

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE BLIND ASSASSIN

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Abstract:

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian novelist, has been known for her forthright views on the issues that concern the society in general and 'women' in particular. Though she cannot be considered as a 'feminist' in the true sense of the term, her fictional world revolves around the matriarchal society. Her novels if not suggest any solution to the problems that a woman face, they do focus on creating awareness of the problems that are common to 'other' gender, the problems including suppression, marginalisation and the tale of independence as felt by 'women'. Her protagonists are not 'rebels' but they are the ones who may be considered as the 'New Women'. The emerging 'New Women' is not a feminist but is one who accommodates to the tradition and strives to get accepted and acknowledge the "modern" tendencies of life style in the march towards what is called 'freedom' from the oppression experienced all through her life. In this background it further attempts to evaluate to critique MA's novel the blind ASSASSIN. It also attempts the social concerns of the writer and the protagonists' abilities and inabilities' that have an impact or influence in her march towards confronting the existential crisis.

Key Words: *Feminist, matriarchal society, gender, marginalization, suppression.*

Canadian literature in its modern phase is young and green. It is known fact that Canada has two 'home cultures': French and British, and that she is quite vulnerable to the domineering American culture and accommodates a large migrant population. to the immediate south. Canada has absorbed over the decades a very large number of outsiders. The fact that the French and the British culture coexisting, with ongoing other influences, it brings up a question whether there actually is such a thing as a single, indigenous culture even now prevailing in Canada. The question of homogeneity has been a matter of controversy. Canadian literature, especially fiction has shown a vitality of its own. In the seventies and the eighties, Canadian writing was stimulated by a renaissance of interest in literature and culture, with a special focus on women's writing.

Like other colonial literatures, Canadian literature was slow to develop; it started assuming significance in the early twentieth century. Canadian writing was stimulated by renaissance of interest in literature and culture with special focus on women's writing. Women's writing in contemporary Canada has been always characterised by the urge to throw the story line open to question and to implement disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions. Most of the women's stories in Canada are concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries challenging limits and having glimpse of new prospects. Many of the stories and novels have women writers as protagonist engaged in a struggle with language and inherited literary convention to find more adequate ways of telling about women's experiences fighting their way out of silence to project more authentic images of how women feel and what they do. Shifts of emphasis are evident in their subject matter and their story telling methods.

Women down the centuries have been subjected to subordination and insinuation. All cultures expect women to be secondary to man within the paradigm of gender, she is man's antithesis; he is active she is passive his realm is the public's sphere; hers is the private. His accomplishments are seen. The male

dominated society has marginalised and excluded women from power.

In Canadian history and literature there are several categories of women. Conservative but endowed with independent nature, assimilated women who easily reconcile to their predicaments and liberated ones who have extricated themselves from patriarchal, clutches are some of these categories.

Margaret Atwood one such writer in most of her works has always tried to portray an autonomous woman. Simone De Beauvoir conceals a woman as hesitating between the role of object, other which is offered to her and the assertion of her liberty. If this other has to assert her liberty to express, her subdued subjectivity, she has to speak through the gaps and learn to exploit the contradictions within a system that cannot afford to acknowledge its own self division. Her protagonists face this dilemma of creating an identity of their own as they confuse themselves in multiple roles and creates a chaos around them. Through ways differing from one another they come to realise their denied liberty and struggle to come out of the muddy puddles that surround them.

In all her novels she pleads for a balanced, harmonious man-woman relationship in which the two are viewed as complimentary and not as a battle of sexes. Her novels reveal an intense awareness of women's relation between bonding and bondage i.e between women's for connection with others and an equally strong need for freedom and independence. She is concerned with the treatment of women as a normal human being. She criticises the social system that assigns roles for and labels them as inferior or superior, sinful or chaste. She is intentionally preoccupied with women fighting against the females' norms of life - sexuality, dichotomy between career and the demands of the family. Atwood exposes the silent and hidden operation and confronts in politics, thereby recommending the rewriting of women's history. She demands a demolition of gender system and hopes for a new world in which men and women are equal. Margaret Atwood depicts history as a partial, often subjectively and politically shaped construction and exposes gendered roles, a social and cultural construction, utilising different forms of expression and different discourses. Atwood exposes constraints suggesting that behaviours, roles, representation and versions could be different.

