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Contours of Postmodern Feminism: A Critique of Margaret Atwood's Select Novels

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ABSTRACT

Feminism which is another aspect of postmodernism in Canadian fiction, is viewed in different perspectives where nationalism predominates and power endures. It is the wrestle for this power and institutional authority which Atwood reiterates in her novels. In the wake of Feminist movement, an awakening has dawned resulting in the reaction of women in many forms: a challenging of male institutional authority, an acknowledgement of power as the basis of sexual politics and a belief in the socio-cultural context in the production and reception of art.

The study attempts to explore some contours of Postmodern Feminism in the select novels of Margaret Atwood- The Edible Woman, Bodily Harm, Surfacing and The Handmaid's Tale. Atwood's novels show the gender discrimination of the narrow, dominant, social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender which atrociously victimize women. Hence, victimization is perceived as the resultant repercussion of social, cultural, religious and geographic variants which exploit the weakness of victim. One may become a victim of consumerism and capitalism, cultural supremacy, patriarchy, emotional insularity, industrialization and most important of all instinctive cruelty and wickedness. The novels studied bear testimony to such corrupt power politics ensnaring the victims in its atrocious grip.

Key Terms:

Postmodernism, Feminism, Atwood, Consumerism, Capitalism, Male chauvinism, Sexual abuse

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to study and analyze certain predominant aspects of Postmodern Feminism in the select novels of Margaret Atwood- The Edible Woman (1969), Bodily Harm (1981), Surfacing (1973) and The Handmaid's Tale (1985). As a postmodern Canadian woman writer of global eminence, poet, novelist, critic and committed activist, Atwood is predominantly a feminist whose writings evolve strong issues of feminism such as female subordination in male dominated society, gender and sex, predicament of women abominably reduced to a state of child bearing machines, the inciteful marriage institution causing loss of female identity, women's utter helplessness in the male dominated society, mutilation and incarceration of female body and such similar themes.

As a result of suppression and oppression of women in the patriarchy, an awakening and consciousness has evolved in women to express their feelings, to identify their self, to hold a place in society, and to break themselves from the shackles of atrocious male hegemony. So they took up to writing which is called women's writing, concentrating on the above mentioned issues which resulted in the feminist movement.

In the context of this topic, it is essential that we know the basic governing theories, or principles or perspectives of postmodernism and feminism. To bring a concise definition of the term postmodernism and confine it to a limited perspective is very difficult for the reason that postmodernism, an era or the movement that occurred after the movement of modernism has its tremendous impact on culture, society,

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politics, history and day to day affairs. Still many criticisms, critical theories, speculations regarding postmodernism continue to come. Especially in women's literature and women's writing, postmodernism as an established theory exercised an abiding influence.

METHOD AND DESIGN

The author identifies the unique position of postmodern feminism in different novels. The study's concern is to read Atwood's novels with a set of preoccupations, to trace their growth as novelists, coinciding transition from modernism to postmodernism. An exclusive explication of the theories is dealt with an attempt to trace their boundaries and to clarify the terms postmodernism and feminism. In the light of the theoretical knowledge that research appropriates, it humbly tries to read their works as a cultural and social history of a given period by accommodating them in a synchronic space.

1. The Edible Woman

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood deals with various predominant issues of Postmodernism and Feminism and also the symbolic representation of consumerism and consumer problems prevalent in the modern capitalist society. Multiple themes such as feministic issues, loss of identity, subordination of woman in the male-dominated male-chauvinistic society, woman striving to establish an identity of her own, where woman being exploited in the consumer society and her body treated as a toy etc. are all speculated in this study.

Atwood has also focused upon the related issues of the two movements Postmodernism and Feminism, problems at the work spot, and employment and gender inequality in an admirable way. The pitfalls of patriarchal system and the uncongenial environment needed to be rectified with immediacy are also highlighted.

Atwood postulates a contextual discourse to examine women as colony, her passivity and incapacitated stand against the male aggression in the patriarchal discourse, which by extension also represents the feeble and powerless status of Canada against devouring domination of America.

Termed by Atwood as "anti-comedy", *The Edible Woman* consists of three parts; the first part beginning with the first person 'I' forging ahead with confidence and assertiveness, of course, with limited scope, second section begins in the third person, is full of permutations and combinations, the protagonist realizing certain facts, and the third part leading on to self discovery. The third part reverting back to the first person 'I' again is a reflection of the fact that the heroine has found her identity.

J. Brooks Bouson says in "The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*" that "Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women" (230).

