Postcolonial Ecocriticism through the Canadian Lens: Select Writings of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract: Postcolonialism and ecocriticism appeared to be contradictory terms in the writing of Rob Nixon. However, in the context of postcolonial literature(s) that inspire the human imagination to move beyond boundaries of nations, the local and ethical positions that ecocriticism foregrounds remain, or ought to remain, important. In the case of Canada, the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial history has taken a different route from that of other countries usually discussed in this context. Margaret Atwood, as one of the foremost Canadian authors, has concentrated on different dimensions of the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism, almost from the beginning of her career as a writer, though she did not always formally mention these two terms. In her fictional and nonfictional works, ecological concerns surfaced along with her readings of the Canadian condition of colonial as well as neocolonial times. *Survival* and *Strange Things* form the nonfictional base and a number of prominent works of social, historical as well as speculative fiction demonstrate Atwood's deep engagement with the nature of colonial and postcolonial history as related to the maladies besetting the ecology of the geographical space concerned.

Keywords: postcolonialism, ecocriticism, Canada, Margaret Atwood.

In "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," Rob Nixon lamented that environmentalism and postcolonialism appeared to remain poles apart (233). The overt concentration of American ecocritics on the writings of a few compatriots only, suggested to Nixon that they were not ready to acknowledge the existence of ecocritical voices from other countries (234). Against the "hybridity and cross-culturation" preferred by postcolonialists, ecocritics were observed by Nixon to remain advocates of "purity" and "preservation" (235). The postcolonial stress on the effects of "displacement" remained opposed to the concern with "place" in environmental literature, according to him (235). He also thought that while postcolonialism concerned itself with "the cosmopolitan and the transnational," environmentalist American literature remained concerned with the "national" and the "nationalistic" (235). Lastly, Nixon argued that while postcolonialism sought to bring to our attention "history from below and border histories," often with the help of the "migrant memory", in American environmental literature, a "timeless" moment of "communion" with the nature of a particular place is often foregrounded even as the history of the "colonized" people there is erased (235). The existence of different aims and paths employed by postcolonialists and the American ecocritics mentioned by Nixon, remained a palpable problem in 2005, when he wrote this essay. The question then arises whether, moving beyond the largely self-restricted and self-reflexive ecocritical practices of the American ecocritics, it is possible today to find proof of the historically and geographically valid existence of the conjunction of postcolonialism and ecocriticism in literature? In this paper, by positing the historical and geographical advantages and disadvantages of Canada, as perceived by Margaret Atwood, it will be argued that a broadened experiential horizon in postcolonialism might sometimes merge with ecological concerns and practices, as in her writing.

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), an early and crucial nonfictional work, Margaret Atwood pointed out an interesting cultural phenomenon observed in certain postcolonial societies that remain unsure of their post-colonial identity, individuality and worth:

> The two questions I was asked most frequently by audience members were, "Is there any Canadian literature?" And, "Supposing there is, isn't it just a second-rate copy of *real* literature, which comes from England and the United States?" In Australia they called such attitudes the Cultural Cringe; in Canada they were termed the Colonial Mentality. In both -

> and in many smaller countries around the world - they were a part of a tendency to believe that the Great Good Place was, culturally speaking, elsewhere. (5; italics in original)

Beginning with this question suggests an insecurity in the Canadian mind about the existence of its own cultural and literary identity even in the evidently postcolonial era in the twentieth century. Canada, a nation in its own right by this time, belonging geographically to the Global North as the northern neighbour of the USA, had no confidence in its over the literary and cultural heritage of the colonial and postcolonial era.

