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Woman as a Subaltern in Canadian Literature

ABSTRACT: The article takes as its subject the possibility of perceiving women as constituting a distinct subgroup of the subaltern. Following a theoretical introduction to this concept, the article focuses on the practical application of the notion in Canadian literature, discussing the two major female-authored Canadian novels published in the 1970s, that is Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. Although Atwood's and Laurence's novels highlight the influences of the opposite colonial centres, the postcolonial situations and reflections of the main female characters appear quite similar. Indeed, both Atwood's narrator and Laurence's Morag Gunn seem to be depicted as doubly colonised: as women, and as Canadians. However, there exists a possibility of reading the protagonists as occasionally acting from a position of superiority towards those subaltern to them, namely the Native population.

KEY WORDS: Canadian literature, feminism, postcolonialism, subalternity.

Even as the exact dimension of Canadian postcolonial status remains the subject of many controversies in the critical discourse (e.g. BENNETT, D., 2007), postcolonial theory seems to have become widely applied to the works of the Canadian literature. Moreover, it should be noted that postcolonial reading might pertain to works created by and treating about a large variety of social groups — from the descendants of the First Nations or the Canadians of Scots and Irish origin, to more recent immigrants, as well as, more generally, women.

The present article aims to demonstrate the possibility of applying the postcolonial notion of subalternity to the interpretation of these works of Canadian literature that describe women as oppressed members of patriarchal society. The article briefly discusses the concept of subalternity before moving on to analyse two important Canadian novels created by women writers in the 1970s, namely Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. Finally, having made a case for the novels presenting the female protagonists as doubly subaltern — as women and as colonised Canadians — the article attempts to show that both characters can be nonetheless seen also as members of dominat-

ing group, partaking in acts of appropriation towards those subaltern to them, that is the Native¹ people of Canada.

It was Antonio Gramsci who first utilised the military term subaltern, traditionally used to refer to “a junior ranking officer in the British army” (MORTON, S., 2003: 48), in order to describe “those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes” (ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., TIFFIN, H., 2007: 198). While Gramsci referred in his writing primarily to Southern Italian peasants, the expression “subaltern” was later popularised in the discourse of postcolonial studies by the group of historians concerned with South Asia, who, calling their work “the Subaltern Studies,” focused their attention on groups different from the elites that were most commonly analysed by other historians (ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., TIFFIN, H., 2007: 199). Yet, possibly the most widely known theoretical work focusing on the term is Gayatri Spivak’s 1985 essay entitled “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (SPIVAK, G., 2003: 24—28). In this, as well as in her other works of the time, Spivak contests the way the Subaltern Studies use the expression “subaltern,” pointing to the fact that the groups thus referred to seem to have their voices appropriated by the critics and historians, rather than to be given an opportunity to speak for themselves (SPIVAK, G., 2003: 24—28; MORTON, S., 2003: 56—58).

The popularity of the expression in the field of postcolonial studies might owe to the fact that “the meaning of the term subaltern is broad and encompasses a range of different social locations” (MORTON, S., 2003: 49). Remarkably, it seems especially useful when describing tensions pertaining to power relations between certain groups as based on their unequal statuses in society, which are, however, connected with perceived, rather than actual, discrepancies in their value as people (e.g. men as superior to women). Indeed, the term can be applied to a variety of groups that may be viewed as oppressed or marginalised, and thus “of inferior rank” (ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., TIFFIN, H., 2007: 198) in terms of, among others, colonial status, nationality, gender, ethnicity, class, or a combination thereof. For example, women can be viewed as inferior within patriarchal society, thus literally corresponding to the definition of the subaltern. Moreover, they may frequently be seen as fulfilling the further requirement of the subaltern through offering “resistance [...] to elite domination” (ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., TIFFIN, H., 2007: 200).

