

Emerging Women in Margaret Atwood's Select Novels

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood is one of the most talented, powerful and intelligent writers in the west today. She articulates the dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities of the late twentieth century with all its complexities and extremities. Casting her vision of life in myriad forms her techniques and themes know no limit. Known widely as a poet and a novelist, Atwood is also a critic, a short story writer, an essayist, a caricaturist and a writer of children's books. A versatile genius, Atwood through her novel explores the various inter-related social, physical and psychological anxieties of the people. Portrayal of women characters in literature are as varied as the authors who create them. Female protagonists have represented an interminable array of roles throughout literature. Whether women are represented as angels or metaphorical monsters, it is obvious that female characters have been pigeonholed and stereo typed for centuries.

I. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is one of the most talented, powerful and intelligent writers in the west today. She articulates the dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities of the late twentieth century with all its complexities and extremities. Casting her vision of life in myriad forms her techniques and themes know no limit. Known widely as a poet and a novelist, Atwood is also a critic, a short story writer, an essayist, a caricaturist and a writer of children's books. A versatile genius, Atwood through her novel explores the various inter-related social, physical and psychological anxieties of the people.

In the portrayal of the quest of the protagonist, the concerns of Atwood regarding various humanitarian issues could be seen. Of course, she is not an exception in voicing such concerns. Writers of every age and every background have been and are engaged setting right the unfair tendencies that are prevalent in the society. All the writers strive to express their thoughts various modes. Therefore, it could be asserted that all those writers have had humanitarian concerns with different viewpoints. Atwood is only a part of this mega frame work. Still she is regarded as an outstanding and distinct writer because appreciably Atwood is a well-poised writer.

Atwood's novels show how daily life gradually wears women down. The little battles won or lost reduce the resilience of women. Urban decay plays an important role in *Cat's Eye* where a contrast between Toronto and northern bush is brought out. Most protagonists suffer because of the distorted attitude of the Urbanites. Mothers are compulsive, fathers are feared, and children are sadistic. Urban decay is an inescapable part of urban life. Urban living and its decay lead to physical and psychological violence against women. The housewives in *Cat's Eye* should love out their marriages where divorce is possible but frowned upon leading to impoverishment. The protagonist in *Cat's Eye* reflects on her childhood in Toronto that is not pleasant. She had difficulties in learning to socialize with other children who were not vulnerable as her. By learning to deal with her childhood, the protagonist learns to enjoy the present. She accepts the bad things that have happened to her and accepts bad things she has done to others. Understanding of these actions helps her to reject victimization. Atwood shows the rejection of victimization by breaking away from the society.

Her four protagonists survive because they are able to change and transform in order to fit in to their environments. These metamorphoses allow the women to find a language suitable for them, thus enabling them to rediscover their voice. They "survive" in a specific way. To be deemed a "survivor" one must not simply continue living, as might be the accepted definition for the term. In fact, Atwood's women survive on many different levels. As Atwood describes in her thematic guide to Canadian literature, Survival in order to Survive from being victimized, one must become a "Creative non-victim" (Scion 38). This position is for "Those who have been able to move into it from internal causes of victimization have been removed". They each thwart off a sort of metaphoric death of women in focusing all to reach this position. They each thwart off a sort of metaphoric death of self to re-emerge as stronger, more connected selves.

Atwood's fascination with mortality is prevalent in all of her novels. She admits to this enthrallment in her chapter titled "Negotiations with the Dead" from her work by the same name. She states "All writing is motivated, deep down, by a bear of and a fascination with mortality....to bring something or someone back from the dead" (NWD 156). Atwood's entire protagonists in a sense undergo this journey to the underworld. They

embark on their own negotiations with the dead. Returning from this journey is not the only way they survive, however. All four women are cruelly victimized in innumerable ways.

One of the most triumphant ways of these women survive is through finding their voice in writing, just as Atwood has. By writing, her protagonists are able to leave something behind to be remembered by; something permanent. Atwood has stated that the nature of writing is "its permanence, the fact that it survives its own performance" (NWD 158). So, just as Atwood exists through her own writing, her protagonists survive through theirs. They overcome responsibility for it. They embark on many journey and are able to reach the destiny "Position Four: To be a creative non-victim" (SF 38). The operative word being "creative" for it is only through creativity that they are able to find their voices and true survival. As Atwood has stated, "Other art forms can last but they do not survive as voice" (NWD 159). Fortunately for Atwood's protagonists, the rediscovery of their voice enables their survival.

Four prominent characters, who fit the previous descriptions, are the nameless protagonist from *Surfacing*, Elaine Risley from *Cat's Eye*, and Marian from *The Edible Woman* and Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale*. All these women are forced to struggle with varying elements in their lives. In order to survive, the women need to connect to their pasts and other people in the attempt to become a less divided, whole self. The heroine in *Surfacing* struggles with her inability. This event has split her reality, her memory, and her personality. Elaine Risley suffers from similar issues. She too, is tormented by her past. Her tumultuous childhood has rendered her incapable of connecting to others. Rennie Wilford also suffers from an inability to feel and connect to others. Her struggles are the result of more obvious invasions. Throughout the novel she is forced to die with a break in (a violation of her privacy) and cancer (a violation of her body). She, like the other protagonists, caste as an inability to connect to others. Offred is stripped of her identity and is restricted from free use of language and literacy.

