

A Cultural Exploration into the Study of Sexuality Based on the Select Works of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract – Margaret Eleanor Atwood is an internationally acclaimed Canadian poet, critic and cultural activist. Even as a young girl, Atwood rejected to assume the role of stereotyped woman. She firmly shows her disregard for gender assumed roles. In her novels, she strictly opposes gender discrimination. Her novels explore the themes of victimisation and survival. Through her novels she speaks about subordination and oppressions of women in a patriarchal society. She clearly portrays how female bodies are exploited for the satisfaction of men's sexual desires. All her women characters become aware of their individuality and finally reject the conventional gender role which is attributed to her. They all refuse to become a victim. They found out their lost part in them and finally achieve wholeness. This chapter focuses on the study of sexuality based on the select works of Margaret Atwood. This paper also focuses on how the female characters in her novels try to discover their own identities and humanity and how they recognise their complicity in the destructive world of power and victimisation. The novels taken for study are *The Edible Women*, *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaids Tale*, and *Cat's Eye*.

Keywords: Identity, Resistance, Sexuality, Power Politics, Victimisation.

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INTRODUCTION

Atwood contributes a lot to the development of Canadian literature. She is concerned with Canada's cultural identity. She is one of the finest Canadian writers. She is honoured with numerous literary awards including the Booker Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Governor General's Award twice. George Woodcock, a Canadian critic states that "no other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use as Margaret Atwood"(327).

The Edible Woman is her first novel which is published in 1969 at the beginning of second feminism. It signals the contemporary women's movement in their resistance to the concept of femininity. Marian is the protagonist of the novel who rebels against her feminine destiny. In this novel, women are projected as an edible product that is a product which is destined to be swallowed by male dominated society. But the protagonist in the novel is searching for her identity, rejecting the concept of the society that a woman is an edible product. This novel reveals the non-status of a woman in an exploitive society where she is considered only as an edible product.

Marian, the young protagonist is working at Seymour Surveys, a market research firm. During the course of her life Marian come across so many men, humiliates her at every step. She became aware of the male strategies of oppression and refused to become an edible woman .In the working place also all important positions are held by men. There was discrimination at every level. Men are allowed to work at the top floor of the building whereas women like Marian having equal qualification, works at the lower level. In the novel, Marian says "The company is layered like an ice cream sandwich, with three floors. The upper crust, the lower crust and our department, the gooey layer in the middle." (19).

There are two major themes which are explored in this novel. One is passive victimisation and another major theme in the novel is searching for the self. Her thoughts and feelings are not respected at home or even at her work place as well. This is the struggle of Marian. More than that, she is cheated by Peter who deceived her. In the patriarchal society women is only a consumer product .She is consumed day by day. She is given food only to have sex with her.

Marian after finding out Peter's consumer nature during a talk, started to identify her with the food

she tastes. Marian's rejection of food symbolizes her rejection of the male dominated society. She believes that Peter is consuming her just as she consumes food. Food, thus become a symbol of her rebellion. The change in the tone that is from first person narrative to third person narrative suggests that Marian lost her control over life.

Clara, Marian's college mate, is the next women who becomes the victim of male sexuality and involves in a succession of pregnancies and become no more than a child bearing machine. Marian, when seeing her miserable condition comments that "the babies had been unplanned. Clara greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment that such things could happen to her, and her second with dismay, now during her third, she had subsided into a grim, but inert fatalism" (36). Thus Clara too falls in the victim position.

From the beginning of the story Marian is considered as a packaged product to be consumed by the male dominated world. But her relationship with Duncan makes her realise the consequences of her passivity. She fears that her passivity will destroy her. Finally she decides to move from the victim position to have a life of her own. The cake which she bakes at the end of the story again shows women as an edible product to be eaten by men. She gives it to Peter. It shows that she is no longer willing to be an edible product. Catherine Malay, another critic who comments that "The cake feast signals the celebration of Marian's new freedom and even rebirth. At the end, Marian has gained a sense of identity and a new knowledge of self" (32).

Thus, Marian becomes an example of a powerful woman who fights against gender inequality in a male dominated society. It is like a form of heroism. She has learnt a great deal about life and finally achieves it. Thus the total story demonstrates identity crisis, gender issues, gender rules and the position of women in a society.