Although the Canadian literature created in the decades immediately following the Second World War might not yet be explicitly referred to as postcolonial (STAINES, D., 1995: 21, 24), it ought to be noted that it frequently focused on the issues of national consciousness, including the attempts at defining Canada and its citizens against the old and the new colonial centres as

¹ It should be noted that throughout the text, the word “Native” is spelled with a capital letter when in reference to the indigenous peoples of Canada.

subjects in their own right. At the same time, a number of works of literature could be seen as influenced by the developing second-wave feminism. Thus, in the novels of the late 1960s and 1970s the national and the feminist themes can often be detected side by side (GAULT, C., 2008). Moreover, in certain cases the convergence of these concerns seems to result in the possibility of interpreting the protagonist as a female embodiment of the colonised Canada (e.g. FRASER, W., 1991), which might point to Canadianness being viewed as a form of subalternity. While this notion may appear somewhat puzzling given an arguably common association of Canada with a high standard of living, it should be noted that the link between Canadianness and subalternity stems primarily from the international position of Canada as a country located between the (post)colonial influences of the United Kingdom and the neo-colonial domination of the United States.²

Indeed, patriarchal authority seems to be unambiguously linked to colonial power in two female-authored novels of the early 1970s which are perceived as classics of Canadian literature (WOODCOCK, G., 1978; WOODCOCK, G., 1990), namely Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974). Interestingly, while the books were written by the authors at different stages of their literary careers (*Surfacing* was only the second novel for Atwood, thus far known primarily as a poet; Laurence did not publish any fiction after *The Diviners*), the novels can be seen as rather similar ideologically. For instance, it can be argued that in both cases, the female protagonists of the texts can be viewed as subaltern both as women and as colonised Canadians.

As Pilar Somacarrera points out, in Atwood's *Surfacing* the "international and sexual politics are interconnected" (SOMACARRERA, P., 2006: 47); indeed, it would not be an overstatement to claim that in Atwood's *Surfacing* the motifs of imperial and gender oppression seem to merge. Significantly, in the narrator's perception of the world, she initially sees the sexes and the nations (Canadian and American) as analogously "absolute[ly] separat[ed]" (FIAMENGO, J., 1999) in terms of victimhood and oppression. This division may be noticed already in the descriptions of the narrator's childhood, in which her rather peaceful childhood interests, evidenced by her drawing idyllic pictures of rabbits and summer days, are juxtaposed with her brother's torturing of animals (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 131). Moreover, it appears that in the narrator's adult life, "women are innocent and men are rapists and exploiters in sexual relationships" (RIGNEY, B., 1987: 48). Indeed, in the narrator's conviction, men seem to take continuous advantage of women, with the main villain of her own life being perhaps her married lover, who was the father of her unborn child. The narrator recalls the man dictating

² Significantly, the herein mentioned (post/neo)colonial situation of Canada constitutes but one facet of the concept of subalternity as related to Canada; however, given the space constraints of the present article other examples of Canadian subalternity, such as of the status of Quebec with regard to Anglophone Canada, cannot be discussed with due attention.

the rules of their affair, for instance insisting on “[their] relationship [...] to be kept separate from life” due to his having a family (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 149). On her becoming pregnant, the man forced the unwilling narrator to have an abortion (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 144). What is more, in the narrator’s recollections, her lover viewed his deed as something charitable and perhaps even commendable: “[...] he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was as good as new; others, he said, wouldn’t have bothered” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 145). As this episode shows, not only does the narrator’s lover take the power to make decisions about the relationship away from her, but also chooses how she should feel about his actions, therefore relegating her to the powerless position of subalternity.

Interestingly, it is in the seemingly much more benign relationship between the narrator and Joe that a connection might be drawn between potential perceiving a subaltern woman as a metaphor for a colonised state. Indeed, as Somacarrera points out, the female body seems to be represented here in terms of invaded country (SOMACARRERA, P., 2006: 48). In the narrator’s internal monologue after Joe’s marriage proposal, she can be seen to reflect on her relations with men in terms of war; the only aim of consenting to marriage or a sexual relationship appears to be gaining a victory for oneself. The imagery in which the narrator views such a success is that of a military triumph, possibly related to a conquest of a new land: “[...] some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 87). What is more, her reasoning behind her supposed inability to enter into a marriage is that she is “[a] small neutral country,” unsuited for matrimony (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 87). Arguably, the narrator might be viewed as reluctant to lose her declared neutrality and return to the status of a subaltern, familiar to her from her previous affair.

