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“A Person from Another Culture”: A Reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Man from Mars*

The central themes of Margaret Atwood’s short story *The Man from Mars* include the hierarchical relationship between the Occidental Self and the Oriental Other (represented here by a white, rich, Anglophone girl named Christine, and a mysterious Asian man, respectively), and the construction of otherness by the majority group. Both issues are fundamental to postcolonial theory, which is why my reading follows a great many interpretations of Atwood’s literary works—and particularly her novels *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Robber’s Bride*—which bring to light the complexities inscribed in the field of postcolonialism.¹

The ambiguities within postcolonial studies are connected, for instance, with the blurring of borderlines between the centre and the margins (resulting, among other reasons, from the fact that otherness is granted a central position—or is, as Graham Huggan suggests, “fetishized”—by postcolonial theorists), with turning ethnicity into commodity, and with the shifting nature of positions of power.² Whereas

¹ See Brydon (1995), Tolan (2009), and Fiamengo (2010).

² See the Introduction to Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic*, titled “Writing at the Margins: Postcolonialism, Exoticism and the Politics of Cultural Value” (1–33).

some of these ambivalences spring from the (sometimes problematic) positioning of postcolonial theory within the Western academe, others arise at the intersections between postcolonialism and other theoretical discourses whose aim is to redefine positions of power, such as discourses of postmodernism, feminism, or queer studies. Yet another discourse which often shapes postcolonial readings of Atwood's fiction is one of Canadianness. The two questions, then, that are repeatedly asked in these analyses are whether or not Canada is a postcolonial country, and whether or not Atwood is a postcolonial writer.

In answer to the first question, Fiona Tolan suggests that "Canada is caught between two opposing power positions. It is both the ex-colonial nation (that is, the colonial other to Britain's colonizing self), and it is also undeniably a First World nation, with a position of privilege and power in the world (and therefore is the First World self to the Third World other)" (Tolan, *Situating Canada* 143). A Canadian subject, therefore, is "fractured" and "schizophrenic": one "subjected to an imperial power" and simultaneously "an agent of that power" (Bennett qtd. in Fiamengo). Consequently, whether Atwood's Canadian nationality in itself makes her an apt observer of cultural marginalizations appears debatable.

One of the more cutting remarks on Atwood's postcolonial angle comes from Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. The author uses Atwood as a primary example of a literary superstar who "rubs shoulders with other, perhaps more obviously attention-seeking postcolonial celebrities like V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie" (Huggan 209). Because of the fact that, in Huggan's opinion, Atwood is merely a skilful performer of staged marginality, she should not be taken particularly seriously as a commentator on Canadian multiculturalism or on the situation of various minority groups. "Her work," writes Huggan "operates as a gauge of white middle-class—predominantly female—fears and anxieties. [...] The dangerous territory that Atwood's work has allegedly explored, the ideological minefields she has uncovered, have mostly been negotiated from the safety of the middle-class family, the middle-class educational system, the middle-class home" (216–217). Far be it for me to claim that At-

wood speaks from any other than her white, middle-class, educated perspective, let alone that she should be authorized as a spokeswoman for the Canadian nation. Still, I find Huggan's rejection of Atwood's voice (as by and large illegitimate for debates concerning marginalization) rather troubling.

Admittedly, Huggan's analysis raises a new set of questions, such as "Who is qualified to talk about oppression, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and Canadianness?" or "Who is an adequate postcolonial writer and/or critic?" To look for answers to these questions may be a compelling—albeit hazardous—task, as the search requires progressive exclusion of not-oppressed-enough authors (which, to a certain extent, is Huggan's strategy). This, in turn, creates both the conviction that there are postcolonial voices untainted by the dominant ideology of the centre, and the pressure to seek them as sole authorities on the subjects crucial for postcolonial studies. Arguably, it is not only Atwood that is lost in this process of elimination, because ultimately it also questions the legitimacy of such distinguished postcolonial theorists as Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak, who have written in English from the self-acknowledged position of exmarginality, enjoying—which Huggan points out—professional and academic success within the dominant Western culture.³ Therefore, rather than deprecate Margaret Atwood as one who usurps someone else's literary territory, I base this paper on the assumption that in the majority of her literary works, Atwood

