghostly presence of the Old Lady still haunts Dog Creek, Greta loses her mind in the abandoned and yet haunted house, pregnant Lenchen is banished by her mother and stays with Felix Prosper, the only hope in the time of crisis. James's return as a failed patriarch is supposed to fill the void remaining after "the dissolution of [the] prior matriarchy" (Muredda: 2012) and as such may symbolize a promise of renewal, although founded on Greta's ashes – yet another feminine sacrifice in the name of patriarchal supremacy. Thus, James's quest may be described as "a journey from *dismemberment* to *at-one-ment*" (Tiffin 125), which consequently legitimises his position in the community through the birth of his child, supposedly the refined version of himself and a hope for a new direction for the community, which is still trying to thrive under the watchful eye of the omnipresent Trickster.

In *What the Crow Said* the concept of exile/journey presents itself as a more complex one, as the community of Big Indian lacks an appropriate candidate for the patriarch. Tiddy's second husband, John Skandl, spends a lot of time outside the town and even though he is expected as a Messiah, who will redeem the rest of the reckless and drunk men from the hands of

authorities (Thieme 120), his flying vehicle fails and Skandl dies. The only symbol of his might, virility and sexual potetntial, the lighthouse, eventually serves only as the reminder of his past glory as Tiddy's husband. Interestingly, the community of Big Indian cannot entirely rely on the power of masculinity. In fact, the overpowered men engage in the game of shmier to find refuge from female domination and domestication (Jackman: 1991) and, therefore, to delay the moment of assuming the responsibility for their actions. Also, it should be noted that the form of their defiance is somewhat puerile: they do not bathe, do not eat properly (i.e. they eat horse excrements mixed with the leather taken from their belts) and excrete in the same room. This kind of voluntary and purposeful exile is not productive, it is only a mere manifestation of male weakness in the face of overwhelming powers of nature and the fear of subjugation to female power. It seems that their only chance to contribute to the community in order to prove their male potential is the battle against the sky. At first, the only men not to participate in this enterprise are Liebhaber and Joe Lightning, who as a Native is aware that no man can fight nature in a reckless manner and win single-handedly. In fact, Joe Lightning seems to be more understanding of nature and, therefore, more careful about direct confrontations and interactions with its elements. Unlike other men, he does not have wanton pride and knows when to surrender and subdue, even if it means failure in the eyes of the whole community. Moreover, it appears, that Joe Lightning's presence is not perceived as threatening, especially due the fact that he is in a relationship with one of Tiddy's daughters and so the people of Bigknife do not ostracise him – he becomes an acknowledged member of the community. Finally, as all men disappear, Liebhaber decides to fire bees into the sky and by means of that becomes a local hero by bringing back the long awaited rain. As John Thieme (121) further observes, *What the Crow Said* "articulates a traditional paradigm of prairie gender relations in which female space is seen as enclosed and male space as expansive". Simultaneously, however, it may be assumed that in the long run the male quest for immortality and transcendence (Thieme 121) is not valid, inasmuch as the feminine practicality and perseverance prevail over intangible fancy. More importantly, male supremacy is not to be established also due to the fact that the younger generation of potential patriarchs is silenced from the very beginning. Vera Lang's son raised by coyotes develops his own language, which renders him unable to participate as a legitimate member of the community, notwithstanding his profound understanding of the laws of nature. Tiddy's son, JG, on the other hand, is entirely isolated from the world outside the house, he is completely mute, the only relationship he develops is with the crow. The rest of the family, especially Tiddy, seem to be oblivious of his rather annoying presence (JG excretes uncontrollably when excited). Even after his tragic death he is referred to as "simply dead" (Kroetsch 131). It may

be argued, therefore, that the restoration of the community in *What the Crow Said* is not to be provided by the ferocity of patriarchal domination but rather a harmonious union between matriarchal and patriarchal elements.

The driving force in both novels proves to be sexuality. In *The Double Hook* sexual practices appear to be implicit and of less intensity than in *What the Crow Said*. The plot revolves around two problematic relationships: the implicitly incestuous attachment between Greta and James and the hidden relationship between James and Lenchen, the mother of his child. James's secret infatuation with Lenchen seems relegated only to physical intimacy, which justifies his virile masculinity and the right to possess a submissive female. Even though the order in the community is long disrupted, his illegitimate union with Lenchen aggravates the community's predicament, inasmuch as at this point he is not capable of assuming responsibility and become the head of the family. Notwithstanding his fathering of Lenchen's child, he decides to flee the community in search of his own fulfilment. Meanwhile, in James's absence, Greta learns about Lenchen's pregnancy:

> She wanted to cry abuse through the boards. She wanted to cram the empty space with hate. She wanted her voice to shatter all memory of the girl who had stayed too long, then gone off perhaps to die in the hills. Die suffering so that James would remember the pain of her. Die young so that James would remember the sweetness of her. Die giving so that he'd live in the thought of her. (Watson 74)