However, as Somacarrera further proposes, not only is “heterosexual relationship [envisioned] as warfare,” but also “sexual intercourse [becomes depicted] as a painful experience” (SOMACARRERA, P., 2006: 49), as a result of which women feel oppressed and humiliated. In the narrator’s relationship with Joe, sex constitutes a means of control, through which she believes Joe wants to bind the two of them together: “[...] he thinks he has won, act of his flesh a rope noosed around [her] neck, he will lead [her] back to the city and tie [her] to fences, doorknobs” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 163). David and Anna’s intercourse, overheard by the narrator, is described in even more brutal terms, with Anna imagined as a hunted animal “at the moment the trap closes” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 82).

This depiction remains consistent with the narrator’s perception of David and Anna’s marriage. At a later point in the novel, the narrator evaluates this relationship in the following words:

[Anna] was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if

she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war.

ATWOOD, M., 1994: 153—154

It can be inferred that the narrator views David and Anna as a “criminal” and his “victim” (RIGNEY, B., 1987: 48). One of the examples of David’s unfair treatment of his wife is the “little set of rules” which he has implemented in their marriage (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 122). As Anna tells the narrator, “if [she] break[s] one of them [she] get[s] punished”; however, since “he keeps changing them [...], [she is] never sure if she is not acting against another rule” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 122). According to one of David’s “rules,” Anna needs to always wear her make-up, so as “to look like a young chick all the time” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 122). On several occasions throughout the novel (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 43—44, 133, 163), Anna can be seen applying or touching up her make-up; the narrator realises that she has never seen her friend without it and that “[Anna’s] artificial face is the natural one” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 43). This precipitates the narrator’s reflections on the superficial image of a modern woman, which might be seen to confirm the views of women’s subjugated position within the novel:

[...] pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, [...] a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel [...], captive princess in someone’s head. She is locked in, she isn’t allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out.

ATWOOD, M., 1994: 165

In the narrator’s reading, this “imitation of a woman” exists solely to sexually please a man, while always remaining under his control (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 165). Moreover, the procreative functions of modern women also become subject to restrictions, and thus an element of the power relations: as the narrator comments, the “miracle” of conception “frightens all of [men]” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 147). In order to prevent this and make “sex without risk” possible, the contraceptive pill was invented; however, a conversation between the narrator and Anna reveals that taking the pill resulted in dangerous side effects for both women’s health (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 79).

Just as relationships are presented as acts of war or of colonial conquest, and a woman who is the object of this conquest defines herself as a “neutral country,” men become linked to colonial powers. Within the framework of the novel, Canada is shown as threatened by the economic and cultural influence of the United States, and therefore the adjective “American” can be increasingly seen as used to denote evil and inhumanity in people. As has already been stated, the instances of imperial and gender domination seem to merge; thus, not by chance is David the first person in the group whom the narrator begins to perceive as

Americanized³: “[...] he was an imposter, a pastiche [...]. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 152). Wayne Fraser suggests that David, as well as the narrator’s former lover, “are ‘American’ because they are male,” and are viewed by the narrator “as predators, just as bent on destroying women as the Americans are determined to exploit Canada” (FRASER, W., 1991: 129—130). While the definition of “American” as equating “male” may be somewhat simplistic, and might be perhaps expanded by such traits of character as indifference, cruelty, or following the rules of superficial society (after all, Anna too becomes an “American” (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 169)), Fraser’s conclusion seems to be right. Indeed, among other critics, Rigney also points out that in *Surfacing*, the oppression of women at male hands seems to be paralleled by the exploitation of Canada by the Americans (RIGNEY, B., 1987: 47—48). Thus the narrator, who perceives herself as subaltern towards men, and a victim of male violence, becomes linked to Canada — subaltern to American neo-colonial proceedings. Although the narrator makes an attempt to escape from the oppressive scheme of her society by withdrawing herself from the human world (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 166—169), at the end of the novel she seems to realise that such a complete departure is impossible (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 191).

