

Contesting Epistemological Dependency and Contextualising Space: A Postcolonial Critique of Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*

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Abstract

Survival, on its first publication in the year 1972, was hailed as “a ground-breaking study of archetypal patterns” in Canadian Literature. One of the salient features of the book is its emphasis on contextualising Canadian literature in a space of its own, through an intrinsic study of its patterns, images and motifs. Space was celebrated as a source of pride by Canadians. To Atwood, Space hence, becomes a metaphor of the postcolonial literary landscape, wherein lies the inherent source of strength and pride of the Canadian writer, and therefore should be reclaimed or conquered from the imperialist onslaught. Therefore by advocating the need for an authentic Canadian literature that effectively expresses the Canadian identity and its cultural survival against the imperial cultural onslaught, Atwood argues for a postcolonial space or a space of intervention that not only challenges epistemological dependency, but also helps create positive new identities by writing back to the centre, and thereby negating the indebtedness of colonised peoples to colonisers' discursive constructions and modes of thinking.

Keywords: postcolonial space, epistemological dependency, interventions, negation

The Canadian tryst with issues of identity, conquest and colonisation, merits a postcolonial reading, as it posits the relationship between power and resistance, alterity and hybridity, being and survival as central motifs towards understanding Canadian literature from a postcolonial context. Since Canada was previously a colony of the British Empire, many writers, historians and literary critics have pointed to the detrimental effects of colonial mentality on Canadian culture, and the resultant epistemological dependency on the Empire, have been critiqued by writers, historians and literary critics in their analyses of postcolonial discourses. Faye Hammill, while commenting on the damaging effects of colonial mentality on Canadian culture, opines,

“The view that the legacy of empire, or ‘the colonial mentality’, continued to influence, and, indeed, to restrict or damage Canadian culture well into the twentieth century has been articulated by many historians and literary critics, most famously by Northrop Frye in his conclusion to *The Literary History of Canada* (1966) and *Margaret Atwood in Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). These critics argue that Canada's art, literature and cultural institutions were, at least until the earlier twentieth century, derived mainly from European models...” (28).

These postcolonial interventions in Canadian space, as regards cultural practices, customs, beliefs, languages and nationhood have been debated by Canadian writers both in the past as well as in the present. Hence a postcolonial critique is a dialectical discourse that allows the colonised people to not only reclaim their sovereignty but also helps them reclaim a space of their own in the creation of a distinctly national culture that seeks to contest epistemological dependency on the empire.

“Epistemological dependency”, is a term coined by Douglas West to describe the “indebtedness of colonised peoples to coloniser's discursive constructions and modes of thinking self, other, and community” (278). The imperative of psychological survival in the midst of the colonial onslaught in the realm of culture, identity and nationhood is a necessity for the Canadian writer, and Atwood alludes to the importance of creating this postcolonial space of re-imagining a postcolonial community outside the discourse of the empire, through her first foray in the realm of literary criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). This seminal text by Atwood, was an answer to Northrop Frye's agonising cry in the previous decade (1966), when he rued the absence of any great Canadian writer on the Canadian literary landscape. He says: “there is no Canadian writer of whom we can say what we can say of the world's major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference” (821). *Survival*, quickly went on to become a classic in Canadian literary criticism. Canada had indeed found a

remarkable writer who established her identity as an authentic voice in the Canadian literary scene.

Spaces are the domains through which human beings express the meaning of their existence, and seek to create an authentic voice with regard to culture, identity and nationhood. Colonial discourses are based on the assumption that, space is the domain of the coloniser proper, and hence, non-Western spaces are deemed to be empty spaces, and these “modes of representation” are, according to John McLeod, “used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonised peoples subservient to colonial rule (17). As Clive Barnett points out, “this relationship involved representing non-Western spaces as empty, or inhabited only by ghostly subjects, or untended, in ways that legitimised colonial and imperial intervention in the name of proper stewardship of people and land.” (7) From a postcolonial viewpoint, this spatial realm, and its relation to culture and identity is presented by Said’s formulation of ‘imaginative geography’, which contrasts the geography that exists on the ground and geography as a cultural construct, which is akin to the “imagined communities” put forward by Benedict Anderson. This culturally constructed nature of geographic knowledge through which meaning is assigned to the ‘space’ in the postcolonial fabric dramatizes distance and difference and is “arbitrary” according to Said.