The average Canadian reader was possibly conscious of certain historical and geographical anxieties, primarily as a colonial legacy, and these concerns about Canadian nature and culture remained intertwined with the question of their viable expression in a literature and culture of their own. Atwood, in *Survival,* had to be affirmative and reassuring in this respect:

> First, that, yes, there was a Canadian literature [….] Second, that this body of work was not just a feeble version of English or American, or, in the case of Francophone books, of French literature, but that it had different preoccupations, which were specific to its own history and geopolitics. (6-7)

She went on to spell out the historical as well as geographical necessity of having a postcolonial existence, represented in Canadian literature:

> If you were a rocky, watery northern country, cool in climate, large in geographical expanse, small but diverse in population, and with a huge aggressive neighbour to the south, why wouldn't you have concerns that varied from those of the huge aggressive neighbour? Or indeed from those of the crowded, history-packed, tight little island, recently but no longer an imperial power, that had once ruled the waves? You'd think they'd be different, wouldn't you? (*Survival* 7)

Canada, as distinct from the erstwhile imperial Britain and the dominant neocolonial neighbour USA, has produced a literature of its own. And Margaret Atwood, as a foremost Canadian literary figure, had analysed the contours of her country's postcolonial and neocolonial life in order to explain the integral relation between Canada's abiding perception of the nation as a colony in some way still, and its nature. For instance, in 2004, while writing a new Introduction to *Survival,* Atwood juxtaposed these realities:

> Many things have happened in the thirty-four years since *Survival* was first published. In politics, the Quebec question and the loss of national control and increased U.S. domination brought about by the 1989 Free Trade Agreement have become, not the tentative warning notes they were in *Survival*, but everyday realities. […]
>
> Technologies have altered the way we communicate; the scorned tree-huggers of yesteryear have become the respected alternate-energy gurus of today; Nature the Monster, though it can still kill you, is more likely to be seen as Nature the Threatened, as predicted in the original *Survival.* (9-10)

In this paper, following Atwood's stance in *Survival,* it will be imagined that Canada narrates its story through an author like her: "I've treated the books as though they were written by Canada, a fiction I hope you'll go along with temporarily [….] until recently our authors were treated only as private people. Authors are also transmitters of their culture" (*Survival* 18-19). Atwood herself recorded the Canadian search for "self-knowledge" and the literary images and reflections of Canada and Canadians in the writings of others (and we note the way the natural bounties of the country are evoked and shown as a major reason behind its exploitation in these works):

> There's the placid, jolly, woodcutting and woodchuck-eating "Canadian" in Thoreau's *Walden*; there's Edmund Wilson saying "In my youth, of the early nineteen-hundreds, we tended to imagine Canada as a kind of vast hunting preserve convenient to the United States." (Right on, Edmund.) In Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Canada is the protagonist's cool fantasy escape-land; if he can only make it there from steamy Mexico, everything will be all right [….] That's more or less the range of Canada as viewed by "international" literature: a place you escape to from "civilization," an unspoiled,

> uncorrupted place imagined as empty or thought of as populated by happy archaic peasants [….] (*Survival* 23-24)

To her readers today, Atwood's enumeration, of the ways in which Canada was viewed, tells us of stereotypes of thought and attitude towards the country. Atwood captured the significance of this phenomenon in a nutshell when she wrote:

> 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, but *not by the people who live there*: the major profit from a colony is made in the centre of the empire. (*Survival* 45; italics in original).

Atwood suggests that the vastness of the country and its comparatively small population have been, historically speaking, at the service of other countries that used, or continue to use it, as a colony practically. Within Canada, though, there is a historically problematic area in the relationship between the First Nation or earlier indigenous population and the Europeans who settled down in the country. Atwood is perceptive enough to point out in another context in *Survival* that "white Canadian identification with the Indian-as-victim may at times conceal a syllogism something like the following: "We are to the Americans as the Indians are to us" (120).

Let us now view the various positions from which it is possible or necessary to observe the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism in the context of Atwood's initial writings. Again, *Survival* provides an indication of this by reminding us of Atwood as a student of English and American literature on the one hand, and her emergence as a literary voice from, and of Canada, on the other. Ecologically speaking, the land one inhabits forms an intimate part of the life, livelihood and wellbeing of both the individual and the community. Hence, how that land is perceived by the coloniser and the colonised are important in any discussion involving post colonialism and ecocriticism. For instance, we learn from *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* about the "issue of place names" through which the settlers sought to assert their existence in the colonised country:

> In settler colonies and postcolonies such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, place names such as Rylstone, Sydney, Victoria, London, Nova Scotia and Wellington indicate the concern to make the land familiar and to mark its ownership by the settlers. Yet these names will be found side by side with indigenous place names such as Mudgee, Wagga Wagga, Saskatchewan and Waikato indicating a continuing consciousness of the connection between the land and the peoples who inhabited it before the settlers.

