



Victim of Urbanisation in the novel *The Cashier* of Gabrielle Roy

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ABSTRACT

A novel whose essential theme is exile and isolation, The Cashier (1955) depicts the morbid tale of the mental anguish of a middle-aged Montreal banker who languishes in the misery of his own mind. A chronic insomniac and paranoiac he worries himself to death due to the overdose of media, information and news of the world.

Keywords: *Banker, suffering, emotional conflict, insomnia, media.*

French-Canadian author Gabrielle Roy (1909-1983) is without question one of Canada's most respected and widely read authors. The grand-daughter of Quebecian pioneers she was the youngest in a family of eleven children. Author of over a dozen novels and short stories she made her mark in the literary world with the publication of *Bonheur d'Occasion* (1945) which literally translated means 'Second Hand Happiness'. However, the English translated version of the book was entitled *The Tin Flute*.

In Canadian fiction, particularly in the case of women writers the depiction of family ties and bondings whether positive or destructive was a poignant theme to dwell on. Roy goes meticulously into the minds and emotions of her characters whether they be three years old or eighty. Her insightful depiction of primary bonds between each family member is meticulously described in all of her books.

With the release of Roy's third novel *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954) translated into English a year later as *The Cashier*, Roy explored another aspect of Canadian life leaving behind the tranquil and harmonious life of her second work *Where Nests the Water Hen* (1950) and the harsh struggles of urban life in *Bonheur d'Occasion*. Of all her works *Alexandre Chenevert* took the longest to write, a gruelling seven years.

Whilst volumes have been written on the female protagonists of Gabrielle Roy the male characters in the works are surprisingly ordinary beings, mediocre in mind and stature more often than not relegated into the shadows of these stories. They are characters operating from behind the curtains, living under the aura of the female protagonist who holds the steering of the story even under the most unimaginable situations. Most of these male characters live in a surreal dream world suffering from delusions of grandeur with lofty ambitions, illogical dreams and no purpose. They do not lack in imagination what they lack in physical presence of the story so the reader often finds them in a reverie dreaming of what they want to achieve but mostly amounting to naught. His desires too haughty and dreams too big often brings this

person crashing down both mentally and physically. He attempts to get a foothold in society but alas he stumbles into an abyss of his own making, all efforts to contribute to family values and contribute positively fail miserably.

Bad communicator with family members his sole contribution is to pro-create and sadly it ends there. Each time it is the mother who stands up for her brood rearing and providing for them in all storms of disaster.

In this paper we will be discussing the emotional crisis and emotional breakdown of the hero Alexandre Chenevert due to the effects of urbanisation and overdose of media and information around him in the novel *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954) which was entitled *The Cashier* in the English version. Third novel of Roy, the writer changed her previous style by choosing to focus on a paranoid banker of Montreal rather than highlight the woes of housewives as she did in her previous two works. But unfortunately even though this novel focuses from beginning to end on one male character we see no evolution in his character as he holds no stance and falls victim to his own feeble imagination. Through the lines of each page we observe the degradation and emotional erosion of a simple man who suffers from acute attacks of paranoia and nervousness caused by his own thoughts and phobias that the big city is devouring him with its overdose of images and notice boards. Living in an age of propaganda the effects of urbanisation prove fatal to this sensitive being as we will discover.

In a universe where men hardly have a say, this book is one of its kind where the protagonist dominates the whole story from beginning to end and the reader is bombarded with detailed descriptions of this man's thinking, analysing and quirky behaviour patterns. Margaret A. Heidermann remarks: "It takes art, to make such a depressing character so sympathetic that the reader follows his almost plotless progress with absorption." (Heidermann 18) Insignificant in the physical world he remains pivotal to the plot of the story in which exist only a handful of other characters who appear and disappear without opinion or consequence. Dialogues in this book are sparse and when they appear they are monologues in which each person expresses his own sentiment, idea and misery. Instead the book is filled with long lengthy descriptions of the city of Montreal, its people and its ways.

The primary problem of this 52 year old Montreal banker is his physical and mental well being. Slave to his diseased body he is a prisoner locked in his own mind, he is not able to escape his solitary destiny of a mind which thinks too much. Due to years of sleeplessness his health suffers terribly "During his life he had lost a great number of things, and almost always the best things – first his youth, and then his health, and now his sleep." (Roy 8) His wife Eugenie feels his continuous reading of the agonies of the world is responsible for his insomnia.

