This paper is intended at reading and analyzing selected poems of two prominent writers of Canada P.K. Page and F.R. Scott. The notion of Canadian poetry is that of incessantly fleeting themes, concerns and ideas. In general Canadian poetry deals with: search for roots, interaction between mindscape and landscape, look inward for interior landscape, personal become political and political become personal, nationalistic concern, nature concern and poetry by women, the fate of selfhood, a sense of wilderness, the life in prairies, the need for personal mythologies, and landscape as a menacing presence. We here try to explicate some of these issues in “Single Traveller” by Page and “Canadian Authors Meet” by Scott. Page’s poetry is characterized by intense visual imagery and her issues deals with unexplored realities, self-expression and alienation. “Single Traveller” in a literal vein shows a craving for love, to have someone as a companion on an otherwise lonely way. However it does not remain simply a cogitation of a traveler but ends in multiple ruminations. Then we have Scott, who is one of the most significant catalysts of modern Canadian poetry because of two reasons: Firstly he has been highly influential in his own poetry. Secondly, he has been associated with several literary groups and ‘little magazines.’ As a satirist in the late twenties and early thirties, he tried to replace outworn Canadian Romanticism with ‘new poetry.’ His “Canadian Authors Meet” is one such attempt to ridicule and enkindle a new indigenous poetic spirit that speaks for Canada.

The notion of Canadian poetry is that of incessantly fleeting themes, concerns and ideas. Owing to its history of colonization—the only history that Canada possesses—the initial writers depended heavily on British models of writing. Besides this the only availability for writer’s expression is through geography which has endowed Canada with beauties as well as peculiarities of nature. Thus we have poets like Standish O’Grady, Charles Sangster, G.D. Roberts and Wilfred Campbell who shows Canada through its nature imagery. Following them are writers like P.K. Page, F.R. Scott, Al Purdy and Margaret Atwood who take Canadian poetry to a different plane, where the concern is about identity and Canada as a nation.

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P.K. Page was born in England and later came to Canada. Her residence never remained permanent and she kept on shifting from one place to another, travelling and experiencing different cultures in different nations. She was deeply influenced by symbolism, surrealism, Sufism and that is what accounts for mysticism in her poetry. P.K. Page’s poetry
is characterized by intense visual imagery and her issues deals with unexplored realities, self–expression and alienation. Here the focus will be on her poem “Single Traveller.”

“Single Traveller” in a literal vein shows a craving for love, to have someone as a companion on an otherwise lonely way. The persona reveals how the companion keeps on changing in her sojourns. Sometimes it is ‘a trillium covered wood’ and sometimes ‘a horse, two dogs, some cats, a blue macaw.’ One is reminded of a typical Bollywood protagonist (Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor) of 1960’s and 70’s singing on a road, encountering with people and things coming on his way. The poem is an expression and cogitation of a traveller who is single and in search of a companion, but noticeably a search that itself is questioned: “O Poet, Squanderer of time and talents / why do you search for love as your companion?” Very adroitly Page is able to recreate the anxiety and solitude of a ‘single traveler’ and she does this with the unique combination of feelings and imagery. Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce remarks about Page:

No other poet in Canada, with the possible exception of Atwood, has been so intensely concerned to explore the nature of visual perception. Eyes abound in her poems, as do lenses, cameras, field glasses. Perspectives are almost unusual compositional elements play an important part; images may be blurred, superimposed, surprisingly juxtaposed, viewed through strangely distorting lenses. These perpetual elements, including a concern for color and light and shade, combines with an imagistic precision and recalls her experience in film. (Geddes 405)

Clearly the poem is postmodern and as Rene Wellek terms it, it exhibits “multivalence” (310) i.e.it speaks on multiple level. One can discover its “dialogic” (Bakhtin 82) nature, not only in the language but also in the process of reading. Seen from other stance the poem appears a feminist text. Page’s diction of ‘Single Traveller’ recalls another poem “Woman to Man” (Narsimhaiah 79) by Judith Wright. Look at the beginning of both poems and the similarity of words struck our minds:

The eyeless labourer in the night
the selfless, shapeless seed I hold. (Woman to Man)

What is this that is my life’s companion?
Shape–changer, sometimes faceless, this companion. (Single Traveller)

Judith Wright has focused on the pregnancy of a woman who is scared and seeks a man’s support. While P.K. Page has shown a vagabond who hankers for true love.’ Judith Wright has shown that it is the ‘embrace’ of man and woman which results in procreation: “the third who lay in our embrace.” But the very stage of pregnancy fills a woman’s mind with doubt and anxiety. However Page shows this ‘embrace’ as an alienating experience: “Behind the loved embrace, a face of light – demon or angel – lures me from my companion.” Judith Wright ends it thus:

