

Review

The Emergence of Canadian Colonialism and Post-Colonialism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood used the two kinds of theories such as, Colonialism and Post-colonialism, because the novel depicts on searching of their identity and a woman who returns to her hometown in Canada to find her missing father. Accompanied by her lover and another married couple, the unnamed protagonist meets her past in her childhood house, recalling events and feelings, while trying to find clues for her father's mysterious disappearance. Little by little, the past overtakes her and drives her into the realm of wildness and madness. Even though these kinds of things are happened in the novel that is why *Surfacing* called as a colonial and post-colonial novel.

Key Words: Canadian Literature, Exploitation, Maintenance, Acquisition, Expansion of colonies, Subaltern Voices, Colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

As the post-colonial criticism developed, the theorists have agreed upon the fact that the role of feminism in the post-colonial practice is crucial. Moreover, these two theories clearly have the same goals. On the one hand, the main objective of both of them is to disclose the traditional power structures, both patriarchal and imperial. On the other hand, both feminism and post-colonial criticism aim to show the way the writers challenge the respective forms of authority.

The main concerns of the post-colonial criticism are the formation of canon, the phases through which imperialism and decolonization have gone, as well as how these processes are expressed in literature (Agnew, 2003). What is more, the criticism is also concerned with the ways of resistance within literary pieces, such as rewritings of traditional concepts and creating voices that stand in opposition. All these issues become the matrix and concern of feminist criticism. Not the least, crucial to feminism is also pointing at the notion of diversity. For many women, the process of writing is an expression of themselves, it allows them to "throw off their chains" and

to struggle for more autonomy (Aspenlieder, 2009).

The twentieth century has given rise to women's efforts to fight for their rights in the Western world. In the forties, they were relatively emancipated, since they perceived the encouragements to enter the workplace. There, they could enjoy a relative independence and they felt responsible. They proved that they can be "effectual workers", but when the World War II was over, they had to face new requirements: they had to give up the jobs to the males coming back from the war ("Feminism"). They were and felt misplaced, everyone expected them to take care of their homeplace instead. What is more, they had to fulfill the role of a perfect mother and wife. The fact that earlier they were able to taste independence, career and pay "reminded women that there was still much work to be done."

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. She went on to study at Victoria College at the University of Toronto and eventually received a master's degree from Radcliffe College. *Surfacing* is Margaret Atwood's second novel, which was published in 1972, only three

years after her first novel *The Edible Woman* was published. Though one of Atwood's early novels, *Surfacing* is not one of Atwood's earliest publications. By the time *Surfacing* was published, she had already published several books of poetry. Atwood's writing has been published in more than thirty languages.

Surfacing takes place in Quebec, and the unique identity of Quebec's population comes into play in the novel. Quebec is the only Canadian province populated by residents of French (rather than British) descent. Atwood wrote *Surfacing* at a time when the cultural differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada were manifesting themselves in terms of rising Quebec nationalism. The 1960s saw the Quiet Revolution in Quebec: a series of economic and educational reforms coupled with a secularization of society. The Quiet Revolution afforded Quebec greater political and economic autonomy, giving Quebec's French citizens a sense of nationalism and a desire to separate from Canada. Atwood marks this political change in *Surfacing*.

Surfacing is a postcolonial novel, though not in the traditional sense. Most postcolonial novels are written by authors from countries that have gained bloody independence from empires such as Britain, France, Spain, or America. These novels usually mark the effects of upheaval and bloody revolution, documenting a search for an independent national identity coupled with a reaction to the political scarring left by imperialism (Cheadle, 2006).

Since Canadian independence from Britain occurred so gradually, *Surfacing* does not fall into the traditional postcolonial categorization. *Surfacing* does, however, explore an emerging Canadian national identity. Atwood includes a passage about the Canadian national flag, which had only been adopted in 1965. More important, *Surfacing* exists as a postcolonial novel in its consideration of Americans and the way that America exerts its cultural influence over Canada. Atwood claims that America's subtle cultural infiltration of Canada is actually a form of colonialism (Parker, 2010).

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone . . . withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death.

