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## Imagery of Wilderness in Margaret Hollingsworth's *Islands*

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### Emotional Realities in Margaret Hollingsworth's Creative Work

Among the women writers in Canada, Margaret Hollingsworth is the most popular modern Canadian writer. According to her "I object to being called a feminist writer as much as I object to being dubbed a woman playwright. My beliefs and attitudes will naturally inform what I write; that should be enough" (p.112). The reality of her immigrant status shaped Hollingsworth's perspective and permeated her work.

All her plays reveal her ongoing desire to present emotional realities, not simply the external ones, and to give the audience access to the inner world of her complicated characters. Her affinity is for unsettling psychic events or circumstances as experienced by female characters trying to make sense of the situation in which they find themselves. In all her plays she pictured the women characters in a very effective and powerful manner, and portrayed how they are carrying out her self-identity by the way of escaping from patriarchal tradition and reaching to colonial.

### Sense of Isolation

Women's sense of isolation and the need for self-recognition relate to both the national struggle for identity in the post-colonial age and female struggle for identity in the tradition of patriarchy. This paper discusses how Margaret Hollingsworth explores the association of national identity

and female identity on many levels. The portrayal of the immigrant is used to further emphasize the female sense of isolation and marginality.

### **Wilderness Imagery**

In the play Islands, the quest for female consciousness finds its expression in the imagery of wilderness. The protagonist's anxiety, her fear of non-being, forces her to confront and overcome the dangers inherent in the physical environment. The wilderness in Islands offers the opportunity for female self-actualization, unhampered by the constraints imposed by patriarchal urban society.

The wilderness in Islands, then, sets the stage on which Muriel projects her inner world. By confronting the uncertainty of coping alone on a secluded island in British Columbia, Muriel is able to reject the trappings of social conventions. This escape from established structures offers the route toward self-discovery and is highly prevalent in Canadian literature. Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and Ringwood's play The Lodge, for example, both deal with the theme of escape to the wilds as a means of self-revelation. The "northern utopia", the unspoiled wilderness, untainted by the corruption of 'southern' civilization, becomes the means of deliverance.

...the northern wilderness is a place where men and women in flight from what they feel are the decadent and sterile values of the 'South' may seek a heightened self-awareness—perhaps even perceptions so transcendental as to be termed 'salvation' (P.17).

### **Retreat from Civilization**

In Islands, Hollingsworth expresses the retreat from civilization through Muriel's flight northward to a secluded island in British Columbia, abandoning the stifling values of her mother's conventional world.

The escape to the wilderness in order to live the pioneer life is traditionally associated with male experience, whereas the role of women alone in the wilderness has often been that of victim. "Traditionally women have survived on the frontier as either wives or prostitutes—and therefore as followers, certainly not as trail-blazers" (P.96). By fleeing from the corruption of civilization, Muriel repudiated the demands of patriarchal society, and finds the courage to define herself in a situation outside social roles and expectations.

In Islands, Hollingsworth expands her dramatic vision of the wilderness myth by associating the idea of female escape from patriarchal tradition with the potential for new definitions offered in a natural setting.

### **Domestic Oppression and Fragmented Consciousness**

The play Islands is a continuation of the play Alli Alli Oh, in which the relationship between Muriel and Alli, a woman Muriel rescues from a mental institution, is explored. While Alli Alli

Oh focuses on the domestic oppression which leads to Alli's fragmented state of consciousness, Islands deals with Muriel's attempt to rid herself of social obligations, which includes the demands of Alli. In Alli Alli Oh, Alli is shown to share in Muriel's search for identity, whereas in Islands, Muriel begins to reject Alli in an attempt to achieve her own autonomy.

The island emblemizes Muriel's attainment of a separate identity and her disconnection from the demands of others. By metaphorically representing the island as a sanctuary, Hollingsworth espoused Margaret Atwood's concept of "The Island". This implies the "island-as-body, self contained, a Body Politic, evolving organically, with a hierarchical structure..." (P. 32) and is, in Atwood's view, the British symbol of refuge and security. To this Hollingsworth adds the Canadian myth of wilderness, implicit in which are the notions of escape and survival. Muriel's decision to live on the island symbolizes both the Canadian "spiritual survival" metaphor, and the British metaphor of island as haven and stronghold. By interiorizing her struggle for survival against the external elements of the wilderness, Muriel takes on the responsibility for her own process of development and salvation.

