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ZENIA AS A CANADIAN MONSTER IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

Abstract

This paper examines the character of Zenia in *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood, focusing on the elements of the novel that are characteristic of Canadian literature. These motifs, which include the split attitude towards nature, the double position of the colonizer and the colonized, victimhood and the treatment of otherness, as well as a sense of inferiority in relation to both Europe and the United States, are examined in an attempt to shed light on the way Atwood uses them to construct Zenia as a fantastically powerful adversary to her three protagonists. Bearing in mind that Atwood has argued that the perceived dullness of Canada might be only a disguise, this paper aims to demonstrate how *The Robber Bride's* monstrous Zenia brings those hidden hauntings to the forefront.

Key words: Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, nature, victimhood, otherness

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* relates the story of Tony, Charis and Roz, three friends brought together by their encounters with the fatal, glamorous and charismatic "other woman" Zenia, whose devastating

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machinations and brutal assaults wreak havoc on their lives. Atwood's Zenia is "impossibly, fantastically bad" (Moore 1993); she is a usurper and a maneater whose seductive powers and manipulation tactics reach such fantastic proportions that no one can escape her clutches unscathed.

All three protagonists meet Zenia in their college days, but her thieving, deceiving and blackmailing ways follow them over the next three decades. Strikingly beautiful and irresistibly charming, Zenia first crosses paths with Tony, a shy history student secretly in love with her best friend, Zenia's boyfriend West. Zenia repays Tony's friendship and admiration with blackmail and extortion, threatening to ruin her academic career by revealing that Tony has written a paper for her, after which she vanishes without a trace. Years later, Tony and West are married, but Zenia returns and reclaims West like "a suitcase left at the train station" (Atwood 1994: 217), only to abandon him again and let Tony pick up the pieces. Next, Zenia targets Charis, a New Ager obsessed with spiritual health, convincing her that she is suffering from cancer and that she has been a victim of West's abuse. Charis lets her in her home, which she shares with Billy, her Vietnam draft-dodger boyfriend, and attempts to nurse her back to health with vegetable juices and meditation. Predictably, Zenia turns on her, seduces Billy and takes him away. Finally, she returns yet again, and this time she befriends Roz: although "forewarned" and "forearmed" (Atwood 1994: 426), Roz is moved and taken in when Zenia claims that Roz's father saved her as a baby during World War II. As readers have by now come to expect, Zenia ends up stealing away Mitch, Roz's chronically unfaithful husband, and then disappears with a generous sum of their money.

Dazzling, deceitful and devilish, Zenia is "presented as a cultural stereotype – as the other woman who undermines the bond between women through her sexual rivalry and competition" (Bouson 1995: 158). The text, however, continually suggests that Zenia is not entirely "other," insofar as she is the protagonists' double. Interpretations of the novel have almost unanimously cast Zenia in the role of a shadow self, the three women's personal monster summoned and possibly even created by their own inner duality, repressed and split-off parts and unrecognized impulses. Coral Ann Howells (1996: 83) points out that Zenia is linked to the protagonists' "dark twins" or hidden alternate selves, while Hilde Staels (2010: 41) states that Zenia is "the main characters' *Doppelgänger* or double." In a New York Times interview, Atwood herself has described

Zenia as “a shadow” similar to those found in Hoffman’s *Doppelgänger* tales (as cited in Wyatt 1998: 38).

However, Zenia is not only a dark shadow self, but also a composite figure assembled from elements of various mythical and literary figures. As Howells (1996: 81) suggests, she is a Gothic “demonic woman” whom Atwood has fashioned by “reassembling parts of old legends and fairy tales” in a feat worthy of Dr. Frankenstein. The very title of the novel points to Zenia’s role of the bloodthirsty Robber Bride in a revised Grimm fairytale where women play all the characters. She is also portrayed as an undead *Vampira* who descends on her victims “with her bared incisors” (Atwood 1994: 228). The novel suggests that Zenia has plenty of other faces too: she is a contemporary incarnation of Jezebel, as well as the Byzantine empress Theophano and Dame Giraude who are featured in Tony’s historical anecdotes. Furthermore, Atwood has stated that Zenia’s literary origins can be traced back to a long line of female rebels and villainesses which, among others, includes Lilith, Lady Macbeth and Becky Sharp (Terkel 1993).

Interweaving the threads of history, myth and fantasy in the figure of Zenia, Atwood creates a character who “seems to be real but [...] has a double existence for she belongs to two different fictional discourses, that of realism and of fantasy” and who “exists both as a character in the realistic fiction and also as the projection of three women’s imaginations” (Howells 1996: 81). Potts (1999: 283) postulates that Atwood, taking inspiration from the “old world” and reworking its myths, introduces a supernatural and fantastic dimension into the novel’s Canadian setting, traditionally viewed as dull, ghostless and devoid of magic.