This double claim also pertains to the flora and the fauna of settler countries (Innes 72; emphasis added). Atwood pointed out the gradation of the settlers' attachment with or hatred of the geographical space of Canada and its localities:

> What we are looking at […] is the types of landscape that prevail in Canadian literature and the kinds of attitude they mirror.
>
> Not surprisingly in a country with such a high ratio of trees, lakes and rocks to people, images from Nature are almost everywhere. Added up, they depict a Nature that is often dead and unanswering or actively hostile to man; or, seen in its gentler spring and summer aspects, unreal. There is a sense in Canadian literature that the true and only season here is winter: the others are either preludes to or mirages concealing it. (*Survival* 59)

The settlers who encountered an inhospitable nature and climate in Canada were puzzled about their own attitude towards the country and establishing ecological relations with the geographical space. Atwood clearly sketched the reasons behind such confusion:

> English Canada was settled first, but sparsely, in the eighteenth century; a larger influx of immigrants from England arrived during the first half of the nineteenth century. The prevailing literary mode in Nature poetry in the late eighteenth century as derived from Edmund Burke was the cult of the sublime and the picturesque, featuring views and inspirational scenery. In the first half of the nineteenth century this shifted to Wordsworthian Romanticism. What you were "supposed" to feel about Nature under the first mode was awe

> at the grandeur of Nature; under the second, you were supposed to feel that Nature was a kind Mother or Nurse [….]
>
> Towards the middle of the century Nature's personality underwent a change; she remained a female deity, but she became redder in tooth and claw as Darwinism infiltrated literature. However, most of the English immigrants were by that time safely in Canada, their heads filled with diluted Burke and Wordsworth, encountering lots and lots of Nature. If Wordsworth was right, Canada ought to have been the Great Good Place [….]
>
> But the tension between what you are officially supposed to feel and what you actually encountered when you got here – and the resultant sense of being gypped – is much in evidence. (*Survival* 59-61)

In other words, the settlers expected to experience the grandeur and benevolence of nature and the seasons simultaneously in Canada, but practically there was a frightening or hostile presence that gave them "a feeling of hopeless imprisonment" (*Survival* 62). A settler who came to dislike the climate, terrain, non-human life forms and the native population of Canada and their traditional divine forms and ideas could not be expected to exert himself or herself for the ecological sustenance of the place. The utmost that could be expected of the average settler was an ongoing battle against bogs and bugs for the sake of the survival of the individual or the family. This difference in the settlers' worldview in general and the outlook towards life there, in particular, from those of the native population, "prevent[ed] him from making meaningful contact with his actual environment" (*Survival* 65).

In the Canadians' experience, nature was considered to be such a hostile force, possibly because many died frozen or drowned. Escaping accidents in nature was part of the struggle of conquering the terrain in Canada. Atwood wrote that "Nature as woman keeps surfacing as a metaphor all over Canadian literature" presumably as "an old, cold, forbidding and possibly vicious one" (*Survival* 238). This is at a great distance from the Romantic ideal of nature as a mother or spiritual guide indeed. "Sometimes the Canadian Nature-goddess is rock, sometimes she is ice […]," wrote Atwood in *Survival* (239). When the Canadians were busy surviving and seeking to control these natural elements, human existence as well as subsistence, and nature remained adversaries in their perception (*Survival* 72). However, the white Canadians' attempt to conquer/control, not only the country and the people but also the natural elements meant that nature was being turned into a human colony, in the name of human survival and benefit. They felled trees commercially, built dams, cleared up the ground and did a lot of farming, in the process of turning nature's force in human favour, and then, once the major part of the usable land had come completely into human control, found commiseration for her in their hearts. Atwood wrote:

> A curious thing starts happening in Canadian literature once man starts winning [….] Sympathy begins to shift from the victorious hero to the defeated giantess, and the problem is no longer how to avoid being swallowed up by a cannibalistic Nature but *how to avoid destroying her*. (*Survival* 72; emphasis added).