In contrast to Atwood’s primary focus in *Surfacing*, Margaret Laurence does not appear concerned with the subject of the United States when exploring her protagonist’s, Morag Gunn’s, Canadian identity. Rather, the theme of Canadian subalternity in *The Diviners* arises mostly in connection with the United Kingdom, while the sexual relationship that becomes a metaphor for Canada’s colonial status is Morag’s marriage to Dr. Brooke Skelton. As numerous critics have suggested, the part of the novel devoted to Morag and Brooke’s marriage is a record of “the process of Morag’s colonization” (FRASER, W., 1991: 139), and also “perhaps the most graphic illustration of the British/Canadian, colonizer/colonized paradigm in the novel” (BEELER, K., 1998: 31). Importantly, Morag seems to be positioned as subaltern to Brooke, both because she is a woman, and thus inferior in patriarchal society, and because she lacks appropriate education and culture.

Although Brooke Skelton was born in India, where his father ran a Church of England school (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 157), he is primarily identified as English. Indeed, the information that “[Brooke] is English” appears in the very second sentence of his description (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 153). Thus, despite the fact that owing to having spent his childhood in India, Brooke is “himself a colonial” (FRASER, W., 1991: 139), he seems to be categorised as a coloniser, displaying

³ It should be noted that while at the end of the novel Joe becomes absolved of American-ness (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 192), he is not without fault when it comes to treatment of women. Although there are fewer examples of sexist behaviour on his part than on David’s, they can be rather easily found in the text (e.g. 81, 136).

“imperialistic tendencies” (BEELER, K., 1998: 32) in both his private life and political opinions. For example, he expresses certain nostalgia for the British India, remaining convinced that sovereignty will cause the country more harm than a continued British rule would have (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 176—177). As Dorota Filipczak suggests, this attitude prefigures Brooke’s approach to Morag, whose behaviour Brooke only seems to accept when it adheres to the standards that he sets for her (FILIPCZAK, D., 2007: 335). Thus, Brooke may be seen to transform his expectations of colonial domination into patriarchal superiority over Morag, situating himself as the dominant side in their relationship.

At the age of six, Brooke left India to attend a school in England (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 175). Presumably, it was there that he received the degree which is part of what makes him, as Margaret Atwood somewhat ironically points out, a “cultivated English professor” (ATWOOD, M., 1993: 388); it also enables him to teach English literature in Canada. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Morag attends Brooke’s “Seventeenth-Century Poetry course and the Milton course” at the university (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 153). Being Morag’s teacher, Brooke is positioned as the bringer of culture in this relationship — and not by chance is this culture English. Indeed, it is also a part of what attracts Morag to Brooke, as her interest in him stems to a certain extent from a need to “identify with [British] literary heritage” (HARRISON, D., 1997: 143) that Brooke might be seen to represent. This attempt ultimately results in failure on Morag’s part; as Harrison comments, “in her marriage she achieves only a colonial relation to that inherited culture” (HARRISON, D., 1997: 143). Furthermore, that very relation prevents Morag from using her own voice to speak about her experience. Significantly, Brooke’s England-based education makes him at the outset superior to Morag, who only attended schools in provincial Manawaka, and then chose to study at a university in Winnipeg. However, while Brooke’s schooling may indeed be viewed as the one of better quality, he perceives his opinions as more valid than Morag’s insights regardless of their actual value, and, consequently, silences her (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 154—155). This pattern carries on from Morag’s participation in Brooke’s university courses well into the marriage of the Skeltons, with Brooke continuing to make intellectual choices for his wife. Brooke and Morag can be seen to discuss the English and American novels that she is reading, and, moreover, Brooke attempts to have critical input into Morag’s writing (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 182). As Atwood puts it, he is “pointing out [...] that he has a more advanced degree in literature than she has and therefore ought to know better” (ATWOOD, M., 1993: 388). Thus, Brooke, coming from a position of authority, tries to exert influence over Morag’s approach to literature and culture. This “colonisation” of Morag’s taste lasts, however, only for a time; on having finished her first novel, Morag asserts her right to express her own opinions, and thus, by establishing her own voice, she can be seen to break out of her status of subalternity.

