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Depiction of Canada as Silent and Victimized Gender in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman and Surfacing*

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ABSTRACT

While threads of various issues and conflicts run through Atwood's writing but the issues concerning women dominate. In her novels, we observe not only the issue of women versus men but it concerns women versus ideology of capitalism (*The Edible Woman*), women versus mythology of patriarchy (*Power Politics*), women facing environment and abuse (*Surfacing*). Almost all the female protagonists of Atwood are university educated, urban and are usually employed. Perhaps Atwood wants to show that her heroines are not dumb dolls, they are educated but even then, they become victims to the circumstances. No doubt, in Atwood's writings, we witness difficulties faced by a woman but there always remains a conflict between male and female interests. It is an attempt to reduce the priority our culture has traditionally granted to male traits made possible by biology (through body size, hormonal specificities, freedom from childbearing). The present paper attempts to represent how women and Canada have been portrayed in Atwood's writings.

Keywords: Victimization, Capitalism, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

Atwood mostly teaches in both her novels *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* through "negative examples." Her protagonists are not very heroic heroines in the beginning. They are not totally reliable narrators. They may lie to their readers as sometimes they lie to themselves. In some instances, they are a bit mad. They are often fragmented, isolated "seeing poorly translating badly." Some of them are in varying degrees failed artists, paralyzed and amputated authors. Most of the protagonists are not ready to face the truth but they prefer to live in illusions. They often use their fictions for evasion of reality and then for confrontation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Atwood believes that art can and should be an agent of truth, a means to know ledged and confrontation. Those of her heroines who resolve the basic conflict of illusion versus reality, who ultimately discover truth in and through art, discover their own identities and own humanity. At the end they refuse to accept and label them as little-girl-lost, as innocent victims but they assert their own maturity as powerfully creative agents. Atwood, sometimes, projects women in her novels to act comically and there is certainly a comic mode in *The Edible Woman*. Although Marian MacAlpine lives in fear and grows increasingly alienated from society, her plight is presented as a comedy of premarital manners. These include the tomato juice survey. Another is Mariano's dinner with three graduate students across the candlelight table. There is a steady purpose throughout to expose everything in contemporary society.

Atwood has made a similarity between the women in her writings and that of her country Canada. She describes Canada as "feminine" in powerfully "masculine" world. This symbolism has parallel in Atwood's novels. Men victimize and oppress women, who in turn exert a passive - aggressive power in the protestation of their own innocence. Atwood's innocent and virginal heroines, like Canada, shed the illusion of their own innocence. They recognize their complicity in the destructive cycle of power and victimization and thus confront their own reality. Atwood's heroines must move from innocence to confrontation. Similarly, Canada as a nation must recognize and confront its own political identity. Whenever any of the heroines becomes desperate and lonely, she prefers to go back to her home country Canada. No doubt her heroines live in the urban area but even then, they always have a longing to go back to their home country, may it be H of *Surfacing* or the heroine of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is the "mother" country for which one longs one for. Atwood always feels the necessity to redefine mother, to return to one's childhood home, to explore the past to confront the present. As the orphaned and isolated protagonist of *Surfacing* begins her actual journey into the Canadian backwoods of her childhood and her psychological journey towards selfhood, she says "I can't believe, I'm on this road again..."

The women not only show a symbolic identity with Canada in their victimization and initial powerlessness, but they also affirm power within the context of Canadian literary tradition. Those of Atwood's heroines who do not bear children are correspondingly failed artists, failed adults locked into their own childhoods doomed to play the role of virginal young women. Marian in *The Edible Woman* truly grows up because she affirms her own feminine powers of procreation. The heroine of *Surfacing* assumes her own integration and sanity with the symbolic recreation of herself in the conception of a baby.

Margaret Atwood can be seen as a "feminist" writer because she is concerned for the psychological and physical survival of women. She sees this in terms, not merely of individual survival but of sisterhood. Almost always there is a sister figure in Atwood's fiction, a secondary character, sometimes a confidant who often aids the protagonist even if the protagonist sophisticatedly refuses to recognize her value. Women friends, being subject to the faults of the rest of humanity, may turn out to be as treacherous as men as is the case with Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* and Anna in *Surfacing*. But they may also serve as unconditional supporters and faithful friends in a way that men never do. The sister and mother figures, in Atwood's novels are human women rather than goddesses. It is the protagonist's recognition of this human status which is a key to the discovery of their own Identities. The above sketched ideas show that Atwood is as perceptive and conscious towards feminist movement as towards the rest of the society. She has made this point clear

in a few interviews. She is against the idea of "power" in general, whether held by men or women. "There is no point in destroying a male child instead of a female One."

Atwood has grown up with the contemporary women's movement. Her work has developed into an increasingly revolutionary vision of women's place. Like many other feminist writers, she is concerned most specifically with the role of women as artists. More than men, women artists are subject to role prescriptions. She says with confidence that now women's liberation has come along. In an interview with Graeme Gibson, she says that if a woman does something that earlier was supposed to be the task of male only, it threatens the position of the men. She says about herself that back in the days when women were supposed to pay attention to the diapers and washing of dishes, she has a threat to other women's life positions: "It is turning me from what I am as a writer into something I'm not." she says.

Atwood states in *Second Words* that she refuses to accept the term "role models" applied for her protagonists. As we see in the chapters of her novels, Atwood's protagonists are human beings, women with a small 'w'. They most frequently constitute negative examples rather than role models. Most importantly they do not represent Atwood herself nor do they speak for her. Margaret Atwood holds that many critics, feminist critics as well as others, have confused Atwood's heroines with Atwood. They have read *Surfacing* as a hymn to the Great Mother rather than psychologically oriented case study it is. Most of the critics have misinterpreted Margaret Atwood and her works as autobiographical statements. Atwood does not believe in stereotype female characters of any other tradition.

Through the women characters of her novels, Atwood states that women themselves are losing their individuality. They live in the way men want them to live. Anna in *Surfacing* is victimized by men. The worst thing that women are ready to give up their own way of seeing, as a result they begin to see everything as men would like them to see. In our Indian view, it is mother-in-law who collaborates in the killing of a young bride. She is not acting as a woman but as men would like her to act. She is against her own sex and its interest. Robert, Rubenstein holds that the heroine of *Surfacing* finds identification with her mother which reflects her inner craving for motherhood. Rubenstein, finds that the heroine's childhood is also contributing a great deal to her subsequent emotional numbness.

In "Women as Metaphor: A Note on Atwood's Feminism" Dr. Jaidev describes the progress of Atwood's feminism. It is fairly gender oriented in *The Edible Woman* but in *Surfacing* Atwood attains a voice that is feminist all right but something more too.... In these novels woman becomes a metaphor for all those who are damaged and abused only because they are powerless. Her feminism has suffered no dilution but it has gathered layers of social and political mass around it.

CONCLUSION

So, through *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* and through their women characters Atwood gives a message to women. She says that time has come when a woman must be bold and self-confident. They are not powerless as they were supposed to be earlier. She further says that no doubt, pregnancy is essential for a woman as it fulfils her deepest femininity but women should not get lost only in diapers, drudgery and repeated pregnancies. No doubt, they should be devoted wives and caring mothers but they should not let their dignity be crushed by anyone. Though the character of heroine of *Surfacing*, she gives the message that women should face the reality and should not live in illusions. She personally feels that women are not weak and humble but they are multifaceted. Atwood's treatment of women

acquires international scenario. The novelist feels that the Canadians are exploited by Americans and by the Canadians who follow the American way of life.

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