

Elements of Nationalism in *Surfacing*

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to study nationalistic elements present in *Surfacing* by highlighting how foreign dominion in a country elevates the concept of national consciousness in the subjects. The purpose of this study is to embark on how colonization is forging nationalism in the subjects (colonized) and compelling them to understand and find their positions in their respective societies

Keywords- Culture, Colonialism, Colonizer, Canadian ideology, Colonized, Hegemony, monology

Introduction

In the national struggle, colonialism tries to disarm national demands by putting forward economic doctrines meant for the development of the host country but sooner these ostentatious demands reveal the true colours of the colonizer and in the process bring up a common notion of nationalism among the subjects. The strongest focus for resisting this imperial control has been the idea of “nation”. A nation culture, as per *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, is the whole body efforts made by people in that sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people have created itself and keep itself in existence”(Fanon 116). Nationalism as a cultural trait is increasingly seen surfacing in *surfacing*.

Surfacing is a novel about human relations. The copious writer Margaret Atwood is one of the most talented feminist writer of post modern Canadian fiction. Distinguished as a novelist, she is a renowned poet, a storyteller and a critic who probes to explore the human psyche, with aims to search for identity both national and religious identities. Search for identity has always been a predominant theme in her works. As having been born in Quebec she has been the victim of French and English influence and is writing to polish that tarnished Canadian identity. Margaret Atwood’s novel *surfacing* brings to forefront the Canadian nationalist ideology of preserving the indigenous culture

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from American infiltration by depicting the local Canadians with American living and Americanization of the Canadian resources as a matter of looting their identity (robbing the natives). By depicting the process of how this draining of culture, identity and economic resources is done, Margaret is invoking national consciousness among the Canadian readers and at the same time making the non Canadian readers aware of her plight.

Surfacing is about a young woman who is an artist going in search of her father on a deserted island in northern Quebec. She takes a couple of companions with her – her lover Joe, friend Anna and Anna’s partner David. While attempting to find the father, she recalls feelings and events as a Canadian when she feels oppressed by the cultural imperialism of Americans. As the novel opens, the narrator presents before us a living picture of Canada under the colonial rule “I can’t believe I am on this road again, twisting along the past where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south and I notice now they have sea planes for hire”(Atwood 3). These lines at the very beginning reveal the situation of exploitation of the Canadian resources at the hands of English and French. She shows that at the border of Canada, Americans spoil environment. This is obvious that right from the beginning of the novel there is an image of disease, the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South. The South, of course, is America. As the novel goes on we become more aware of the degree of the widespread damages to nature: rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over and roots in the air. Although at first the protagonist is somehow unusual to the place, she gradually feels affinity with nature and tries to protect it against the damages done by the Americans. As we go on reading, the images like of generals living in concrete bunkers and ordinary soldiers in underground apartment buildings appear implying the imperial control over Canada by the Americans. The nameless narrator of the novel points to the place where rockets were kept by Americans to which David replies “Bloody Fascist pig yanks” revealing anti American feelings in the hearts of Canadians. The reason for this constant bashing of America is because she thinks America is destroying Canada and through David, Atwood voices the concern about the planning of a secret war by Americans on Canada. It is this abhorrence that paves way to affirm that Canadians are aware of their exploitation which is why this unified national sentiment of condemning has aroused. In the novel, on catching a fish, David wants her (narrator) to kill it but she says the fish is whole, she couldn’t any more as she had no right as these were no longer the right reasons. Josie P. Campbell claims that, *surfacing* goes quite beyond the borders of Canada, except in details of place, despite her polemics in survival the consciousness is the central task of humankind everywhere. Her quest is represented as a search for national identity.

Although Canadian independence from Britain occurred so gradually, *Surfacing* explores an

emerging Canadian national identity. Atwood includes a passage about the Canadian national flag, which had only been adopted in 1965. More importantly, *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 117) and being able to differentiate the native culture from non native unveils the efforts Atwood has put in to preserve the culture of Canada (post colonialism forging the concept of nationalism). Atwood packs *surfacing* with the images of Americans culturally invading and ruining Canada. The instances from the novel where the narrator says:, "Madame, makes tea on the new electric stove, a blue ceramic Madonna with pink child hanging above it ; when i glimpsed the stove on my way through the kitchen i felt betrayed, she should have remained loyal too her wood range" (Atwood 20) .