Surfacing is Atwood's second novel published in 1972. This novel has been described as a comparison novel to Atwood's collection of poems titled, "Power Politics". This novel deals with many issues like quest for self-identity and wholeness and the preservation of Canadian nationalism.

The story is about an unnamed female narrator who returns to her female and in search of her missing father; she is accompanied by her lover Joe, and a married couple named David Ana Anna. In the native town, she recalls her past memories. She tries to find reason for her father's mysterious disappearance. In the village she meets Paul who also couldn't locate her father. During the course of her journey in search of her father, she encounters on many incidents which led her to the return of madness. In this confused state she discovers the needs to reclaim her female identity. Thus, this novel is about search: a search for the self and a search for relationship.

In this novel, Atwood presents a variety of topics. Gender issues are one of the major aspects of this novel. Annis Pratt interprets *Surfacing* as "a quest for rebirth and transformation" (139). In a male dominated world, woman is not allowed to take decision on matters like marriage and motherhood. She is bound to follow the decisions taken by her husband. In this novel, through the character of this unnamed narrator, Atwood explores how a woman can be exploited both emotionally and morally in this patriarchal society. Here, the unnamed woman is sexually abused by her art teacher and her fake husband proves this fact. She remembers her ex-husband. "It was good at first but he changed after I married him, he married me, we committed that paper act" (46).

In this novel, both the characters- the unnamed women and Anna, are prey to gender victimization. The unnamed woman was reduced by the male art teacher and got pregnant also. She was forced to abort her child by him. More than that, this male art teacher destroys the artistic talents in her by imposing his ideas upon her. She seems to live in a paralysed state which set shows the male instincts to destroy a woman in all aspects. Thus both physically and mentally, she was abused by her male art teacher. But it becomes difficult for her to overcome the mental trauma which she suffers when she has to abort her child. She feels guilty of it. She becomes frustrated. But it was necessary for the better future of the male art teacher. She feels disconnected to everyone. It destroys her mental stability. It is quite natural while we encounter the harsh realities of life. This is not the story of the unnamed protagonist only, but the trauma of all women who fall as a prey to gender victimization.

Anna is another character in the novel who also suffers exploitation at the hands of her husband. At one instance when she forgot to do makeup she became afraid and says, "God, what I am I going to do? I forgot my makeup, he will kill me" (156). This shows her fear towards him. Even at another instant, David asks Anna to remove her clothes to record a video which he is taking with Joe. She refuses, finally she is seen naked on the sand, crying. He always forces her to act according to his wishes.

The protagonist, finally decides to achieve identity. She is presented as broken pieces through all these incidents and finally all these broken pieces unites together to form a perfect whole. Anna, unaware of her position in the society, undergo various abuse from her husband, but the unnamed protagonist, achieve wholeness through the process of self-discovery.

Bodily Harm is another novel written by Margaret Atwood. It was published in 1981. The protagonist of the novel is Rennie Wilford who is a freelance journalist. This novel depicts how female body is exploited to satisfy male sexuality. This novel exposes the problems of being a female. It focus on gender power politics which is prevailing in the

society. It is a powerful feminist novel, in which the protagonist encounters brutal and exploitive incidents and finally reaches at the path of self-discovery.

Rennie's childhood days are dominated by her grandmother. She was guided by the rules of her grandmother who had a very traditional attitude. "According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions" (54), says Rennie. Her mother too neglects her as she had to take care of her aged parents. She decided to take off carrier of a freelancer journalist and leaves for Toronto to have a life of freedom there.

In the course of her life as a versatile writer, Rennie becomes close to a man named, Jack. But he is an exploiter and thus, victimizes her to a large extent. She soon realises that he is using her body to satisfy his sexual desires. Focusing on the power relations existing between men and women, here Jack exhibits the true nature of a male chauvinist who degraded women as an object of pleasure only.

Jack has a negative attitude towards female sexuality. It is clearly shown when he says "women should be locked in cages" (73). For him, women are only a sexual object. Life becomes dramatically change when breast cancer is diagnosed in her. Jack pretends to be fine with this situation. Finally he leaves her to face this pathetic situation alone. Though she is both physically and emotionally abused, she remains passive all the time.

