

Abstract

The dissertation examines the 'semiotic' effects in the first six novels of Margaret Atwood and analyses how the writer searches for new forms and meanings through periodically subverting the symbolic structures by fashioning her own brand of semiotic idiom. For Julia Kristeva 'semiotic' is the interface between words and life in which language instead of being a static entity is charged with new meanings and a dynamic subjectivity is constantly made and unmade through it. The thesis does not take 'semiotic' in its already perceived sense of being stylistically different from symbolic writing. It views it as an unconscious discourse by the protagonist which is analyzed through the prism of three types of discourses: The Wilderness writing, Gothic writing and Writing the Body.

I have taken metaphoric language as a part of Atwood's 'semiotic' lexicon because it has a flexibility, malleability, evanescence and subversiveness which can overthrow the static meanings of symbolic language. The three writing techniques have not only been discussed as traditions in themselves but chiefly as a part of semiotic language through which the author without losing her lucidity and clarity plunges headlong into feminine language and subverts the patriarchal codes.

The first chapter, "Wilderness and Identity" explicates why wilderness as a Canadian national symbol has been appropriated by Canadian women writers. The apparent formlessness of the wilderness terrain, the lurking fear, the passionate desire for conquest are reflected in the wilderness images and metaphors that Atwood applies in her writing thus mirroring the formlessness of the semiotic chora. The second chapter, "The Gothic Connection" explains how the sublimated drives in human beings which are abjected largely in our childhood do not vanish entirely but erupt into consciousness in moments of fear and anxiety and are expressed by writers in the gothic mode. Gothic writing is obsessed with secrets which are unspeakable, hidden yet familiar and cannot be expressed by the straightforwardness of the symbolic terminology, therefore it is in close proximity with the semiotic. The third chapter, "Writing the Body" analyses Atwood's recognition and celebration of female body in her texts because truth for her is best grasped by the language of the body and not the science of words. This language is made explicit through the use of body images and ailments such as constriction of throat and hysteria.