In *Postcolonial Ecologies*, despite Nixon, it has been foregrounded that "an ecological frame is vital to understanding how geography has been and still is radically altered by colonialism, including resource use, stewardship and sovereignty" (24). Atwood read this in the changing images of nature in Canadian literature across centuries, in the trajectory of the movement in the compatriots' mind from fear, through the exploitative to the ecologically conscious conditions:

> The war against Nature assumed that Nature was hostile to begin with; man could fight and lose, or he could fight and win. If he won he would be rewarded: he could conquer and enslave Nature, and, in practical terms, exploit her resources. But it is increasingly obvious to some writers that man is now more destructive towards Nature than Nature can be towards man; and, furthermore, that the destruction of Nature is equivalent to self-destruction on the part of man. (*Survival* 73)

But this change in the human attitude took centuries. And though the drama in the human psyche appears to be completed in three Acts flat, the process involved serious conflict, twists, bends,

backtracking even, and moments of anagnorisis that we can view reflected in Atwood's writings, along with *Survival*, presented across decades.

2

Human beings seeking to make a colony out of not only one unfortunate human being, usually female, as in the case of Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman* (1969) by Margaret Atwood, also often seek to make a colony out of nature, preferably taming the wilderness that their forefathers feared a few generations earlier. This is the reason that the telephone advertisement jingle could go like this:

> Moose, Moose,
> From the land of pine and spruce,
> Tingly, heady, rough-and-ready….
>
> Then a speaking voice […] intoned persuasively […]
>
> Any real man, on a real man's holiday - hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing - needs a beer with a […] manly flavour. The first long cool swallow will tell you that
> Moose Beer is just what you've always wanted for beer enjoyment ….] (*Edible Woman* 23)

In *Survival*, Atwood, citing Graeme Gibson's writings, wrote about Canadians who were "successful by 'international' (or American) society's proclaimed standards, who are identified as hunters, soldiers, and aggressive moneymen" (98). In the advertisement in *The Edible Woman*, presumably the same class of men would deserve to be called the 'real' or 'manly' man. In other words, the American ability to dominate Canada in both postcolonial and neocolonial settings, and certain groups of Canadians following them unquestioningly, would intersect with the violation of nature. How remotely and irresponsibly these human beings can destroy non-human life and nature might be gauged from Marian's inability to eat meat when she remembered the day's newspaper:

> The young boy who had gone berserk with a rifle and killed nine people before he was cornered by the police. Shooting out of an upstairs window. […] When he chose violence it was a removed violence […] he himself watching the explosion from a distance; the explosion of flesh and blood. It was a violence of the mind, almost like magic: you thought it and it happened. (*The Edible Woman* 190)

Like Marian, the ecocritic loses her appetite, once awakened to the fact of the destruction carried on in nature in the name of colonies, postcolonies and in neocolonial times, with or without physical proximity to the 'object' of destruction.

In *Survival*, analysing the works of other authors, Atwood noted:

> The slaughter of moose and fish which occurs […] and which is performed in some cases by Canadians, is […] given an ironic framework: Canadians too can be hunters, but only by taking a stance towards Nature which is like the stance of America towards them. The only "authentic" hunters are those who must still kill to eat, the Indians and locals ….] (93)

A tendency prevails in Canadian literature to feel that the country is often perceived as a satellite of America. Nobody, of course, would say or believe it. In such a scenario, it would be impossible to understand the postcolonial as well as ecocritical gravity of Atwood's simple statement: "Canada is the place where Americans now come to hunt" (*Survival* 94). And Atwood has not forgotten for a moment the history of Canada, in which the white settlers exploited the land, trees, non-human existence and the indigenous population for creating their own place, their own kind of civilization:

