



SABITA

3107-376X (Online)



Journal Homepage: www.sabitajournal.com

Article

Diasporic Female Subjectivity and Dissent in Margaret Atwood's Neo-Victorian Novel *Alias Grace*

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	ABSTRACT
Keywords: <i>Canada, Diaspora, Female, Neo-Victorianism, Victorian.</i> 	This article will critically discuss the issues of diaspora, migration and subversive female individuality in Margaret Atwood's neo-Victorian novel <i>Alias Grace</i> (1996). The first part will briefly consider the emerging trends of retro-Victorian, post-Victorian and neo-Victorian fictional responses by contemporary authors to revive and reinvent the Victorian world order. It will then consider how Atwood as a Canadian British writer opposes the grand metanarrative of Victorian imperialism through her subtle critique of British colonization and patriarchy in this novel which deals specifically with nineteenth century Canada. As a neo-Victorian novel, it offers a subversive critique of white Victorian mainstream neo-Victorian fictional texts that revive the British Victorian past with an unambiguous sense of nostalgia, antiquarianism and celebration. Atwood in this novel exposes the precarious and problematic lives of diasporic British women in the Victorian imperial context and exposes the dark underbelly of British racism, sexism and imperialism and renders the Victorian world order as self-contradictory, unjust and essentially problematic. Overall, this article will critically engage with marginalized female criminals and their ambivalent diasporic subjectivity in the historical context of nineteenth century Britain and Canada.

This article will concentrate on the neo-Victorian representation of nineteenth-century voices of women's suppression and resistance as well as their diasporic consciousness in Margaret Atwood's historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996). By discussing the problems of migration, exile and diaspora from a long historical perspective Atwood in this novel revisits and revises some of the basic concerns of the originary moments of settlement in Canada. This novel set in the nineteenth-century past grapples with the problematic emergence of migrant subjectivities in the context of a hybrid national order that paradoxically incorporated as well as excluded foreign immigrants. Atwood's contemporary text is a virtual re-invention of the nineteenth-century British diasporic consciousness within Canada and is broadly indicative of the ways in which similar concerns over transmigration and cultural heterogeneity dominate the present-century national configurations. But before I go into the discussion of how Atwood establishes the problems of the diasporic consciousness through her principal characters, I will very briefly touch upon Atwood's deployment of the revisionary textual strategies of contemporary neo-Victorianism which enables her to offer an imaginary history of immigration, dislocation and identity crisis and female empowerment. In this respect, Linda Hutcheon has defined cultural nostalgia for the historical past as an idealizing impulse that distorts the historical actuality and complexity of the past (1988:25-28). Nostalgia elicits dissatisfaction with the anarchic present and a sentimental yearning for an imaginary past. For Hutcheon, a balanced attitude would be to combine nostalgia with irony and allow a free interplay of reflective thought both about the past and present (1989: 77-79). This balancing act, she suggests, attempts to re-configure the dichotomous claims of antiquarianism and presentism.

Dana Shiller's article 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel' (1997) is one of the earliest critical contributions in this area. She virtually coins the term 'neo-Victorian' as a 'capacious umbrella [which] includes texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and "new" Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions.' (1997: 539). Her term is most comprehensive because it can be applied to describe all kinds of contemporary fiction related to the nineteenth century. In comparison, Sally Shuttleworth's term, 'retro-Victorian' used in her article 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel' (1997) mainly applies to those texts written by white British authors, which relate more nostalgically and less critically with the Victorians (1997: 255). A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) is an apt example of retro-Victorian fiction. In contrast, the novels about the Victorians by anglophone writers like Jean Rhys, Peter Carey, Caryl Phillips and many others are more critical and less obsequiously retrospective. Since my thesis discusses novels by both white and non-white writers, I prefer the more generalized term, 'neo-Victorian'.

Coming back to Shiller's article, we find that it scores in its discussion of Jameson and especially, in her countering of the Jamesonian claims of 'false textualized history'. She asserts the 'redemptive' value of historical fiction, which retrieves the past in the light of present