Dr. Daniel is another victimizer in this novel who diagnosed breast cancer in her. She falls a prey to him and feels victimized. She is a victim of disease as well as male exploitation. She experienced the mental agonies of mastectomy. She feels as if she is half dead. Because it affects her sense of procreative capabilities. Both the men have shattered her life physically and psychologically. She feels like she has no identity of her own.

As Jake and Dr. Daniel proves to be seducers she finds a hope in another man named Paul. She feels that she has a meaningful relation with him. In this context Dorothy Jones comments that "Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else or Daniel who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is" (11). The scar on her body never affects him. But soon she realises that he is an immature person and is not serious in their relationship.

All these incidents make her realize that women are delineated to a lower position where she is stripped of her identity by the patriarchal society. She realized the victimizing nature of male society. She decided to achieve women's liberations even though it is a distant dream. She determines to write about all these in an article on pornography from a women's point of view. She visited pornography museum, where she

witnessed the brutality of male power and realised how she is also used as a raw material for their pleasure.

Thus, this novel explores the honourable status of women in a patriarchal society. Rennie the protagonist of the novel, finally complete her quest for identity and manage a successful survival. She uses her pen as a powerful weapon to fight against the male chauvinism and finally achieves an identity of a freelance journalist.

The Handmaid's Tale is another powerful feminist novel by Atwood which narrates how the power structure of Gilead, critiques the feminist roles enabling the suppression of women. It presents a dystopian society where a woman is delegated to the position of sexual objects. This novel is concerned with sexual power politics and relation between the sexes. The politics of religion is also explored in this novel. This novel is set in a futuristic United States.

The narrator of the story Offred is a handmaid. A handmaid belongs to those categories of women who are appointed by the commanders to breed children's for them. Commanders will impregnate those who were selected as handmaids and these handmaids are supposed to hand over the child to the commander and his barren wife after the delivery. It is a gender biased society where women are used as a reproductive machine. Offred is one such Handmaids who lives in Gilead.

Here, a master – slave relationship is existed between the commander and the handmaids. The fertile women assume is used as an object to be manipulated by the master. These handmaids are exempted from every aspects of life. They are supported to accept their passive existence. They have no name of their own. They are given names by the commanders. As name signifies one's identity, here these, handmaid's birth names are erased from them and it shows that their true identity is stripped off from them. This re-identification is essential for the existence of such a totalitarian regime. "As a part of the system promoted at the Red Centre, each Handmaids will eventually be forced to give up her name and adopt a patronymic consisting of the preposition 'of' and the first name of the commander to whom she is temporarily assigned" (Thomas 92). So, the protagonist of the story is named as Offred because her commander's first name is Fred.

Another method of stripping the identity of these handmaids is done through assigning specific dress code to them. The colour of the dress indicates her status and function of her in the society. Green coloured clothes are assigned to slaves, khaki dress for Aunts, Blue coloured clothes for the wives

of the commanders and finally the handmaids have to wear red clothes.

Another category of women who are used to impose these patriarchal values on the handmaids are the aunts. Humiliation is the method used by these aunts to enslave the handmaids according to the will of the patriarchy. Aunts achieve complete control over the handmaids by their torture techniques. They forced these handmaids to watch pornographic movies which are all full of violent sexual acts. Aunt Lydia was of the opinion that women are merely bodies that are to be used by men. In the previous novels of Atwood men were the victimizers, but here women themselves turned into victimisers as per the will of the patriarchal society.

There is one heroic woman who can't be controlled by the aunts. Her name is Moria, who continues to resist the aunts' authority over her. She finally escapes from there. The way she manages to escape from Red centre by taking off her robes and putting on the khaki dress suggests her attempt to reject the identity which is attributed to her by the authority.

But handmaids like Offred often falls a prey to the sexual harassment of the commanders. Even she has to remain passive when the doctor, whom they have to visit for monthly check up, tries to have sexual intercourse with her. These handmaids thus become sexual objects for male sexual satisfaction. There are several such incidents in the novel where Offred has to face many expatriations. Offred remarks that, "Nobody dies from lack of sex. It is lack of love we die from (113),

In the last part of the novel we see that Offred seems to be trying to regain her lost identity. She tries to have a command over the language. She breaks the silence and passivity which is imposed upon her by the patriarchy, by narrating her own story. It highlights her existence in the society. She was able to survive and acquires the status of the non-victim thereby creating an identity of her own. Through this novel Atwood envisions a society where all these power hierarchies are crumbled. She is very successful in presenting the power struggles exist in the society.