In a shaman-like trance Greta decides to set the house on fire: her sacrifice is ultimate while the community is to be restored on her ashes. Through the performance of the cleansing ritual she wants to spite James ,but at the same time, she makes a clear statement by a ritual condemnation of Lenchen. Interestingly however, Lenchen becomes a victim of the double standard, her position in the community is compromised due to the illegitimate pregnancy and consequently she is excluded from her own family. In the end she seeks refuge at Felix Prosper's house, who in James's absence somewhat unwittingly takes over the role of the leader who holds the community, however shattered and disintegrated, together. The role of sexuality in *The Double Hook* is two-fold, both a threat and salvation, as Lenchen's body carries the hope of redemption – the son of a failed patriarch. It may be observed, therefore, that the unarticulated fear of destructive powers of the body permeates the reality of Dog Creek. Greta's ritual suicide proves an inevitable step towards integrity, her presence disturbs order, James appears to be torn between two sexual forces. Although it is not explicitly stated, the incestuous taint, along with the Old Lady's ghost, haunts James and so he has to flee in order to release himself from this burden. Simultaneously, it may be argued that after Greta's suicide sexuality in the community regains its life-

giving purpose. In this light, James's sexual potential is of secondary importance: he only mediates in the process of renewal, even though he may be perceived as the failed father of the newborn community.

The concept of sexuality in *What the Crow Said* seems to be far more complex in that it may be associated mote in terms of transgression and challenging traditional conventions. Also, sexuality in the novel frequently manifests itself through subversive practices, be it sexual withdrawal or physical communion with nature. The opening scene depicts sexual intercourse between Vera Lang and the swarm of bees, which later on results in her mysterious impregnation. Tiddy, with her full breasts, epitomises the ideal of earth mother, nurturer and care-giver (Wall 92). Indeed, Kroetsch, as Jackman (4) notes:

> (…) plays with all of these definitions of woman. (…) The Lang women are excessive. (…) The four generations, as close as it is possible to figure, are made up of 14 women. And one black mare. So the women are healthy, long-lived and fertile (Jackman 4).

It may be argued, therefore, that Lang women's sexuality threatens the patriarchal order, their uncontrollable and mysterious impregnations fill the men with uneasiness as most of them are dismissive of men, to some extent even sexually self-sufficient (Vera, Rita, Theresa). Each of the women act as a separate sexual being by developing her own ways of sexual fulfilment: Vera's obsessive infatuation with bees brings her to voluntary isolation and silent communion with nature, Rita writes passionate letters to prisoners and Theresa develops a nearly incestuous relationship with the ghost reminiscent of her grandfather and as a result gets pregnant (Jackman 5). Significantly, Tiddy seems to be the one who "seeks legitimate pregnancy" (Jackman 5) but, in fact, accepts things as they are and, hence, she does not question her daughters about the circumstances of their impregnations. The seemingly virile men of Big Indian appear to be, however, intimidated by the sexual might of the Lang women. The mysterious impregnations prove their sexual impotence, inasmuch as they are not able to control the process, even though the Lang women get pregnant consecutively. Apparently, the life-giving cycle is not to be interrupted and as such may be perceived as the harbinger of immortality. Also, the fertility of the Lang women may mirror the fertility of the land after a long period of drought. It may be assumed, therefore, that the sexual might in *What the Crow Said*, however vehement and intimidating, sustains order in the community and ensures its continuity. Hence, the final union between Tiddy and Liebhaber may serve as a victorious example of conscious matriarchal supremacy over the masculine element in which Tiddy reveals her masculine attributes – she virtually claims Liebhaber's body in the

final intercourse. Her union with the man reveals her awakening and recognition of her needs: "Tiddy was living for the moment. She liked the way his body slipped against her own, sweating, his chest sliding over her breasts" (Kroetsch 191). Undoubtedly, this scene evokes the image of Tiddy making love to Liebhaber as the main initiator and for the first time in the novel her satisfaction comes first. Thus, due to Tiddy's awakening and Liebhaber's submission the fate of the community is complete, mostly due to the fact that they both form "the naked circle of everything" (Kroetsch 191), through which everything falls into place, despite the ubiquitous and overwhelming chaos.

The more in-depth insight into different dimensions of the prairie in Watson's *The Double Hook* and Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* proves to be problematic in that the symbolical layers of both novels serve as a vast space for further exploration. The concept of the community in *The Double Hook* is grounded in an internal discord between the mother and son while the community in *What the Crow Said* seems to immersed in the chaos caused for no apparent reason. The image of the two communities, however, embodies alienation and gives space for the uncanny and inexplicable events and nature's interference. The numerous disturbances foreground, however, the significance of the individual, albeit either novel focuses on different aspects of the individual's exile and journey. Therefore, it may be argued that sexuality is also one of the focal points when discussing Watson's and Kroetsch's novels: it may be destructive, life-giving but at the same time purely carnal and self-contained. Hence, the reality presented in the prairie novels of the second half of the 20th century mirrors the internal conditions of the characters who transcend the prairie through the quest of identity, self-imposed exile and sexuality. As a result, the community is restored either through rebirth or the ideal union between masculine and feminine elements. The harmony, however, remains in question, inasmuch as Trickster and nature always prevail over the possibility of creating an inherently peaceable kingdom. The prairie is thus a sinister space and a shaky ground, where no ready-made truths are provided and, therefore, the mysterious cycle of the unknown continues.

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