Atwood always deals emphatically with the twin theme of victimization and survival which is synonymous with Canada and female. She uses Marian as her mouth piece at times to express her sentiments of the working system, the languor, and lapses in companies and the helpless predicament of women among domineering men. As a researcher in Seymour Surveys, Marian's observation reflects Atwood's innately critical perception of the status quo in consumer society. Peter, Marian's fiancé, is gripped with the power of ego, male superiority to which Marian refuses to submit, as she feels trapped, confined, and apprehends loss of her identity. Atwood opines that the baneful system of power structure has been creeping reprehensibly both into national consciousness and female psyche where family harmony is jeopardized. Her Canadian experience under the imperialistic power of suzerainty and female experience, female being subjugated by male superiority are envisioned here. Atwood remarks, as quoted by Linda Hutcheon, "I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger non-exclusive picture"(33).

2. Bodily Harm

The study also reads the novel *Bodily Harm* focusing many feministic issues relating to body, sex and pornography, with a view to interpret themes which are relevant and vital in the contemporary

scenario for the amelioration of society. The themes discussed are: the problem of power politics , power and body , patriarchy, identity of women, Canada's political predicament, the theme of philosophy, didacticism, escapism, CIA agents, the realms of fantasy elements , the corruption in the governmental organizations and spy in the network of system.

Bodily Harm also explicitly states the perils and risks in manufacturing and trading lethal weapons and the risks prone to women in the alien soil which fetched universal fame and recognition to Atwood. As the title aptly describes, Bodily Harm evokes many layers of meanings, 'body' being the subject, the body is subject to undue torture and atrocious victimization both physical and psychological; for which there is no solution unless the repressed victim asserts her autonomy or identity. And that woman is absolutely powerless in the patriarchal society where she is a victim of diabolic desire of man to subordinate which leads to banal lust , lust for political and personal power.

The novel depicts the mutilation of the body of the protagonist in the form of mastectomy, while the removal of one of her breast results consequently in the removal of her lover Jake, who abandons her. The moral of it is that the body which is the locus of power and adoration, the mutilation of it results in the total loss of her identity. This is a truly Postmodern Feminist theme dexterously handled by Atwood.

The protagonist Renata Wilford, a typical ambitious white Canadian journalist is avidly determined in exposing the lifestyles not seen. So she flies to Caribbean island, the fictional place where she, unfortunately encounters horrendous experiences including prison life and brutal treatment by the police guards, but she emerges victorious in the end. Renata Wilford whose name suggests being " born again", and "crossing over", comments Carrington, "is in a way being born again after the holocaust of her experiences in the Caribbean island" (61-62).

The beginning of the novel seems to be somewhat hilarious, but it moves towards a serious and tragic dimension, exposing all the ills of society. The novel explores all the themes, self identity, loss of identity, power politics, pornography, political power and sex and exploitation of women by men treating them as objects in the consumer society.

3. Surfacing

The study also analyzes Atwood's Surfacing which discusses the main theme of woman's quest for identity, which is also a symbolic, cultural , universal quest for the Self in general and womanhood in particular. Alienation and survival with an indomitable will to fight out in a turbulent, male-dominated society is presented with a technique of projecting a journey through the myth of wilderness. Apart from the theme of victimization, marginalization of Canada, mutilation of nature and exploitation of culture, the other themes are marriage, divorce, sex, the pitfalls of patriarchal domination in a capitalist, consumer society which is a truly post- modern approach and theme. Atwood also delineates the trauma of abortion and artistic disintegrity from the feministic point of view besides focusing on American infiltration.

Vast prairies, menacing wilderness, ubiquitous snow and equally powerful nation inducing awful fear, self-pity and morbidity in the Canadian psyche, are the subjective factors behind Canada's struggle for survival. Hence the myth of victimization has become the leitmotif of the Canadian literature. Atwood's Survival draws an adequate map of Canadian mythology.

Frye urges the Canadians to believe in the role myth plays in decoding and shaping the cultural consciousness. In his "Conclusion" to The Literary History of Canada of 1965 ,Frye describes Canada as an alien continent. He felt that "the traveller from Europe edges into it like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale". He was not only aware of the fearfulness of the Canadian nature but also believed that the human mind could maintain its integrity and sanity only by clinging to human and moral values. So he exhorts them to have personal relationship with the intractable wilderness. Atwood in Surfacing explores all possibilities of gaining access into wilderness. The novel is also a desperate exploration and vehement longing for the junction of humans and nature.