> But in Canada it is the nation as a whole that joins in animal-salvation campaigns such as the protest over the slaughter of baby seals and the movement to protect the wolf. This could - mistakenly, I think - be seen as national guilt: Canada after all was founded on the fur trade, and an animal cannot painlessly be separated from its skin. From the animal point of view, Canadians are as bad as the slave trade or the Inquisition; which casts a new light on those beavers on the nickels and caribou on the quarters. But it is much more likely that Canadians themselves feel threatened and nearly-extinct as a nation ….] (*Survival* 95)

Postcolonial Ecologies states, despite Nixon that "the ecocritical interrogation of anthropocentrism offers the persistent reminder that human political and social inequities cannot be successfully and sustainably resolved without some engagement with the more-than-human world and with deep time" (25). Atwood mapped this process in her work.

The complexities of intra- and inter- country emotions about being in the position of a colony practically and having used others historically as colony, resurface in *Surfacing* (1972). The anonymous woman returns home after many years and the first few lines are an indication of the malady that came, along with larger commercial connections, from Canada's southern neighbour, the USA:

> I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire. But this is still near the city limits [….]
>
> In the first few hours of driving we moved through flattened cow-sprinkled hills and leaf trees and dead elm skeletons, then into the needle trees and the cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite and the flimsy tourist cabins, and the signs saying GATEWAY TO THE NORTH [….] (*Surfacing* 9-11]

Trees died or were dying. A disease was spreading, if not literally, then metaphorically, from the south to the north, along the route the tourists from America would take. And the living trees had another fate in reserve as a historical and integral part of Canadian economy and commercial interests:

> The first smell is the mill, sawdust, there are mounds of it in a yard with the stacked timber slabs. The pulpwood goes elsewhere to the paper mill, but the bigger logs are corralled in a boom on the river, a ring of logs chained together with the free ones nudging each other inside it; they travel to the saws in a clanking overhead chute, that hasn't been changed. (*Surfacing* 14)

Nature remained a commodity since it had been brought, in the habitable parts, under control in Canada. And, as in the earlier novel, *The Edible Woman*, the moose-image was used to bring together the multiple strands of neocolonial practices, consumerism and wilful ecological forgetfulness, in *Surfacing* too, the moose is used in an apparently loveable way which hides the sordid history of gross exploitation of nature behind this ploy to attract the American tourists to this gas-station:

> What they're after is the three stuffed moose […]: they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, *waving an American flag* […] and there is, a little girl moose in a frilly skirt and pigtailed blond wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof. (16; emphasis added)

The anonymous narrator feels embarrassed when her friends capture this moose family in the pictures they take, without asking or paying for the permission of the owner of the gas-station. The rot had reached well into Canada, this would suggest.

Lest the message of Atwood's criticism of the USA as exploiting Canada and the nature in the country in the twentieth century has not become clear, along with its warping of the Canadian mind and mores as well, in *Surfacing*, the situation is made quite explicit, when the protagonist and her friends go fishing in the lake beside which she has her home:

> […] I hear a whine, motorboat. I listen, […] it rounds a point and becomes a roar, homing in on us, big powerboat [….] American flag on the front and another at the back, two irritated-looking businessmen with […] Claude from the motel, he scowls at us, he feels we're poaching on his preserve. […]
>
> "Reel in," I say [….] There's no sense in staying here now. If they catch one they'll be here all night, if they don't get anything in fifteen minutes they'll blast off and scream around the lake […] deafening the fish. They're the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it. […]

> On the way back we hug the shore, avoiding the open lake in case the Americans take it into their heads to zoom past us as close as possible, *they sometimes do that for fun*, their wake could tip us. (76-77; emphasis added)

The local Canadians are not welcome in their own lake, or amidst nature, but the Americans are. But Atwood suggests not only that they are irresponsible towards nature, by citing how the Americans, and their Canadian guide are loud and noisy, disturbing the fish and the ecology of the place, but through the inherent violence of their attempt to sink the local people's boats, presumably to have fun, as in the remotely inflicted act of violence in *The Edible Woman*.

