



MARTA, THE PATIENCE INCARNATE, IN GABRIELLE ROY'S GARDEN IN THE WIND

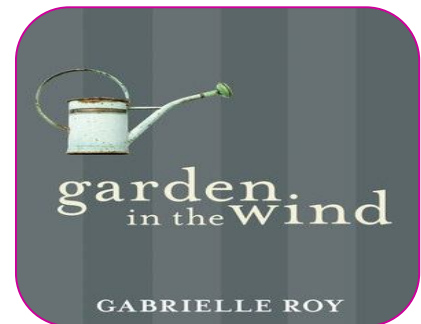
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ABSTRACT

Whereas the American West was opened "by" settlers, the preposition "for" is more appropriate to Canada, as commerce, law, and transportation... preceded the influx of population. (Moss 87)

*Gabrielle Roy is one of the most prolific francophone women writers of Canada. Her father was an officer in the federal government of Canada with the responsibility of settling many colonies of immigrants. Her recollections of these immigrants have helped her in writing *Garden in the Wind*.*



KEYWORDS : *Garden in the Wind* , federal government of Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Gabrielle Roy and other "Quebecois novelists write out of a different literary tradition as well as different culture, and in French, so that many English-speaking readers know their work only in translation" (Howells 9). Roy knew English well and worked very hard with her English translators to make the English text look as close to the original as she could. In fact she was a stickler for exactitude. Here are the words of Joyce Marshall, one of the translators of Roy's works:

And while I am discussing translation, I should add a digression that may not be generally known, the extent to which... Roy collaborated with her translator. She knew English well and at the beginning of her career, even considered writing in that language. She went through every word not once but several times with her translator, pounded out each sentence of the original. She had an excellent and exacting ear for language; nothing extraneous or false was allowed to stand. It was an exhausting and stimulating process and the final English text was as close to the original vision as two brains could get it. (150)

As a writer born and bred in the prairie region of Manitoba, Gabrielle Roy has set many of her fictional works against the prairie background. The forbidding features of the prairies have come handy to Roy in placing her characters in a pathetic condition, for it is mostly the prairies which offer geophysical conditions which are most depressing and intimidating. It is in the prairies that Nature shows up most conspicuously as a monster and destroyer. It is these geophysical features and conditions which make the immigrants hapless and leave them with a sense of isolation and alienation, intensifying their feeling of helplessness. Gabrielle Roy has used to great advantage this aspect of prairie life in the immigrant characters whom she has created and these immigrant characters find these inhospitable geophysical conditions of the prairies not only terrifying and depressing but also comforting at times.

"Garden in the Wind" is the title story and the last of the four stories in *Garden in the Wind*. It is the story of Marta. The following is in Roy's own words how she came to have the character of Marta in the story:

Garden in the Wind was born of the passing vision I had one day of a garden filled with flowers at the very outer limit of cultivated territory, and a woman working there, in the wind, a kerchief on her head, who looked up and followed me with a long, perplexed and supplicating gaze which never left my memory and never ceased to demand for years and years – the thing we are all asking for, from the very depth of our silence: Tell about my life. (10)

"Garden in the Wind" is essentially the story of Marta, which is in effect, the story of her loneliness. In fact, there is not much of a story here and what we get is a poignant picture of suffering – suffering which is both physical and mental but relieved now and then by the protagonist's turning to the comforting presence of a blossoming garden. Marta and her husband Stepan have migrated to Canada from Ukraine carrying with them dreams of prosperity. Their plight can well be imagined if the place of their settlement is known. Volhyn is the place where they settled, rather where they tried to settle. Roy does not like to call it a village but just a place since there are no vestiges of human life. Long after the couple have become extinct, Roy visits the place and finds just two things – an abandoned chapel and a Polish style aspen grove. These two things were enough to rouse the imagination of Roy and instantly the story of the couple unfolded in her mind.

The abode of Marta and Stepan is engulfed by the immense and grassy plain that opens "before their eyes like some endless reverie on man and his destiny" (124). "There runs the solitary road like a ribbon. The prairie wind that blows outside the chapel is a never-ending moan just like the sea wind... bringing the same unease ceaselessly curling and whipping at the grasses as it does in water" (124). Marta and Stepan, along with others, most of them illiterate peasants from their native Volhynia, chose this desolate strip for their settlement. Maria Marta Yaramko began her life in this hostile land and her life proved to be one long tenure of loneliness, disappointment, desolation and despair.

The external emptiness that stares at Marta when she looks outside her house, is intensified by what happens inside that lonely house in the lonely place. All communications between her and her husband, the only occupants of the house, have long ceased. She and her husband live like total strangers under the same roof. There is no love lost anymore between the two, for they have not been on talking terms for several years. Stepan slowly drifts away from Marta when he finds that she has grown more and more wedded to the plants, the flowers and the animals. The gulf widens and the strained relationship reaches a point of no return.

To Marta the plant-world is heaven. She is now lost in admiring the aspen grove. It seems to her that the grove is filled with music. That seems a silver lining in her cloud of marital life. That is the consolation in her life. She wants or hopes to count on it rather than on her husband, to link her always with the wellspring of her life. She has by then forgot why she came to the door and searches across the plain which seems to give her no notion. Then not knowing to direct her voice to reach Stepan, she simply shouts into the immensity to him. She calls him, Yaramko. If she calls him 'Man' as he said 'Woman', it will be an offence against their former love. Marta cannot bring herself to use the Christian name Stepan, which has a feeling of friendship clinging to it; it is like calling a person who has long ceased to exist, according to Marta.