The opening scene of the play shows Muriel absorbed at her drawing board where she designs experimental techniques for her farm. Through Muriel's efforts to be self-sufficient in organizing her new life, Hollingsworth suggests the correlation between the protagonist's building of her own farm and acquiring recognition of her own powers. Like the protagonist in The Tomorrow Box, by Anne Chislett, Muriel's farm gives her life meaning. On an individual level, in both plays, the women reject human relationships in an attempt to define their own selfhood in relation to the farm they manage.

### **Expression of Female Interior Space**

The wilderness in Islands is an expression of female interior space which the protagonist tries to map out. On the secluded island, Muriel seeks to create a self-contained reality. Uncertain about her identity within society and her family, Muriel finds the untamed island a stimulating setting in which she can project her inner self.

In her social realm on the mainland of British Columbia, Muriel had no clear definition of self. In solitude on the island, Muriel is able to explore and penetrate her inner psyche without intrusion. Muriel's new understanding of self is expressed in the shaping of her external reality and the defining of her female sense of place.

I looked around here...tried to take stock of the old place. I began to see... how...how unfocused I'd allowed myself to get. I'd started clearing a couple of spots, got a few head of stock, couple of hens, weather proofed part of the barn, made a half-assed attempt at rewiring. Nothing carried through. I'd let myself get sloppy. I took too much notice of other people.(P.126-127)

Produced in 1977, Islands embodies the feminist quest for alternatives to women's traditional position according to patriarchal doctrine. Muriel exudes the feminist rejection of the stereotypical role of women, one that "assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to

the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male” (P.26). Representative of sex role stereotypes within conventional society is Rose, Muriel’s mother. When Rose comes to visit Muriel for the first time in five years, she is a reminder of the conformity from which Muriel has tried to escape.

Muriel sees her mother’s relationship with Chuck as part of the corruption of society from which she has fled. Muriel believes Chuck, as a banker, was instrumental in exploiting the farmers and destroying their connection with the land. To Muriel, Rose’s reality is one that is disconnected from the natural world.

Rose is portrayed as the traditional mother who sacrifices her own individuality for the sake of the family. Her unquestioning acceptance of her role creates an illusion of harmony, concealing the truth behind a mask of assumed moral values.

In the natural setting of the wilderness, stimulated by the wild landscape far from the confines of established society, Rose begins to reflect upon her role as a mother and wife. She reveals to Muriel for the first time that she knew about the illicit activities of Muriel’s father. Both Muriel and Rose attain a new level of intimacy, by expressing feelings they previously concealed. Rose reveals the hypocrisies of her position as the peace-keeping wife and mother, and finally admits she knew about the cockfights and her husband’s affairs. However, when she thinks of her relationship with Chuck, she quickly returns to her former orthodox approach. Afraid of the powerful feelings evoked by her confessions to Muriel, Rose tries to bring the level of discussion back to the boundaries of surface reality.

Rose seems most concerned that Chuck’s expectations be upheld, again by concealing the truth, and clings tenaciously to the moral values Chuck represents. Rose’s hypocrisy is apparent when she must keep an air of respectability by not sharing a bed with Chuck when he comes nor does she find it suitable to share a bed with Muriel.

Muriel’s sense of betrayal indicates the ambivalent relationship between herself and her mother. She feels protective of her mother’s helplessness, but at the same time blames her mother for being weak and complacent. In response to Muriel’s anger, Rose defends her position by saying: “If you marry a wild man you take the consequences”. (P.126) Jean Baker Miller writes about the position of motherhood in patriarchy and its effect on mother-daughter relationships:

### **Devalued Mothers**

Mothers have been deprived and devalued and conscripted as agents of a system that diminished all women. Daughters have felt the confusing repercussions of all of these forces. Further, it is impossible to analyze the mother-daughter relationship without an analysis of the actions of the father, more accurately an analysis of the overall context which defines the family structure (P.139-140).