3

If we now pause for a moment and take stock of the ways in which Atwood's writings make vivid, different aspects of what is understood as postcolonial ecocriticism, what would be found? By following the enumeration and analysis presented by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), we have found traces literary representations of the following category in Atwood's writings so far:

> One […] understanding of ecological imperialism is that of […] Val Plumwood [….] Any *historical* analysis of practices and patterns of ecological imperialism, Plumwood insists, must return to […] philosophical basis, acknowledging those forms of instrumental reason that view nature and the animal 'other' as being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or being in permanent service to them, and thus an endlessly replenishable resource. (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 3-4)

However, Huggan and Tiffin refer to another category, which we are yet to explore in Atwood's works.

> Another form of ecological imperialism goes under the more contemporary-sounding term biocolonisation, used […] to cover the broadly geopolitical implications of current westem technological experiments and trends [….] Examples here range from biopiracy - e.g. the corporate raiding of indigenous natural-cultural property and embodied knowledge - to western-patented genetic modification […] and other recent instances of biotechnological suprematism and 'planetary management' […] in which the allegedly world-saving potential of science is seconded for self-serving western needs and political ends. (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 4)

While the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy represents Atwood's thoughts in this regard, translated into the future setting of the novels, the earlier, Booker-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000) reveals facets of her idea of postcolonial ecocriticism as well. In this novel, with its setting in the twentieth century, an outcast builds an imaginary world for his beloved, telling her a story. In this story, what happened in the imaginary past is as important as what happens in the galaxy, at other points of time:

> Earth was colonized by the Zycronites. […] They arrived here eight thousand years ago. They brought a lot of plant seeds with them, which is why we have apples and oranges, not to mention bananas [….] They also brought animals - horses and dogs and goats and so on. They were the builders of Atlantis. Then they blew themselves up through being too clever. We're descended from the stragglers. (*Blind Assassin* 19)

The novel, though, is not actually about earth as a colony and the benevolence of Zycronites. Rather, Iris and Laura Chase, in the first half of the twentieth century, are Canadians whose forefathers were into the business of making buttons. We learn from Iris:

> First there's a quote from a newspaper - a Montreal newspaper, not ours - with a date, 1899: One must not imagine the dark Satanic mills of Olde England. The factories of Port Ticonderoga are situated amid a profusion of greenery brightened with gay flowers, and are soothed by the sound of the rushing currents; they are clean and well-ventilated, and the workers cheerful and efficient. (*Blind Assassin* 63)

Atwood proved to be really economical in suggesting the entire history of British imperialism and the polluting mills and factories, where the workers were almost held captive till their death or incapacity, producing goods to be sold dear in the colonies. And at the button factory too, there was

a history of exploitation, related to the culture of consuming the bounties of nature at will in Canada, at the time of the girls' grandfather:

> The first buttons were made from wood and bone, and the fancier ones from cow horns. These last two materials could be obtained for next to nothing from the several abattoirs in the vicinity, and as for the wood, it lay all round about, clogging up the land, and people were burning it just to get rid of it. With cheap raw materials and cheap labour and an expanding market, how could he have failed to prosper? […] He thought flower beds were good for the workers' morale - zinnias and snapdragons […] as they were inexpensive and showy and lasted a long time. (*Blind Assassin* 66-68)

Even the last touch about the flowers notwithstanding, the business-intentions, the processes of exploiting nature to get cheap raw material and the profit making strategies bring Britain, the imperial power, and Canada, to the same level, teaching us a lesson about the incipient prevalence of subjects that keep postcolonial ecocritics alert. Imperial Britain and her erstwhile 'colony' Canada provide epistemological lessons in the relation between ecological exploitation and colonies within colonies.

The point of intersection of postcolonialism/neocolonialism and biocolonisation through genetic modification and biotechnological suprematism, mentioned in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, becomes clear in *Oryx and Crake* (2003). In the future, in this novel, there would be the immensely rich, scientifically superior and highly protected Company Compounds. Whatever existed outside such a place was full of commoners and were called pleeblands. We learn from *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam* that though, those belonging to the Company Compounds would consider the pleeblands as full of human beings who were vastly inferior creatures in being "the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies," there were wonderful people there too (*Oryx and Crake* 27). In other words, we are reminded of the ways in which the other classes and races of people have always been denigrated as subhuman by the imperial powers. It is not impossible to imagine each Company Compound in the place of an erstwhile imperial power centre. Only, here the Company would specialise in biocolonisation in some way or the other. For instance, at the beginning of *Oryx and Crake*, we find a description of the activities and produce of the OrganInc Farms:

> Pigoon was only a nickname: the official name was *sus multiorganifer*. […] The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host - organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year. A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys, then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs [….] That would be less wasteful, as it took a lot of food and care to grow a pigoon. A great deal of investment money had gone into OrganInc Farms. (22-23).