This is the marker and the made
This is the question and reply;
The blind head butting at the dark
The blaze of light along the blade
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

Then we have Page who writes:

Am I too blinded and bounded by coarse wrappings
Ever to know true love as my companion?
O Poet, squanderer of time and talents
Why do you search for love as your companion?
In Wright’s poem we see the hope of woman in man but in Page the relationship between man and woman remains dubious. What remains common in both these poets is the equation of ‘woman and nature’ and ‘man and culture.’ While ‘wood,’ ‘horse,’ ‘dogs,’ ‘cats,’ and ‘macaw’ symbolize nature; ‘wasting world,’ ‘street’ and ‘coarse wrappings’ indicate man’s influence.

As could be seen in P.K. Page’s real life that she has been constantly travelling from one place to another; there lingers nostalgia for that place, for that past. She herself said in an interview: “I simply have this great yearning . . . The sort of yearning that is almost nostalgia. As I’ve once known it and I want to go back wherever that was. Just as one has . . . a memory of Eden, of Heaven, and one has such a homesickness for it that it breaks one’s bloody heart.” (Fried Eggs 31-37)

The element of diaspora is clearly visible as we see the traveler mentioning: “Shape Changer, sometimes faceless, this companion.” Here companion is the place of dwelling which never remained constant for Page. Conspicuously poem begins with a question and ends with a question certifying the uncertainty of the place where this traveler resides. The final question comes as an answer since again the traveler has to go to some other place, it is superfluous to be in love with this present dwelling. The ‘love’ here exhibits diasporic consciousness of home.

In “First Neighbour” (Narsimhaiah 182) Page has conveyed the sense of alienation of a resident in new location:

- The people I live among, unforgivingly
- previous to me, grudging
- the way I breathe their
- property, the air,
- speaking a twisted dialect to my differently –
- shaped ears . . .

The ‘Single Traveller’ transforms this experience and it imbues in itself the human tendency to love, but also not to get hurt by that love and hence avert from that love. That’s why the question with implicit answer: “Why do you search for love as your companion?”

At another level P.K. Page has tried to show poet’s interaction with Canada. The ‘love’ than embodies the poet’s love for Canadian literature which is under the state of flux. The poet wanders through ‘wasting world’ i.e. the world where grand narratives have ended and the “companion” poet is searching is the ‘way of expression.’ “A horse, two dogs, some cats, a blue macaw / each in its turn became a loyal companion.” These lines are action oriented that inspires the poet to write in spite of the criticism and people’s remarks that are ensued on her.

Page’s poetry has a rippling effect so as to say that it hints the reader of several aspects and creates varying ‘horizons of expectations.’ (Jauss 28) This aspect of her poetry is described by Rosemary Sullivan: “Statis, solidification, has always described a hell state for Page; the bright osmosis in which the self dissolves and is integrated with its deeper substrata is described as a molecular dance. Fluidity leads to new direction, another seeing.” (Sullivan 41-42)

As mentioned earlier P.K. Page’s poetry characterizes that features of Canadian literature where the focus turns to interior landscape and mindscape and interaction between them. Page is concerned more with objectified identity of Canada and the poet. Though she adroitly uses natural imagery, what remains the cynosure of her poems is the rumination that she is able to introduce with that imagery. If P.K. Page is involved in Canadian landscape and mindscape, than F.R. Scott is indulged in enkindling literary acumen amongst the poet. If Page focuses on the issue of roots and identity than F.R. Scott highlights the need for personal mythologies.
Influence of Scott can be realized in his own poetry and in literary magazines and academia associated with them. He has been a catalyst in the field of Canadian poetry so as to enkindle it with newness of ideas, and themes. With a view that “the existing order is complete before the new work arrives: for one order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be... altered... the past should be altered by the present as much as the present should be altered by the past.” (Eliot 295) Therefore, as a satirist in the late twenties and early thirties, he tried to replace outworn Canadian Romanticism with ‘new poetry.’ Scott’s most important document about poetry is “New Poems for old” (published in The Canadian Forum in 1931) on the modernist movement of poetry out of late nineteenth century poetry:

Gardens are very nice in their way . . . and poetry can be made of the m, but they represent but a small portion of reality. The modernist kicked poetry rather rudely out into the street to seek amongst the haunts and habits of living men for the stuff from which a vital and human art might be created. (337)

The figure of F.R. Scott in Canadian poetry is like that of Pope and Dryden in English poetry who criticized the widespread hypocrisy in English society. F.R. Scott too does not dither to point out the short-comings of Canadian poets and their trifling activities. Scott tried to rebuild the canon which is independent and individual and stands distinct from colonial penumbra of the British. As C.D. Narsimhaiah points: “The prevalent notion about Canadian poetry for a long time was that it was a pale imitation of British Victorian verse trying to assert its independence from American Poetry.” (Narsimhaiah 156) It is this notion that Scott endeavors to attack.

