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Postcolonialism in Margaret Atwood's "Surfacing": Disconnectedness from language, history and culture

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Abstract

This paper describes that Margaret Atwood is a powerful exponent of a concrete, dialogized socio-ideological language consciousness. There is abundance of social diversity of speech; critical interlamination of languages, voices; sharp comprehension of internally persuasive discourse as against the authoritarian discourse; multivoicedness and heteroglossia; accentuated evaluation and polyphony; art and answerability with the ethical dominance. Evidently, there are Bakhtinian concepts. A dialogized literary consciousness can unravel the contradictions inherent in imperialism and neo-colonialism as they perpetuate brutalization of human sensibilities. Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) focuses more directly on the psychological dimensions and strategies of sexual politics. It traces the experiences of the unnamed central female character-including a devastating extramarital affair, abortion, and the death of her father which lead to alienation and ultimately, to her mad identification with the exploited Canadian wilderness. Fully expressing post-sixties revulsion against international violence, American capitalist expansion, and pollution of environment, Atwood implies a basic analogy between woman's personal victimization by a male-dominated society and the ecological destruction of the land under American economic imperialism.

Keywords: postcolonialism in Margaret, language, history and culture

Introduction

The combined colonial experience of cultural imperialism and geographical colonization has left the victims with feeling of displacement and disconnectedness from their language, history and culture, which in turn has led to a fractured sense of self and a desperate need to regain and reclaim identity.

The damage caused to those who have been colonized is plat-formed by Atwood through her focus on how one individual has been affected. 'Surfacing' does not deal with the physical act of colonizing a country, instead it focuses on the aftermath and the mental colonizing that still exists, long after so-called decolonization has occurred.' This is much more insidious from of colonization and control and it has left people with words that do not express their ideas, a displacement from the country or cultural group to which they belong and a past they feel disconnected from.

Feminism and post-colonialism have both been concerned with language because of its importance to identify formation and also its use as a weapon to subvert patriarchal and colonial powers. It is recognized as one of the most fundamental aspects of our being and therefore fundamental to these discourses that recognize the importance of identity.

Atwood incorporates inter illumination of voices and languages because "language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation. Atwood goes on to show that the inability to communicate and own a language is not necessarily that of speaking different tongues, as her fellow Canadian, Dennis Lee writes in, 'Writing the Colonial Space', 'The Words I know said Britain and they said America, but they did not say my home'.

Language is not the only thing in the novel that needs to be appropriated by the oppressed; their history and their past must also be reclaimed, and in some cases almost completely rewritten. History is another means of control, developed by European nations, much of which they had little knowledge or comprehension of, but which nevertheless became, 'a construction of world reality'. To have a history, in effect, legitimates us, it gives us the story of our existence, explains our role in the world and without it, it is almost as though we did not exist.

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As the narrator of 'Surfacing' demonstrates, a single version of history allows for falsehood and construction, so we must, along with the protagonist, deconstruct the stories already told because as Derek Walcott points out, "History is subject to a fitful muse, memory." Our nameless heroine' has marginalized the painful memories from her past and only reveals what she deems necessary. It is the literal journey to the site of her past that initiates the metaphorical one into her subconscious. She becomes awakened to the fictionality of history and memory and thus begins the re-examination of her past,

"I must be more careful of my memories, I have to sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said" (p.67)

Atwood clearly stands with 'the wretched of the earth' and so develops a multiple voiced discourse with Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'O and others who stand strongly for decolonizing the mind so as to unbash refreshing waves of freedom. In Atwood's view social relations are determined by power-politics. This has resulted into her "engagement with the question of Canadian national identity together with the associated narratives of Canada's relationship with the United States and the issues of post colonialism, her ecological interests and increasingly urgent warnings about global pollution, her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human right and their infringement by institutional oppression."

Throughout the novel there is a definite condemnation of this Americanisation of people and places but it is most poignantly and symbolically demonstrated with the narrator's final rejection of her 'friends', her clothes and any food that is not natural. She rejects neo-colonialism in every form and travels to a precolonial space that she must visit in order to return with an understanding and her identity as a Canadian and as a woman. Her surfacing is made possible by, firstly rejecting all that seeks to colonise her and then subverting the forces they use such as language, history and culture to reject her identity as victim.

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