

INSURGENT FEMININE PSYCHE IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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Abstract

It was a corollary of the women's liberation movement of America of the late sixties which has resulted in the modern feminist movement continuing in Canada in the early 1970s. This feminist movement, as in the USA, demanded equality for women in all spheres of social, economic, cultural, judicial, and sexual matters. This movement in Canada corroborated women as an sternly subjugated faction. Conversing the role of the writer in humanity Atwood reveals that the writer tends to deliberate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is. By survival Atwood does not mean stability of sheer substantial subsistence, other than a determined for self-esteem in the battle with the social order and state of affairs. Atwood scans the place of women in contemporary social order. She discovers her identity in a commercialized, technological age. Atwood tolerates her women protagonists the imperfection a normal human being possesses. Her depiction is of a woman concerned with selfhood and with that dynamic ambition conflicting from norms of subservience to the prevailing femininity. A woman writer is seen as an aberration, neurotically denying herself the delights of sex. It is this threatenability, the victim-victimizer relationship, that Atwood probed in her novels. Atwood's innovative woman repudiates to be a victim, while in the process of refusal she faces the indignities that are showered upon a women.

Key Words: Dignity of women, faminst movement, insurgent feminine, new women, survival, women libration

Introduction:

The feminist movement, as initiated in the United State of America, demanded equal opportunity for women in all the affairs associated with societal, economic, intellectual, legal, and sexual issues. This interested group of America of the late sixties has resulted in the modern feminist movement in Canada also. It is the patriarchal set up which reinforced the prejudiced treatment of women. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise examine that the spirit of feminism is its idea about the

delicate, its insistence on the validity of women's experience and “its argument that an understanding of women's expression can be gained only through understanding and analysing everyday life, where oppression as well as everything else is grounded.” Such domination and oppression affecting a woman are vitally the indispensable themes of the feminist movement.

The open-minded women instigated a systematic campaign against financial discrimination, violence against women, and sexual humiliation. This the patriarchal set up which reinforced the prejudiced treatment of women. The quintessence of feminism is its idea about the personal, its avowal on the legitimacy of women's familiarity. Subjugation and autocracy touching a woman are fundamentally the crucial themes of the feminist movement. Atwood is concerned with the pathetic as against the well-built victim versus the victimizer. A key word in any Atwood discussion is “survival”. By survival Atwood does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Almost all her protagonists are victimized - either by man or by authority or by a particular social environment. Atwood examines the place of women in modern society. She explores her identity in a commercialized, technological age. Atwood says thus:

Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human.

Atwood sets aside her women protagonists blemish a normal human being possesses. Atwood reveals the societal classification that assigns roles to the sexes and labels them as inferior or superior. Atwood's representation is of a woman concerned with selfhood and with that dynamic ambition conflicting from norms of subservience to the dominant gender. A woman writer is seen as an aberration, neurotically denying herself the delights of sex. Concerning the male outlook towards the feminine and vice versa, Margaret Atwood reveals thus:

Why do men feel threatened by women? I asked a male friend of mine... “I mean,” I said, “Men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, struggle better and they have on average a lot more money and power. They are afraid of women laugh at them,” he said, “Undercut their world over,” then I asked women... Why do women feel threatened by men? “they are afraid of being killed.”

From this Atwood came to the conclusion that men and women are diversified in the variety and capacity of their threatenability. It is this threatenability, the victim-victimizer relationship, that Atwood explores in her novels. Atwood's new woman refuses to be a victim, but in the process of refusal she faces the indignities that are showered upon women. Supplementary considerable distinctiveness of Margaret Atwood's fiction is that it is post-modern in its use and abuse of traditional literary conventions, including novelistic realism.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* can be called as a proto-feminist novel as it entertains and reveals the most grave problems that women face. It reveals how women are objectified by conservative social order as consumer products. It shows that there is no place for the attitudes, beliefs, desires, and opinions expressed by women, the central figures of Atwood's fiction. *The Edible Woman* is shaped and unified by a central image, the metaphor of eating, that runs through the entire novel, from title page to final scene. Dealing as it does with the

patriarchal society which has become synonymous with consumerism (of women especially), the novel reveals “symbolic cannibalism” of women. This novel displays once for all that monetary independence is no independence at all. The consciousness of being subjugated and victimized has to come from within the self of an individual.

The Edible Woman offers a pursuit for self-identity by Marian, the protagonist. She is a fairly sensible, intelligent young woman, decently liberal in her views and somewhat defensive about her own individuality. Facing an identity crisis, she is confronted with various alternatives. Marian’s crisis, however, acquires a feminine colouration when she looks for alternatives to her present situation. Disturbed by his casual attitude towards sex and general behaviour, she feels at times that “he was treating her as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline” (71). She recognises her loss of identity and her “edibility” to Peter. Her intelligence of victimization becomes delicate after she comes across Joe discussing the after-effects of university education on women. Atwood herself, typically, is most fascinated in the technical effect of the image within the fiction. In an interview with Graeme Gibson Atwood describes Marian’s action in moulding the woman-cake as “preposterous,” but adds, “as all pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself.”

The Edible Woman maps out how Marian first goes down and then revives herself. Marian is still in her own possession, the narrative is told from the first person point of view. The first chapter (and the first section) begins, “I knew I was all right on Friday when I got up, if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual” (9). But within this section of the story, Marian’s self gets lost, and in the single chapter that makes up the final section, Marian becomes herself again, and Atwood returns to the first person point of view. As Marian says “I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again” (278). Thus *The Edible Woman*, “a convincing narrative of personal growth,” reveals how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self.