While this perceived lack of ghosts¹ has long haunted Canadian literature, various interpretations have, in fact, linked Zenia’s uncanny powers with certain figures of the Canadian imagination. In her role of the archetypal trickster, the amoral messenger of gods who disrupts the status quo and sets events in motion (Staels 2010), Zenia may be related to certain Native legends in which, as Atwood points out, the trickster is often female or ambiguously gendered (Terkel 1993). What is more, Zenia has been analysed in light of another Canadian myth – that of the Wendigo, a monster with a heart of ice, whom Atwood takes as an example that affirms the existence of the supernatural in Canada (Atwood 1991). Isla J. Duncan (1999) discusses the role of the cannibalistic Wendigo in the portrayal of Zenia as a man-eater; given that this creature may be seen as “a fragment

of the protagonist's psyche, a sliver of his inner life made visible" (Atwood 1991: 74), this author arrives at yet another reading of Zenia as a double, but this time interconnected with characteristically Canadian motifs.

Building on the notion that these elements of the Canadian imagination form part of Zenia, as well as on the idea that nation and belonging are of considerable significance for this novel (Rao 2006), this paper will attempt to go further and examine how certain mainstays of Canadian literature have shaped the figure of the monstrous Robber Bride. We postulate that Zenia may be seen as a Canadian monster, as the depiction of this sinister antagonist has a distinctively Canadian flavor. Zenia will first be discussed as a manifestation of the split attitude towards nature, which is seen as a place that can both bring spiritual healing and drive one insane. It will then be examined how the figure of Zenia highlights the Canadian position as both colonizers and the colonized, allowing Atwood to examine the way otherness is perceived and treated in Canada. Finally, the paper will look at the way Zenia abuses the Canadian identification with victims and sense of inferiority in order to dazzle and deceive the protagonists. This analysis aims to offer new insights into how Zenia, as Howells remarks, survives as "a powerful force [...] in 1990s Toronto" (Howells 1996: 80) and demonstrate how this amalgamation of various monsters, ghosts, myths and legends is made relevant in a contemporary Canadian context.

2. Theoretical Background

In the attempt to situate Zenia within the context of Canadian literature, some of its key concepts and concerns should first be clarified. We might therefore ask, as Atwood (2012: 3) puts it – "What is Canadian about Canadian literature?" This is a question that she famously poses in her 1972 work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she posits that Canada has its own distinctive literature that merits consideration and is not the same as British or American. This proposition, which might today seem self-evident, was not always universally acknowledged: *Survival* was met with "the ire of many who could not tolerate the belief that there was a literature in Canada" (Staines 2006: 19).

Atwood perceives this anxiety about the (non-)existence of Canadian literature as characteristic of the country's colonial mentality, an attitude which assumes that history, culture and literature are things that happen

somewhere else, while whatever is written in Canada is merely “a second-rate copy of *real* literature” (Atwood 2006: xvii). Identifying Canada as a cultural and economic colony and therefore a “collective victim,” she goes on to define victimhood and survival as the key themes of its literature, or its “persistent cultural obsession[s]” (2006: 31, xx). As Atwood suggests, there is a “superabundance of victims” in Canlit: “Stick a pin in Canadian literature at random, and nine times out of ten you will hit a victim”; consequently, she articulates her theory of the four Basic Victim Positions² as a perspective from which this literature “makes a surprising amount of sense” (Atwood 2012: 36–37).

But if Canadians are habitually portrayed as victims in the country’s literature, who – or what – are their tormentors? Apart from being the victims of colonial mentality and colonial power dynamics – in relation to both Britain and the United States, as a neo-colonial power which increasingly threatens its cultural survival (Atwood 2021: 27) – Canada and Canadian literary heroes seem to be continually victimized by their own landscape. In *Survival*, Atwood begins her analysis of the Canadian victim complex by examining the figure of Nature the Monster. As she explains, the eighteenth-century “cult of the sublime” and nineteenth-century depictions of nature as “a kind Mother or Nurse” turn out to be untenable when settlers are faced with the challenges of life in the bush, giving way to “a double-minded attitude towards Canada” and its wilderness (Atwood 2012: 46–47). Atwood illustrates this by quoting a paragraph from Susana Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* with its abrupt shift in the author’s tone:

The aspect of Nature ever did, and I hope ever will, continue: “To shoot marvelous strength into my heart.” As long as we remain true to the Divine Mother, so long will she remain faithful to her suffering children.

At the time my love for Canada was a feeling very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave. (Moodie, as cited in Atwood 2012: 47)

Atwood returns to her examination of this split attitude in *Stranger Things*, where she elaborates on the image of an “evil” Nature seen as “a frigid but sparkling fin-de-siecle femme fatale, who entices and hypnotizes male

protagonists and leads them to their doom” (Atwood 1991: 3). This image, paradoxically counteracted by visions of nature as a place of pilgrimage where one goes in search of salvation, “not as where you go to die but as where you go to renew life” (Atwood 1991: 9), gives rise to what Northrop Frye famously defines as the Canadian “garrison mentality”. “Small and isolated communities,” he writes, “confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting [...] are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality” (Frye 2003: 350–351). Such a mentality is marked by “an impulse to build fortifications both literally, against the encroaching wilderness, and figuratively, against the unknown” (Hammil 2007: 63–64), as well as by an appreciation of stability and established norms. Therefore Frye views garrisons as sterile environments “in which nothing original can grow” (Frye 2003: 351). The element of this influential concept that Atwood builds on, opening her *Survival* chapter on nature by quoting Frye, concerns the relationship with nature that forms part of garrison mentality:

I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature [...]. It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values. (Frye 2003: 350)

Sugars (2014: 20–21) observes that Frye has correctly placed the Gothic image of a vast unexplored landscape, which one enters as if being “silently swallowed,” at the root of Gothic sensibility in Canadian writing. But what is at the source of this terror in regard to nature? Frye (2003: 366) believes it to be the “riddle of unconsciousness” with its “massive indifference” and “moral silence” that stretch out before the explorer. But while Canadians might be tormented by this monstrous and haunting nature, that is not to say that encounters with it are avoided in the country’s literature. Interestingly, Sugars (2014) points out that Canadian literature in fact actively seeks different forms of hauntings – which might explain the irresistible appeal of the seductive but deadly nature to which Atwood refers. As Sugars explains, Canadian texts often “exhibit a desire for Gothic infusion” which reflects Canadian White settlers’ need to become “fixed in the landscape,”

confirming its sense of place and belonging through encountering a form of haunting (Sugars 2014: 178). If we shift our gaze back to the Canadian anxieties about the (non-)existence of their own distinct literature and culture, we may conclude that these hauntings might be so appealing precisely because they dispel doubts that the country is “too new” (Sugars 2014: 60), or too “unspoiled, uncorrupted [...] or dull” (Atwood 2012: 10) to have any hidden stories of its own to reveal.

Going back to the sources of the terror in regard to nature in Frye's writings, it is important to note that Sugars (2014) offers a different interpretation of its causes. She points out that Frye's individual whose values nature negates is in fact a colonizer “confronted with his inarticulate illegitimacy with regard to the space he inhabits”; what is at the root of this terror is therefore a “repressed sensation that one does not, in effect, belong there” (Sugars 2014: 24). As Atwood suggests, the travelers' impression that nature has remained mute and “withheld all revelation” may actually be a reflection of their inability to perceive any revelation that doesn't arrive on their terms (Atwood 2012: 51). Viewed in this context, it seems that even the Canadian lack of ghosts is not so much a lack as it is a deliberate silencing of the ones that have always inhabited its wilderness, while the hauntings the Canadian landscape brings to the fore might have to do with the colonizers' sense of displacement and preoccupation with not belonging. Defying the romantic vision of a return to nature as a return to oneself, wilderness ultimately confronts the Canadian settler with otherness.

This highlights the fact that White Canadians, from whose literary tradition Atwood speaks, occupy a dual position in relation to colonialism – if, on the one hand, they are victims – of the British Empire, of the United States, of Nature the Monster – on the other hand they must also contend with the fact that they are colonizers and victimizers as well. This is something that Atwood is well aware of: in her own words, “[w]e sometimes forget, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances towards others, both inside the country and outside it” (as cited in Staines 2006: 22). A postcolonial rethinking of Canadianness entails a redefinition of the “traditional colonial concepts of a dominantly British Canada” so as to “include the heterogeneous histories of its citizens” (Howells 2003: 90), emphasizing hybridity, reinventions and transformations. More space has therefore been given to voices that challenge “the narrative of Canada as a generous

land open to immigrants” and foreground “the divisions within Canadian society, the existence of a ‘we’ and a ‘them’” (Rao 2006: 108), questioning the treatment of otherness in Canada.

In this context, Atwood remains a “troublesome figure” in the canon of post-colonial writers, as she is, in Fiona Tolan’s words, “uncompromisingly white, middle-class, university-educated, indeed ‘waspish’” (2007: 202). It might, after all, as Hutcheon (1989) suggests, make more sense to refer to the Indigenous Peoples when discussing postcolonial literature in Canada. Nevertheless, Howells (2003: 90) indicates that Atwood’s work read through a postcolonial lens has an important role in “deconstruct[ing] myths of White European Canadian authenticity,” revealing their gaps and hidden histories of otherness that these myths are built on.

Dangerous wilderness and stifling garrisons, a search for ghosts and a denial of them, colonial inferiority and victimhood on the one hand and the role of a colonizer on the other: those seem to be some of the dualities that have shaped Canadian literature, which Atwood aims to place “on a level with other literatures of the world” (Staines 2006: 25). With these tensions in mind, we now proceed to investigate how the persistent themes of Canadian literature take shape in the character of Zenia as she exposes the ghosts that secretly haunt the novel’s heroines.

3. Zenia, a Force of Nature

In the lives of Tony, Charis and Roz, Zenia appears as an advisor with more experience under her belt than they could dream of, a worldly-wise friend from whom they can learn; Perrakis (1997) even suggests that their relationships with Zenia allows them to reexamine and reform their ways of relating to parental figures. When Zenia’s malice and trickery are unveiled, however, this congenial aspect of hers is transformed into that of a monstrous destructive force. Such an ambivalent *femme fatale* figure is not uncommon in Canadian literature, where nature, as it has already been pointed out, is often personified as a woman who is simultaneously maternal and fickle, capable of both seduction and entrapment.

