

ASSONANCE

a journal of russian and comparative literary studies



**DEPARTMENT OF RUSSIAN
&
CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT**

**P.O.Calicut University 673 635
Kerala**

Colonizer/Colonized: in Margaret Atwood's short stories "A Man from Mars" and "Dancing Girls"

Tessy Anthony C

A society, which is multicultural, is a tolerant society. It tolerates differences. And Canadian society is a multicultural one. So it gives rise to binaries like 'them' and 'us'. Margaret Atwood an Anglo Canadian raises binary oppositions in her short story "The Man from Mars" and the "Dancing Girls" (Culture: barbarism). On one hand immigrant Canadians feel marginalized on the other hand they tend to dominate. Canada is bilingual, predominantly Anglophone and Francophone. The Anglophones and Francophones are descendants of settlers. They suffer feelings of inferiority in encounters with the English and French and with the big American brother. The sense of being overpowered by the presence of the superpower across the border is repeated in Atwood. It is one of the themes of *Surfacing* and also figures in *The Blind Assassin*. The trope of the woman as the colonized is another concern in Atwood. Canada existed in a colonial relationship first with England and then with America. Today, Canada looks beyond its borders and refuses to be a victim. Immigrant writing reflects the geographical and cultural dislocation that they feel. The text is a 'social vehicle' that reflects society. In the texts of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, the polarities of victim: victimizer, colonizer/ colonized is manifested.

Colonialism creates a way of seeing the world. Both France and England spent time producing knowledge about their respective colonies. Following the Foucauldian logic that power generates knowledge which in turn is used to buttress up power. They produced a degenerate picture of their colonies especially the Orient. This step led to the colonization of imaginations and minds. On exploring one

finds that representations and modes of perceptions are used as weapons to keep minority cultures subservient to colonial rule. This being the hypothesis of Said's controversy begetting Orientalism. Minority cultures are identified and represented as objects by the mainstream majority. Minority cultures are deprived of an identity to define themselves as subjects. The imperialist nation's that define minority culture has the power and uses language to define minority cultures. Fanon had famously remarked that one must take great care with one's language for one shall be more or less judged by it. So minority cultures have internalized that he is 'the other'. Margaret Atwood opines in *Survival* that, "a work is a piece of art that should act as a "mirror". She goes on to say that, "The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in" (Atwood, 1972: 15). The writer reflects a world where he has been a subject of ethnocentrism. But Atwood describes a world where she is a victim of both.

Language is a theme of quest – a quest for one's identity. The relationship between language and power is far reaching, since it helps to assert one's identity. Atwood says that what a lost person needs is to find his bearings and "Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind" (*Survival* 18-19). Literature reveals the human psyche and feelings involved. It is the interior colonization that has to be shaken off if minority cultures have to assert and define themselves. The assertion of these ethnic identities is similar to Sartre's revolutionary pronouncement in *Being and Nothingness* "I lay claim to this being which I am; that is, I wish to recover it, or, more exactly, I am the project of the recovery of my being" (1998: 17). Only if the individual is conscious of himself as a being will he not want to be just another being but want to assert his identity and difference. The settler Canadians have asserted themselves and this is reflected in their literature. As Atwood says: "Bare survival isn't a central theme by accident, and neither is the victim motif; the land was hard, and we have been (and are) an

exploited colony; our literature is rooted in those facts" (*Survival* 41).

Canada is a colony of both England and France. Ethnic minorities like Asians, Africans and Native Indians today live there in tolerance. Bharati Mukherjee had relocated to the US as she found racial discrimination in Canada oppressive. But with the influx of immigration, the Euro centric immigrants adopt the tactics of their imperial master. They look at the minorities through racist eyes. Both ethnocentrism and double-consciousness can cause an identity problem. With the mother country they don the role of the subordinate. Consciously or unconsciously with the ethnic minorities they assume their master's voice. This spilt in their subjectivity is described by Atwood, when she remarks in her Afterword of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* that Mrs. Moodie (in her works) reflects many of the obsessions that are still with Canadians:

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia.... Perhaps that is the way we still live. We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit it completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen- it is so easy to leave-and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality (62).