Through her quest for identity, Muriel finds that even in the wilderness she can be stifled by the intrusion of others. Prior to her mother’s visit, as depicted in Alli Alli Oh, Muriel had been living

with Alli in a lesbian relationship, perceiving lesbianism as an escape from patriarchal domination. Miller expresses this concept of lesbianism as a diversion from gender power structures. "...lesbian women by their very existence challenge the fundamental structure of women's dependence on men" (P.13).

### **Alternatives to Limited Upbringing**

In her quest for an alternative to her limited upbringing, Muriel discovers that her lesbian relationship with Alli is not a solution to the traditional female role, as Muriel finds that even with Alli her individuality is threatened. The fact that Muriel cannot tell Rose about her lesbian affair shows Muriel is still controlled by the values and expectations of her mother's world. Muriel's involvement with Alli represents the exploration of a love relationship outside the conventional realm defined by her mother—an involvement she had hoped would not restrict her human growth.

Muriel's venture beyond the borders of prevailing sexual behaviour shows an interesting parallel with her exploration of new, revolutionary farming methods, particularly "hydroponics", by which plants are grown without soil, itself symbolic of Muriel's search for self-sufficiency. Experimenting with her environment by producing plants through hydroponics can be seen as Muriel's attempt to gain control over her environment, thus shaping it to her own design. Muriel's plan to use science and technology to make plants grow without soil is a manipulation of the natural world, one that changes the life process. To Muriel, this becomes the creative ordering of her physical environment. As Miller points out the connection between personal change and the transformation of reality:

For women to act and react out of their own beings it to fly in the face of their appointed definition and their prescribed way of living. To move toward authenticity, then, also involves creation, in an immediate and pressing personal way. The whole fabric of one's life begins to change, and one sees it in a new light (P.150-151)

Rose on the other hand, does not see Muriel's activities in terms of individual growth, but as unnatural. She reminds Muriel of the traditional perception of women in relation to men. In perceiving women as helpless, Rose attempts to undermine Muriel's efforts to obtain control over her own life.

Rose's intrusion in Muriel's life signifies the difficulty Muriel has in shaking the restrictions of her social realm. By announcing that she would like to come and live on the island with Chuck, Rose and the patriarchal society she represents, become a threat to Muriel's private world. Both Muriel's inner world and her external world, the island, are threatened by the invasion of society and its expectations from which she has tried to escape. She tries to discourage her mother from moving to the island.

### **Fulfilling the Traditional Female Role**

By expecting Muriel to fulfill the traditional female role, Rose, as a mother, is shown to be instrumental in perpetuating the dichotomy of gender identity. Stacey and Price believe women, by not trying to change the accepted norms, have been “architects of the reproduction of their oppression” (P.20)

Alli, who arrives without warning, is the antithesis of the conforming woman. Mentally ill and bisexual, she lives on the periphery of conventional society. Nevertheless, Alli tries to identify with Rose, telling Rose that she herself is a mother and was married for eighteen years. Alli discusses her children with Rose: “Yes. Mine are called Denny and Christine. Christine’s just had her seventeenth birthday. She’s an Aries”. (P.132). Alli eventually turns the level of reality away from trivialities toward the darker world of psychological fragmentation. By telling Rose about her experience in “the nut house” (P.133) Alli draws Rose into an unknown world. Her presence is shown to confront and disrupt Rose’s established values. Where Rose sees the need to conceal and pretend in order to keep the harmony, Alli is overtly direct in her emotional and psychological expression.

Rose is the voice of the conventional woman who stifles the truth for the sake of appearances. By contrast, Alli is portrayed as mentally ill, thus allowing her to depart from society’s customary perception of women. As she is also a lesbian, Alli defies the traditional voice of female sexuality, and is seen as a threat to the moral fibre of her community. Muriel, on the other hand, does not believe that Alli is mentally ill, and explains Alli’s repetition of phrases as a mantra, telling Rose, ‘I always thought of it as meditating’. (p.134) While Muriel tries to justify Alli’s behaviour to Rose, Alli asserts that she has been “cured” and adds, “I really don’t have to talk to myself” (P.134).