Untamed and unrestrained, the hypnotizing Zenia is linked with images of wilderness throughout the novel. In Charis’s story (“Weasel Nights”), a parallel is implied between the vampiric Zenia, who flees from Charis’s home leaving behind chickens with slit throats, and weasels that

attack her grandmother's farm at night: "Karen imagined them, long thin animals like snakes, cold and silent, slithering in through walls, their mouths open, their sharp fangs ready, their eyes shining and vicious. [...] They don't kill to eat, she said. They kill for the pleasure of it" (Atwood 1994: 290). Roz envisions Zenia as the Robber Bride "lurking in her mansion in the dark forest"; returning home upon seeing her again, she feels "as if she's been away from it for a long time. Wandering lost in the dark wood with its twisted trees, enchanted" (Atwood 1994: 352, 473). The fatal Zenia, who shines "like the moon" (Atwood 1994: 149), is evidently associated with seductive and mindlessly cruel nature. It should, however, be noted that nature is not always external, but often closely related to the body and sexuality; as Hutcheon indicates, an interesting transformation of traditionally male wilderness novel occurs in Canadian writing when female characters are made to "cope with the wilderness that is both inside and outside them – that both of physical nature and of their human/sexual nature as women" (Hutcheon 1988: 132). This aspect of nature is doubtless essential to Zenia's power and appeal: "She was raw, [...] she was raw sex, whereas Tony herself was only the cooked variety. Parboiled to get the dangerous wildness out" (Atwood 1994: 487).

As opposed to the wild, homeless and homewrecking Zenia, the three friends are depicted as focused on separating themselves from the outside world with all sorts of shells and walls, which is a tendency reflected above all in the way they relate to their homes. Rao (2006: 103) argues that the protagonists, who all struggle with a sense of alienation from their families and communities, seek refuge and belonging in the safety of their home, with its "implications of stability and security".

Tony, for instance, is proud of her "solid house, reassuring; a fort, a bastion, a keep"; she lives inside a "beetle-like little armoured carapace" in a "turreted fortress" (Atwood 1994: 21, 153, 470). Charis, unsure "where the edges of her body [end] and the rest of the world [begins]," is repeatedly seen struggling to regain control over her personal space: "*My body, mine*" (Atwood 1994: 73, 79). With Tony and Roz's help, she exorcises fragments of Billy and Zenia's presence from her island house: "Here she is, back at her house, her fragile but steady house, her house that is still standing" (Atwood 1994: 341). Roz experiences regular "redecorating frenzies" and keeps making over her home, which, as Potts (1999: 289) remarks, points to her struggles – and her need – to define where she belongs and what home is for her. She is bound to her house by

her maternal and marital role: Mitch “likes the image of Roz with an apron and a watering can, just as he likes the image of Roz with an apron and a frying pan”; Roz concludes that “[t]he constant is the apron, the Good Housekeeping guarantee that Roz will always be home whenever Mitch chooses to get back there” (Atwood 1994: 429). She wants her children to “know this is a safe house, [to] know she’s there, planted solidly” (Atwood 1994: 363). Roz’s homemaking role is emphasized by her desire to keep the outside world at an arm’s length: “The worst thing about swimming pools as far as Roz is concerned is that they are one step too close to the great outdoors” (Atwood 1994: 429). She is often troubled by images of the wilderness invading her home; she imagines, for instance, that “there are sharks” swimming in her bathtub (Atwood 1994: 126).

If the wandering Zenia is a personification of the wilderness on the one hand, Tony, Charis and Roz’s attitude towards their homes could, on the other, be linked with the Canadian garrison mentality. The three women seek shelter in the safety of their homes, holding on to their stable identities and defending their boundaries. Yet if nothing new can grow in barricaded garrisons, as Frye suggests, the interventions of the seductive and destructive Zenia may actually be necessary. “*No! No! On! On!*” (Atwood 1994: 218), Tony therefore finds herself thinking as she contemplates Zenia’s rampage. Before they meet Zenia, the three women’s attitude does not allow for growth or change; in fact, they all find themselves in unsatisfactory relationships, troubled by their childhood memories and traumas that they are only able to repress and not resolve. This impasse is, however, broken when they begin to identify with Zenia and her rebelliousness, boldness, unfettered sexuality and ability to reshape and refashion the world and herself as she pleases. While disturbing their boundaries, the homewrecking Zenia “makes [them] over and fundamentally changes [their] relationship with the events of the past” (McWilliams 2016: 96), allowing them to identify with “a figure of adult female sexuality” (Wyatt 1998: 49) and access new modes of relating to those around them while “imaginatively recreating their relationships with the (m)other” (Perrakis 1997: 166).