Atwood refers to Mrs. Moodie's love for Canada that springs from her hatred for it. Margaret Atwood being a settler once and a part of mainstream today adopts dual roles of colonizer and colonized. Canada should look beyond its borders and refuse to be a victim. There exists a colonial relationship first with England and then with America. One of the major concerns in Atwood's work is "the relationship between Canada and the United States and between French and English cultures in Canada" (Introduction Van Spanckeren Kathryn, Jan Garden xx).

Margaret Eleanor "Peggy" Atwood is an English Canadian novelist, poet and short story writer and literary critic. She was born in Ottawa and attended school in Victoria College, Toronto. Her writing focuses on feminist issues, the environment and her deep interest in Canada. According to Atwood Canadians view themselves as victims. She has been a full time writer since 1972 and has held various academic posts and writer residencies. She has lived in many places including Canada, England, Scotland and France, and currently lives in Toronto. She was President of the Writers Union of Canada from 1981-1982 and President of PEN, Canada from 1984-1986. Margaret Atwood is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, has been presented with the Order of Ontario and the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, and has been awarded sixteen honorary degrees.

Cultural interfaces triggers off self-consciousness and ethnocentrism. Awareness of one's culture as secondary makes people of that culture insecure. Dominant cultures adopt a condescending attitude towards minor cultures. It is this attitude of cultures towards minor or alien ones that is ethnocentric. Evaluating other cultures according to preconceptions originating in one's own culture is called ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is an attitude of dominant cultures towards alien ones. It can elevate mainstream culture hence it is a great blow to growing ethnicity. Since mainstream culture evaluates other cultures by their own yardsticks minor cultures are marginalized.

The depiction that Atwood makes is of the colonizer in the short story "The Dancing Girls" when she says, "Her mother volunteered that the thing about people from another culture is that you could never tell whether they were insane or not because their ways were so different. The policemen agreed with her, deferential but also condescending," (*Dancing Girls* 26). What dominant cultures say and do, does not always have to be within the norms of propriety. In a multicultural society today, the purity of a race raises many eyebrows. One has only the hybrid straddled with many cultures or multiple identities. There is more cultural pluralism than pure cultures. The

concept of pure cultures is a myth as Andrew Smith points out culture is a flux, ever changing. All of these sub cultures add a little flavor to the modern composite society. Immigrant literature is claustrophobic and xenophobic in nature. Immigrants try to preserve their exclusivity within the larger Canadian social mosaic. Modern societies are one of cultural pluralism or of diverse cultures.

Migrants of different cultures who originally speak other languages on cultural encounters experience the push-pull factor. Within them they experience a love-hate relationship for the old country values the and new country values. Their text is a product of resisting hegemonic structures. Within this one can see the tussle and tensions within them. The attempt of the writer to often de-throne Western perspectives of a culture is felt. Afraid of ethnic cleansing the writer grapples for a meaningful space. As Alfred Adler said, human behavior can be explained in terms of a struggle for power. When white culture encounters other non-European cultures they are overcome by a superiority complex which Octave Mannoni postulates, is an overcompensated inferiority complex. This is made clear when Atwood makes her protagonist Christine in the short story "The Dancing girls", say that "She was aware of the ridiculous spectacle they must make, galloping across campus, something out of a cartoon shot, a lumbering elephant stampeded by a smiling emaciated mouse, both of them locked in the classic pattern of comic pursuit" (*Dancing Girls* 22).