The Blind Assassin

Margaret Atwood's tenth novel *The Blind Assassin* was first published by McClelland and Stewart in 2000 and is a winner of the Booker prize and the International Association of Crime Writers Dashiell Hammett Award. It is a Canadian postmodern metafiction that is deliberately deceptive. It is a novel within a novel within another novel. The tales nested perfectly in Russian doll style.

"*The Blind Assassin* takes the novel within a novel" idea to new heights, the elderly Iris Chase Griffen writing her record of the past, side by side with her late sister's book *The Blind Assassin* which is an account of two surreptitious lovers meeting in seedy room and eateries, plotting a strange science world story. As well, Iris looks at her slowed down world of the present, in the fictional Ontario town of Post Ticonderoga. The three stories are all separate yet slowly come together in such a skilful and subtle way. It is also a snapshot of the first half of the 20th century, with two world wars, the depression and the social realities of the time.

The Blind Assassin is set in the tumultuous period between the wars. Margaret Atwood nails these details beautifully; the optimism in the 1920s, the fear and hunger of the depression, the enthusiasm and political unrest into the late 1940s. Margaret Atwood brings us physical details as well; meals, clothing styles and the general modes of life, etc. the pragmatic focus in the novels is significant because the stories dealing with life provide enlightenment as to how to live with truth.

It is a novel subtle and dangerous as a spider web- its surface simple as water, its depth complex as the teeming, hungry sea. Three stories are intertwined in this complex novel, in the end, they become one. As Margaret Atwood's most ambitious work unfolds- a tricky process, in fact, with several nested narratives, we're reminded of just how complicated the familial game of hide and seek can be;

What had she been thinking of as the car sailed off the bridge, they hung suspended in the afternoon sunlight, glinting like a dragonfly, for that one instant of held breath before the plummet? Of Alex, of Richard, of bad faith, of our father, of his wreckage, of God, perhaps, and her fatal triangular bargain (Wilson Sharon, 1998)

The First narrative of the novel is the fictional autobiography of a Canadian woman whose life spans over century. It is a self-reflexive memoir of Iris Chase's life in Port Ticonderoga and Toronto, Canada. In the novel's present, this is in her 80s and living simultaneously in three time periods, the past of the two narrative's events, the present of the writing, and the future of the science fiction.

It is a tale of two sisters, namely Iris and Laura Chase one of whom Laura dies under ambiguous circumstances in the opening pages. Iris, the elderly protagonist who narrates this story of her family life starts with a dispassionate observation:

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge

Iris initially seems a little cold blooded about this death in the family. She knows the actual reason behind her death. When a police officer suggests that the brakes failed; Iris thinks:

It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were over the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way (American historical review, 103, 1998).

Iris sets out to write the true story of Laura's life and death and in this process, she tells her own life history. Laura and Iris spend their childhood in Avilion a "merchant's palace" and like princesses in a fairy tale. They virtually untouched by the outside world. Her grandmother named her mansion after an island valley where King Arthur went to die. Their grandfather is considered as a wealthy industrialist.

Her childhood experiences are not happy as her mother dies of miscarriage and due to her father's escape to alcoholism. Father always wanted boys to carry on the family business. Iris' father Norval returns from military service with one good eye and one good leg from the World War I; where he has lost his two brothers. He becomes alcoholic after being shattered by these tragic deaths. He runs, Chase industries, a button factory but problems start in the button factory and shut down was announced and the interior thunder storm struck when the factory caught fire apparently set by Alex Thomas, the radical on the run. After this incident, the sisters managed to hide Alex Thomas in the family attic before he escaped to Spain. They both fell in love with him but at the age of nineteen, Iris is forced to enter a joyless marriage to thirty-five years old wealthy Richard Griffen out of obedience to her father who hoped that this union would save his factory and his daughters.