Speaking on the emphasis of this concept of ‘imaginative geographies’ and its effects on the creation of a ‘postcolonial space’ in Canadian literature, Edward Said observes that, “Geography was essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in its geography (*Orientalism* 216). Atwood’s *Survival* attempts to interrogate these ‘imaginative geographies’ which suggests specific modes of understanding the world as ‘proper’ and taught as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. This emphasis on geography is pointed out by Magdalene Redekop, that, “Not all the criticism written during the heady nationalist years after 1967 was as entertaining as *Survival*, but much of it was similarly dominated by geography and the tendency was to employ sweeping themes to paper over the huge cracks in Canadian unity” (271).

Critical paradigms of space and identity have been evolved by a host of Canadian writers in their definition of the Canadian literarandscape. While for Northrop Frye it was the “garrison mentality” that defined the Canadian concept of space, to Robert Kroetsch, it was “disunity as unity”, and for Frank Davey, the Canadian paradigm of identity and space was a “site of social contestation”; but for Margaret Atwood, “survival” was the central paradigm in the postcolonial Canadian space. Atwood interrogates this concept of space as a central symbol for Canada.

Moreover, this space, from her perspective, is synonymous with ‘survival’. “For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of ‘hostile’ elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive... For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government” (*Survival* 32). Although the Canadian canon is thought to have become obsolete, Atwood says that, their survival is like a “vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past, like a primitive reptile”.

Secondly, the mind becomes a metaphor in the postcolonial space, and, ‘mapping the mind’ becomes an ideological strategy, as it is shaped by the language and culture of the coloniser. Thiong’o, the renowned postcolonial critic posits the three important aspects of language as culture, and alludes to the second aspect of “language as culture”, as “an image-forming agent in the mind of a child”. He adds to say that, “Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place (*Decolonising the Mind* 15). Thus the mind becomes a receptacle of pictures and images which, produces its literary offspring based on the discursive knowledge formations ingrained into it by the colonial masters.

As the postcolonial critic Nathanael O’Reilly points out, “An awareness of a different perception of space can only be perceived when the process of mental mapping is allowed to occur” (96). Survival thus, becomes necessitated in the postcolonial space, where literature, for Atwood, is “not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind” (*Survival* 19). Yet again, she alludes to the interior landscapes of poets as “maps of the state of mind” (*Survival* 49). Atwood alludes to this geography of the mind as a key determiner of the postcolonial space which becomes instrumental for the Canadian writer, to experience the world from a ‘decolonised’ perspective. For Atwood, an advocacy of a unique postcolonial space results not only in the interrogation of the epistemological dependency but also by a radical decolonising of the mind.

For Atwood, the postcolonial space should reflect an authentic Canadian sensibility. As Thiong’o rightly observes,

“a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the

culture it carries. Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world (*Decolonising the Mind* 15, 16).

However, the British imperial project focussed on civilising the Canadian colonised subjects by teaching English literature based on set British paradigms. Teaching of Canadian literature, therefore, Atwood says, became “a political act” (*Survival* 12). Therefore, she emphasises the creation of a postcolonial space which would reflect ‘what’s Canadian about Canadian literature’. Written in a persuasive tone and addressed to a Canadian reader, the lead motif of *Survival*, according to Atwood, “is something that would make Canadian literature, as *Canadian* literature – not just literature that happened to be written in Canada – accessible to people other than scholars and specialists, and that would do it with simplicity and practicality” (13 *Surfacing*) Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, while commenting on this Eurocentric experience of history, reinforced in the minds of students in their study of geography and history, observes that, “African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the universe. The earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by their study of geography and history, and science and technology where Europe was, once again, the centre. This in turn fitted well with the cultural imperatives of British imperialism (93).