These are self-created fears created by his own thoughts. A mind unceasingly racing from beginning to end Chenevert unhappily hunts for peace of mind. He works in a bustling bank yet he lives in isolation from the world. He blames modernisation of the city for his frail disposition. He spews hate and hostility to this city as each thing,

each noise distresses him and holds it entirely responsible for his sickly health. The early morning city noises of the trams, cars honking and dogs barking agitate him so much : “And suddenly Alexandre sat upright in his bed, boiling with resentment, a crazed gleam in his eyes the whole city was certainly in a conspiracy to prevent his sleeping, all mankind was against Alexandre.” (Roy 23)

This negative thought pattern contributes to the agonies of this man poisoning every part of his body and eventually leading to a complete nervous breakdown. It is so astonishing that a person can be so uncomfortable in his own skin that he is not able to adapt to his exterior surroundings. All his efforts to introspect and analyse people and events only alienate him further from himself and others in his circle. The first chapter of the novel is infact just full of the torments of the hero who cannot sleep and is left wandering in his own mind the whole night.

Living in a progressive era of media and propaganda he suffers from chronic insomnia passing his nights in torment as he tosses and turns his nights away. He is tormented by the smallest non-consequential happenings and details of the whole world like the loose button of his raincoat and the his brand new black umbrella which he misplaced, then the more pressing issues like the possibility of a world war, atomic bombs, strikes, aeroplane crashes and the hunger strike of Mahatama Gandhi in India. He thinks that he has full control of his mind but it is infact the reverse.

Tormented by the city, the bank is his territory where he has spent long tedious days of work for the last eighteen years. He refers to it time and again as his “cage” as he sits in his glass cubicle like a caged animal in full view of all. He feels naked sitting there counting money and being scrutinized by the public who continuously come and go and even by his own colleagues who can notice every little nervous gesture he makes. He is overtaken by paranoia. It is from this transparent glass box that spring up his miseries slowly growing to become mountains of tension. From here his mind runs full throttle observing each and every person in the bank premises and feeling that they are all conspiring and gossiping about him. This bank although high security thereby becomes the most vulnerable zone and a place of moral conflict as he feels he loses all anonymity here. Every mutter from his colleagues irritates him, he is enraged at his co-workers and their callous and casual approach to life “This chap whom he had once helped out, avoided him; another had not paid him a small loan made long ago yet another, in whom he thought he could confide, kept telling people behind Alexandre’s back that ‘poor Chenevert was turning sour’. A very real bitterness stirred within him. He was uncovering most precise reasons for being pained at mankind.” (Roy 15)

He finds himself getting into heated arguments and debates with his colleague Godias over worldly issues such as the Palestine issue, the Jews, the Spanish Civil war, the Hindus of India issues which leave him completely flustered and red faced. Its as if the weight of the worlds afflictions lie on his frail shoulders.

He carries the burdens of the world on his shoulders, his thoughts trick him and throw him into a labyrinth of meaningless problems and useless issues. Alexandre is caught

in a web of sleepless nights which increase his paranoia and lead to more absurd thoughts like the spelling of 'Hyderabad' and 'Aspirin'. He worries himself sick for the future of humanity: the Palestine problem, the Bolchevic Peril, the square headed Nazis, the Jews, a bank colleague who's not returned money he owed, the crafty Japanese, all these thoughts devour him whole. All that he listens to on the radio during the day and reads in the newspaper play havoc with his mind at night. His wife Eugenie is weary of him as he refuses to listen to her pleadings to stop listening to the radio. "Every night also he insisted on hearing the news: sure stalemates, endless parleys, rumors of war, aviation accidents, defence measures – how could he possibly be interested in all that monotonous stuff, so lacking in any variety that, from evening to evening, Eugenie had the impression that she heard exactly the same thing over and over again!" (Roy 99) Michael Argyle, in *'The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour'* states that persons 'with low self-esteem feel hostile and dependant and may behave in a ruthless manner.' (Argyle) Media slowly eats him up and effects his health. This pathetic figure is haunted by the past, fearful of the future and lives in exile in a society that disturbs him. In short he is a misfit on the planet. "Sometimes while he probed the night in the white silence of the kitchen, he suffered such strangeness that it constricted his very heart. What business had he to live in such an age? Like many imaginative men, Alexandre felt that he was not made for the century in which he lived, this epoch of appalling tedium all too relived by gadgets, by nickel, aluminium, plastic, celluloid, Bakelite, nylon, zylon...." (Roy 13)