concerns, but does not promote a presentist de-evaluation of the past by ignoring its autonomy and enigmatic intractability. (see Kar Chaudhuri 2008: 14-15). She also shares the general explanation in postmodern historiography that the confusing ambiguity of the past is not a hindrance to its appeal, but generates continuous 'desire to know and comprehend it'. Our ideological re-appropriation of the past does not make the past less authentic and consumable because then it seems to pervade us with a greater amount of immediacy and urgency. Shiller has a very impressive opinion about neo-Victorian texts like A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) for they largely preserve the 'retro-feel' without pandering to populist Victoriana. But Shiller never bothers to wonder why novels set in the 1980s and 1990s Britain look back to the Victorian age and why they find the Victorian era specifically 'redemptive'. These questions are more urgently broached in Sally Shuttleworth's essay 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', which is content to explore just a minor part of the entire gamut of neo-Victorian novels in the British multicultural canon. Yet, this essay raises two vital points completely ignored by Shiller's article. Shuttleworth recognizes Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as the precursor of a post-colonial variety of novels on the Victorians, and deciphers a deep strain of post-imperial nostalgia as the motivating cause behind the efflorescence of retro-Victorian fiction in 1980s and 1990s Britain (1997: 259). The desire to remedy current socio-cultural and philosophical problems is more concretely explained, at least, in terms of science and literature, whereas this essay like the previous one is largely oblivious of the ironical criticism of the Victorians made by these seemingly 'nostalgic' texts.

Neo-Victorianism, as Christian Gutleben proposes, is at once "paradoxically nostalgic, critical and cynical about the Victorian tradition" (2001: 218), and as an example of postmodern or "contemporary syncretism is an aesthetics of maximum plurality, exploiting, combining and revising all the aesthetic, generic or modal practices of the past..." (2001: 221). Thus, while Gutleben has analyzed the ironical (dis)continuity of the Victorian past in the contemporary "syncretic" retro-Victorian text, Jay Clayton considers "Victorian Afterlife" a study in the continuation of trends and "a hidden and repressed connection" (2003:5) of postmodernism with the nineteenth-century culture. Neo-Victorianism is also read as an "antiquarian" textual exercise that produces "a fresh perspective on the present" (2000: 27). Again, John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff calls retro-Victorianism a form of "post-Victorianism", a term which conveys for them "the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption" (2000: xiii). Thus, there is a consensus among the existing theorists of neo-Victorian fiction that it contains the doubleness of nostalgia and criticism. Cora Kaplan point out that we do not have any "merely costumery and antiquarian" interest about the Victorians but post-Victorian critical and cultural discourses locate the roots of our cultural identities in Victorian configurations of politics, sociology, gender, race and economy (2007: 47). The ability to re-absorb, re-consider and re-invent the Victorians, according to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llwelllyn have given the postmodern variety of new Victorian studies a fresh set of ideological and critical fields to engage with and re-instate the intellectual aura, relevance and

significance of the Victorians. (2010: 203).

Elleke Boehmer succinctly observes that contemporary post-colonial fiction is “structured by and gives structure to history” (1995: 198). She underscores how colonial historiography has been revised and challenged by the interventionist narratives of post-colonial fictional works. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin consider post-colonial fiction an ideological tool to subvert and appropriate the hegemonic historical discourse of Europe. They claim that this subversion is not just achieved by challenging ‘the message of [Eurocentric] history’, but by contesting the ‘dominant rhetoric’ and ‘linear narrativity’ of Western history itself. (1995: 355). Therefore, opposition is implicated both at the level of form and content. The contemporary British novelistic canon is predominantly multicultural. The multiplicity suggested by it has overthrown the orthodox notion that a writer’s entry into a particular national canon is coterminous with his/her authentic national identity. Britain, as an imperial centre, has not just plundered and ruled over several colonies, immigrants from several colonies have infiltrated it. (see Kar Chaudhuri 2008: 160). The settlements of blacks and other diasporic subjects in Britain have produced a long, chequered and complex history of racial discrimination and animosity. This crosscurrent of racial politics gets amply reflected in contemporary British fiction about the migrant and diasporic sensibility. In this respect, Dominic Head appropriately comments: ‘Much migrant writing in Britain, chary of identifying with unaccommodating England, seeks, ostensibly, to enlarge perceptions of “Britishness” in pursuit of propitious hybrids (Black-British, Jewish-British, and so on)” (2002: 182). The postmodern British canon is now a large extended family that has to acknowledge the perspective of the ‘other’, the post-colonial viewpoint, which has added to its variety and enrichment through multiculturalism. (see Kar Chaudhuri 2008: 161)

