

## **On the Road to a Postcolonial Consciousness of Selfhood: Narrator's Quest for the Past in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing***

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### **Abstract**

With no possibility of nostalgia for the lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness (or consciousness-effect as operated by the disciplinary training), so that the elaboration of the insurgency [the colonialism], packaged with an insurgent consciousness does not freeze into to an object of investigation, or worse yet, a model for imitation (Spivak 287). Spivak's argument forms a major shift in postcolonial thought. The tendency of postcolonial discourse until then was concentrated only on the question of how to retrieve the Past, what was there, solely of one culture, before the onset of west's colonial enterprise. Works like *Black Athena* ambitiously brought out what we can, in a sense, call as a culture and civilization eradicated by the colonial enterprise and is not there anymore in the context of the African people. Aime Cesaire's attempts to proclaim 'Negritude', one's own native self, as a violent resistance against the 'thingification' of native people by 'spiritually indefensible' west is, to my understanding, again an attempt to retrieve the Past (101). The tendency has always been nostalgic, there was a major belief that going back to the Past was the future; the future is in the Past.

**Keywords-** Negritude, Identity, Imperialism

My paper attempts to trace out elements from the journey, the unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* makes from the city to her childhood home, in search of her missing father, and her decision to go back to the city in the end, and describe how the contentions made by Spivak become evident in the text. By doing a postcolonial reading and assuming, rather ambitiously, the narrator as a metaphor for a postcolonial identity, the constant references to Americans (the south) and her ex-husband as figures of the colonizer, I would like to look majorly in to the narrator's reflections and how she arrives at, what I call, a postcolonial consciousness of selfhood.

What is presented by Atwood's *Surfacing* is the analogous nature of patriarchy, cultural imperialism and geographical colonization and how this combined colonial experience has left the victim with feelings of displacement and disconnectedness from their

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language, history and culture, which in turn has led to a fractured sense of self and a desperate need to regain and reclaim identity. (Agnew 91)

The narrator reflects, at a very early stage in the novel, after seeing the signs saying “Gate way to the north”, “The future is in the North, that was the political slogan once; when my father heard it he said there was nothing in the North but the Past and not much of that either” (Atwood 5). The North here symbolizes the Past of the Canada, the political slogan attempted to move people back to their Past, to their own culture, devoid of American influence. After the colonized countries got independence this has been the major trend, to certain extend it still is; to reclaim the Past, and brush out everything the colonization created. However, her father was right in saying that what was there before the influence of the outsider was nothing but past. Going back to the Past is not future but would be past itself, which will not realize the present and its needs.

The narrator’s journey is to her Past. Her childhood in the secluded remote island was the happiest days in her life. The search for her missing father is a search for the missing past. She is not sure of what happened to her father, whether he is alive or dead. She herself is a numb character, without a name or particular history and all she has is certain memories, which constantly fail to help her in quest towards the Past. She is accompanied by her Present, her friends David, Anna and Joe, with whom she has been acquainted only for a brief time; however, she claims them to be the best friends.

The change she finds on her way to home is disturbing for the narrator. She is told that the road she knew was the “old one” and what she needs is the “new one”. She struggles to come into terms with those changes. She accuses her father [the Past] for letting the changes happen “he shouldn’t have allowed them to do it”. She even thinks of escaping from all these torments, “I want to turn around and go back to the city [her Present] and never find out what happened to him [father, the Past]” (8).

The Past is something her friends have disowned long ago, “the way you are supposed to” and “they don’t understand” the narrator’s reason to go back to home (in search of her Past); it is embarrassing for them. David, Anna and Joe are the embodiments of an identity which colonizer wanted to create, civilized beings devoid of their Past. “Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs” (13), where as the narrator is aware that she was a ‘civilized’ being, this new identity which her friends embody was forced on her rather than being gracefully accepted. Narrator remembers how, in the city, she was forced to mingle with people, persuaded in the name of being ‘civilized’

Studying her photos of childhood, the narrator concludes, “I was civilized at last, the finished product”. To Anna, the dress that the narrator wore in the childhood photo is unthinkable, though she is aware that she too had such a Past, she in a way disowns it by reflecting ‘Christ, how could we wear that stuff?’ but on the other hand, the narrator is

thinking about how the change happened in her Past, how she became what she is now. She says “No hints, or facts, I didn’t know when it happened. I must have been all right then; but after that I had allowed myself to be cut in to two [a limbo between unavoidable Past and the pressing reality of the Present]” (108).

The only acquaintance the narrator’s family had was Paul and his wife Madame. They are old now and are the only living remains of her Past. Confronting how her Past looked, the dresses of Paul and Madame, the narrator gets annoyed however, she soon reflects that it was their identity which the outsider has now turned into antiques in tourist handicraft shops. “I’m annoyed with them for looking so much like carvings, the habitant kind they sell into tourist handicraft shops; but of course it’s the other way around, it’s the carvings that look like them” (16).