As myth provides a sense of oneness to the people of common race or gender, inflicted with the existential dilemma and sense of alienation, and it binds them like adhesive, the postmodern writers rediscover or sometimes invent myths unique to a culture or nation. Atwood takes up the task of

redefining the national myths of Canada in her writings. Sullivan remarks in “Northrop Frye: Canadian Mythographer”:

By an inductive study of Canadian literature, she (Atwood) sets out to distinguish the species from all other literatures. She writes the map of the territory, geography of the collective mind. The research is familiar. The idea that holds the country together and helps the people to co-operate for common ends is survival; the mentality this induces is a victim psyche, the will to lose. The literature participates this confusion in that its archetypes are negative. Nature is a monster, in which animals are victims, artistes are paralyzed (12).

ManjuJaidka opines, for Atwood, the two, Canadian and female identity have a deep and inseparable bond. Nationalism can be perceived as a “desire to shield and preserve identity in the face of hostile powers” (52).

Surfacing deals with the prime concern of Atwood’s writing about Canada’s survival, Canada being subjugated by the imperialistic power. Atwood’s emphasis on Canada gains significant momentum particularly in this novel. In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood defines the novel as a “ghost story” in which she examines apart from other things “the great Canadian victim complex.”

The nameless protagonist’s search for her missing father, a retired botanist, along with her friends initiates the inner journey of her own psyche. PremaKumari Marshall views that “the search for the father is actually a conscious quest for her true identity which is in turn linked with the search for the meaning of life” (96).

The novel symbolically suggests that it is a “pilgrim’s progress”, everyone’s or every woman’s quest. The protagonist quests for some mythical illumination in the northern wilderness of her childhood with the hope of establishing peace with her past and present, in order to overcome desperately self-deceptive life that she leads. Inwardly, it is a story of a perturbed and frightened individual caught in the web of alienation, in search of her own identity and lost way of life through which she seeks purification.

The journey of the protagonist which begins as a physical/ geographical journey triggers off a parallel psychological/spiritual journey and discovery of her father’s corpse triggers off her self-discovery. When the protagonist surfaces from the lake, she surfaces with a new knowledge that entails re-assessment of her self in relation to the world. She re-integrates herself with nature. As the title, Surfacing aptly implies that the protagonist reaches a position of new awareness, a new consciousness, spiritual onward journey which entails her new positive vision.

The protagonist regains faith in her own power, asserts moral courage to survive physically and psychologically which gives her realization of paramount importance of the survival policy - of ‘live and let live’. This self-discovered re-assertion of faith culminates in a ritualistic re-alignment with the primitive world and a subsequent re-alignment with the practical world with altered vision and new perspectives. Ultimately her journey consummates in the acceptance of her lover Joe in order to lead a normal, practical life in relation to the outside world.

She understands the fact that “Withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (p.222). She has understood the true connotation of love, faith and freedom. Love can be defined only by its failure, and freedom lies not in escape but in the captivity that Joe is offering her. Withdrawal from society leads to psychic wreck and fragmentation of personality. Thus, the protagonist has reached a stage of re-integration with society from that of alienation from society.

Rigney remarks that “the protagonist’s return to sanity and to human existence is marked by her recognition that she must have food and shelter to survive, that she is neither animal nor primitive god and is, therefore, incapable of living in the wilderness. To live, she decides is a responsibility to her parents, to society, to herself” (89).

When the two female protagonists suffer in *The Edible Woman* and *the Bodily Harm*, in their struggles, in their feministic personal concerns, there seems to be a plausible end, at least they can revert to an endpoint which is from where they have begun..... whereas the nameless heroine in *Surfacing* undertakes a journey which does not end where she begins.

Atwood remarks “the difference between them is that *The Edible Woman* and *the Bodily Harm* is a circle where as *Surfacing* is a spiral.... the heroine of *Surfacing* does not end where she began” (p.134).

4. The Handmaid’s Tale

The study also examines the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a dystopian novel discussing some predominant feminist issues such as suppression of women, a gloomy future vision of repression of women leading down to the reduction of their image to a child- producing machine, in a totalitarian, theocratic state.

The Handmaid’s Tale - a dystopian novel in which there is a gloomy future vision of women as being reduced to birth-giving machine - the totalitarian state that appears only at its outline in *Bodily Harm* becomes a comprehensive reality in the dystopic vision manifest in the novel. There seems to be no possibility of rescue existing for Offred, the narrator protagonist.

Atwood presents the most pessimistic view/ vision of imperialistic structure of power and dominion in the negation of hope for redemption for Offred. The novel is set in future time in the U.S.A. which is now the Republic of Gilead. Although the republic is ruled by men, commanders, women’s world is depicted in the novel.