Neo-Victorian novels also seem to be polarized on the basis of their use of colonial and racial themes. The white British writers do not generally consider the perspective of the colonized (Byatt, Swift, Ackroyd) while the Anglophone writers have exclusively devoted their attention to foreground the ambushed voice of the colonial ‘other’ (Rhys, Phillips and Carey). Their choices of ideology and narrative voice seem largely predicated upon their respective nationalist affiliations. The issue of Victorian colonialism has particularly attracted diametrically opposed reactions among white and non-white neo-Victorian novelists. For example, pro-imperial narratives on Victorian racism by J. G. Farrell, Margaret Atwood and Matthew Kneale contain a cogent criticism of white hypocrisy, colonial and sexual double standards. Anti-imperial novels on Victorian colonialism by Caryl Phillips, Peter Carey and Valerie Martin are dependent on Victorian narrative codes, rhetoric and aesthetics. The most interesting aspect of this sub-genre has been this co-production and coexistence of pro-Victorian critical appraisals by white British writers and anti-Victorian revisions by non-British writers (Elizabeth Ho 2012: 33). However, the constant overlapping of these two attitudes also cannot be ignored. But predominantly, the white British novels have been fired by an impulse to guide and orient the declining nation through nostalgic Victoriana; while the

non-white writers have persistently attacked the monoliths of British Victorian racism and its present-day continuations in contemporary official and cultural policies.

As a postcolonial neo-Victorian or retro-Victorian narrative Atwood's novel engages with the nineteenth-century with this characteristic mixture of nostalgia and irony. On the one hand, she uses Victorian narrative forms and novelistic conventions to present the story of Grace Marks's diasporic life in nineteenth-century Canada; on the other hand, she overtly critiques nineteenth-century gender discrimination, prison systems, conditions of immigration and public morality to present us with a very nuanced and detailed picture of the past. For Atwood, narrating the story of Grace Marks is also a means of negotiating the porous boundaries of the discourses of history and fiction. Using historical details from various existing sources, she reconstructs her own imaginative version of Grace's life and struggles in an alien land where she is perceived both as a victim and an aggressor. The stigmas of murder and madness that clings to her reputation complicate Atwood's historicization of Grace Marks's troubled life and times. In the annals of official Canadian history, Grace Marks was convicted with a life sentence for her alleged involvement in the Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery murder case. Her trial and prison life generated unprecedented public concern and euphoria and she was seen an ideal example of female transgressiveness as the Canadian authorities made a terrifying example of her by subjecting her to constant penal and medical self-surveillance. But Atwood's narrativization of Grace's history captures the human and personal side of her life by presenting a detailed account of her hapless immigration to Canada from Ireland in search of stability and fortune. In this respect, Atwood's contemporary re-telling of Grace's story corresponds with the subject and narratology of one of her own early neo-Victorian Gothic narrative poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) in which we find a horrific tale of struggle and survival of the actual nineteenth-century Ontario pioneer Susanna Moodie. Incidentally, Moodie's works like *Life in the Clearings* (1853) and *Letters of a Lifetime* (1885) also form the backbone of Atwood's reconstruction of Grace's life, though she makes independent imaginative inputs in her version to present us with a Gothicized version of this quaint tale of murder and retribution. Interlinked with her story is the life of another troubled Canadian immigrant, Dr Simon Jordan, an English psychiatrist who chooses to deal with Grace's case during her stay in the notorious Kingston Penitentiary.

The novel is divided into fifteen elaborate sections with each segment bringing out several facets of the lives of Dr Jordan and Grace Marks. In the section entitled "Broken Dishes" Grace narrates her life in Ireland, her immigration to Canada and the problems of relocation in a foreign land. Her family life is riddled with poverty, unemployment and lack of proper resources for healthy sustenance since her father fails to earn adequately to maintain a big family. Moreover, he gets embroiled in a murder and religious dispute which virtually forces them to flee to Canada. Thus, Atwood here reinforces how nineteenth century Canada was perceived as a refuge for wastrels, outlaws and families from the imperial centre in search

of better fortunes in the colonial margins. The Marks family decide to relocate themselves in Canada to escape the rigours of Irish laws and in hope of better job prospects. However, there is also a sense of loss and nostalgia pervading them, especially Grace and her mother who do not necessarily foresee their passage to Canada as an elevating experience. Their copious tears and sorrow convey their heightened sense of rootlessness and anxiety. This fear and distress in crossing over to an unknown land is accentuated by the discomfiting middle passage they endure in the ship. In a ship that provides cheap travel rates they are goaded by lack of hygiene, food and other necessary resources. Again, in Toronto, Grace is forced to work as a household servant to support her family wherein begins her arduous struggle to adjust to an alien culture and hostile environment. However, her first job as a servant with Mr Alderman Parkinson gives her the opportunity to befriend the young, independent and vivacious fellow servant Mary Whitney, who provides her with friendship, strength and love denied to her by her family. Thus, despite enduring a forced migration and alienation Grace meets this strong-willed and democratic native Canadian girl who brings a positive transformation in her character and enables her to cope with untold misery.