Marta tries in vain to reconcile herself as wife to Stepan by looking at their wedding photo. She makes up her mind to dig out of her trunk, their old wedding photograph so as to see Stepan's face and remind herself that this is indeed the man with whom, before the priest and for her lifetime, she had sworn an alliance of affection. She had sworn to be a companion in his life, sharing his joys and sorrows. But all this pulls her away from his 'old woman', whom he no longer calls 'Marta'.

When Marta is unwell, she does not want to speak of her illness and the rift between them widens. If Stephan does not ask about Marta's sickness, Marta too does not bring herself to talk about it.

Just like any other disturbed wife, Marta seeks the quietude of the chapel. Only the chapel provides her with a soothing breeze, which she thinks is the only thing which will drop a note of interest in her well-being. Unfortunately even that fails to reach her reminding her again of her husband.

One day Marta walks down the endless dirty road to the chapel which they built when they first come to Volhynia. She is deep in her thoughts about her life that has now been buried in silence. She asks to herself : "What kind of life did you have anyway, Marta Yaramko ?" It is a question which she herself cannot answer. It is a pathetic one. She is alive because she has no choice. Back to her question, it is one that is hard enough for anyone to answer.

She speaks as though she is explaining something to someone. She says :

We came into the world in our little villages in Poland, living on top of each other, where you could hear the neighbours crying or laughing in their house. And next thing you know we're lost away here in so much silence and sky, our lives small and forgotten as those of insects. (140)

Things have not been bad at all in the beginning. In those early days at Volhyn Stepan had been a fairly good husband, talking to her in a tone that was still well-meaning. Marta recalls the good old days one day when she is waiting for a storm to end. Marta sit down, crosses her hands and remembers how the little garden that lies in front of her was born and how it grew, for in a sense, it tells the history of her own life. They are short of everything when they first land at Volhyn. All they have is a shelter and they camp in a readymade hut or cabin that barely keeps out the rain with a few chickens, a cow and their babies. And so Stepan was about to set off on the stiff forty-mile trip to buy the things that they need most urgently.

The same husband who had no objection to Marta's garden and who had brought back what garden seeds he could, does not now bother about her garden and rather has taken a strong dislike to it. Marta is so full of sorrow at this thought that she tries to get back to those memories whenever she can. She even remembers that it was seven or eight little envelopes of seeds that Stepan had brought home. They produced a fine harvest and plenty of new seeds to plant. Stepan does not now care about Marta and leaves her to toil with her watering of the plants. All he does is to pass by the garden not missing the opportunity to grumble, of course.

Sure enough, Marta's garden has always been an object of Stepan's jealousy because Marta always waters the garden or walks amidst the plants to take care to see if one plant is not tangled with the other. He looks up from the fields one day and sees the 'old woman' with her pails, struggling with her body as if to pass through an invisible wall. He thinks that this is sheer madness. According to Stepan, "everything was dying of heat, thirst and despair and life was a dust-ridden exile. He thought "how could anyone still worry about a few wretched flowers?" (152). He slowly grasps the way in which Marta has always been his enemy, loving life despite the bitter sorrows it has thrust upon them. He is seized by a kind of jealousy and fury, seeing only evil intentions around him. Blinded by jealousy, the already bitter Stepan turns inhuman towards his wife. He will show this old woman what he can do when pushed to it. Now she will have to declare herself for him and live according to his wishes and will and against life or he will have no other choice than to have his vengeance. Marta is worried meanwhile about who will die first, she or the garden. She does not mind dying first, because it will save her the problem of worrying over it when she herself goes. It seems to Stepan that Marta is just worrying herself old, now that he sees that she looks old, and it seems to happen all of a sudden too because he seldom gives her a look and thought. And when he does, it is just out of his anger. Marta is busy finding solace in the flowers and Stepan pours out his angry and spiteful thoughts in words as he walks past Marta and her garden anytime.

Stepan's turning an alcoholic is the last straw in the soured relationship between the couple. He will ride to Codessa and drink to his heart's content. Marta is sick but he does not know she is sick and does not even care to find out if she needs help. He even thinks it is only a trick played by Marta to escape from domestic chores. On the contrary in spite of her illness Marta does all the domestic chores with great difficulty. Sometimes caught in the pool of drunkards, Stepan used to pour out his feelings in a loud voice

and speak out hostile words about Marta. He drinks and drinks and will not entertain thoughts of spending on her medicine.

Another blow in the life of the couple is at the instance of Marta being unable to bear the pain of her illness any longer and Stepan being firm in taking that to be an undoubted falsification. One day Marta's sudden feeling of fatigue of the efforts she has made, makes her drop heavily to a bench by the wall. Her exhaustion, which to Stepan is just a mean trick, is so great that she fears she will never get her thoughts together again – the lovely things she dreams of. Marta is fooled even by nature, she felt.

When Marta is bed-ridden Stepan is not able to bring himself to talk to her. But the fact is that once he has stopped talking it is almost impossible to start again. He keeps on postponing the thing. At one stage, a male chauvinist that he is, he feels that it will be infra dig to be the first one to break the existing silence – after all Marta too has not spoken to him for a long time. His secret delight is that, soon it will be the end of the flowers and the garden and the summer which make Marta happy, when existing. So, he loses the last chance to speak to Marta, for with the overnight storm Marta's garden goes to ruins and with it Marta's life. Yes, Marta quietly passes away.

The title, "Garden in the Wind", means, at the lexical level, the garden raised by Marta in the prairies at the end of the world. But at the figurative level it means that Marta is herself a garden, ploughing a lonely furrow at the end of the world. She lives with her husband, but they are apart. Marta is weather – beaten, a real garden in the wind. Spring marks the advent of her life in the prairies, the summer, the blossoming, the violent autumn with its fierce wind withers her as it does her plants and flowers, and when the winter arrives, she is already at death's door.

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