The narrator makes this remark in Chapter 27, after coming out of her madness. The phrase punctuates her attempt to completely withdraw from society and live like a natural animal, and it contains her cathartic conclusion to rejoin society. When she refers to being a victim, she refers to mental stumbling blocks that had once made her believe she was being oppressed by forces beyond her control, including religion, men, and marital conventions.

Here, the narrator decides not to be a victim. The narrator's mention of powerlessness echoes her earlier search for "the power" during her madness. The narrator had searched for "the power" in her dead parents, the Indian gods, and in nature. Here, her resolution not to feel powerless marks the moment when she finally seeks refuge from her social isolation by internal (rather than external) means.

In this passage, the narrator comes to the conclusion that she possesses agency, and that her actions have consequences. Previously, emotional numbness had prevented her from believing that anything she did could affect others. She believed that her friends looked at her as a mirror of themselves, and that therefore she played no part in their lives. This opinion comes about when she asserts that Joe wants to marry an idea rather than a person. Here, the narrator concedes that because she will become an active member of society, her actions will have consequences. She relinquishes her emotional numbness by acknowledging that in possessing emotions, she will affect others' emotions.

Through *Surfacing*, Atwood questions a woman's conventional social and sexual role. *Surfacing* touches on the health risks associated with hormonal contraception, the idea of contraception as a male invention, the power inherent in pregnancy, the social implications of makeup, the potentially false ideal of marriage, the notion of a natural woman, and the psychological mechanisms that men use to exert control over women. Atwood creates a narrator who feels alienated by social pressures that cast her in a specific gender role, and the narrator's response to those pressures is complete withdrawal. As such, Atwood presents a frank condemnation of the sexual and social norms forced upon women. *Surfacing* can therefore be seen as a proto-feminist novel.

Surfacing marks a social period of growing secularization and of widening generational gaps. Atwood deems religion as more of a social regulatory force than a truth. For example, the town priest abuses his religious authority on the village by enforcing a strict dress code for women. The narrator also labels Christianity as a social control mechanism that is learned at a young age and stays potent throughout adulthood. Religion in *Surfacing* becomes a false ideal, and Atwood's condemnation of Christianity marks a larger social tendency toward secularization. At the same time, Atwood explores a growing rift between generations. The narrator of the book casts the older generation as crippled by a rigid sense of morality. In this way, Atwood documents a split between the conservative older generation and the liberal younger generation.

A minor undercurrent in *Surfacing* is the novel's existence as a post-World War II novel. The narrator recalls growing up in the wake of World War II and documents small effects of the war on her childhood. She believes that the war served as an outlet for men's

inherent violence, and she tries to trace the effects of pent-up violence in a society devoid of war. The narrator sees the American infiltration of Canada as a direct result of American restlessness during the post-war period. *Surfacing* examines the ambiguous moral landscape left in the wake of World War II. The narrator's childhood recollection of Hitler as the embodiment of all evil depicts the World War II era as morally simplistic. The post-war world is more ambiguous, and the narrator challenges herself to discover the roots of evil now that humans no longer have a single scapegoat.

Surfacing predates the environmentalist movement, but the narrator's reverence for the Canadian wilderness is a pro-environmentalist one. The narrator feels protective of nature and reacts with hostility to the American tourists who overfish, kill for sport, and litter the ground. *Surfacing* is full of tourists, urban outgrowth, and technology that directly encroach upon the unspoiled land. These environmental concerns still resonate today given continuing trends toward overconsumption and the prevalence of technology that relies upon natural resources.

CONCLUSION

In *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood used the two kinds of

theories such as, Colonialism and Post-colonialism, because the novel depicts on searching of their identity and a woman who returns to her hometown in Canada to find her missing father (Benson and Conolly, 1994). Accompanied by her lover and another married couple, the unnamed protagonist meets her past in her childhood house, recalling events and feelings, while trying to find clues for her father's mysterious disappearance. Little by little, the past overtakes her and drives her into the realm of wildness and madness. Even though these kinds of things are happened in the novel that is why *Surfacing* called as a colonial and post-colonial novel.

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