Later Grace gets involved in the murder of her new master and mistress from Richmond Hill quite inadvertently and is forced by circumstances to follow the real murderer James McDermott. One of the constant dilemmas of her life is her identity crisis ushered by the dichotomous projections of her identity by the Canadian penal authorities and the public and at large. She feels deceived and appropriated by a culture to which she neither belongs nor is she allowed to adjust and assimilate herself. In various sections of the novel we find Grace engaging in relentless soul-searching, introspection and self-analysis where she clearly protests against the larger public forces that over-determines her criminal identity ignoring all humanitarian concerns. She refers to the alarming double standard in the Governor's household where she is praised and incorporated as useful, reliable and practical servant but the Governor's wife dreads her as deceptive, unpredictable and wild. Her native identity is fractured and re-fabricated by the foreign authorities and over-determined to prove the efficacy of their systems of law and penal regulations. In Canada, she always finds herself at the receiving end of social conventions that exploit and exclude her on the basis of her gender and race. This liminality and identarian precarity remain the markers of her cultural identity and reinforce her plight and trauma as a diasporic and migrant subject. Jeanette King has repeatedly argued in favour of such marginal 'neo-Victorian' women characters from the Victorian period who adorn these contemporary re-tellings of Victorian lives in fictional format. For her, their very vulnerable and suppressed existence make them attractive and appropriate choices for historical reclamation and reinstatement (2005: 45)

In the Governor's mansion she observes how the posh diasporic British community of Canada wallow in nostalgia and remembrance as they fondly adopt English lifestyles and conventions or reminisce about their past life in Britain by compiling keepsake albums, scrapbooks and memoirs. By preserving fragments of memory from their life in Europe which

consist of snippets of ribbon, pictures of people and places and scraps of old cloth these immigrant women express their inability to reconcile to their changed lives away from their native land, customs and culture. It also points out at the deep gaps and fissures in their own national identity which remains as fragmented and incoherent as the distinct and disjointed items in the memory albums. Similarly, instead of trying to evolve new lifestyles and socio-cultural habits conducive to their changed social environment they blindly follow trends and fashions popular with the British imperial centre and initiate “impoverished imitations of the originary culture” (Brazier and Mannur: 8). For example, social habits popular in Victorian Britain like discussion over the Woman Question and formation of Spiritualist Circles are blindly imitated by these British women relegated to the colonial margins as settler colony subjects. Grace readily finds this imitative attitude very peculiar and aptly puts in: “I don’t know why they are all so eager to be remembered. What good will it do to them? There are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again” (p.26). Thus, in Canada, Grace notices a pervasive sense of unbelonging and dislocatedness among the diasporic British as they struggle to grow a separate culture of their own yet are unable to transcend and forget their original Continental roots. Herein Grace as the passive servant partly identifies with this cultural crisis but at the same time she is honestly critical of the inability of the master class to forge a new identity transcending all racial prejudices and nationalistic affiliations. In fact, Christian Gutleben and Marie-Luise Kohlke in their recent works on transgenerational trauma and violence faced in fractured and dysfunctional families by migrant subjects have emphasized that broken family histories and racial “othering” produced moments of intense psychological crisis and pervasive trauma in Victorian subjects, the effect of which was felt after several generations making us the shared subjects and affective recipients of such transnational and transhistorical events and catastrophes that forced exile, migration and diaspora. (2010 : 124-125 and 2011: 145)

This problem of liminal diasporic subjectivity is further intensified in case of Dr Simon Jordan whose life in Canada is also given much prominence in the novel along with Grace’s story. Dr Jordan also travels to Canada partly for reviving his family fortunes and largely due to his ambition to further his career. The letters he exchanges with his friends, colleagues and family express his ambivalences and dilemmas concerning his immigration to Canada. Some of these letters remind us of the letters the young and confused Rochester writes back to England in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). He hides the squalor and emptiness he is subjected to and tries to put forward a rosy picture of his life abroad. Dr Jordan’s mother disapproves of his career move to work in the Canadian asylum and instead suggests him to settle for the ideal and homely family business of manufacturing. She wants her son to enjoy placid domesticity like a typical Victorian bourgeoisie confined to his home country enjoying the fresh “first lettuces” and the view of the “budding” apple tree (2006: 52) rather than wasting his youth and energy in the desolate Canadian snows. However, Dr Jordan pretends that his mother has misconceptions about the Canadian weather and replies “Dearest Mother... The weather here is very good; the snow is almost gone, spring is in the air, the sun

