

Ms. Banu Priya A

Part time Research Scholar

University of Madras

Department of English

Sir Theagaraya College,

Chennai

Dr. K. Thiyagarajan

Research Supervisor and Convenor

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

Sir Theagaraya College,

Chennai

The Quebec Novel in Multi Perspectives

Abstract:

THE QUEBEC NOVEL of the last decade in many ways radically different from those of present -classic texts of the 1960s that first attracted the attention of American critics. Those novels seemed borne on the wave of a new sense of national identity associated with Quebec's Quiet Revolution. A bursting of the forth creative activity made names like Marie-Claire Blais, Hu-bert Aquin, Michel Tremblay, Jacques Godbout, Anne Hébert, and Réjean Ducharme familiar even to an American public. Together, these writers produced a sense of a lively new Quebec, satirizing the complacent of old ways and looking toward new, even revolutionary forms of political and artistic expression. Following closely on their heels, a generation of feminists translated this sense of newly-emerging identity from nationalism to gender, and writers like Nicole Brossard, France Theoret, Madeleine Gag- non, and Louky Bersianik became the spokespersons for

an active feminist movement that broke with traditional generic models and experimented with language as a means of representing difference. Emerging from a remarkably close-knit intellectual community located primarily in Montreal, the major Quebec novelists of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to share similar concerns, often ideological as well as artistic, and to participate in a homogeneous society, whereas one undergoing rapid change.

Full Paper

The writing of the era inaugurated but not determined by the 1980 referendum on Quebec independence is not easily characterized. It is perhaps its very slipperiness, its tendency to move off in every direction that is its very nature. A monolithic view of Quebec literature in terms of easily-characterized trends and movements is no longer possible, and the society represented in the novel itself appears multiform, multicultural, and, even, multilingual. While some political commentators have seen the recent Canadian constitutional debates as a clash between an increasingly multicultural Canada and a Quebec bent on preserving a distinct cultural identity, recent developments in literature suggest that Quebec, too, has begun to perceive itself as a pluralistic, decentered cultural space. In the 1960s and early 1970s, poems about Quebec were written to be declaimed at public gatherings, like Michele Lalonde's famous "Speak White", which made an impassioned statement about the people of Quebec and their solidarity with other oppressed peoples all over the world. Today, some in Quebec may feel more at home with the parody of Lalonde's poem written by Marco Micone, a hyphenated *Italo-Quebecois*, which he entitled "Speak What".

This is not to say that the writers who created the new Quebec literature of the 1960s and 1970s, many of them quite young at the time, have ceased to publish. Several of them have, in the course of the 1980s, produced some of their major work. Réjean Ducharme's *Dkade* (1990) continues his playful experimentation with language. Even Hubert Aquin, the intensely nationalistic writer who committed suicide in 1977, has continued to be a presence in the Quebec literary world, with the posthumous publication of his *Journal* (1992) and his early narrative, *L'invention de la mort* (1991).

But even in the work of established writers, and certainly in the new voices have begun to express themselves in a Quebec French whose

linguistic status is no longer open to question, a change has taken place in the 1980s. If the writers of the 1960s had been concerned with defining the content of the newly-adopted adjective “Québécois,” with foregrounding the reality of a modern, urban Quebec, the Quebec fiction produced since 1980 has opened the Quebec cultural space to a multiplicity of near *forces*. As Sherry Simon has written:

Perhaps the most important single issue which has emerged during the 1980s concerns the definition of the “culture” which the novel is charged to convey—or challenge. It is surely something of a truism to say that Quebec has entered a crisis of culture as it passes from an ideal of a homogeneous, collective identity to a more problematic and heterogeneous conception of social and symbolic union. Increasing diversity in the representations of cultural space reflects the plurality of discourses and interests which seek expression within the borders of Quebec culture. (“Culture” 167)

Simon cites as revelatory of this new expansion of the Quebec literary domain were two important works of criticism appeared in 1988, Patricia Smart’s *Irrire dans la maison du pere*, traces the emergence of a feminine voice in Quebec literature, and Pierre Nepveu’s *L’ecologie du reel*, whose last chapter on current Quebec literature is entitled, “Ecritures mi-grantes.” To these works might be added, among others, the collection of essays produced by Simon’s own research group (which also included Pierre Iltérault, Robert Schwartzwald, and Alexis Nouss) entitled *fictions de l’idehtitaire an Quebec* and Simon Harel’s *k Voleur de parcours: identity ct tosWopolitisme dahis la litterature quebequoise tohtemporaine*. Evident in the titles of these works is a reexamination of the concept of “identity” and the sense that current Quebec writing has exploded old concepts of Quebec identity as constituted by an unbroken line of Québécois *pure laine*, essentially male and heterosexual, descending from the original French settlement.