The Republic prohibits any sort of alliances. Therefore, Offred is unable to connect with others as well. This inability to connect is common among Atwood's protagonists. In order for them to survive they need to overcome the impediments that make connection possible. Not only do they need to be able to connect with other people, but also they need to connect to their past and themselves. Only then can these women be considered more fully integrated selves. A nameless protagonist from *Surfacing*, Elaine Risley from *Cat's Eye*, Marian from *The Edible Woman*, and Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* are victimized in myriad ways. They all suffer from fragmented memories of their past and have been placed in degrading positions. Each individual protagonist was victimized.

The particular way in which they survive is significant. They do not simply continue to live. They are all able to recover a lost or oppressed piece of themselves and can therefore reconnect to become whole again. These four protagonists ultimately acknowledge their own responsibility for their victimization, and that reorganization helps them find their personal once and regain a political consciousness. Through a close examination of Atwood's protagonists, it is clear that these characters succeed in procuring "knowledge of their place". By gaining possession of this knowledge and by acknowledging responsibility for their victimization these characters are able to become "whole" again. They are able to survive.

It further illuminates the victim that victimizes dichotomy; while reiterative the plethora of reasons that Atwood's protagonist should be deemed survivors. In order to understand Atwood's female characters, it is necessary to examine certain generalities that can be seen in Atwood's works, specifically her thoughts on feminism and survival. Arguably, she is one of the most prolific Canadian writers. Her works have been thoroughly studied and examined. Atwood is impossible to pin down, although critics insist on trying to categorize her.

As Rosenberg points out, "Reviewers of Atwood's work have attempted to place her in many different categories" (Rosenberg 15), including the misnomer that Atwood is a "feminist writer" (Rosenberg 15). Although the feminist factor is clearly an important issue, "She refuses to endorse feminist cliches because she intensely dislikes the role of the rthodox ideological mouthpiece" (Pache 126). Atwood resists being lumped into the same categories and stereotypes with what is thought of as a 'typical feminist' writer. Elaine Risley from *Cat's Eye* for example, is a strong female protagonist, but her emotional problems are the direct result of other women. Atwood's female characters are ambiguous, in that they all posses positive and negative qualities, which prohibit them from being categorized as all good or entirely bad.

By giving a scientific fictional background, she stresses the point that man may advance in Science and technology but that may not give him completely happy .The only thing which can sustain him is love and compassion. This is implied in the novel. Gilead has an environment whose action depend upon scientific technology that is p[ossible but not as yet realized. Compucount, Compucheck, Compubank, Compuhome and Soul Scroll parade. But viewed in the light of the existence for the modern society. But viewed in the light of the proceedings of the novel, a discerning reader can decode the message of Atwood, that scientific technology

which can be employed for man's happiness and success can equally be instrumental in destroying his relationships with the fell beings and his undisturbed relationship with God.

As Pache points out, "Atwood prefers to look at women's role in society, more specifically at the women writer's role in society. She works by pinpointing inconsistencies and contradictions, keeping a keen eye on changing conventional attitudes, rather than lending her voice to an abstract critique of the system" (Plahe 126). She does this brilliantly. At no time in her novels does she voice outrage against society in general; instead, she spends time examining the minute details. She does not hold one sex culpable over the other for society's problems.

The protagonists in Atwood's novels struggle to understand why they are dissatisfied with the world around them. They do not fit easily into the society. Some go beyond recognition of victimization, others attempt rejection, and some fail but most survive. All of them use one agent that is difficult for others: their creativity. They do not have any conventional heroes or do not perform any extraordinary actions. All of them are women in typical situations who refuse to accept and do what they can to fight victimization.

Victimization and survival are the themes explored by Atwood in her criticism, fiction and poetry. As a Canadian woman writer, Atwood is concerned with the issue of victimization and survival of both Canadian experience and female experience. She sees a similarity between the status of Canada and of woman. Power political is the major and common factor in both. Atwood explores the Canadian national consciousness and the female psyche.

Atwood's strategy consists of creating female protagonists who, each in her own way, find the means to seize the metaphorical pen and conquer their fear of being chased. The protagonist from *Surfacing* uses pictures to connect to her past. Elaine Risley's pen takes the form of paintbrush, which she uses to create meaning on her blank canvas. Rennie Wilford is determined to be an important journalist and write about significant issues. Offred finds her voice and seizes the ability to speak out by narrating her sordid tale. By allowing her fictional characters the ability to create, Atwood herself proves that she too has the power to seize the pen. She is not afraid of "castration".

What makes Atwood's book such a moving tale is her clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a voice. She is almost like a sleep walker conceiving disjointed perception of her surroundings as well as flashing reminiscences about a by-gone life. As the scenes gather prominence, more details start to fill in. The heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptively transfigured into a full-rounded one which parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. As Amin Malak observes, Thus the victim manipulated and metamorphosed into a determined conniver who angrily violates the perverted canons of Gilead. (14)

Atwood skillfully manipulates the time sequence the heroine's pre-Gilead past and the present. Those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of life filled with energy, creativity, humaneness and a sense of self-hood. This life sharply contrasts the totalitarian features such as alienation and suffering. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively revealed how the regimental misogynous state functions: it is rather of power, not choice, coercion not volition, of fear not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities through a grim dystopian nightmare.

The fact that her victimized protagonists all suffer from specifically female issues has to be acknowledged as well. Many of the struggles that they are forced to deal with are strictly feminine struggles; the nameless protagonist from *Surfacing* is haunted by her abortion. Elaine Risley is tormented by her desire to be accepted in women's society. Rennie Wilford has had a mastectomy and Offred is objectified by the mere fact that she has "viable ovaries." These women struggle because they are women. In order to survive, they need to address the inequalities of their societies and reconstruct themselves. They are thus the **emerging women** and they eventually are able to take greater control of their lives by resisting society's expectations for women and creating their own.

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