³ "When marginality, as Gayatri Spivak has noted, comes with the seal of academic approval, this may only help to commodify it, at the university and elsewhere in society" (Huggan 154). As is often the case with Spivak, this is a partly autobiographical statement: as an "economic migrant" relocated from Calcutta, Spivak is referring among others to *herself* when she speaks of "the upwardly mobile exmarginal [teacher], justifiably searching for validation" (quoted in: Huggan 154). Spivak's concept of the "exmarginal" is, of course, partly self-ironic—elsewhere she has spoken of the "luxuries" of academic self-marginalisation (Huggan 121). "One is tempted to add that exmarginality is just as much of a luxury; caught up in the ostensibly survivalist politics of academic position-taking, it represents a conscious strategy for professional success" (Huggan 23).

purposely undermines and subverts the only position available to her, namely, one of a white, privileged woman. As a political writer, Atwood insists on “de-centring positions of power, undermining stable structures, and refocusing debates at the margins” (Tolan *Margaret Atwood*, 199). It is, in fact, the way in which she destabilizes the traditionally hierarchical power relations between the two protagonists of her short-story that is the focus of my reading.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Man from Mars*, first published in 1977 (which is six years after the federal government announced its policy of multiculturalism) has often been interpreted as a literary commentary on the transformations Canada was experiencing, or—as the story is set in the 1950s and 1960s—on the Canadian society of the previous decades. My belief, however, is that the narrative should not be dismissed as a mere comment on Canadian early struggle with multiculturalism, as it originates at the intersection I mentioned earlier, between feminist and postcolonial studies, and thus reveals how the relationship between the protagonists—initially separated by their unequal racial status—transforms due to the symbolic meanings attached to the concept of gender.

The plot of Atwood’s short-story appears to be simple—one day, on her way home from her tennis practice, Christine is accosted by “a person from another culture,” i.e. the eponymous man from Mars. Because she believes herself to be tolerant and cultured, she gives him “her official welcoming smile” (Atwood 10) and helps him find the building he is looking for. Her courteous conduct encourages the man to assume that Christine is his friend (“You are my friend” being the line the man repeats over and over in the course of the story) and seek contact with her. In time, her indecisiveness towards the man results in him routinely stalking Christine at her campus, and, consequently, in him being deported from Canada to his mysterious country of origin. Because of the fact that the presence of the Oriental admirer changes Christine’s self-perception, as well as others’ perception of her, as years go by Christine actually starts to miss the man, and tries—in vain—to find out who he was.

The descriptions of the first encounter between the two protagonists, of Christine’s family, and the man from Mars’s visit at Christine’s

house, seem to establish a clear-cut hierarchy between the two characters. Christine's family, for example, is composed—in the traditionally patriarchal way—of an influential absent father, a beautiful fragile mother (whose sole responsibility is to decorate the house with flowers and her lovely presence), and three daughters, Christine being the youngest. This unambiguous family structure is contrasted with the mysterious blur that the man's life story is. Throughout the narrative, he remains nameless, ageless (at the first encounter Christine thinks he is a boy of twelve, and then assumes he must be a university student) and metaphorically homeless (the Oriental country he comes from is only indirectly indicated at the end of the story). His feelings and motives are obscure, which is due to a curious narrative strategy employed by Atwood.

With the purpose that a distance between him/her and the protagonists of the story be maintained, the third person narrator often adopts a harshly critical attitude towards them. In other words, the narrator distances himself/herself from the characters with the use of irony and humour, or simply by means of mercilessly scrutinizing and mocking them. Interestingly, however, the text also creates a profound impression that it is the man from Mars, rather than Christine, who is a customary butt of the joke. The reason for it is that the narrator *knows* things about Christine that s/he does not know about the man, and seems to base his/her opinions on the man on how Christine perceives him. Christine, therefore, may at times appear pathetic or unattractive, but at the same time, her actions are explicable, and clearly stem from what the reader learns about her life. This insight into Christine's mind, on the one hand, proves that the narrator is not objective or innocent, although the narratorial distance s/he creates might suggest so. Conversely, the narrator seems to comply with the traditional Western binary logic: whereas the Occident is knowable, the Orient remains impenetrable. On the other hand, however, the strategy clearly unveils how otherness is constructed as impenetrable and then dealt with by the Occidental self. Therefore, even though the tension between insiders and outsiders is here largely examined from the perspective of a white, rich, Anglophone girl, which "may seem to undermine the potency of