Margaret Atwood’s second novel *Surfacing*, is not about the surfaces but about the depths and the process of rising from those depths. This novel is about an unnamed protagonist who dives deep into the depths of a lake to learn about the mistakes she has committed. She surfaces from the depths of the lake and consequently from deception. One of the essential themes of Margaret Atwood is the place of women in metropolitan patriarchal society. She criticises the double standards that are predominant in all societies. She explores:

Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human feelings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human. You are worse than human, you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful scary monster.

Atwood criticises the public classification that assigns roles to the sexes and then categorically labels them as either inferior or superior, sinful or chaste. She is intensely preoccupied with women fighting against the female norms of life - sexuality and dichotomy between career and the claims of the family. *Surfacing* begins as a straight forward narrative of a physical journey. The protagonist returns to her childhood home, a remote island in the Quebec bush, to search for her missing father. She is accompanied by Joe, with whom she has been living, and the couple, David and Anna. She also brings in memory several other characters who influence her actions more truly; her mother, her father, her brother, and her “husband.” The failure of relationships is generated by the narrator’s sense of aloneness. In none of her

relationships is there a sense of commitment. She has intentionally chosen freedom from commitment in her selection of friends and in her response to her family. This is most clear about Joe whom she describes in a detached manner as being: like a buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the definite but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction (8).

In *Survival*, Atwood has commented on the Canadian habit of introducing babies at the end of novels “to solve problems for the characters, which they obviously can’t solve for themselves.” The baby here seems to function in this manner. But in her interview with Gibson, Atwood explores that a baby keeps a woman in touch with her body, with the physical elements of life, in a manner not available to the man.” The protagonist in *Surfacing* is female and the novel is written from the view-point of a female narrator. According to this point of view women are dominated by men, and in some ways even more so when they are distanced from the accepted relationships of a traditional and more nature-oriented society.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a critique of female brutalization articulated in *Bodily Harm*. This is a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied the basic rights. This novel is a kind of anti-Utopia of the not-too-distant future as reflected through the voice of Offred, a handmaid and one of the victims in the theocracy. Patriarchy and colonialism are both power structures which operate on similar principles. Colonialism may well be seen as a paradigm of patriarchy in feminist literary discourse. This is because gender relations provide the “blue-print for all other power relationships” and are “the model for power relations between generations, socio-economic classes, relations, racial and ethnic groups as well as between imperial powers and their colonies.”

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference: it is recorded and not written - a cumbersome exercise in the twentieth century with all technical amenities at our command. Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Undergrowth Female Road to tell her tale of victimization. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not presented as history or *his* story, i.e. a story from a man’s point of view, but as her story, the story of Offred, narrated by herself orally. The narration is made off and on, not chronologically, into a recording machine and preserved in tapes. Annis Pratt’s generalization about women’s fiction could perhaps be applied to Offred’s narrative: “Women’s fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-today life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology.” In all of Atwood’s fiction formalist concerns (such as parody and metafictional self-reflexivity) are never separate from political ones, and this is largely because of the very postmodern paradox that ties them together. Margaret Atwood’s best known feminist text is *Bodily Harm*, written after the women’s liberation movement. In the 1970’s women were very hopeful and optimistic and they felt that they could change the society for the better. Atwood is critical of the facile optimism of the post-feminist era concerning the state of women’s emancipation. Renata Wilford, the “camera-narrator” of *Bodily Harm*, is a Canadian free-lance journalist as well as a “Life-Tourist” writer. She uses the “pen” as a “weapon” to write her travelogue, “*Bodily Harm*”. Rennie’s travelogue addresses itself to the nature of violence and victimization of women. Atwood explores the travelogue with a sense of commitment to expose the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. In the seventies, women were hopeful and optimistic because it was believed that they could change the society faster.

Conclusion :

Margaret Atwood instigated to reveal the full potentialities of her ingenuity in the year 1972. The *Survival* is important in the context of Canadian writing (present and past). It is the presentation of Canadian literary history in terms of traditions of fiction and verse that give expression to strong collective fears regarding their survival as a distinct Canadian culture. Atwood proceeds from the assumption that the society which has emerged from a reliance on logic, and which defies the natural instinctual urges, will be a sick one. In *Surfacing* - and before it in *The Edible Woman* - the social situation is not accepted; it is liberation through self-understanding and self-realization that the individual is led towards, and this of course produces a new attitude towards the character, who is seen from within rather than in a constantly changing dramatic relationship with others. Many novels of Atwood deal with woman's experience in a male-dominated society. They present the woman caught in oppressive stereotypes and they show how some women struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought through self-definition and reconstruction of the self, through bonding among women, and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation.

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About the Author:



Dr. Ashok K. Saini reached the pinnacles of glory in his academic career when he was awarded the scholarship funded by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, for E-Teacher Scholarship Program to English teaching professionals abroad through Linguistics Department, American English Institute, University of Oregon USA. At present Dr. Saini is faculty in the Department of English Language & Literature, College of Arts & Sciences, Wadi Aldawaser, Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He has published large number of articles and research papers in different National and International journals and magazines. He has dozens of books to his credit published both in India and abroad also. He has been meticulously associated with *Indian Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies: An International Journal of Literature, Culture & Translation*, ***The Literary Herald***, an open-access, International, refereed e-journal of English language and literature open to Post-colonial Literature, International English Literature, Commonwealth Literature, English Language Teaching, New Literature, Indian Writing in English, Applied Linguistics and TEFL and Literatures written in English and *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Social Sciences*, as member board of editors, published in Zilina, Slovakia.