Iris sells herself into marriage. She immediately finds herself and Laura thrown into a pit of snakes -Richard and his sister Winifred are the ones with sharpest fangs. In due course we get to know that defiance and maternity allow Iris to carve out her own space within the confines of the social situation. Later Laura becomes Richard's victim and seduction and sent to an "asylum" where she has an abortion. Upon her release the sisters reconnect and hurt each other with painful revelations. Iris tells Laura that she has had secret affair with Alex. She pushed Laura towards suicide by telling why she and not Laura, received the telegram announcing Alex's death. This story ends in tragedy because Iris alone knows who the real culprit of Laura's death is; and yet, at the same time, Iris is aware that she is nearing her journey's end, so she wants to tell the truth though it is difficult.

The second narrative also called *The Blind Assassins* supposed to have been written by Laura Chase. The manuscript was found after her death and published by Iris. It becomes a cult classic of Canadian Literature. Although the protagonists are identified only as "He" and "She" we are led to believe that it records the secret love affair of Alex and Laura. Later we come to know that it is authored by Iris.

The Blind Assassin describes the risky affair in the turbulent thirties between a wealthy young woman and a man. During their meetings in the cramped dirty and rented rooms, the lover tells a science fiction to entertain his girlfriend.

Within *The Blind Assassin* there is another story with a happy ending. It is about lizard man of planet Xenor and peach women of planet Aa'A. Earth fighter pilots want to wipe out the Xenorians entirely. During this war two young men Will and Boyd are shot to hell. The Zorch rays have put a hole in their tank and loose contact with earth control. They've been seized by a gravity field and find themselves on the Plant of Aa'A. There are no men except them and the women are virgins. After some days they discover that there is no birth and death. These women are completely shameless and display the most whorish behaviours. At first men find this entertaining but after a while it irritates them.

Margaret Atwood subtly braids all these stories together and gradually reveals their buried secrets. She co-relates these stories with the help of a torn photograph. In the Prologue and the Epilogue of *The Blind Assassin* and Iris memoir, there is a photograph of a man and woman on a picnic, showing just the hand of a third person in one corner, which evidently frames the whole novel. But actually, both are different photographs, one is tinted and the other is black and white.

The mixing of the genres, blending of documentary materials with the main narrative, a memoir, makes the novel a postmodern fiction. Sharon Wilson says:

The novel seems to build a meticulously realistic portrait of Canada through the first and second world wars. Only to deconstruct it through postmodernist magical realism and the exposure of deceptive contradictions and gaps (Wilson Sharon)

The characters within Iris' memoir are superb recalling her life over the past seventy years is a long, tedious process, but characters make this novel an unforgettable piece of literature. The main characters include Iris and Laura Chase and their parents; father Norval, Mother named only as "Our Mother" who sacrifices herself for others. Two sisters are brought up by their nursemaid Rennie. Her grandfather Benjamin, who built the button factory in the early 1870, and Grand Mother Adelia who was "married off" rather than married. Adelia's maiden name was Montfort. She was from an established family. She died in 1973 of cancer. Iris father was the eldest of three brothers. Two younger brothers Edger and Percival were killed in the war. Norval is a serious gentleman. After her mother's death, Iris' father meets Callista Fitzsimmons who is the sculptress of the weary soldier project. She is twenty years old woman and a read head. She is consulted like a man and strides around and shakes hands like one as well.

Miss Violet Groeham is the tutor of Chase sisters. She is forty years old woman with a wardrobe of faded cardigans that hinted at an earlier, more prosperous existence. The sisters called her Miss Violence. In the place of Miss Violence, their father appoints a man, Mr. Erskine, who'd once taught at a boy's school in England. He changed the whole system of their study and is a hair puller, and ear twister. He tries to exploit Laura so Mr. Norvel expelled him from his house.