Quebec history has recently seen as a subject of new exploration and reconsideration, this time by women writers. Anne Hébert, who had already foreseen the new spirit of the Quiet Revolution in stories like “Le Torrent,” dating from the 1940s, turns back toward Quebec history and tradition in her 1988 novel *fi Premier jardin*. Like Madeleine Ouelette-Michalska’s *A Maison TrslJer* (1984), *Mr Premier jrdirt* is a prime example of what Linda Hutcheon would call the postmodern form of historiographic metafiction, as it intertwines personal and cultural history through a focus on the lives

of women. In shifting the title of Quebec's "first settler" from her ancestor Louis Hébert to his wife, creator of the "the first garden" in the Canadian New World, Hébert's work expands the traditional vision of Quebec history to make room for the difference of gender.

While many feminist texts of the 1970s seemed strangely disconnected from Quebec nationalist discourse, several women writers of the 1980s have returned to the tradition to produce new readings of the Quebec past. "[J]'ai dans mes veines les générations antérieures," (10) proclaims the narrator of France Théoret's *Nods parlerons comme on écrit* (1982), as she interweaves the story of her own life with the long-silenced voices of an earlier generation of Quebec women, creating, as she says, an open and multiple feminine identity. This feminist revision of Quebec history has been a source of great popular interest, as is evident in the case of Arlette Cousture's best-selling novels, *Les Lilles de Caleb* (1985, 1986), which have been made into a widely-viewed television series. Based on the lives of her mother and grandmother, Cousture radically revises traditional images of the nineteenth-century Quebec family by showing a woman supporting her large family through her work as a schoolteacher.

Like *Premier jardin*, *Les Lilles de Caleb* casts a sympathetic eye on the lives of previous generations, effecting a reconciliation of mothers and daughters, whose conflictual relationship had been used by Quebec writers to signify a revolt against tradition. This theme is also played out in Marie-Claire Blais's *Visions d'Anna* (1982), a striking example of Blais's mature work, more given to compassion than the violent satire of her early success, *Itte SaisOn d'iv die d'EmmanueJ*. This theme of reconciliation also extends to the relationship between fathers and sons, as seen in Robert Lalonde's *R You du pere* (1988).

Michel Tremblay, too, has written novels that move away from the black humor and biting social criticism of his early theater, to the warmer, more self-revealing stance indicated by the title of his 1986 novel *fi (our decouvert*. Both Blais and Tremblay, however, return to a more somber mode as Blais in *L'Pnge de la solitude* (1989) and Tremblay in *k Cmur eclate* (1993) confront the era of AIDS. This recent work by Tremblay and Blais, among others, is indicative of an opening of the mainstream Quebec novel to encompass the experience of homosexuality, viewed not as a form of marginal existence, as in plays like Tremblay's *R Durfiesse de Langeais*, but as a facet of everyday Quebec life.

The 1980s has also seen as a geographical expansion of the Quebec fictional world. The characters of Jacques Poulin, Jacques Godbout, and Nicole Brossard move across a variety of North American spaces, engaged in multi-cultural dialogues and translations. Even writers like these, who can be considered Quebecer as *pure laine*, see their world as extending beyond the borders of Quebec itself, and they see themselves as positioned at the intersection of a multiplicity of cultural forces. A number of significant works are set in a larger North American setting and foreground the interpenetration of Quebec and “American” culture, more properly described by the neologistic adjective “*efalsunien*.” In Pefifes *Violences* (1982), the characters of Madeleine Monette shuttle back and forth between New York and Montreal, when they do not venture more widely. In *fi Trmps des Goisrnesu* (1993), Jacques Godbout has written a sequel to the story of the *Quebecois* everyman he had portrayed in his 1960s classic, *Salut Galarneau!*, but his novel that captures the spirit of the 1980s as Galarneau had captured the 1960s, is *Line Hisl0ire amérirdinr* (1986), a wildly funny collage of anecdotes about life in contemporary California, loosely evoking Godbout’s own sojourns at Berkeley. The *Québécois* protagonist of Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* (1984) also makes a ritualized pilgrimage to San Francisco, symbolically accompanied by a *mefisse* woman companion. As he follows in the footsteps of the French explorers who crossed the American continent, she finds and traces the destruction of her own Native American ancestors.

The device of a Quebec visitor lost in the futuristic wilderness of California also provides a framework for Monique LaRue’s *Copies Conf0rmes* (1989), which uses a feminine rewriting of Dashiell Hammett’s San Francisco-based *Malfrsr falcon* to satirize lifestyles determined by Silicon Valley technology—and to underline their destructive nature. Nicole Brossard’s *fi Desert mance* (1987) presents an even darker vision of a certain side of American culture as she showcases the violence engendered by men bent on nuclear destruction and sexual domination. All these Quebec writers share an uneasy fascination with the American West as a vision of a possible future life, and their *Quebec0is* protagonists seem to gain a sense of their own identity in their contact with the cultural confusion of California. Evident as well in the work of LaRue and Brossard is a critique of this new society as a dangerous extension of traditional patriarchal values.