In this poem “The Canadian Authors Meet” Scott creates, as Baudrilard termed it, a “hyperreal” vision i.e. when the distinction between reality and illusion, real and imagined are eroded. Here Scott talks about Canadian Authors Meet where known Canadian authors have gathered. The meet is illusory yet it has been regarded to convey the idea of real meeting of the authors.

Scott refers to rich writers who indulge in egotistic eulogies. These writers follow the patterns and models of British writers: “Expansive puppets percolate self-unction / Beneath a portrait of the Prince of Whales.” Scott satirizes such poets as “Miss Crotchet” who is not able to get publish her single work and yet she hail herself as a poet. Similarly there are other writers too who are “virgins” in literary field i.e. they have not been able to establish themselves as poet but still they label themselves as poet. Scott attacks against “victorian saintliness.” He writes in “Laurentian Shield” (Narsimhaiah 176):

Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
This land stares at the sun in a huge silence . . .
Not written on by history, empty as paper,
                    . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
This waiting is wanting
It will choose its language
When it has chosen its technic,

In this respect Scott urges for the transition from ‘adopt’ and ‘adapt’ phases of postcolonial literature to ‘adept’ phase (Ashcroft and others). The modernist movement that Scott has in his mind is one which has intrinsic property to reform literature as well as society. He says:

The modernist poet, like the socialist, has thought through present forms to a new and more suitable order. He is not concerned with destroying, but with creating, and being a creator he strikes terror into the hearts of the old and decrepit who can not adjust themselves to that which is to be. The modernist poet frequently uses accepted forms
and discard them when he discovers that they are unsuited to what he has to say. Then he creates a new form, groomed to his thought. (NPO 338)

Scott has shown concern for the lack of poets who pick up native concerns. For Scott “remythologizing becomes a necessity for narratives of person and nation alike.” (Wolfram 112) Lot many poets assemble in the meet, they chat and gossip, make show of their opulence, but their poetry lacks essence and quality that can add up to the merit of Canadian literature. They don’t discuss about styles, techniques, themes and innovations but manoeuvre to ‘appoint a Poet Laureate’, decide venue for the next party and relish the cakes and tea. He writes:

O Canada, O Canada, O Can
A day go by without new authors springing
To paint the native mapping, and to plan
More ways to set the self same welkin ringing? (CAM)

Similar concern for the native scenario has been shown by A.K. Ramanujan in his poem “A River.” Ramanujan too describes a meeting of poets in Madurai who are busy in narrating about the river and copying old poets, but none strikes a new note about the suffering of the natives:

The new poet still quoted
the old poets, but no one
spoke in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at the blank walls
even before birth.

Here ‘pregnant woman’ who died with twins ‘even before birth’ may signify the failure of innovations in literary field. It may be symbolic of attempts of new writers which go unnoticed because they choose to write about these quotidian realities. Likewise Scott shows “day go by” and no author springs who can “paint the native maple,” that is, who can write about native elements in their own unique style. What remains common in both Ramanujan and Scott is their element of satire and their bothering about the native and the nation.

In an Introduction to The Canadian Modernists Meet Dean Irvine writes: “With its ludic, self-mocking caricatures of the modernists poets, Scott’s poem at once plays into the hands of its Canadian Authors Association audience and deploys modernist self-parody to critique that same audience’s tendency to ridicule his technique.” Scott was successful in his attempt of creating Canadian consciousness among poets is suggested by the poems by writers like Al Purdy and Margaret Atwood who developed their own themes, techniques and models for poetry.

What P.K. Page and F.R. Scott has been able to do through their poetry can be better understood in words of Margaret Atwood: “[Their] poetry is a lens that magnifies and highlights the qualities of Canadian creative impulses and offers a pathway to an effective life and surroundings.”

Undoubtedly owing to their association with several currently fashionable movements in society Page and Scott conform to the Canadian notion of poet as ‘cultural heroes’ and ‘counter-cultural readers.’ They have been able to hold ‘collective truth’ i.e. replicas of community life, ethics and mores. While on one hand they resist the oppression of race, gender and class; on the other hand they are the source of strong intellectual and emotional content. It enables them to be ‘civilizing influence’ on the people. Thus Page and Scott seem to fabricate emotions and concerns that are rooted in Canadian soil and which carry with them the seeds of native experience. There poetry is a vigorous attempt to reconstruct new
models of writing so that the entire pantheon of Canadian writers comes out of colonial penumbra of British and American influence.

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