Both Rose and Alli epitomize different extremes: Rose denies her individuality in order to gain social acceptance; Alli rejects her role as mother and wife, as well as the prevailing feminine characteristics. Rose embodies the complete acceptance of convention and Alli exemplifies the total rejection of it. Where Rose is passive and inscrutable, Alli is aggressive and often cruel in her honesty. Muriel is caught between the two extremes: surrendering to conventional ubiquity, as Rose does; or, like Alli, forsaking entirely the norms of society. Muriel’s task is to find her own identity through the confrontation of both extremes. Although Muriel rejects her mother’s position, Muriel shares her dislike of Alli’s insensitive probing and disruption of social order; her destructive honesty.

### **Display of Inner Feelings**

Alli and Rose are left to talk alone, and Rose is brought further into Alli’s world of psychological flux. Alli makes Rose deal with a side of female experience she has never acknowledged before. Alli describes her inner psyche, her intimate feelings. She tells Rose how her personal life was probed by the doctors in the hospital, and how she had been labeled a paranoid schizophrenic.

Rose is unsure how to respond to Alli’s display of inner feelings and emotional turmoil. When Alli tells her there are questions walking “all over town”, (P.143) Rose tries to bring the statement into the context of light conversation. “I don’t know the town. I only came to the coast

once before". (P.143) Then Alli attempts to force Rose into a frank reaction, asking her how it feels, "knowing your daughter's a dyke". (P.143) Rose finally admits her true feelings: "You disgust me". (P.144) Alli replies eagerly, "Do I? Do I really?" (P.144) Alli has achieved the emotional reaction from Rose she had been waiting for, she has succeeded in breaking Rose's polite façade. After admitting her real feelings, Rose immediately feels sorry for what she said, realizing that Alli "can't help it". (P.144) By saying Alli "can't help it", Rose displays how she associated lesbianism with mental sickness and abnormality. Consequently, she is able to pity Alli and perceive her behaviour as less threatening.

Although their opposing realities clash with one another, Rose and Alli are forced into each other's inner worlds. Both must accept the different levels of female experience the other represents. Rose is made to acknowledge Alli's rejection of conventional values, and Alli is confronted with Rose's position within the patriarchal model. Rose begins to confide in Alli and expresses her feeling of failure as a 'good' mother.

At this stage Chuck calls, rescuing Rose from this threatening and chaotic setting bringing her back to her familiar world. Rose wants to keep Chuck separate from all this, as he symbolizes Rose's sense of security within the old patriarchal tradition, where Rose's position as a woman is clearly defined. Within the confines of her respectable social framework, Rose has found a limited kind of order and integration: an integration, however, that excludes the search for individuality outside the dictates of assigned roles. Thus Rose's inner world, the exploration of her inner female consciousness, is left untouched.

Both Rose and Alli leave for the mainland. As Alli prepares to leave, she picks up the money Rose gave her and put it in her pocket. Muriel finds herself alone again. She places the quilt made by Alli on the bed and sits on it, as if contemplating her involvement with Alli. Muriel then gets up from the bed and returns to her desk, choosing to focus her attention on the development of her farm. She must continue her search for self identity in the light of her newly defined relationship with both her mother and Alli.

Rose and her conventional world, and Alli and her disordered world, have both disrupted Muriel's search for self-definition. Her relationship with Alli and Rose is still tenuous, as is her connection with the wilderness in which she must struggle to construct her own sense of place.

What remains constant is Muriel's relation to the farm and the satisfaction her work brings when she is liberated from the demands of others. The last image focuses on Muriel alone, a common technique in women's plays, like Kelly Rebar's Checkin Out, where the final frame of the heroine alone reflects her autonomy and self-actualization.

In Islands Hollingsworth's' exploration of female identity concerns the female characters' relation to their physical environment. Muriel's place in the wilderness is connected with her search for individuality and the liberation from the patriarchal mold.

Muriel is shown to break away from a restrictive social realm and withdraws from the urban, public world to the seclusion of nature.

By becoming a farmer, a traditionally male vocation, Muriel's separation from urban mainstream society offers her power over her environment rather than isolation. However, Muriel's independence is not without a price. By protecting herself from the demands of others, Muriel chooses the safety of solitude and in the process limits the potential for self-enrichment through human companionship.

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