While Brooke's wishing to position himself as Morag's teacher might constitute one expression of his colonising impulses, his "patronizing attitude" towards her (FRASER, W., 1991: 140) appears to be another example of this desire to colonise Morag. From the beginning of their relationship, Brooke expresses his notion of ownership over Morag through addressing her as either "his" or "[his] woman" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 182). Furthermore, he frequently infantilises Morag, calling her variations of the expression "child" or "little one," on more than one occasion (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 158, 162). Moreover, he tends to remind Morag how "very young" and inexperienced she is, especially when compared to him (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 160, 181). Although Brooke claims that these are only "expression[s] of affection" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 183) or "affectionate diminutive[s]" (210), they might be also seen as tools of humiliation (FRASER, W., 1999: 140); indubitably they constitute a means by which Brooke asserts his dominance over Morag. It should also be noted that Brooke's language bears a resemblance to that of colonial discourse, in which the figure of the Native/subaltern is constructed as infantile, foolish and in need of a guidance. Thus, in her relationship to Brooke, Morag appears to be relegated to the position of the subaltern, similar to this of "a child[,] feeling dependence, insecurity and helplessness" (FILIPCZAK, D., 2007: 322). Importantly however, Morag finds Brooke's mode of addressing her objectionable since the very beginning of their relationship. At first, she insists that she is "far from a child" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 158); another time, she protests by reminding Brooke that she is "not [his] child", but "[his] wife" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 183), but after his assertions of love and care she allows herself to be pacified. Yet, several years into the marriage, Brooke's calling Morag "little one" serves to remind her of her subaltern position towards him, and results in an angry outburst (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 210). It is significant that Morag's reaction is described as relying on her stepfather Christie's way of speaking (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 210); this stands in contrast to her behaviour at the beginning of their acquaintance, when, as Laurie Lindberg shows, Morag would attempt to "abando[n] all vestiges of the working-class language of Manawaka" (LINDBERG, L., 1996: 193) for the vocabulary of more respectable classes used by Brooke.

These aspects of Morag's relationship with Brooke might be seen as based primarily on patriarchal, rather than colonial, principles. However, as Linda Hutcheon notes, although British colonisation of Canada was not that much connected to "civilizing" the country, "[it] still defined itself in terms of values that can today be seen as British, white, middle-class, heterosexual and male" (HUTCHEON, L., 1991: 76). With his actions towards Morag motivated by these very principles, Brooke operates from a decidedly colonial perspective.

Throughout their relationship Brooke remains uninterested in learning about Morag's past and her possible experiences before she met him, claiming that he likes "[her] mysterious nonexistent past" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 158) and her

“genuine innocence” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 159). Coming from the position of the coloniser, Brooke creates his own, “official,” version of the history of the subaltern — Morag, not permitting her to speak of her own life. The appreciation of her innocence also seems to stem from the colonial mentality: it may be compared to colonisers’ fascination with the ingenuousness of a newly colonised land. Indeed, according to Neil ten Kortenaar, “Brooke loves Morag’s lack of a past — she is virgin territory — and Morag’s acceptance [...] that she has nothing to put alongside his cultural tradition” (KORTENAAR, N., 1996: 14). Thus, Morag seems to resemble an “empty New World” (14), into which the coloniser brings his civilisation and culture for the benefit of the innocent subaltern.

Furthermore, as Clara Thomas points out, Brooke “[holds] [Morag] back and diminishe[s] her” (THOMAS, C., 1994: 247) denying her such possible options of self-realisation as education, job or motherhood, and thus reaffirming her status as subaltern in their relationship. Having discouraged Morag from pursuing further education even before they got married (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 164), Brooke now speaks against her idea of getting a job (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 182). He manages to convince her that she would not “really care for [...] [a] routine job” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 182), even though, arguably, Morag’s current housework duties and occupations are as much routine as a proposed job in a bookshop might be. Moreover, Brooke repeatedly refuses Morag’s suggestion that they should have children. Thomas comments that the level at which Brooke would like Morag to stay is “the point at which he first found her” (THOMAS, C., 1994: 272). This kind of approach again seems to reflect an imperial framework of wishing to see the subaltern undergoing only such kinds of transformation as allowed by the coloniser.

