



## **VARIOUS VOICES, SIMILAR CONCERNS: NERUDA, WALCOTT AND ATWOOD**

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Post-Colonial literature consists of a body of writing emanating from Europe's former colonies which addresses questions of history, identity, gender and language. The term should be used loosely and hesitantly, for it is replete with contradictions and conundrums.

Pablo Neruda, Derek Walcott and Margaret Atwood are the three post-colonial poets who have become cult figures for portraying socio-political conditions of their countries in contemporary times, discussing language and racial, identity as the most important measures for an individual culture to survive and for employing similar metaphors for instance, water and animal imagery in their poetry to get their point of view across to their readers. They displace a historical sense upon which their literary culture is founded and are acutely conscious of their place in time, of their own contemporaneity.

Neruda, Walcott and Atwood deal largely with primary post colonial issues like linguistic and cultural transpositions, alienation and loss, displacement from one homeland and racial conflicts in the wake of Columbus's discovery of America in 1492. But it would not be fair to club them as "post-colonial" poets.

There are conflicts of identity and historicity in the works of all the three poets, but the subject matter they deal with so diverse that it is difficult to classify them under one category. Classifications such as "20<sup>th</sup> Century Poets" and "Post Colonial Poets" are too wide to bind securely the structural elements and subject matter of these poets. Such classifications raise other immediate and problematic questions regarding why only three writers should be included in these categories and many other especially poets from England, Australia and the other European countries or other continents be not classified as such. Even a categorization like "poets from Americas" does little to solve the equation. In my view, they should be called and considered as "three contemporary poets".

Neruda, Walcott and Atwood certainly belong to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While Walcott and Atwood are contemporary poets, Neruda remains their senior. According to places of origin, each of these poets comes from a different country and even the language (English) is not common to them. Neruda writes in Spanish and he has been translated into numerous western and eastern languages, English being one of them. Besides, Neruda's concern is also with European Spain and he shaves many thoughts with those Spanish writers as well as the other writers of South America, other than Chile. Atwood's language (English) is ensured by her birth in Canada, but she is very conscious of the language conflicts at home. There was a time when French became a principal issue in the politics of Quebec and Quebec's succession from Canada seemed imminent. Atwood depicted her troubled nation as "Siamese twins joined at the head, each twin desperate to be an individual, but each caught in the other's identity". For Walcott, English, French and Creoles are all his languages although he is inevitably an English writer because of the colonial question of the previous centuries that brought his ancestors to the West Indies.

Atwood's poetry focuses on the question of identity with as much passion as Neruda and Walcott. There is a style and force in her writing that has a peculiarity of its own because she is precise in delineating her subject matter, and she very rarely tells an actual story. She performs mental transformations of identity as she looks at the Canadian pioneers, the displaced American Indians, the animals in the forests, the savage land buffeted by adverse weather conditions and, of course, the changing roles of women. The country stands in as a metaphor for all of them.

They are most interested in the concepts of self-awareness and self-consciousness, and the ways in which they are displayed through space and time. There is constant metamorphosis in her images, but a recurring cycle is maintained where the same metaphors, similes and personification resonate through her work across genres. Their images are her lenses through which they perceives life as a force so persistent that it, too, needs to constantly change into other forms of self expression.

To call Neruda, Walcott and Atwood "post-colonial poets" would thus be a blanket statement because one would expect post-colonial writings to include the work of other writers of the Diaspora, especially the Indian subcontinent, Africa, the Middle and the Far-East, where the colonisers ruled but did not settle.

Neither the "20<sup>th</sup> Century" nor post-colonial demonstrates any singular movement in literature like Romantic or Neo-Classical writing does. Rather, the former are names given to a period of time when varying experiments in styles and writing came into focus because similarity of political events caused the intellectuals to be sensitive about the loss of culture. Boundaries were lost and replaced, and exile became an international condition. Thus, it is safer to narrow down the borders of Neruda, Walcott and Atwood and call them "contemporary poets" belonging to the other Americas beyond the United States.

Neruda, Walcott and Atwood represent various voices and cultures that make up the grand mix of American identity and they are descended from the settler's who made the New World possible. All of them portray socio-political conditions of their countries in contemporary times, factoring in war and colonization as significantly destructive forces for the human psyche. These poets also discuss language and racial identity as important measures for an individual culture to survive. Finally, they have certain similar metaphors running through the lines of their poetry- for instance, water and animal imagery. A single description for Neruda, Walcott and Atwood would be what T.S.Eliot wrote in his essay, 'Tradition and Individual Talent', that historical sense must be the foundation upon which literary culture stands, for it.

*compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones but... the whole of literature of his own country (which) has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order ... a sense of timelessness as well as the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together is what makes a writer traditional ... what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.*

To appreciate the "contemporaneity" of Neruda, Walcott and Atwood, we need to view them against the backdrop of their countries' literatures, and engage ourselves in a close reading of the poems chosen. They are contemporary poets voicing their individual and nationalistic concerns while, at the same time, universalising their predicament--- a search for identity.

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