In *R Desert mauve*, with its focus on the process of translation—the central text is printed twice, with subtle changes in each version—and on the

interaction of woman reader and woman's text, Brossard continues to explore the theoretical concerns raised in her earlier work, but she produces a novel immediately hailed as evidencing the "new readability" said to characterize recent feminist writing in Quebec. Feminism, of course, is now less frequently discussed, and if younger women writers are grouped together for the purposes of critical comparison, it is done under the rubric of "postfeminism" or even, as Lori Saint-Martin has suggested, "metafeminism." Although the writers so characterized proclaim no common program or identity, in contrast to their highly theoretical feminist predecessors of the 1970s, they share an apparent indifference to theory and a return to realism, which makes their work more accessible for the average reader.

Yet, women writers continue to open fictional space for new areas of women's experience. Anne Dandurand's diary-novel *In Corr qui craque* (1990) generated discussion of a new feminine eroticism, following on the heels of a controversial issue of the feminist periodical *R die en rise*. In another vein, Monique Proulx's *R Sexe des eloiles* questions a number of assumptions about the meaning of gender in modern life, transplanting a flamboyant transvestite character straight out of Michel Tremblay into a world of otherwise unremarkable urban lives, as a daughter undertakes the passage through adolescence aided by her newly-feminized father.

When not set in a historicized *Vieux-Quebec* or a futuristic California, the Quebec fiction of the 1980s and 1990s embraces the present reality of Montreal. But it is a Montreal far different from the linguistically-polarized city first introduced into the Quebec novel by Gabrielle Roy, who portrayed the heights of anglophone Westmount as literally dominating the francophone working-class world below. As it is clear in the new Quebec novel, these old lines of demarcation have collapsed, and the face of the city has been altered by the arrival of groups of immigrants from many areas of the world, who join long-established "allophone" communities originating in Italy or Greece. A dominant current image of Quebec society—or, more properly, of its cosmopolitan center, Montreal—is that of Babel. This is the title of a play by the *Ilal0- Quebecois* writer Antonio D'Alfonso, as well as a recent novel by Francine Noiil. As Noel's *Marysr* (1983) had seemed to many to sum up the experience of the new *QuebecOise* everywoman produced by the Quiet Revolution, her more recent *Babel prise dear* (1990), also entitled *Nods aeons tons di'cOuaert J'Amérique*, shows a Montreal of Spanish-speaking *emigres*

and hasidic Jews who happily share living space with the old Cfs (*Cenadiens fran ais*). While Noël, herself a Cf, sees this Babel as a joyous polyphony, the same reality seen from the perspective of the recent immigrant is often harder to negotiate.

The new, multi-layered Quebec identity has also been apparent in the writing of Montreal's large Italian community, as exemplified in the multi-lingual periodical *Prorsa*, whose cover proclaims in French, English, and Italian its identity as a "transcultural magazine." The novels of Antonio D'Alfonso reflect this multilingual reality. Born in Montreal of Italian parents, schooled in English but choosing to write in French, D'Alfonso, in his autobiographical novel *Peril on l'anli-passion* (1990), proclaims the desirability of a triple allegiance: "Montreal me permet d'être trois personnes en une seule. Enfant tripartite, j'aligne mes trois visions différentes sur la même ville" (180). One of the founders of *Versa*, Marco Micone aptly expressed his new Quebec reality in his parodic poem, "Speak What," where in answer to the question, "Que parlez-vous," Micone proposes:

notre verbe batard
et nos accents fêlés
du Cambodge et du Salvador
du Chili et de la Roumanie
de la Molise et du Péloponnèse. (85)

Like D'Alfonso and other members of the Quebec Italian community, some of the new practitioners of "la parole immigrantemigrante" have adopted French as a language of literary expression as an overlay to another mother tongue. This is notably the case with the many writers of Latin American origin, like the Chilean Marilu Mallet and the Uruguayan Gloria Escomel, who have come to Montreal as a refuge from political turmoil at home, this turmoil often forming the background for novels like Escomel's recent *Picges* (1992). To read the current Quebec novel is to encounter a North American *franc0pb0ne* society conscious of its language and history but open to multiple forms of experience. With the exception of a few remaining traces of apparent xenophobia, such as the portrait of a clearly "ethnic" villain in Yves Beauchemin's 1981 best-seller *R Matou*, the post-1980 Quebec novel seems to be a haven for pluralism, multiculturalism, and diversity in all its forms. Moving beyond the identity politics of the 1960s,

the new Quebec novel of the 1980s and 1990s has given new and multiple meanings to the concept of *Quebec*.

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