However, from this point in her marriage on, Morag begins the process of her liberation from Brooke’s colonising attempts. Arguably, Laurence provides her protagonist with a more decisive solution than the one proposed by Atwood in *Surfacing*; upon becoming tired of her position of subalternity, Morag can be seen to rather successfully rebel against Brooke.

Writing her first novel turns out to fulfil Morag’s creative needs as much as constitute a major act of defiance against Brooke. Engrossed in composing the book, Morag “sometimes [...] forgets that time, outside, is passing,” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 187) and ignores Brooke’s expectations that she should take perfect care of their household. Having finally shown Brooke the book, Morag (initially silently) disagrees with his critical opinion about it (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 202), sends the novel to a publisher without her husband’s knowledge, and then rejects Brooke’s offer of helping her with the editing (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 213). Interestingly, Morag titles her novel *Spear of Innocence*, believing her protagonist’s innocence to be “harmful.” Therefore, Morag’s book can be seen as a critique of Brooke’s aforementioned admiration of Morag’s fictional innocence. It should be moreover emphasised that *Spear of Innocence* is “published under

the name of Morag Gunn,” rather than Morag Skelton (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 214). Lindberg assesses this action as “another unplanned but significant rejection of [Brooke’s] authority” (LINDBERG, L., 1996: 194). At this point in the narrative, Morag’s marriage is falling apart; Morag “knows now that she does not want to stay with Brooke” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 215), although she does not seem capable of ending their colonial relationship by herself.

Significantly, it is Brooke’s response to Morag’s chance meeting with Jules Tonnerre, her Métis lover from Manawaka, that becomes a catalyst for the divorce. Morag impulsively invites the old friend home; however, Brooke is indignant to find an “Indian” drinking “[his] scotch” with his wife (220). At this moment “Morag ‘walks out’ and begins her rebellion against Brooke’s imperial standards” (FRASER, W., 1991: 142), starting with rejecting his racist behaviour directed at her friend. Having spent a night with Jules, she decides to leave Brooke for good (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 226); Brooke reacts with sadness, anger, and surprise at what he reads as her desire to hurt him (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 227—228).

Despite Morag’s decision to move west, to Vancouver, at times she might be seen to waver in her determination to divorce Brooke; this may be read as a parallel to the British-Canadian connection that lasted long after the passing of the documents legally separating Canada from the United Kingdom, such as the 1867 British North America Act, and even the 1931 Statute of Westminster. As Donna Bennett comments, “officially Canada ceased to be a British colony in 1867, but its complete independence has only been achieved since that time and by increments” (BENNETT, D., 2007: 252). Paradoxically, Morag’s situation is made easier by her awareness that, being pregnant with Jules’ child, she has already separated herself from Brooke and his racist views (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 243). Eventually, “Morag’s divorce comes through in [...] record time” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 252), being “certainly more decisive than the fictional and national resolutions which had gone before” (FRASER, W., 1991: 141). Importantly, having left Brooke, Morag is able to perceive their voices as being “a million miles apart” (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 231); it has also become possible for her to speak in her own voice in her fiction. Therefore, through her divorce Morag seems to have broken out of the bonds of subalternity, gaining the possibility to decide her fate, and describe her experiences by the means of her choosing, uninfluenced by the dominating view of another.

As the discussion above shows, Atwood’s and Laurence’s novels contain evidence enabling to interpret their female protagonists as subaltern both in patriarchal and in colonial relationships. However, it ought to be noted that neither of these women can be seen as universally subaltern. Indeed, one can argue that the issue of the protagonist taking on the role of the coloniser, and partaking in the acts of appropriation towards those inferior to her, namely Native Canadians, can be detected in both texts, albeit on different levels. In *Surfacing*,

the narrator's spiritual experience that serves to return her to nature may be viewed as drawing on Native beliefs; it appears, however, to be assessed rather positively within the narrative, and becomes contested only in critical analyses of the novel. Conversely, certain aspects of Morag's behaviour towards her Métis lover Jules might be seen to come under criticism as revealing her superiority in the very text of *The Diviners*, although Laurence does not seem to comment upon all issues that construct Jules as subaltern to Morag.