this examination, this [strategy]"—as Fiona Tolan suggests in her postcolonial reading of Atwood's *The Robber Bride*—it also "allows Atwood to challenge Canada on some of its assumptions of postcolonial innocence by examining [...] the manner in which the First World self responds to the presence of the other" (Tolan, *Situating Canada* 144).

Accordingly, when Christine first sees the man from Mars, she immediately reads him as "Oriental without a doubt" (Atwood 10). The mystifying concept of the Oriental man denotes, in Christine's view, a set of very specific features, and requires a very distinctive behaviour on her part. On the one hand, Christine translates "oriental" into "inferior," "pitiful," and "insignificant." Consequently, the man is immediately disregarded as peculiar and powerless—when he writes down his name on a piece of paper and gives it to Christine, what she sees is only "an odd assemblage of Gs, Ys and Ns, neatly printed in block letters" (Atwood 11) but destined to be indecipherable. On the other hand, however, Christine—a student of Political Science—is well-educated in tolerance and political correctness. In high school, as the narrator ironically remarks, she was president of the United Nations Club and represented Egypt at a mock assembly. "It [was] an unpopular assignment—nobody wanted to be the Arabs—but she [saw] it through. She [made] rather a good speech about the Palestinian refugees" (Atwood 10). On a similar note, the day she first meets the man from Mars, Christine attends a meeting of a debating society: "The topic [is], 'Resolved: That War is Obsolete.' Her team [takes] the affirmative and [wins]" (Atwood 13).

Consequently, Christine politely does what the man asks her to do—i.e. she also writes her name on a piece of paper—and (although she grows alarmed by the man's increasingly aggressive behavior) wonders how to leave "without being rude" (Atwood 12). Her sense of decorum springs from what she mistakenly takes for sensitivity to cultural differences: "in his culture"—Christine expects—"this exchange of names on pieces of paper [is] probably a formal politeness, like saying thank you" (Atwood 11). In fact, Christine's reasoning is a convoluted version of a highly prejudiced opinion her mother proclaims at the end of the story, namely, that "the thing about people from another culture [is] that you [can] never tell whether they [are] insane or not because

their ways [are] so different" (Atwood 26). Paradoxically, throughout the text Christine simultaneously fears the man and does not take actions against him, because of her general misapprehension of him. She situates him outside the reality as she knows it, which is why, despite the fact that the man stalks Christine for weeks, she never calls the police or complains to anyone about it, "though if he'd been a citizen of the country she would have called the police" (Atwood 26) without hesitation.

Christine then draws a very clear borderline between the inside and the outside, between "the culture" and "another culture." "The culture" is an extremely narrow category—at one point, for instance, the narrator remarks that Christine "was vaguely acquainted with several people from other cultures, *Britain mostly*" (Atwood 14, italics mine). Both Christine and her mother believe there are multiple levels of otherness, some of which are more acceptable than others. It is, in fact, Christine's mother who invites the man from Mars to their house, because—on hearing him speak with a foreign accent—she automatically assumes he is a French potentate and possibly a candidate for Christine's husband. The man's actual cultural background, however, signifies ultimate, absolute otherness, which is why it cannot be specified or named—even though the man introduces himself a number of times and sends them postcards from home, Christine and her mother seem incapable of remembering any facts about him.