Yet if stepping outside of the safe boundaries of a garrison can be transformative, it could also lead the protagonists to their doom. In her constant shapeshifting transformations and reinventions, Zenia remains as vast, amoral and impenetrable as Nature the Monster, swallowing and driving mad those who answer the seductive call of the wild. Eternally indeterminate, shadowy and vague, she is able to become anyone – but

she is also no one, as she has no fixed identity. Interestingly, Zenia has no surname, home, or definitive place and time of birth – for Wyatt (1998: 42), she is not even a subject. When faced with Zenia, the protagonists feel invaded by her overpowering presence; nevertheless, just like settlers exploring the Canadian landscape, they also fear terror at being faced with a vast nothingness. They repeatedly voice their anxieties in regard to the potentially “empty” essence of Zenia, who, as Charis fears, may be “soulless” and only an “empty shell;” there might be “nothing behind the two-dimensional image” of Zenia “but a thin layer of mercury” (Atwood 1994: 508, 553). The protagonists’ identities are therefore in danger of being drained and taken over by a soulless vampiric thief as they all identify and merge with Zenia. Tony “looks at her [...] and sees her own reflection,” Charis “thinks about being Zenia”; in a dream, “Zenia’s edges dissolve like a watercolour in the rain and Charis merges into her,” while Roz “would like to be Zenia” (Atwood 1994: 197, 317, 479, 473). Perrakis observes that in identifying with Zenia, Tony “risks having her inner world invaded and appropriated by a powerful (m)other” (Perrakis 1997: 158).

While these depictions of Zenia’s emptiness link her with the maddening silent expanse of Nature the Monster, they are also related to the image of Zenia as a double that many interpretations point to. In fact, what is terrifying in nature might be akin to what is terrifying about Zenia as a second self. The image of a self being swallowed and absorbed, a self who disintegrates when faced with an inscrutable shadowy figure, is typical of the literature of doubles and second selves. The existence of a double, a being who remains half-hidden and whose motivation is impossible to grasp, implies that “identity is a false category” and threatens to shatter it: if two people are identical, then “neither has a unique, well defined identity of his own” (Slethaug 1993: 5). Eran Dorfman (2020: 71) postulates that certain forms of the double originate from “a timeless and impersonal environment” revealed to one during sleepless nights as an “endless, yet empty existence,” calling into question the world of clear forms and stable identities – much like Frye’s terrifying nature in whose vast unconsciousness travelers lose themselves.

Nevertheless, as numerous studies dealing with doubles indicate, this seemingly destructive being often plays an inwardly constructive role in the life of the protagonist and therefore needs to be approached and accounted for (Rosenfield 1963, Keppler 1972, Dorfman 2020); it is Keppler’s proposition that every story of a second self is “a story of

shaping” the protagonist, “a *Bildungsroman*” (Keppler 1972: 195). As well as Canadian nature, the double is an ambivalent figure; yet while nature in Canadian literature has been typically cast as either “good” or “evil,” either a kind mother or a fickle tormentor, the double can be both things at once. While this creature who is both *I* and not-*I* threatens to erase the protagonists’ subjectivity by demolishing the walls meant to separate the self from the outside world, the destruction it creates might offer the protagonists a chance to reexamine and rebuild their identities.

Similarly, Zenia drives each of the three friends to the edge of madness and death: after her attacks, “devastated” Tony finds and contemplates using the gun her father committed suicide with, Charis hears a voice telling her “that she might as well give up,” and Roz swallows a handful of sleeping pills “out of simple irritation of being awake” (Atwood 1994: 218–219, 333, 464). Nevertheless, as Zenia points out during their final confrontations, it may well be true that she “never had anything against [them] personally” and that they, in fact, are “better off” after her interventions (Atwood 1994: 494, 526). What is more, when we meet the same characters again, in the short story “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth” that appeared in Atwood’s collection *Stone Mattress*, they all appear to be leading peaceful and contented lives, and even Zenia reappears in a much more benevolent form. It seems that the outcome of their battles with Zenia is indeed similar to what Rosenfield (1963: 333) describes in her account of literary doubles:

In so far as the hero does return from the underworld of his being and is able to use his new knowledge [...] The Double novel reveals not a disintegration of the personality but a reintegration, a recognition of the necessary balance between order and freedom.

By interweaving the figure of the double with the Canadian tensions between the safety of the garrison and the call of the wilderness, Atwood manages to create a character who is able to play both paradoxical roles of Canadian nature at once. Almost driving the heroines to madness and destruction, Zenia ultimately guides them towards the freeing possibility of transformation. As Tony thinks about Zenia in the final chapter of the novel, she wonders: “Are we in any way like her?” (Atwood 1994: 564). This question, however, no longer suggests the threat of being annihilated and swallowed by her unbounded, omnipotent and indecipherable presence;

instead, it points to an examination of the three women's identities that has allowed them to seek freedom outside the walls of the garrison, without getting lost in the wilderness.