Magdalene Redekop points out that, “If Frye’s “garrison mentality” was an example of how not to imagine Canadian literature, Atwood’s book offered pages of illustrations of the kinds of “victim positions” resulting from such environmental determinism. So sinister and overwhelming is the threat of the hostile environment that the writer’s ability to shape literary

forms – in the works of Atwood, Pratt, Frye, and many other writers – is like the tool of survival seen by McLuhan as a “counter-environment” (271).

Atwood posits this predicament of creating a postcolonial space both from a literal and figurative viewpoint, where there is an alteration in the type of survival:

In earlier writers, these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. (*Survival* 33).

This predicament is also referred to as the “difficulty of being” by a few other Canadian writers, where “‘being’ is not simply survival or existence, but living with full comprehension of the circumstance” (Blodgett 64). This quest for survival, according to Atwood, leads to the reaffirmation of a unique Canadian idiom that reflects issues of culture, identity and nationhood, and hence she emphasises, “For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive (*Survival* 19).

This postcolonial predicament, based on the proposition of the will to survive gives way to the binaries of victor/victim wherein the colonised are relegated to victim positions.

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim . . .

Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea ...

Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable . . .

Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. (*Survival* 36-8)

Hence Atwood argues that, in order to survive from being victimised, one must become a ‘creative non-victim’ (*Survival* 38), since it is only by being creative can the Canadian writers create a unique

postcolonial space of their own, and thereby identify their aura of authenticity and truly survive. Through the victim position in Position Four, Atwood seeks to interrogate the epistemological dependency on the coloniser, by being able to accept one's own experience and writing about it. Elaborating on the 'creative victim position' Atwood says:

“In Position Four, creative energy of all kinds becomes possible. Energy is no longer being suppressed (as in Position One) or used up for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimisation along to others (Man kicks Child, Child kicks Dog) as in Position Two; nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of Position Three. And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors) (*Survival* 39).

Further, the “creative non-victims” are writers, who, according to Atwood, are free to be creative, because they do not spend their energies to suppress, displace or protest victimisation (38-9). Secondly, Atwood intertwines the concept of victim position with that of the colony, as “an oppressed minority and exploited” nation. “Let us suppose for the sake of argument, that Canada, as a whole is a victim, or an ‘oppressed minority or exploited. Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony. A partial definition of a colony is that it is a place from which a profit is made” (*Survival* 38)

Moreover, according to Paul Goetsch, these basic victim positions “allow Atwood to deal with all kinds of power relationships from political and social violence to gender relationships” (173).

The premise of positing a postcolonial space, within the domain of the Canadian literary landscape, is, for Atwood, an epistemological premise based on the motif of Canadians as survivors with a “victim mentality” or “garrison mentality”. Bill Ashcroft, while commenting on this postcolonial space in the Canadian literary fabric, states that it is “inevitably a hybridised phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the ‘grafted’ European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity (*The Empire Writes Back* 195). It is this independent local identity that Atwood seeks to create or recreate through her profuse initiation and invitation to Canadian writers to create a postcolonial space that expresses a unique Canadian sensibility in the formation of identity, community and nationhood. In doing so, she argues for

an authentic Canadian literary canon that addresses questions of Canadian heritage and cultural identity.

Thus, Atwood strategically positions the arts as being pivotal for survival, where writing is, paradoxically, both necessary and dangerous. Moreover, just as the Frontier is a central theme in American literature, characterised by “excitement and sense of adventure or danger,” or, conquest is the dominant theme of English literature, characterised by “the smugness and/or sense of security, of everything in its place”, Atwood says that, the theme of survival best describes the literature of Canada, which is characterised by an almost “intolerable anxiety”. Hence, *Survival* is an exhortation to fellow Canadian writers to cultivate a national sensibility that not only interrogates epistemological dependency, but also provides a counter epistemological knowledge – ‘an aura of authenticity’ that would serve as a corrective to the Eurocentric epistemology of the colonial past and would thus meet the demands of survival in the postcolonial space.

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