To Christine, the man is the representation of cultural difference, which is why she construes him as inscrutable, and tolerates the fact that he acts in ways she finds peculiar, or even threatening. Evidently, her apparent "tolerance" only serves to maintain the distance between them. To her mother, in turn, the man's otherness is not so much threatening as it is disgusting. When he visits Christine's house—and turns out not to be rich or French—Christine notices her mother's "dropped jaw and flawless recovery" (Atwood 17), as well as the fact that the woman suddenly braces her white glove before she shakes hands with their guest. The Occidental category of the "Non-white" connotes impurity, contagion, and waste. A lady that Christine's mother believes herself to be has to *brace* herself against the potentiality of pollution. In fact,

to some extent this is also Christine's attitude—the Man from Mars (as seen through Christine's eyes) is constantly ridiculed on the basis of his appearance. The descriptions of his looks are detailed and unkind—the man is depicted as one wearing shabby, outdated clothes and smelling like cooked cauliflower. The idea of him being dirty is also emphasized by the fact that his fingers are always blue from a leaky ball-point.

Another representation of an "impure" Other in the story is Elvira, a girl from the West Indies whom Christine's mother employs as a servant. As the narrator remarks, when they were "down for Christmas," Christine's parents were "enraptured" with the girl and brought her back home. Since then "she [became] pregnant, but Christine's mother [did not dismiss] her. She said she was slightly disappointed but what could you expect, and she didn't see any real difference between a girl who was pregnant before you hired her and one who got that way afterwards. She prided herself on her tolerance" (Atwood 17). The colonialist implications of these statements are obvious—the parents were "enraptured" with the exotic girl, which is why they took her to "a better place" to serve them. In fact, before Elvira is introduced, the narrator mentions the family's attitude towards "girls" in general: "the only ones available [are] either foreign or pregnant; their expressions usually [suggest] they [are] being taken advantage of somehow. But [Christine's] mother asked what they would do otherwise; they'd either have to go into a Home or stay in their own countries, and Christine had to agree this was probably true" (Atwood 14). Elvira appears to be a perfect embodiment of this image. As black women were traditionally associated with uncontrollable sexuality in discourses of colonization, the girl's pregnancy only confirms what Christine's mother already knows about her.

Importantly, however, the girl actually refuses to play the role of a servile servant—similarly to Caribbean women in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the girl from *The Man from Mars* is definitely not a girl Friday. At first, as the narrator reveals, "Christine [tried] to treat [Elvira] as an equal. 'Don't call me Miss Christine,' she [said] with an imitation of light, comradely laughter. 'What do you want me to call you then?' the girl [said] scowling" (Atwood 18). What Elvira recognizes is that there is an expectation behind the seemingly benign "Don't call me

Miss Christine." This expectation is to appreciate Christine as gracious and tolerant towards someone who is manifestly inferior; not to call her Miss Christine perhaps, but always think of her as a Miss. Instead, the girl continues referring to Christine as "Miss Christine," but lets her know she neither likes nor respects her, if only for the reason that "no one [has] yet attempted to get [Christine] pregnant" (Atwood 18). What Elvira also sees very clearly is that various members of the family she became a part of are granted different amount of power, and that Christine has almost none of it. This is why the two girls have "brief, surly arguments in the kitchen which [are] like the arguments between one servant and another: [Christine's] mother's attitude towards each of them [is] similar, they [are] not altogether satisfactory but they [will] have to do" (Atwood 18).

Resultantly, the character of Elvira draws the reader's attention to how relative various power positions might be, and how "the experience of being on the inside or on the outside of postcolonial power relations is not a stable experience, but is instead a position that shifts with perspective" (Tolan, *Margaret Atwood* 147). Correspondingly, the relationship between Christine and the man from Mars undergoes a striking transformation in the course of the story, although at the start it seems unquestionable that Christine is a representation of power contrasted with the powerless Oriental man. Also at the start, however, the narrator reveals that within the confines of the majority group that Christine represents, she actually is relegated to the margins. The main reason for it is that she is thoroughly unfeminine. Big, heavy, with a face of a Russian peasant (Atwood 1), Christine stands in a direct contrast with her mother ("so delicate, so preserved-looking, a harsh breath would scratch the finish") (Atwood 14) and sisters ("one married already and the other [will] clearly have no trouble") (15). Moreover, the protagonist has highly unfeminine interests: politics, economy and sports.⁴ She spends her time with boy-friends—never boyfriends—with whom she

⁴ In her mother's opinion, "since Christine could not possibly be beautiful even if she took off weight, it [is] just as well she [is] so athletic and political, it [is] a good thing she [has] interests" (Atwood 15).