The traditions had now changed in the village close to the island where she spent her childhood. In a store, seeing the shopkeeper women on ‘slacks and sleeveless jersey top’ the narrator concludes that the old priest, who disapproved of such kind of dressing in women, must have gone. When enquired about her place, the reply she gets from a man in the store is “*Des bar bares*, they are not civilized” (22). In a Bar in the village, the narrator observes the interior decorations as “imitation of other place, more southern ones [American, i.e. outsider], which are themselves imitations” (24).

We also find reflections of changes in nature, which the narrator confirms repeatedly as, due to the influence of America, the outsider. From the very first page, there are constant references to white birches, an indigenous tree in Canada, - “twisting along the Past lake where the white birches is dying, the disease is spreading from the South, and I notice they now have Seaplanes for hire” (3). Around her house, when she encounters white birches, she notices that the “disease hasn’t yet hit this part of the country” (32), she’s consoled by this and assumes herself that there is something in and around her house, in the island where she spent her childhood, which she can hold on for an identity of her own. In another part of the island where she goes to discover the rock paintings about which her father has been working on during his last days, she observes that “the white birch grew in clumps by the shore edge, doomed eventually by the disease, tree cancer, but no yet” (118).

Among her friends, David especially has an eccentric nature. We see him as a person who hates the Americans, who swears at everything because of the Yankee influence in it. However, it would not be an over reading to suggest that David is a character embodying all that an outsider wants him to be and Atwood cleverly disguises him from an immediate interpretation by reader. When narrator mentions about the place where Americans kept rockets, David says “Bloody fascist pig Yank’, but the narrator feels the lack of real engagement in David’s utterances and says that it was ‘though he’s commenting on weather’ (5).

The narrator's memories associated with her childhood days in the remote island are of a happy life. Though the place was remote and the only acquaintance her family had was Paul and Madame, they lead a life, which was entirely independent, and they didn't require a help from outside or society. Her parents found people as irrational beings and always wanted to live a separate secluded life. They had vegetable garden which sufficed all their food requirements, her father had made a kind of playing area with swinging ropes and all near to the house, they had all kinds of guide books and her father "believed that with proper guide books you can do everything yourself"(34). Her father wanted a "place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them" (56). What her father wanted was 'freedom from interference'. It is this kind of living setup, without bothering much on anything else is what drives the narrator to go back to her Past, for a happy life.

An evident postcolonial reality is to choose between what was there at the time of colonization or before the colonization, the question is how to come in terms with the colonial history and a nostalgic pre-colonial assumption. For the narrator the city is similar to the colonial history, she was a victim there and it is in a way also her Present as that was the life she was leading before travelling to the island. Her Past, the island and her father, is something she can relate as pre-colonial Past. We see that at various stages in the novel, the narrator constantly struggles to choose between the two. After initial attempts of search for her father, she comes to a conclusion that there is nothing more she can do by saying 'it's like searching for a ring lost on a beach or snow: futile'. She decides, "there is no act I can perform except waiting; tomorrow Evans will ship us to the village, and after that we'll travel to the city and the present tense" (70).

The past haunts the narrator as she believes that her father is out in the forest, watching what she and her friends were doing, without appearing in front of them, like a ghost. She says "After Evans left that day I was uneasy: the island wasn't safe, we were trapped on it. They [her friends] didn't realize it but I did, I was responsible for them. The sense of watching eyes, his [her father] presence lurking just behind the green leaf screen, ready to pounce or take flight, he wasn't predictable, I was trying to think of ways to keep them out of danger" (76). We also see the narrator telling Joe at a later stage in the novel, "let's go back to city, the way it was before" (106).

The similar existential dilemma disturbs the narrator in a different form when she realizes that her father was researching on the cave paintings, which he seems to have seen in a cliff in a different part of the island. To the narrator, it seems that her Past [father] was itself in the quest of the Past [the cave paintings] - this makes her assume that her father is dead and no more there in the island. Leafing through the leather album, incapable of assimilating the death of her father, she says "It was no more his [father] death but my own that concerned

me; perhaps I would be able to tell when the change occurred by the differences in my former faces” (107).

The image of her ex-husband and reflections related to abortion is highly metaphorical of the colonization itself. The figure of the husband for the narrator is of someone who guided her on his own terms. She thinks that she couldn't have brought the child to the island, as she never felt it as her own. “It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, and all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator”. In the civilizing mission, the colonizers' 'modest' attempt was to create a civilization that might look like a non-white but in all other ways, they would be a replica of the west. It is for this that the colonizers ventured into the area of education, implanting western attitude into the young minds of their colonies.

The colonizers' 'knowledge' that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia' and their arrogance in believing 'the intrinsic superiority of the Western literature' (Macaulay 211) made them import western literature into the third world nations and the native culture was substituted completely with it. It is in this context that the narrator's statement becomes meaningful- “He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was of no use. I couldn't prove it though; he was clever: he kept saying he loved me” (30).

After she dives in the lake (to find her Past) and gets a dead body that she cannot recognize whether as her brother or father, she instantly relates it to the scenes of the abortion. She struggles to put the different versions of her memories together but is unable to get a real understanding; she concludes that it was on a fake reality that she lived till now. “I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now” (114-115).