Being a huge devourer of news and information, he reads anything that comes his way. At the cafeteria in the bank he's reading a newspaper while eating his lunch, in the evening he listens to the radio whether it be international, national, political, local or the medical news or even the labels of medicine bottles prescribed to him "And while he munched his bread, he learned that ten policemen had been hanged in Palestine as reprisal for each terrorist condemned to death.....that there was no hope of coming to an agreement with the Soviets....that all the residents of Louisville had taken a day off to honour the Virgin." (Roy 45) He's ingesting a daily dose of negative news all day long which leaves its mark on his subconscious mind and effects his daily life.

His world is flooded with boards and notices which torment him: advertisement boards, headlines, editorials, dailies, evening news, leaflets, 5 cent newspaper, reviews, magazines, publications, critics, radio reviews, hoardings, street signs, brochures, pamphlets, slogans, public messages, cartons, circulars, radio announcements its this overdose of media that devours his poor soul.

The reader realises that this advanced urban development instead of aiding him leaves him with more feelings of insecurity and hopelessness. Gabrielle Roy has very finely depicted how daily life alienates a sensitive soul in the course of life. Her minute descriptions of every gesture, grimace and reaction of this silly old man are a marvel to read. Every thought and action has been cleverly and painstakingly described in this book.

Alexandre's problem is that he finds no happiness in people, places and things around him, he only knows how to suffer. On the advice of a doctor he takes a vacation to Lac Vert but here also he is not able to find peace and adapt to the calm surroundings. The peace and tranquillity that he was in search of stifles him, he feels suffocated sitting there alone in his cabin on the lakeside without a soul to talk to and no newspaper, no radio and no overpowering hoardings. Left all alone at the mercy of his own mind he begins to question his very own existence leading himself to more torment. He tries to find answers to questions on God, man and life.

By some miracle or Gods mercy gradually as the days go by the sound of the lake and the rain plus the clear air begin to take their effect on him as he finds himself eating and sleeping well. Distanced from all noise and media he feels a calmness overtake his body for the first time in his life which he finds relaxing. Overwhelmed with gratitude for this serene place he tries to write a letter to family and friends expressing the ecstasy and contentment he has discovered at the Lake but his subconscious restlessness overtakes him and he is lost for words not being able to pen down what he feels in his heart. Alas this failure to express his sentiments is blocked by a brain which has degenerated by the madness of the city. M.G Hesse comments: "The bank teller is as much a stranger in Montreal as he would be in any city, for he is fundamentally a stranger to himself. Chenevert is alone and believes that his isolation is largely inherent in city life. His longing for a desert island in the metropolis and his need at Lac Vert for the city, whose life suddenly seems to represent a contrast fraternal exchange, are but more examples of the cashiers contradictory personality." (Hesse 26)

This failure to express himself has a terrible effect on him psychologically and physically as he leaves the Lake even more torn and frustrated. On returning to the city once again he is bombarded with the chaos of the place, traffic honking, drivers abusing, hoardings screaming out at him, advertisements, headlines of disaster and being shoved around on the streets. He finds himself feeling more ill than before.

Later diagnosed with stomach cancer he finds himself lying in the hospital more confused than before. Even when he can no longer express himself except through frantic gestures, in the midst of a suffering that morphine and heroin can no longer contain, that burning, desperately searching light in the eyes of Alexandre Chenevert is still asking his question: "What is the sense of a life like mine – a cashier's life – in this world?" (Roy 279)

Hesse adds : " While time and action are detailed, the human misery that the novel portrays is timeless and reminds the reader of the world's increasing interrelation and unity." (Hesse 14)

Conclusion: As observed in this study the reader becomes fully aware from the very first chapter that this overdose of information, media and propoganda leads to the emotional and physical downfall of this character. Alexandre who is very sensitive to the exterior world is totally overwhelmed by these informations which gobble him up whole. The calamities of the world delivered by the media haunt him, prevent him

from sleeping at night making him sick to death. This sickness is also triggered by his isolation from others around him. He is not able to enjoy the company of others whether it be colleagues or family for his anxiety overtakes the reality of the world around him.

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