has “grown to share [...] contempt for most women” (Atwood 24), as they do not believe she is one. Christine thinks of herself as an exception who “[fits] none of the categories [the boys] commonly used when talking about girls; she [isn’t] a cock-teaser, a cold fish, and easy lay or a snarky bitch” (Atwood 24). “To her parents [in turn] she [is] a beefy heavyweight, a plodder, lacking in flair, ordinary as bread” (Atwood 23). In consequence, even though at the first encounter Christine finds the man from Mars’s behaviour peculiar and slightly alarming (before he asks for directions he touches “her freshly bared arm” (Atwood 10) and is difficult to brush off), she also realizes that “there [is] nothing he could do to her” (Atwood 12) as “he [is] only half her size” (Atwood 12), and “his hold [is] feeble and could not compete with her tennis biceps” (Atwood 13).

Initially, then, the two protagonists represent opposite sets of features: Christine embodies the values of the Occident (i.e. reason, wealth, and masculinity), whereas the man epitomizes the Orient (traditionally associated with poverty, mystery, and femininity). The first shift in their relationship takes place when the man visits Christine at her house and takes a photograph of them both: “he went over and did something to the camera, his back to her. The next instant he was crouched beside her, his arm around her waist as far as it could reach, his other hand covering her own hands which she had folded in her lap, his cheek jammed up against hers. She was too startled to move. The camera clicked” (Atwood 19). Immediately afterwards he leaves and Christine is relieved to admit that he “raped, *rapere*, *rapui*, to seize and carry off, not herself, but her celluloid image” (Atwood 20). Although the girl recovers and laughs, the reference to rape is striking, especially that—having received the photograph from the man—Christine sees “on her own face astonishment and outrage, as though he was sticking her in the behind with his hidden thumb” (Atwood 20).

Soon afterwards, the man starts appearing at Christine’s campus and a strange routine is established: he appears, she runs, he follows. In a sense, this practice is the only “conversation” that ever truly works between the characters (whenever the man speaks, his broken English makes him sound unsophisticated and ridiculous), as they both read

the signs correctly and act accordingly. Interestingly, too, the aim of the chase is not to actually catch Christine who sometimes stops running, faces the man, and asks him what he wants. (To that he would first state that he wants to talk to her, but then "he would say nothing; he would stand in front of her, shifting his feet, smiling perhaps apologetically [...], his eyes jerking from one part of her face to another as though he saw her in fragments") (Atwood 23). The race, as a matter of fact, is about maintaining—not cutting—the distance between them (as if the man "were a pull-toy attached to [the girl] by a string") (Atwood 22), because it is the distance that makes this strange form of communication possible.

However, the most important reason why both characters engage in the peculiar routine is that they seem to benefit from it. "Locked in the classic pattern of [...] pursuit and flight" (Atwood 22), the two protagonists find themselves suddenly fitting into the stereotypical and accepted categories of femininity and masculinity: the man becomes the romantic pursuer, the girl the romantic object of the pursuit.⁵ In consequence, Christine starts to feel—to use a popular cliché— "like a woman." What this entails, among other things, is that she feels sensual, or sexy: "In the bathtub she no longer [imagines] she [is] a dolphin; instead she [imagines] she [is] an elusive water-nixie, or sometimes, in moments of audacity, Marilyn Monroe" (Atwood 24). Moreover, finally "there is something about her that could not be explained" (Atwood 24)—a mysterious Oriental man is clearly obsessed with her, which attracts other boys who feel challenged to solve the riddle. Christine becomes popular, she is asked out, examined and appraised.