Procreating function of women becomes prime importance as men in Gilead have become sterile and women infertile. Each commander has one Handmaid “two-legged wombs” whose sole function is to bear children. If they fail to perform their duty, they are sent to colonies where old, the rebels and the unwanted are sent.

Offred is a Handmaid, one of the victims recruited for “breeding purposes” in theocracy. In Gilead, women are completely controlled by men and segregated in a hierarchy of values. They are subject to rigid categories based on their roles and function. Gilead Society packed with commanders, Marthas, domestic slaves, the wives, and the Aunts envisages a ‘mythical state’ where human values are at a discount. Freedom is at stake. Truth is what is acceptable and dictated by the authority which articulate the postmodern tendencies. “Truth has been replaced by truths, uncapitalized and in the plural” (Hutcheon 1988, IX). Women are reduced to mere possessions, mere objects in the repressive and regressive society. They are condemned to play their roles as sexual objects, which they accept passively without any resistance.

Offered, a librarian works her way to freedom through language which is officially forbidden as there is a gradual development of feminist consciousness in Offred. She says: “I’m tired of keeping silent” (p.275). She associates herself with the underground May Day resistance group. She escapes from the dominating and subjugating power-structures, thus rebelling the marginalization of women and narrates the despicable story of atrocities. According to Howells, her narrative mode is a “gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival. In the process of reconstructing herself into an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead” (127).

Atwood depicts women as equally ruthless and domineering in overpowering fellow-women. Here Atwood’s deconstruction of patriarchal structures of power is not gender-specific, but it is a criticism of all power-structures that quash and inferiorize individuals.

The novel incorporates nationalist concern apart from feminist polemic in equating Canada to female posture vis-à-vis America’s male, but it also raises the Canadian problem to a universal level. Thus, the novel is also raised to the level of a hallowed myth, though a chilling one. Myth and reality are coalesced to facilitate a better and deeper understanding of life in all its complexities.

The novel presents a picture of an abominable state of society where body is given priority over the persona. How a man uses a woman only for his absolute sexual pleasure, as a consumer object to be enjoyed and thrown, has been presented in this novel. How women are confined within four walls, nothing short of incarceration of female bodies, along with female sexuality is the recurrent theme of Margaret Atwood in all her novels. In the modern days when science and technology grow to luminous heights, when there is a vociferous cry for Women’s liberation and education, The

Handmaid's Tale mirrors how the victims suffer due to subordination and oppression by male chauvinistic measures, to the point of women's fertility being a necessity for the social status of man in society.

CONCLUSION

The objective of research was to analyse the major findings, to revisit the four novels of Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm*, *Surfacing*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* foraying into myths establishing a lasting ambience. Atwood's feminist ideology is explicitly stated in an interview with Jo Brans in 1988, where Atwood has said, "I'm defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice" (142). Atwood's feminist perspective is 'holistic', 'anti-militaristic' and 'moralistic' which is shown through her characters. She is a pro-woman paving way for an equal footing of woman with her male counterpart in society. Her philosophy is that of the 'survivalist', that advocates for the assimilation of quality like self-assertion in women, a force that strengthens them in fighting against the odds created by the male chauvinistic society.

Marian in *The Edible Woman* feels trapped by Peter the hunter once she learns about the temperament of Peter during her meeting with him. She takes a bold decision to walk back on her engagement, thus consequently saves herself from the male bondage. Rennie in *Bodily Harm* after perceiving the traps of patriarchy takes refuge by running away from all men. The unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* being jilted by her lover after a forced abortion, flees to an island hence metaphorically goes on a psychic journey which results in epiphany. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* gains rich knowledge of the world from her sufferings and boldly marches to the world of freedom refusing to be victimized.

The growth of the writer's mental outlook can be traced through the heroines of her later novels. Her writing corpus shows the influence of Elaine Showalter who distinguished the three major phases of woman's writing, as cited below.

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on its social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values including demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity (274).

All the four novels of Atwood studied here, discuss the problem of survival of women in the patriarchy. *The Edible Woman* focuses on the survival of the 'authentic self' while *Bodily Harm* delineates the survival of the 'inauthentic self' in the grip of fear, and *Surfacing* deals with the survival of the 'submerged self'. Atwood portrays the negative saga and dystopian vision of women being reduced to child-producing machine in *The Handmaid's Tale*, yet there is a glimmer of hope in it. The first two novels conjure up the crude, voluptuous picture of womanhood typically produced in Canadian milieu, but the later novels reveal her attempt of universalization of women identity cutting across the cultural perspective.

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