4. *Xeno, Xenophobic, Xenia: The Other as a Scapegoat and a Victim*

As the protagonists' second self, Zenia stands at the threshold of otherness: she is a mirror reflection on the one hand and a hostile stranger who demolishes their homes and identities on the other. An orphan with no identifiable homeland and an eternal outsider with no friends, family, or any other ties that bind her to the community, Zenia – who continually presents herself as a member of an oppressed and minority group – can be seen as the embodiment of difference and foreignness. No one knows where Zenia comes from, yet Tony imagines it to be “someplace long ago and distant in space, [...] someplace bruised, and very tangled” where “something ordinary but horrifying is taking place” (Atwood 1994: 3). Her foreignness is encoded even in her name – when Tony attempts to trace its meaning, among its possible roots she finds the following: “*Xenia*, a Russian word for hospitable, a Greek one pertaining to the action of a foreign pollen upon the fruit [...]; *Xeno*, Greek, a stranger, as in *xenophobic*” (Atwood 1994: 553). As she shatters the three women's homes and identities that once provided “an illusion of coherence and stability based on the exclusion of specific histories [...], the repression of differences even within oneself” (Rao 2006: 106), Zenia puts to the test their ability to confront otherness that comes both from within and without.

According to Tolan (2007), who analyzes *The Robber Bride* through a postcolonial lens, Zenia is at the same time a double (i.e., a repressed and split off part of themselves) and an other. This author argues that “[i]n colonial discourse, the imposition of the image of the self onto the other becomes compulsive” (Tolan 2007: 217); therefore, the three women all project their own image onto Zenia, an unknowable foreigner. But while Zenia is a master of mimicry – after all, “even her most superficial disguises were total” (Atwood 1994: 42), it is a mimicry that is fickle and treacherous, as it “prompts anxiety because she refuses to reflect a stable image back to the self” (Tolan 2007: 219). It therefore turns out that among the many borders that Zenia crosses is the one between sameness and difference: she is a second self who allows the protagonists to identify with her, yet she

retains the power to look back and reject the passive role of a reflection. This character consequently provides a way “to challenge Canada on some of its assumptions of racial innocence by examining the way in which the First World self responds to the presence of the other” (Tolan 2007: 200). As it turns out, this response is shown to abound in dualities: the position of Canada is simultaneously that of privilege and oppression, and the identification with the victim is counteracted by xenophobic scapegoating.

As a perpetual outsider, Zenia is the one who does and says all that society deems forbidden and unthinkable. “So much for propriety” (Atwood 1994: 114), thinks Roz as she witnesses her defiant outbursts. These forbidden acts, however, are secretly desired: while the heroines fear and despise her, they must also admit that they want “[t]o cheer Zenia on, even to encourage her [...]. To participate in her daring, her contempt for almost everything, her rapacity and lawlessness” (Atwood 1994: 218). This is made even more explicit in “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth,” where Charis concludes that “[m]aybe Zenia was [...] acting out stuff that they didn’t have the strength to act out by themselves” (Atwood 2015: 169). Nevertheless, once she enacts these hidden fantasies, Zenia becomes the target of collective rage: as the women’s secret admiration gives way to envy and hatred, Zenia is no longer seen as a secret ally, but as a usurper. She is also the target of anger that ought to have been directed at the men who betrayed and abandoned the protagonists, but whom all three infantilize and absolve of guilt. “You used him,” shouts Roz at Zenia after Mitch’s suicide, “You’re responsible for his death;” “West has been hypnotized,” Tony claims, “it’s Zenia talking, from the inside of his head;” Charis is convinced that Zenia “sold Billy,” took him away and mercilessly killed her chickens, even though it turns out that Billy did all these things himself – and with gusto, if we are to believe Zenia’s side of the story (Atwood 1994: 527, 217, 342).

Consequently, as Potts suggests, Zenia becomes a scapegoat onto which the community projects its collective conflicts and hidden impulses. Relying on René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, which examines sacrificial rites in different societies, this author explains that the group chooses to target the outsider when it needs to release pent-up anger that might otherwise destroy the community from within, as the death of an outcast with no links to the community will not lead to further escalation of violence (Potts 1999: 286–288). The protagonists, however, remain unaware that they have turned Zenia into a scapegoat: “Because the three friends have so

thoroughly accepted their victim status as women and as Canadians, they fail to see themselves as potential victimizers” (Potts 1999: 292).

As, according to Atwood, it might often happen in Canada, in focusing on their own powerlessness and victimization the protagonists disregard the injury they inflict on others. Thus, while the three women occasionally seem to glimpse that there is something, as Charis suggests, that they should “ask [...] forgiveness” for in regard to their relationship with Zenia (Atwood 1994: 533), this realization is never allowed to come entirely to the surface. In her role of the community’s scapegoat, Zenia is therefore a figure who calls into question the Canadian readiness to hold themselves accountable for their treatment of otherness and difference.

Perhaps, however, Zenia must become a scapegoat because she refuses to passively accept the only other option that may be offered to her as an outsider – that of a victim. Instead, she consciously appropriates the mask of a victim and masterfully manipulates it in yet another act of mimicry. As Charis, Roz and Tony’s childhoods are marked by abuse, neglect, powerlessness or humiliation, they are accustomed to the position of the victim and therefore quick to identify with Zenia’s concocted histories of suffering and oppression, befriending her and extending their compassion and hospitality. Upon encountering Zenia, each of the three women looks back on her past and reconstructs the memories of their own trauma: Tony’s relationship with her disengaged mother who ends up abandoning her, and her father’s suicide, Charis’s physical abuse at the hands of her mother, followed by horrifying sexual abuse when she is adopted by her uncle, and Roz’s status of a “displaced person” torn between two communities, her mother’s Irish Catholic and her father’s Jewish one. But as Bouson (1995: 157) observes, “[i]f the psychoanalytic paradigm is put to serious use in *The Robber Bride*’s reconstruction of the histories of Roz, Tony, and Charis, it is openly parodied in Zenia’s sensational stories about her childhood and adult life,” stories that she uses to justify and explain away her destructive behavior.