There are, therefore, unquestionable pleasures that the transformation warrants: for Christine, this would be the comfort of fitting in, for the man, the fact that his relationship with Christine is as close as it could be. Besides, as Christine becomes more and more feminine, the man grows more and more masculine. In the patriarchal reality de-

⁵ In the story, the pattern is referred to as "comic." It seems, however, that the pattern is also romantic, and it is the romantic aspect of it that allows the characters to change.

scribed in Atwood's story, the former requires losing power, the latter, gaining it. Accordingly, as the chase continues, Christine redefines her relations with the man and reverses the past hierarchy—in her mind, the man is no longer a pitiable wimp, but a potential murderer, or a rapist, a palpable threat against which she feels utterly helpless. For Christine, to feel “like a woman,” in other words, is also to feel inferior, vulnerable, exposed and guilty. Christine, in fact, starts to believe that “it [is] she herself who [is] the tormentor, the persecutor. She [is] in some sense responsible; from the folds and crevices of her body she [treated] for so long as a reliable machine was emanating, against her will, some potent invisible odour, like a dog's in heat or a female moth's, that made [the man] unable to stop following her” (Atwood 25). Her metamorphosis then—as well as the apparent benefits and pleasures that it brings—is highly problematic, because, in Charlotte Sturgess's words, “there seems to be no such thing as a feminine subject here, for such a concept is presented as a contradiction in terms” (89).

Throughout the text Christine oscillates between two different positions—one of an unfeminine (privileged white) girl, the other of a feminine (privileged white) girl. The first one involves being looked down on (especially by other women) and bearing a stamp of a curiosity. At the same time, however, it also entails relative independence, the feeling of physical strength, the chance to be, as Christine imagines it, “an honorary person” (Atwood 24). The second position, in turn, offers Christine the bliss of “normality” and the potentiality of romance. On the downside, however, it also evokes the feelings of weakness and exposure, as well as the need of protection. The man from Mars, on the other hand, moves between the position of a victim and that of an oppressor, depending on whether or not he behaves “like a man.”

In Atwood's story, ethnicity is one—perhaps the most important—factor determining the characters' social standing; gender is clearly another. Femininity is a role Christine is chased into, which she ceases to play as soon as her pursuer leaves the country. Her “aura of mystery soon [fades]” (Atwood 30), she graduates from a college, gets a job, and gains more weight. As years go by and “the war begins to fill the newspapers” (Atwood 30), Christine becomes increasingly interested

in the man from Mars, searching for his face on the covers of magazines and on her TV screen.⁶ "She [studies] maps, she [watches] the late night newscasts, the distant country and terrain becoming almost more familiar to her than her own. Once or twice she [thinks] she [can] recognize him but it [is] no use, they all look like him" (Atwood 31). Her obsession seems to be sentimental in nature—what she chases, in this reversed situation from her past, is the memory of romance. This is further emphasized by the fact that—in order to cure herself—she turns to nineteenth-century novels known for their propagation of rationality and pragmatism. When sometimes she still thinks about the man, she imagines him as "something nondescript, something in the background, like herself; perhaps [...] an interpreter" (Atwood 31). This striking final sentence of the story stresses the similarity between the two protagonists—they both appear to be unexceptional and featureless, "somethings" rather than "someones." The man is an interpreter not in a sense that he translates words from one language to another—his English is broken and it is difficult to imagine him using it professionally—but in a sense that he endows Christine with a new meaning (no matter how elusive and problematic).

Recapitulating, in *The Man from Mars* Atwood first establishes a clear-cut hierarchy between Christine and the Oriental man, only to destabilize it further on. The power shifts that the characters are exposed to are the result of them adopting socially appropriate gender roles which Atwood reveals to be artificial social constructs. Atwood further subverts these roles by means of inscribing the text within the convention of a romantic narrative and simultaneously ridiculing this convention. Known for her interest in the genre,⁷ the writer transforms her short story into a (distorted) fairy-tale. All the required elements are apparently here: the story begins with "A long time ago," Christine's father is as powerful as a king, as always, there are three sisters with the youngest one being the heroine of the story, a mysterious, Oriental man falls in love with a plain girl who then undergoes a transforma-

⁶ This is the only (indirect) reference to Korea as the man's country of origin.

⁷ See Wilson (1993).

tion, he is determined to win her heart, she is determined to resist, etc. At the same time, however, everything about this fairy-tale is wrong. Canada is not a mythical kingdom, the man from Mars is hardly Prince Charming, Christine's mother and sisters are much prettier than she is, and finally, Christine and the man are never destined to live happily ever after. In this sense, the short-story draws the reader's attention to the structure of various texts—not just fairy-tales, but also other texts of the Western culture, including the stories of the Orient and the tales of femininity.

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