In their teenage life, Iris and Laura meet Alex Thomas in the button factory picnic. He is an orphan and adopted by a Presbyterian minister and his wife. He is an European immigrant and a labour organizer. Suspected of Bolshevik Violence, and dodging the law, he is secretly sheltered by Laura and Iris when they are too young to understand his position and their own sexual pull.

At the age of nineteen Iris' father "sells" Iris to Richard in Marriage. He is the owner of a successful firm called "Royal Classic Knitwear". Iris marries Richard because of her father's hope that she can in this way save the now-failing button factory. But this proved to be a bitter pill saturated in sweetness. Iris is so busy trying to resist the imposition of monarchical authority, of the civilization for which Richard stands, and she fails to see how greatly her sister is being victimized.

Richard is a very selfish kind of man, as he didn't tell Iris about her father's death because he doesn't want any disturbance during their trip; actually, it was his business trip. But Iris feels no emotional

attachment with him. Their honeymoon trip is just a business for Richard. Later Iris finds that Richard had seduced Laura and says that he did nothing without Laura's consent. Iris leaves his house with Aimee and after that Richard is discovered dead in the sail boat "Water Nixie" because his political career is ruined by the scandal of Laura's book.

Richard's sister Winifred is an over ambitious and cunning socialite, a perfect manipulator. She is thirty years old and liked to be called as Freddie. She arranges parties' dinners and social events for Richard. She takes the helpless bride Iris in her hand and arranges all her shopping according to her taste.

Richard consults Winifred about everything because she is the one who encourages him. Iris recalls:

They'd both decide that Richard was the man of the future, and the woman standing behind him.... was her. It certainly wasn't me Our relative positions were now clear, hers and mine.... she was necessary to Richard, I on the other hand could always be replaced. My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth. (The Blind Assassin, 341-42).

After Richard's death she blamed Iris and now there is an open war. She does the worst thing to Iris and takes Aimee away from Iris. Iris's daughter Aimee dies of drugs, was self-neglected, and alienated from her mother. She was resentful of Iris for having dragged her away from her former and considerably more affluent life. Richard takes advantage of long distance and develops sympathy for himself by giving gifts to Aimee. Throughout her life Aimee is hoping that her real mother is somehow Laura.

Laura Chase is the younger glamorous, strange sister, the artist and empathy a temple girl with no illusions about god's mercy. She is the girl who will never fit into the world's regulations and structures. She is spiritual, curious, uncompromising. She is not a woman with the organisational power or love of self-advertisement to write an autobiography or a novel- but she is both heroic soul and sacrificed female. Others who claim they don't know her always use her.

Richard uses her for her lust and Iris her own sister uses her by posting her story under Laura's name. Throughout her life Laura becomes a helpless victim. She confined to an asylum as an acknowledgement that she is not enough of this world and she is raving and hysterical. Winifred says to Iris that mental specialist suggests that she is jealous of Iris and is better to send her to an asylum. But actually Richard whisks her out because Laura gets pregnant from him. Laura has more courage and dignity than Iris. Laura herself was more devoted to Alex;

She escapes from Asylum just to meet Alex. When Iris tells Laura about Alex's death, she kills herself by driving off the bridge. Here Iris functions as her sister's assassin. Iris Chase emerges from the story as one of Atwood's most memorable characters to date. She is a woman of ascetic life and ascetic wit, sharp and bitter as old wine. In her childhood she was her father's substitute boy. Iris has moved through her life in a fog of other's expectations, incapable of identifying her own needs and responsibilities. The impulse to grab her by the shoulders and shakes her is strong, particularly when she sleepwalks into an arranged marriage and passively permits her sister's institutionalization in a mental hospital. Iris is a victim to whom fate has not been kind, but whose ills- like those of many victims of circumstance are largely of her own making, even if her contribution was often one of complacency.