Her husband persuades her to go through an abortion by explaining how natural, legal and simple act it is, while she considers it as a slaughter. And after the abortion, her husband expects her to be thankful to him for making all the arrangements for it. She says “he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him anymore; it bewildered him, he resented me for it, he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was good” (146). And, in a different instance she says that her bitterness about her husband was surprising to herself, “I was what's known as offending party, the one who left, he didn't do anything to me” (44). The above reflections can be put in the context, where the colonizer expects gratitude from the colonized for 'civilizing' them and accuses colonized of being offensive due to unawareness of the advantages colonization have done to them.

Like the western imperial powers, which were authoritative earlier but not anymore, the narrator says that Joe has the “insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction” (4). [Now] It is only the demanding nature of Joe that the narrator doesn't



like. She says “perhaps that was the only time there could be anything like love, when he was asleep, demanding nothing” (125). Marriage, for the narrator is a playing monopoly which worked only when one is not conscious of the victimization. It was not only that she suffered in her previous marriage, it is also that she was conscious of her suffering, which the narrator feels as something which qualifies her to be aware of the true nature of the relationship in marriage. “But marriage was like playing Monopoly, either your mind worked that way, like Anna’s, or it didn’t; and I’d proved mine didn’t” (87). These thoughts of marriage are what make the narrator refuse Joe’s proposal to get married, a refusal to have an engagement with once colonizer again.

She destroys the film reels of the Joe and David’s Random Samples; she doesn’t want them to take anything of her island away. She decides to stay back and live alone in the island like the way her family lived during her childhood days without interference from anybody. The society was a system too much to bear for her. In her Past she wants to dwell and decides to find consolation; going back to the Present is futile for her. For her the truth is in the island and her small house, and going back to the city would be running away from that truth: “what are they saying about me now? That I was running away, but to go with them would have been running away, the truth is here” (174).

Her days in the island show major shifts in her thought process. After getting inside her house by breaking the window she spends the whole night sleeping in the bed and the next morning she destroys all the materials in the house. Her decision is to avoid associating herself with human beings. She abandons her cloths in the lake and lie in the mud close to the vegetable garden wrapped in a blanket taking it to be a camouflage. She fancies herself as not being a human being. The next day when she notices human beings approaching in a powerboat, she thinks that they have come to attack her. She takes them to ‘have been sent to hunt for’ her. She is worried whether they would mistake her for a human being. “They can’t be trusted. They’ll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket: possibly that’s what they have come here for, it’s running around loose, ownerless, why not take it. They won’t be able to tell what I really am. But If they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree” (189)

The narrator feels an immense sense of freedom living alone in the island. She feels that “the rules are over”, now she ‘can go anywhere now, into the cabin, into the garden’, she ‘can walk on the paths’. She feels herself to be the ‘only one alive in the island’ (194). However, after sometime she realizes that there is no escape for her from reality. She knows that early as October, may be before snow, “they’ll close the floodgates on the dam and the water will rise’ and the island will be immersed in water, it will be impossible for her live there. She comes to her senses that island is not the place for her. She says ‘in any case I can’t stay here forever, there isn’t enough food. The garden won’t last and the tins and bottles will give out; the link between me and the factories is broken, I have no money” (195).

She refused herself to be identified as an American [outsider]. She irrevocably takes everything like the Americans to be the Americans themselves. 'If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do' (130). Alone in the island, she thinks deeply about the fact that these Americans exist in the city and they are advancing themselves spreading the disease from the south, and she decides that she should deal with them.

The Past wouldn't help her. There is nobody who can come to her aid. She realizes there are "no god to help" her now as 'they've receded back to the past'. 'They'll never appear to me again, I can't afford it; from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation. I regret them; but they give the only kind of truth, one hand" (195). There is no truth in the past other than that it was the past, there were losses and failures and the only way to come in terms with the past is to understand its absence.

The fact that she can never free herself from reality, the failed expectation for her past [father and mother] to come and help her, the decision that she has to be firm and fight against victimization, the immediate presence of the child [the future] growing in her womb whom she wants to grow, protect, nurture and take care the way her parents took care of her, all these multitudes of thoughts make her contemplate that withdrawal is no escape and she has no alternative but to face reality.

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. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no other but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death (Atwood 197).

When Paul and Joe come back to the island to search for her, the narrator finds a mediator in Joe, somebody who would help her get through in the city. She says "what's importance is that he's here, a mediator, an ambassador, offering me something: captivity in any of its forms, a new freedom?" (198)

The narrator knows that Joe might have features of the outsider and she will have 'to talk' with him; there is no way 'avoiding each other'. It is necessary and they'll 'probably fail' to understand each other 'sooner or later, more or less painfully'. However, she feels that 'that's normal, it's the way it happens now' and even if she can't be sure 'whether it's worth it or even if she 'can depend on him', the very fact that Joe came back for her makes her think that he isn't an American completely; "he isn't anything, he is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (198).

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