However, what seems to be parodied in Zenia’s stories is not only the discourse of psychoanalysis, but also the status of victim narratives in Canadian literature. Bearing in mind the prominence of victims in Canadian storytelling, it should come as no surprise that Charis, Roz and Tony identify with her as yet another victim; in Canada, with its “superabundance of victims,” Zenia and her outrageous stories of suffering and hardship are perhaps more at home than they would be elsewhere in the world. Where

Zenia unexpectedly switches the plot on the protagonists, however, is in revealing that she has actively constructed this role and turned it to her own advantage, instead of having it imposed upon her. If in the context of seduction the “Zenias of this world have studied the situation,” and instead of letting themselves “be moulded into male fantasies, they’ve done it themselves” (Atwood 1994: 471–472), it appears that Zenia has done the same with victim roles in a Canadian setting.

The fact that Zenia’s victimhood is only a mask therefore implies that she has the power to take it off, but once she does that, she is transformed into a monstrous force that is all otherness, a pure manifestation of repressed and unacknowledged impulses. That is the face of Zenia, both feared and scapegoated, that is eventually expelled from the text as the heroines are granted their happy ending. While the three women do not succumb to their murderous impulses in regard to Zenia, it is implied that they are somehow responsible for her death – an inexplicable accident, murder or suicide, which suddenly grants them their greatest wish: to be rid of their wicked rival, their own rejected mirror image.

Does such an ending suggest the three friends’ ultimate inability to deal with otherness, both within and without, and an unwillingness to acknowledge their own complicity in its destruction? Does this outcome imply that Canada is equally incapable of accepting those who are seen as outsiders, and that the issues they raise are therefore made to conveniently disappear as if by magic? Having said goodbye to Zenia, the three women gather to tell stories of their battles with her: “That’s what they will do, increasingly in their lives: tell stories. Tonight their stories will be about Zenia” (Atwood 1994: 564). We may, this resolution seems to suggest, attempt to banish our repressed ghosts, but their stories continue to haunt us and demand to be reckoned with. If the protagonists were unable to confront Zenia directly, what remains to be seen is whether they can confront her through storytelling. The stories of Zenia, it is implied, will have to be stories of hybridity and constant reinventions, of otherness hidden behind the ostensible unity of personal and national identities – just like many other stories that contemporary Canada aims to articulate.

5. Such Things Don’t Happen Here: Manipulating the Canadian Sense of Inferiority

Demonstrating the split position of Canadians as both colonizers and colonized, in addition to underscoring the complexities of their stance towards otherness, the protagonists' reaction to Zenia also reveals a sense of inferiority that Atwood identifies as part of colonial mentality. As Potts (1999: 290) points out, Zenia deceives all three women by "playing on their sense that there is nothing inherently terrifying, fascinating, or even notable about where they come from." Zenia, after all, is a paradoxical creature: she is not only an exotic and otherized stranger who "with a wave of her hand [...] invokes deserts, date palms, mystic knowledge," but also has European roots and is familiar with "a higher, a deeper culture" of Europe, as well as "the States, where the big folks play" (Atwood 1994: 215). Manipulative and beguiling, she uses this knowledge to captivate the three friends, play on their insecurities and catch them by surprise.

In Tony's case, the sense of inferiority that Zenia takes advantage of stems from her relationship with her cold and uncaring mother, who unwillingly gave up her life in England to move to Canada. She shows nothing but contempt for her new home and "this narrow-minded provincial city, in this too-large, too-small, too-cold, too-hot country that she hates with a strange, entrapped, and baffled fury. *Don't talk like that!* she hisses at Tony. She means the accent" (Atwood 1994: 171). Tony's deeply ingrained feeling that her homeland is a second-rate place makes her susceptible to the charms of Zenia, whose life story abounds in anecdotes that take place in Europe, that continent of tumultuous history and momentous battles that Tony is fascinated by; as a Canadian, Tony believes that "real" life can only be found elsewhere. She is therefore easily taken in by Zenia's dazzling adventures, which make her own story seem "minor, grey, suburban; a sedate parochial anecdote; a footnote. Whereas Zenia's life sparkles – no, it glares, in the lurid although uncertain light cast by large and portentous world events" (Atwood 1994: 196–197).