Although Atwood does not make an explicit reference to any specific system of Native beliefs, the narrator's spiritual experience in the third part of *Surfacing* has been frequently viewed as stemming from indigenous mysticism (e.g. GRACE, S., 1980). According to Sherrill Grace, the narrator's experience is based "upon Ojibway concepts of homology and transformation" (GRACE, S., 1980: 106). Certainly the features of a Native spirit quest as enumerated by Woodcock (e.g. loneliness, ingesting little food, meeting a guardian spirit, the scenery (WOODCOCK, G., 1990: 105)) seem to have their parallels in what happens to the narrator. It appears that only the immediate outcome of her experience differs from that expected of a spirit quest, in that she earns neither "a dance or a song" nor a name (WOODCOCK, G., 1990: 105). Rather, the narrator might be seen to reconcile with her past, symbolized by the appearances of her parents (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 182, 187—188), and with nature. Yet, at the end of the novel she declares her readiness to return to the world of man (ATWOOD, M., 1994: 191—192), which seems to parallel the conclusion of a Native spirit quest.

Still, while the rite of passage depicted in *Surfacing* might not follow the exact route of any specific Native spiritual experience, its origins in indigenous beliefs do not seem to come under dispute. Rather, the issue here appears to lie in the fact that while the narrator's experience re-affirms her connection to nature and, tentatively, a primal, Native, uncolonised Canada, it draws on the notions of a culture that is not her own, and, indeed, which could perceive her as an impostor or a coloniser. As Janice Fiamengo suggests, in this episode "Atwood's narrator re-enacts one of the classic gestures of colonial appropriation in order to escape her own identity, claiming the purity and authenticity of a Native subjectivity" (FIAMENGO, J., 1999). Fiamengo's further scrutiny of the text of *Surfacing* yields a conclusion that the narrator's experience might have been a "self-consciously rhetorical gesture of resistance rather than an absolute claim to identity," and thus a passing phase facilitating her eventual reconciling with her "membership in a white-supremacist society" (1999). Still, the episode serves as a further proof for Fiamengo's claim that the narrator cannot assert her innocence from the American (neo-)colonial practices, as she can be perceived as guilty of behaviour that relegates others to the subaltern position on only seemingly her own, Canadian ground.

In *The Diviners*, Morag is figured as coloniser in relation to her lover Jules Tonnerre, a Métis, who might at times be seen as subaltern to her. While this

issue may be visible in Morag's attitude towards conceiving her child with Jules, it seems to be explicitly addressed within the text in Jules' criticism of Morag's privilege.

Morag's approach to the issue of conceiving a child with Jules may be viewed as somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Jules' not denying Morag's wish to have a baby, as well as his surprise at the idea that she would need his permission to get pregnant (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 228—229) stands in stark contrast to the attitude displayed by Brooke, and thus appears commendable. However, Morag's own motivations in becoming a mother may be read as somewhat selfish. Indeed, while Pique's accusing Morag that she "had [her] [...] for [her] own satisfaction" has its roots primarily in teenage acting out (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 193), she may be right in the assessment of her mother. When Jules first comes to see his daughter, Morag in a rather emotional manner says that "it was [her] idea to have [Pique] born, [hers] only" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 277). In reply, Jules assures her that Pique is "[hers], all right," yet adds that "she's [his], too" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 277), which Morag accepts after a moment of consideration. It seems quite clear that in her desire to have a child, Morag becomes insensitive to the repercussions that her giving birth might mean for Jules as the potential father, or for the child as such. For instance, it should be noted that Morag decides to conceive her daughter with the very first man she has intercourse with after her leaving Brooke. What is more, as Morag herself reflects, the choice of Jules might have been subconscious, as the child born out of the union with him would be visibly not Brooke's (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 243). Morag's deciding to make Métis Jules the father of her child might be seen as an act of colonisation on her part. Paradoxically, her declaration of not needing monetary support from Jules (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 229) may also be seen as somewhat problematic, because while it aims to free Jules of responsibility, it results in relegating him to the bodily function of providing genetic material required for the conception. Thus, Morag downgrades her lover to a body that she can use, inadvertently inscribing herself into the imperial discourse that does not appear concerned with the Native's intellect or personal convictions. What is more, while naming their child after Jules' sister Piquette (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 251) may be read as a acknowledgement of Jules' connection to Pique on Morag's part, it should be noted that this occurs without Morag's asking Jules' opinion. Thus, this choice of a name can be interpreted as Morag's usurping of identity that does not belong to her, and, further, as Morag's using the language of the subaltern — Jules — and attempting to speak for him.