The Anglophone Canadian Margaret Atwood, projects people from other cultures as weird in her short story "A Man from Mars" and "Dancing Girls". They forget for a short while that as descendants of settlers they have undergone marginalisation too. "Let us suppose for the sake of argument, that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an "oppressed minority," or exploited" (*Survival* 35). Atwood speaks of the basic victim position that is to deny the fact that you are a victim (those who have a little better position) (*Survival* 36). To acknowledge the fact that you

are a victim but you accept it as your fate (Survival 37). You refuse to accept that the role is inevitable. (Survival 37)

To be a creative non victim (those who have never been victims at all) (Survival 38)

“Atwood says: “And I’ll point out too that a book can be a symptom or reflection of a Position (Survival 41)

Atwood acknowledges and reveals her identity with the traits of the colonizer and the colonized in her short stories. In the short story “The Man from Mars” Atwood describes a young girl Christine who meets “a person from another culture”: oriental without a doubt, though perhaps not a Chinese (*Dancing Girls* 10). Even Atwood adopts the colonizer’s stance in her description of the oriental as being the lowest in the hegemonic structure. He has a student’s visa for Montreal. He was not supposed to leave Montreal. Eventually towards the end of the story he is deported.

Upon arriving home one day Christine’s mother tells her that a friend called. “He’s a person from another culture. He said he would call back later” (*Dancing Girls* 14). Christine’s mother liked her daughter’s friend when she heard him on the phone. He used French and his warmth melted her heart. She went on to invite him to tea. Christine was not too happy because she neither liked him nor did she want to have anything to do with him. Her mother noticed her daughter’s reluctance to be friendly with her so-called-friend. But like all mothers she wished for a polite and good groom for her daughter so she was busy matchmaking worried if Christine would find someone as easily as her two older daughters.

One day Christine is asked to show her friend the way to the Economics building. She guides him. From then on he seems to be seen everywhere she goes. She realizes that he is deliberately bumping into her. Since exposed to so many cultures Margaret Atwood is conscious of the ignorance of the implications of other cultural signifiers. She represents this through Christine’s thoughts. Atwood writes:

If this had been a person from her own culture she would have thought he was trying to pick her up. But then people from her own culture never tried to pick her up; she was too big. The only one who had made the attempt was the Moroccan waiter at the beer parlour where they sometimes went after meetings, and he had been direct. (*Dancing Girls* 11)

Even though she experiences the aftermaths of colonization, she needs both to understand her self in binary terms of colonizer colonized. Whereas Christine on account of "double consciousness" sees herself through the eyes of the West Indian girl, "She knew, her positioning the girl's eyes had suffered because no one had yet attempted to get her pregnant" (*Dancing Girls* 18). This only indicates that men folk didn't find her attractive enough to pursue her. And even a minority like the West Indian girl in the story was more successful than Christine.

The process of "othering" and selfhood was a cause of concern to Frantz Fanon. The self- other is yet another dichotomy in the discursive field of colonialists. One notices how others are different from them, and what the link is. In the "Dancing Girls" the land-lady discriminates between her tenants. She tells Anna the protagonist a student of Urban Design, "I can talk to you. You're not like foreign. Not like most of them" (*Dancing Girls* 199). Eventually one realizes that there is an aura of mystery and the exotic portrayed through him. He is portrayed negatively. "He was wearing a white shirt that was too big for him and some greenish trousers. His feet were not bare, in fact he was wearing a pair of prosaic brown shoes. He did have tattoo marks, tough, or rather scars a set of them running across each cheek" (*Dancing Girls* 203). Imperialists boasted that culture comes from imperialists disciplining.

Racism is a barrier to solidarity. Racism takes its birth from ethnocentrism. A person from another culture is portrayed as a butt of ridicule. As W.E.B Dubois said the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line -- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in the islands of the sea. When the man from

another culture came to tea he is described as follows: "He had slicked on so much hair cream that his head seemed to be covered with a tight black patent-leather cap, and he had cut the threads of his jacket sleeves. His orange tie was overpoweringly splendid" (*Dancing Girls* 17). People from other cultures are pictured as weird.