Now Iris is the woman near the end of her life, reflecting on the path she's taken to old age. She has lived fifty years with the secret meaning of Laura's death, and her story. Now she is constructing her story as the more personal memorial to preserve her memories of the paradise lost of her love affairs with Alex Thomas.

Iris memoir seems as the tragedy of a woman sold into a loveless marriage by her bankrupt father to preserve the family's social and economic standing, only to lose the man she loves, her reputation, and even her love of her daughter, a daughter fathered perhaps by the only man she loved.

The Blind Assassin explores how men can be convinced to sacrifice themselves in war for such dubious concepts as honour, courage and nationalism and about how women can be passively indoctrinated being marked with abuse. The novel's themes of sacrifice, loss, betrayal, assassination, blindness, amputation and silencing connect to the novel's mythic and fairy tale inter texts and allusions.

Iris is a victim of patriarchal society where her father sells her and her sister to the "devil" Richard. She feels helpless, tired and useless. Iris is the only survivor, who is recounting. Her story has to cope with the fact of her own survival, with a failing body and diminished powers in a world which is impatient of illness, weakness, vulnerability and death itself.

Iris is also an assassin, because she tells Laura about Alex's death. Iris, acting according to traditional female virtue, has tried to spare her father by marrying Richard, but that proves to be the road to her father's death and ultimately to Richard's also. Iris wants to take revenge yet she is not triumphant but forsaken as her daughter died prematurely and her granddaughter has long been estranged from her.

The novel moves along, chronicling iris's life, the young Iris is presented as so vapid, so unaware so stupid and the older Iris realize this, it is something for which she is quite apologetic and sad. She never fully understood the implications other people had on her life, on the lives of her sister and father. By the time she did, it was too late. The older Iris is batter and sad, but she never really descends into angst or insincere emotion-there are times when she chides herself for being melodramatic. She is very sympathetic, a sad, sorry woman. Who demands and deserves respect and care.

The Blind Assassin is a dark master piece in which tension comes from the sharp juxtaposition of worlds and in which futuristic fantasy interrupts and reflects a disquieting reality. This novel brings out social problems in Canadian culture discrimination of class, isolation, falsehood, complexity of life, poverty, fate, evil and good. The significance of the title with relevance to the characters and their blindness are found. Blindness of women characters and assassination by men characters are found in the novel. Sometimes women like Winifred and Iris also act assassins. Blindness of the Chase family is compared to the blindness of the children in Sakiel Norn.

The feminine search for a distinctive identity, within a predominantly feminist framework is found. Atwood's intention in her fiction, however, is not merely to expose woman's complicity in the processes that lead to her colonization and enslavement. It also explores the possibilities of combating patriarchal structures of power and domination that disallow woman's equal claims as an individual in society.

In *the novel*, Atwood brings out the quest for inner self and self-assertion of woman which is quite natural. Atwood also expresses the family relationship as a central element in her novels. Here Women are treated as victims by both time and society. The women are oppressed and humiliated by the society. Throughout the novel women are victimized not only by men but also by women. It is well expressed by Atwood that life for women in this male-dominated society is to strive hard for one's survival.

The Blind Assassin is note-worthy for its open ending strategy. It hovers on the verge of new possibilities. Locale plays an important role in the novel. Port Ticonderoga represents a new land, which provides a state of bliss and unhappiness to the Chase family. The novel has a specific socio-cultural background. The patterns of inner experience recorded in the novel are the memories of home and childhood, parental relationships, betrayal of love and marriage. Atwood elicits the quest for inner self and self-assertion of women in *The Blind Assassin*. Atwood also expresses the family relationship as a central element in her novel. She emphasizes, through the heroines of her work, that women should not lose their identity. They should always make up their minds to struggle against all the problems in their lives and lead the life to possess their own self-identity. Thus, the novel establishes an effective confluence of social and cultural domains.

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