While in the case of the circumstances of Pique's conception Morag's identification as the superior in the relationship remains in the sphere of interpretation, Jules himself also at times sees Morag as one of "the dispossessors of his people" (THOMAS, C., 1976: 160), and as a member of the dominating group in society. This attitude is probably best exemplified by his reaction to Morag's

telling him of his sister's death, when Jules speaks of white people in anger, exclaiming "[b]y Jesus, I hate you [...] I hate all of you. Every goddamn one" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 225).

As evidenced by that occurrence, despite the fact that the connection between the two of them appears rather strong, Jules perceives Morag as belonging to the privileged group in the society in comparison to his subalternity. It should be noted that while initially both of them belong to the outsiders of Manawaka, Morag's attitude towards her societal position appears to stand in contrast to that of Jules. Indeed, Jules seems quite right in noting Morag's desire to escape the poverty and "marry a rich professor" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 133). Importantly, these opportunities are indeed available to Morag; due to her white ethnicity, that might be seen as transparent within the framework of the novel, she is able to deny her past, and, by marrying Brooke, advance in society. However, although Jules sees her behaviour as "bourgeois" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 192), it ought to be stated that Morag's access to the benefits of her privilege is at times depicted as somewhat unwitting. She does not boast of her acquired wealth, and only after hearing the story of Jules' struggling to earn money by singing does she begin to wonder "how scornful he must feel about [her] apartment" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 218). Yet, Jules does not want to sing his songs to her; it seems that he believes there exists a division between them that would not allow Morag to "hear them, really" (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 229). Moreover, he does not want Morag's help when he arrives in Vancouver to take care of his sister. Emphasising Morag's superiority through addressing her as "lady", Jules firmly declines her offer of aid (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 278); Morag reflects that "[he] never let[s] [her] forget" about the racial split between them and the inequality of their positions (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 278).

It is to their daughter Pique that Jules eventually sings his songs (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 281—284, 347—351). Morag's being able to listen to Jules' compositions might serve as an example of an important aspect of their relationship, because, as Clara Thomas posits, through his tales and songs Jules "ha[s] made [Morag] aware of an entire other language, that of the Métis, one with its own history and its own mythology" (THOMAS, C., 1994: 38). However, although this assertion appears to be correct, it might be argued that Morag does not truly comprehend the extent of the prejudice against the Métis until she learns of the problems that her own Métis daughter has at school (LAURENCE, M., 1993: 343—344). Thus, while Morag's relationship with Jules can be seen as revealing, regarding certain aspects of the situation of the subaltern, she seems to remain on the outside, as the member of the dominating class.

As the analytical part of this article has demonstrated, female subalternity can be detected in both Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. Moreover, not only might the female protagonists be simultaneously seen as subaltern as the colonised Canadians, but the metaphorical schemes

of both novels seem to draw a connection between patriarchal and colonial oppression. Importantly, although the motif of the protagonist taking on a dominating role towards the Native people can be found in both books, it seems to be dealt with in a different manner by the authors. Indeed, although the narrator's spiritual experience resembles a Native spirit quest, the actual figure of a Native appears absent from the text of Atwood's *Surfacing*. Conversely, Laurence criticises certain aspects of Morag's behaviour towards the Métis Jules Tonnerre in *The Diviners*, and, moreover, she can be seen to draw attention to the concrete problems of the Métis present in the novel. Thus, the issue of subalternity in Canadian literature might be viewed as complex and even somewhat ambiguous; arguably, the interpretative focus on one form of subalternity in the given protagonist's characterisation might result in overlooking the privilege they might otherwise be able to access.

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