The colonized always has a very servile and sheepish attitude to the dominant culture. The man from the "other" culture came to tea. He views Christine as rich when he sees a girl attending on them. Tea is served by a girl from West Indies. The dominant culture adopts a very tolerant and condescending attitude to minority cultures. As though they were doing them a great big favour, Atwood describes in "The Man from Mars":

Christine's parents had been enraptured with her when they were down at Christmas and had brought her back with them. Since that time she had become pregnant, but Christine's mother had not dismissed her. She said she was slightly disappointed but what could you expect, and she didn't see any real difference between a girl who was pregnant before you hired her and one who got that way afterwards. She prided herself on her tolerance; also there was a scarcity of girls (*Dancing Girls* 17).

That man had to pursue her to make other men realize she was worth pursuing. "Other men examined her more closely than they ever had, appraising her, trying to find out what it was these twitching bespectacled eyes saw in her. They started to ask her out, (*Dancing Girls* 24). "In addition to other benefits she was losing weight" (*Dancing Girls* 24). She needs other cultures to define herself.

Atwood feels being a woman along with being a Canadian was a great advantage. Since Canada was a colony for other writers "being a male writer in Canada branded you a sissy," (Van Spankeren Kathryn, Jan Garden xiv) "She is a feminist who likes men" (Van Spankeren Kathryn, Jan Garden xix) Fore word is from xiii -xvi. "But since gender is prior to nationality, the advantages of being a

Canadian woman writer were cancelled out by the disadvantages of being a woman writer" (Van Spanckeren Kathryn, Jan Garden xiv).

Atwood's work *Survival* "identifies the victim role and outlines concretely how female and Canadian cultural identities have been repressed over the years" (Van Spanckeren Kathryn, Jan Garden xxii) She speaks of the treatment with Canada equated with the female and the U.S. as the colonizer or male. Canada versus the U.S. is a paradigm of domination and subservience.

Canada is a surrogate for Atwood herself. The image of Canada as a colony, physically exploited and psychologically oppressed by the U.S., is manifest. One can identify 4 "Basic Victim positions" in Atwood's works says June Schlueter (VanSpanckeren Kathryn, Jan Garden 2)

In her article "Poetics in Limbo" Claire Harris writes:

A blatant ethnocentricity condemns people of colour to the sidelines: eternal immigrants poised on the verge of not belonging. Aforsporic writers challenge their otherization in Canada by asserting that being different in no way equates with being unCanadian (sic). For the immigrant there can be no return, for colonialism and imperialism have altered much, and the diasporic condition of their existence is an inescapable fact. (115)

Writing is a way of voicing aloud an understanding of the self and community in relation to the other. Writing comes from experiential knowledge. Even in Canada that boasts of multiculturalism, ethnicity and race and inequalities exist. Multiculturalism implies a social situation in which members of different ethnic communities are able to retain their ethnic identities, yet participate to the full in natural life. Immigrant literature is claustrophobic and xenophobic. If multiculturalism speaks of many immigrants and races then there should be tolerance and cosmopolitanism. Ethnocentrism and othering has only a derogatory effect.

Bibliography

1. Atwood, Margaret. *Dancing Girls: and Other Stories* Great Britain Vintage Books
2. Atwood Margaret Afterword (p62-64) *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* Toronto: Oxford University Press 1970
3. Atwood Margaret *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* Toronto: Anansi 1972
4. Spector Judith Ed. *Gender Studies* Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press 1986
5. Van Spanckeren, Kathryn Jan Garden Castro Ed *Margaret Atwood Visions and Forms U.S.A.* Southern Illinois University Press 1988
6. Prabhakar M. *Feminism/Postmodernism: Margaret Atwood's Fiction* New Delhi Nice Printing Press 1999.
7. Harris Claire "poets in limbo" *A Mazing space: Writing Canadian women Writing* Ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli Edmonton Newwest, 1986 109-119.
8. Lavine T. Z. *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophical Quest* New York: Bantam 1984.