The readers can understand that in this form of neo- and biocolonisation, only those who could raise the money to pay for the kidney, heart and liver, would expect to receive a new lease on life. But, going beyond this, it becomes important to note how the pigoons were treated:

> The pigoon organs could be customised, using cells from individual human donors [….] It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts [….] In the OrganInc promotional materials, glossy and discreetly worded, stress was laid on the efficacy and comparative health benefits of the pigoon procedure. Also, to set the queasy at ease, it was claimed that none of the defunct pigoons ended up as bacon and sausages: no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own. (*Oryx and Crake* 23-24)

However, in more and more ecologically inhospitable situations, whether the promise made in the brochure was really kept, turned into the big suspect:

> Still, as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the mid continental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became

harder to come by, some people had their doubts. Within OrganInc Farms itself it was noticeable how often back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies turned up on the staff cafe menu. (*Oryx and Crake* 24)

Jimmy, the young boy, is the narrator in *Oryx and Crake* and we learn about the Compounds from him in the early parts of the novel:

> Jimmy's earliest complete memory was of a huge bonfire. […] The bonfire was an enormous pile of cows and sheep and pigs.Their legs stuck out stiff and straight; gasoline had been poured into them; the flames shot up and out, yellow and white and red and orange, and a smell of charred flesh filled the air. […]
>
> At the bonfire Jimmy was anxious about the animals, because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them. No, his father told him. The animals were dead. They were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their skins on.
>
> And their heads, thought Jimmy. […] he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. (15-18)

Atwood's readers would be justified in feeling shaken up. It was given out that the animals were infected with some deadly disease and had to be burnt. At the same time, one of the possible reasons behind the bonfire of animals remains extremely pertinent to the practitioners of postcolonial, or rather, if we might call it, neocolonial ecocriticism. We learn about this surmise from a conversation between Jimmy's father and another Compound man during the bonfire: "Drive up the prices," said the man. "Make a killing on their own stuff, that way" (*Oryx and Crake* 18).

Jimmy's father had joined a new Company, NooSkins. Its sinister nature was pointed out by a brilliant scientist who had given up her career, Jimmy's ethically aware mother. Jimmy's father had explained to him that at NooSkins the work done would help people with a radiant skin if they succeeded:

> There were pigeons at NooSkins, just as at OrganInc Farms, but these were smaller and were being used to develop skin-related biotechnologies. The main idea was to find of replacing the older epidermis with a fresh one, […] a genuine start-over skin that would be wrinkle-and blemish free. […] What well-to-do and once-young, once beautiful woman or man […] wouldn't sell their house, their gated retirement villa, their kids, and their soul to get a second kick at the sexual can? NooSkins for Olds, said the snappy logo. (55)

Atwood's readers understand that nobody wanted to suffer like the mythical Tithonus (relevant in the context of medicines saving and prolonging life today and yet eternal youth and beauty remaining elusive) and were willing to pay to perpetuate a younger self. Jimmy's father had no difficulty in living with and off this business. But, when he was celebrating another biotechnological success, Jimmy's mother objected on ethical and humanitarian grounds:

> "It's the neuro-regeneration project. We now have genuine human neocortex tissue growing in a pigoon. Finally, after all those duds! Think of the possibilities, for stroke victims …" […]
>
> "[…] It's wrong, the whole organisation is wrong, it's a moral cesspool and you know it."
>
> "We can give people hope. Hope isn't ripping off!"
>
> "At NooSkins prices it is. You hype your wares and take all their money and then they run out of cash, and it's no more treatments for them. They can rot as far as you and your pals are concerned. […] Don't you remember […] everything we wanted to do? Making life better for people not just people with money. […] You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's … sacrilegious." (*Oryx and Crake* 56-57)