is warming the lake..." (2006: 61) and this is done to assert the righteousness of his decision to move to Canada. Though to his friend Edward he is much more truthful and openly critical about the deplorable food and social habits of the Canadian West, which are in his terms, petty imitations of European lifestyles. He is even personally attacked for "all the sins of his country" by the settler British community in Canada as they perceive him to be a scapegoat representative of the indifference, neglect and discrimination Britain shows towards them. Moreover, he is troubled by the sullen and disrespectful behaviour of the servant Dora who displays an audacity he is unaccustomed to in Europe. Even the excessive affection his landlady Mrs. Humphreys showers on him is extremely disconcerting and leads to intense emotional crisis. Therefore, in his frequent dreams often either Mrs. Humphreys or Grace Marks become the subject of his passionate erotic outbursts bringing to surface his restlessness and acute sense of spatial and psychological instability.

Dr Jordan is riddled with doubts and contradictions of a typical migrant subject unable to re-assimilate himself in a foreign and virtually inclement environment. He is especially disappointed with his patient, the enigmatic and inscrutable Grace Marks who ushers in a strange kind of soul-searching in him. Dr Jordan as the representative of male reason is hardly able to dominate and decipher the supposedly criminal and deranged mind of Grace as she displays a silent resistance to be appropriated. The encounters between Dr Jordan and Grace recycle the traditional binaries between science and supernaturalism since Grace's insanity and crime are explained away as an outcome of a ghostly possession and that weakens Dr Jordan's medical efforts to comprehend her insanity. Both Grace and Dr Jordan share similar experiences of migrancy and cross-Atlantic travel but the female patient here fails to identify with the male doctor as Dr Jordan has travelled widely and freely all over Europe before coming to Canada, while she has been virtually forced to migrate to this new country. Grace and Simon Jordan represent apparently two divergent kinds of migrant experiences since the latter has all the economic privileges denied to the former, but deep inside they share the same insecurities and fear of maladjustments. This shared experience is rightly summed up when Grace says the following to Dr Jordan: "I don't know how you manage, Sir, amongst all the foreigners; you never know what they are saying. When the poor things first come here they gabble away like geese, although the children can speak well enough" (2006: 39). Even the description Grace gives of Mr. Jordan's diasporic self is astute and precise, she says:

A travelling man. He must be a wanderer, like Jeremiah the peddler. But Jeremiah travelled to earn his bread, and these other sorts of men are rich enough already. They go on voyages because they are curious. They amble around the world and stare at things, they sail across the ocean as if there's nothing to it at all, and if it goes ill with them in one place they simply pick up and move along to another. (2006: 39)

Grace's analysis of Dr Jordan's privileged global nomadism symbolizes how diasporic traversals questioned the rigidities of native identities and embodied new forms of becoming.

Ultimately, through their repeated encounters Dr Jordan recognises the talent and resilience of his migrant patient who despite the lack of class, education and social privileges becomes for him the symbol of complete femininity. His positive views on Grace are worth quoting in some detail:

Grace has beauty without frivolity, domesticity without dullness, and simplicity of manner, and prudence, and circumspection. She is also an excellent needlewoman, and could doubtless crochet rings around Miss Faith Cartwright... It comes to him that Grace Marks is the only woman he's ever met that he would wish to marry.
(2006: 388)

Discovering the true worth of Grace enables Dr Jordan to discover himself and surge forward in life leaving behind his predatory landlady and his stifling and unrewarding career as he decides to forge his career ahead in Canada with a renewed vigour and a heightened sense of the changed socio-cultural realities in the Canadian West. The novel ends on a somewhat positive note with Grace's release from the prison after twenty-eight years of confinement and her subsequent marriage with Jamie Walsh. Atwood suggests how immigration to Canada in the nineteenth century past was both an unsettling as well as a rewarding experience in the sense that the struggles of the migrant individual to adopt the foreign culture and forge a hybrid identity allowed him/her a more poignant insight into the ways in which diasporic identities were negotiated, lived, experienced and even practiced. The problems of racial identification, transculturation and migrancy encountered by Atwood's Victorian characters portend similar concerns in the present century where even in a globalized and multicultural world order, identities are fissured, fractured and fragmented on the basis of economic, ethnic, geopolitical and cultural concerns. If we accept the oft-quoted critical opinion that the nineteenth-century can be aptly regarded as the historical bedrock of contemporary trends of globalization and multiculturalism for the *laissez-faire* fluidity of national and colonial boundaries it suggested, then Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a fitting historical retrospection on the discourses of immigration, transnationalism and diaspora that dominate the contemporary century.

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