Depicting the drain of the traditional methods of cooking which were representative of Canadian culture, yet another instance where draining of cultural identity is seen is presented by David who claims to hate Americans by calling them fascist pigs but the same time is a huge American baseball fan, imitating Woody Pecker. The characters like Elvis Presley are being followed in terms of style and music. This American hegemony is achieved by creating subjects who willingly submit to the concept of American greatness. "Ideology is crucial in creating consent, it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and more importantly, held to be true" (Loomba 30). The narrator herself is so accustomed to encountering cultural lies that she is actually annoyed with Madame and Paul as well for "looking so much like carvings, the habitant kind they sell in tourist handicraft shops; but of course it's the other way around, it's the carvings that look like them." The instance from the novel where, because they belong to the narrator's childhood experience of French Canada, Madame and Paul acquire special significance as the last living contacts with old Quebec and with the heroine's dead parents. With their children's houses clustered around theirs, they represent a sense of family and community long since lost by metropolitan English Canadians like David, Anna and Joe. Hence it is most appropriate that after making her peace with her ancestors the narrator finally leaves her island not in the powerful speedboat belonging to Evans the American, but in Paul's old homemade boat, "thick and slow and painted white." The narrator's refusal to accept as genuine the trite folk tales she has been commissioned to illustrate reveals the sort of cultural authenticity she wants Quebec to have for her. English Canada has no genuine folklore; its children literature consists of "Humanoid bears and talking pigs, Protestant chow-chow trains who make the grade and become successful," which she can illustrate quite fittingly as "fake Walt Disney, Victorian etchings in sepia, Bavarian cookies, ersatz Eskimo." But she wants Quebec's traditions to be recognizably unique.

In *Surfacing*, Quebec is shown to be rapidly learning the American language that has already infiltrated the rest of Canada. One result is that the province is acquiring new territory in the mental geography of English Canadians. Quebec can still, as the novel's heroine demonstrates, fulfil its traditional role as the location of genuine Canadian experience and identity and further more infusing a quest for national identity. In all of *Surfacing*, perhaps the most cogent connection between English and French Canada is the confusion of messages - English, French and American - painted on the rocks outside the village.

America is called by the narrator as a brain disease linking American identity to behaviour and nationality. To narrator everyone who commits senseless violence, over consumes and loves technology must always be an American. An account of over fishing and felling of trees by the Americans reflected in the novel elucidate the draining of Canadian resources thereby economically affecting the country. The main aim of colonialism is to extract the resources from the host country in the pretext of development and in case of *surfacing*, building bridges to connect the distant areas. In context to development the narrator writes:

There was a covered bridge here once, but it was too far to north to be quaint. They tore it down three years before I left, to improve the dam, and replaced it with concrete bridge which is here now, enormous, monumental, dwarfing the village. It is the damn that controls the village: sixty years ago they raised the lake level so that whenever they wanted to flush the logs down the narrow outflow river to the mill will have enough water power. (Atwood 30)

The looting of natural resources be it the forest resource or water resource to produce electricity is addressed by Atwood in her novel making the Canadian as well as non Canadian reader aware of how colonialism exploits a country and in the process forges national consciousness among its subjects. The conception of a fundamental opposition between nature and the technologically destructive Americans has appeared in many pretexts in western thought. It is uttered in the representation of the heron. The shape of heron flying above us the first evening we fished, legs and neck stretched, wings outspread, a blue grey. Cross and the other heron or was it someone, hanging wrenched from the tree. Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ, if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. Animals die so that we may live, they are substitute people. This ultimate statement about the imperial control evokes the storm of national consciousness not only in the Canadian readers but in the hearts of non Canadians thereby legitimizing their claim for an independent, self controlled government.

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Although nation, like race, has only the most tenuous theoretical purchase, in political practice it has continued to be what Anderson describes as 'the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (Anderson 12). While nationalism operated as a general force of resistance in earlier times in post-colonial societies, a perception of its hegemonic and 'monologic' status is growing. "The ties between literature and nation evoke a sense of 'fricative quality of political concept'" (Brennan 43).

To sum it up Atwood in 'surfacing' is seriously concerned with 'the country's predicament' as a political victim. She is trying to show what being a victim in the colonial culture feels like. She puts her anguish into words by saying that the United States as an imperial master is the cause of Canada's victimisation. The novel voices Atwood's border relationship with the United States of Canadian consciousness - the threat of Americanism to Canada's national identity. Of course, the novel in its complete truthfulness presents a slice of Canadian reality.

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