Of course, he does not pay any heed to her words of caution. Later, Jimmy's friend, Crake, using the same tactics of making his product popular had brought in the waterless flood and managed to wipe off the majority of the humankind. But, the point we note over here is that he possibly understood, better than everybody else, that biocolonisation had degraded human beings into monstrous creatures and purer human beings, with no greed, no politics and no pretensions were necessary to make the world a viable living space for both human and nonhuman existence. That is why, Atwood possibly revealed the strife and neocolonial exploitation through the politics and policies of making medicines

and scientific products available to only those with the power to pay, leading to the intolerable situation Crake addressed so drastically, in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. But simultaneously, in the second, *The Year of the Flood*, and especially the last book of the trilogy, *Maddaddam*, she revealed an ecocentric way of living and healing, in highlighting the precepts of Adam One and the work of Ren, Zeb and Pilar, or the group called God's Gardeners and eco-warriors. The trajectory of postcolonial ecocriticism, read through the works of Margaret Atwood, reaches a positive note, albeit in the world of her speculative fiction.

4

In *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), Atwood evoked opposite images of what might happen to a Canadian, or when one explores Canada without due respect shown to Canadian nature. *Strange Things* is the collection of the four lectures she had delivered as part of the Clarendon Lecture Series in English Literature at Oxford University, in 1991. By delivering these lectures about Canadian literature, she not only proved her point made in *Survival* about the existence of a distinctive literature in Canada, but also highlighted certain ethical positions in it, that prove to be extremely relevant to postcolonial ecocritics. For instance, in the first lecture, she discussed how, in May 1845, Sir John Franklin and 135 men arrived from England to Canada to discover the North-west Passage. They perished, unable to make way through the solid mass of ice, despite carrying three years' provisions and having reinforced hulks in their ships. In other words, Atwood suggests that opposing nature represents *hubris* sometimes and the earthen wisdom of the local and native population, as in the case of the Inuits, serve such human endeavours much better than any attempt to confront nature without adequate knowledge of the terrain. We have seen the consequences of human arrogance in her later trilogy in a future setting.

In her third lecture, Atwood cited the Canadian belief in the Wendigo that killed and ate human beings, and more significantly, there was always the "fear of becoming one" (*Strange Things* 82). We learn:

> Becoming one is the real horror, for, if you go Wendigo, you may end by losing your human mind and personality and destroying your own family members, or those you love most. […] The Wendigo has been seen as the personification of winter, or hunger, or spiritual selfishness, and indeed the three are connected: winter is the time of scarcity, which gives rise to hunger, which gives rise to selfishness. (*Strange Things* 83)

In Atwood's works, we have already seen the effects of natural or human-made scarcity, the hunger and greed that follow, and the horror of cannibalistic destruction of lives, livelihoods and human and nonhuman habitats.

A tentative positive note is struck in Atwood's second lecture about the Grey Owl Syndrome. She told the story of Archie Belaney from England who had settled down in Canada, adopting the ways of the Ojibway Indians, becoming one of them, and emerging as "Grey Owl, a world-famous naturalist, writer, and lecturer, accepted and beloved by all" (*Strange Things* 43).

The inauguration of an eco-ethical consciousness, as reflected in the work of God's Gardeners and eco-warriors, as a distinct choice even in the worst, or, especially in the worst condition that the human and natural world are turning towards, because of human deeds and decisions, could suggest that potentially, there is a Grey Owl in each human being. With effort and care, we can nurture ourselves into an eco-ethically better version of ourselves, contributing to collective survival, the *leit motif* in Atwood's writings.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a dynamic process and discourse. Atwood, writing about Canada and moving to the horizons opened up in speculative fiction, has made her literary and critical work indispensable to it, encompassing the trajectory from a negative, through the ethically undecided, to a positive ecological consciousness in the context of our shared post- and neocolonial world.

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