Zenia's next victim, Charis, believes that Canada is a peaceful, mundane place where nothing extraordinary could happen and no monsters could be lurking from the shadows. Her understanding of her homeland is marked, as Potts (1999: 290) suggests, by "a false sense of security that blinds her to encroaching doom." "Things like that might happen in the United States," she muses while considering Billy's potential arrest, but "not in this country, familiar to her and drab, undramatic and flat." On the other hand, she perceives the States, where Billy is from, as "[s]trange, and more dangerous [...] – and maybe because of that, superior. The things that

happen there are said to matter in the world. Unlike the things that happen here” (Atwood 1994: 248–249). Charis’s perception of Canada as a safe, lackluster and unmagical place appears to make her oblivious to Zenia’s uncanny doings and fantastic abductions that are taking place right before her eyes.

Finally, Roz, whose ancestry and social position perhaps best illustrate the dual Canadian position of simultaneous oppression and privilege, feels inferior to “waspish” Mitch, who “had roots on his roots,” due to her immigrant background:

Mitch has always been able to make her feel as if she were just off the boat [...]. Which boat? There are many boats in her ancestral past, as far as she can tell. Everyone she’s descended from got kicked out of somewhere else, for being too poor or too politically uncouth or for having the wrong profile or accent or hair colour. (Atwood 1994: 364)

As it turns out, Zenia deceives Roz by offering her an escape from this feeling of inferiority with a fabricated story that promises to untangle her roots and justify the actions of her “cunning father, her father the fixer, her father the crook” (Atwood 1994: 426), granting her a backstory she can be proud of. While playing on those insecurities and at the same time impressing Roz with her stories of “the wide world, wider than Toronto; the deep world, deeper than the small pond where Roz is such a large and sheltered frog” (Atwood 1994: 438), Zenia convinces her to let her guard down and then mercilessly abuses her trust.

Manipulating the three friends’ view of their homeland as an inferior place where no monsters can reside, where one must always seek excitement and validation in someone else’s stories, it seems that the undead Zenia, ironically, confirms Earle Birney’s famous thoughts on the lack of ghosts that haunts Canada. The protagonists are continually haunted by Zenia’s presence in part because they wrongly believe that they live in a place where no such monsters could reside. What makes the irony even greater is the fact that Zenia is – alongside many other things she embodies – also an incarnation of the obsessive preoccupations that haunt precisely that place, outwardly so drab and seemingly devoid of magic. In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood therefore provides a striking response to the entrenched belief that Canada is “a dull place, devoid of romantic interest

and rhetorical excesses, with not enough blood spilled on the soil to make it fertile, and above all, ghostless” (Atwood, as cited in Potts 1999: 283).

If, as Atwood suggests in *Survival*, Canadians continue to look at “here” as nothing but an inferior version of what happens “there,” then they “render invisible” what actually exists on their soil and end up destined to “look at a thing without really seeing it, or look at it and mistake it for something else” (Atwood 2012: 12). While advocating for the recognition of Canadian literature, in *The Robber Bride* she also seems to illustrate what happens when Canadians believe that they have no stories of their own to tell, or that they are nothing but footnotes. Much to their detriment, they allow themselves to be dazzled and seduced by someone else’s stories, obediently playing the roles they are assigned. Failing to recognize where they are, they risk getting lost in the snares of diabolical Robber Brides that lurk in dark forests. Ghosts and monsters, the story of Zenia therefore seems to affirm, may very well be found in Canada, and if they are ever to be defeated, what needs to be exorcised first is the belief in the lack of ghosts – the haunting fixation on one’s own inferiority and illegitimacy.

6. Conclusion: A Haunting Found, a Map Redrawn

“Boringness, in anglophone Canadian literature and sometimes even in its life, is often a disguise concealing dark doings in the cellar,” writes Margaret Atwood (1991: 54). In creating the character of Zenia – wild, excessive and nightmarish, but certainly never boring – Atwood seems to have shed light on those dark cellars, revealing what creatures that haunt Canada might be made of. While for Tony, Charis and Roz Zenia might be their “own monster” (Atwood 1994: 113) as she plays on their personal secrets, repressed desires and hidden anxieties, she is also a monster who embodies the unresolved tensions and persistent challenges that keep resurfacing in Canadian literature and demand to be addressed. A relentless force of nature that invades the protagonists’ homes, an oppressed other who refuses to be silenced, a dazzling messenger from places both dangerous and exhilarating, a scapegoat and a victim who uses victimhood to her own advantage, Atwood’s Zenia not only affirms the presence of ghosts in Canada, but also weaves distinctly Canadian elements into a familiar literary tapestry of “old world” antagonists – Gothic monsters, *Doppelgängers*, and phantoms.

If Canadian literature, as Sugars (2014) suggests, actively seeks its ghosts and hauntings so as to achieve substantiation, it seems that the war with the gothic figure of Zenia has certainly helped it achieve this goal. As the novel draws to a close, in one of its final scenes we see Tony spread out a map of Toronto over her map of thirteenth-century Europe. No longer seen as dull, insignificant and inferior, the city where she fought her battles with Zenia finally seems to be placed on the same level as the portentous battlefields of the old world. Living on in the minds and memories of the three women whose lives and homes she used to rob and raid, the ravishing and ravaging Zenia also lives on as a remarkable female monster that puts Canadian literary preoccupations on a larger literary map.

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