Cat's Eye is another novel written by Atwood. It is the story of a painter named Elaine Risley. When the novel opens, she has been called back to Toronto for the exhibition of her painting. She remembers her childhood memories. When she was eight years old she became friends with Carol and Grace. But through them she realises that her nomadic upbringing by her entomologist father and independent mother has left her all equipped for conventional expectation of femininity. The very next year Cordelia also joins with them. As she is not fit to the norms of femininity she is out casted by her three best friends – Carol, Grace and Cordelia. Their bullying continues. She found herself as a victim. She can't connect to others, because of her ignorance of social gender roles. Thus, this novel highlights the post structuralist concepts of

identity as socially constructed. She says, "I am not used to girls or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward with them. I don't know what to say" (52).

During the childhood days, she always feels like she is not fit into their world. Her friends always dominated her. They used her as a scapegoat. Among the victimisers, Cordelia is the worst one. Elaine's individuality is stripped off from her, thereby sending her to nothing. Cordelia becomes a part of her identity. Her image always haunts her. She has to suffer a lot from them. She carries all these harsh memories into her adulthood.

Besides the victimisation of her girlfriends, she has to face the exploitation of two other ladies- Mrs. Lumley and Mrs. Smeath. They forces her to take all the steps so that she would be accepted into the feminine world. Thus, they also have a negative impact upon her life.

She relies upon painting in order to escape from the harsh realities of the world. But again she fell into victimisation. Mr. Josef was her art teacher. He tries to seduce her. Here, Atwood exposes discrimination against female partners. Here we can see the domination of male painters over the female painters. The works of female painters don't get much admiration and they are underpaid also. This highlights the supremacy of male painters in a patriarchal society.

After a long journey through all these exploitations, a new sense of identity wakes up in her mind. She decides that she would never confirm to the gender roles which the society expected to perform. She opts to have an independent life. She engages in her paintings. Each painting has some meaning to convey. Her paintings *Cat's Eye* depicts her quest for lost identity. Thus art transforms her completely. She is no longer afraid to remember her past memories rather she begins to look at it in different perspective.

In a male chauvinist society, all the major roles are performed by male only. Woman are expected to perform the roles of a mother and wife. Thus our society is not willing to accept their talents. But in this novel, Atwood proves that women can also perform the role of a good artist. Through this, Atwood is actually raising her voice against classifying artist based on gender.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine is immersed in the web of complex relations. Atwood, through her deep inside, unfolds the complexities of such relations. And finally, the protagonist comes out of the boundaries of male dominated world and become a successful artist. An inner journey of self-discovery helps the protagonist to achieve the identity of her own. This is what the author wants to convey through this novel. As a writer, Atwood uses her words and voices of her characters to convey her views on the issues of inequality.

CONCLUSION

Atwood as a feminist writer writes about women psyche, their search for identity, conflict between self and society, the ways of oppression and subordination in her novels. Each of these novels deals with issues related to gender roles. She uses literature as a tool to question the very existence of women in a society. She uses her words and voices of her characters to advocate for the rights of women. Thus, she proves to be a skilful feminist writer. Atwood believes that literature is a mirror through which the readers can see themselves. Thus, her novels give us a ray of hope that every women can emerge out from the shackles of male dominated society. Marian, in *The Edible Women*, finally refuses to become edible woman. In this novel, *Surfacing* the narrator refuses to become a victim and thereafter, there was a tremendous change in her personality as well. In the *Bodily Harm*, Renni articulates the exploitation of men through her writings and thereby achieves a major transformation of her passive character. In *The Handmaids Tale*, women too are seemed to be victimizers. But, Offred rebels against the society and achieves an identity. In *Cat's Eye*, the protagonist Elaine realises a position of a women painter in a patriarchal society. So, she tries to attain an identity through her paintings. Thus, through all these novels Atwood tries to challenge the concept of gender and conveys how women try to redefine themselves and find a space for them.

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