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Margaret Atwood – Changing Perspectives
(Some Notes on the Variability of Atwood's Characters and Themes)

Abstract

This paper examines changing themes in some representative novels by Margaret Atwood. Focussing on *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *The Robber Bride* and *Oryx and Crake*, it argues that Atwood has moved from largely feminist themes to more humanist themes in her novels. Rather than confining herself to the individual, Atwood – unlike many contemporary fiction writers – considers the wider human context in her novels.

Résumé

Cette contribution examine l'évolution thématique dans certains romans représentatifs/emblématiques de Margaret Atwood. Focalisant l'essentiel de l'attention sur *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing, The Robber Bride*, et *Oryx and Crake*, l'auteur conteste que Atwood ait véritablement transcendé des thèmes féministes afin d'examiner des thèmes plus humanistes dans ses romans. L'auteur précise enfin que, contrairement à beaucoup de fiction contemporaine, dans ses romans Atwood ne se contente pas d'examiner l'individu pris isolément; elle s'affaire plutôt à saisir le contexte humain plus large dans lequel se construisent et évoluent les individualités.

It seems that much contemporary fiction today has resigned itself against taking a global view of humankind and instead concentrates more on individual issues. To make the link between an individual life and its relation to a wider human context is left to the reader. The works of Margaret Atwood seem to be an exception to this. Atwood points out that "It is fiction where individual memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportion. The closer fiction is to us as readers the more we recognize and claim it as individual rather than collective. …each character in fiction has an individual life replete with personal detail …. But each also exists within a context" (Atwood 1997, 3). Atwood's fiction reflects both individual and collective consciousness and experience. Her view of reality is characterized by a shifting of artistic focus from the individual to the social, from female to human, from past to present, from present to future – "to challenge an accepted version of history" (ibid, 8). Atwood has written both "contemporary" fiction (*The Edible Woman, Cat's Eye*) and historical novels (*Alias Grace*) as well as historical dystopias (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*). To achieve

the greatest possible verisimilitude of her view of the contemporary world she is shifting her temporal perspective of reality.

Atwood, as both an iconic and iconoclastic figure of Canadian literature, does not reflect only historical social and cultural diversification but also the main concerns and discontents of Canada. Her literary genius exceeds the boundaries of the local and the national and transfers her Canadian experience into what is universally human. Thus, the literary works of Atwood constitute an inseparable part of studies on Canada because she reflects its national, cultural and social essence.

Studying the novels of Atwood we can observe that their primary concern with women's lives is communicated to us through varying perspectives of her view of a female world and the transformation of the positions of women in Canada and the world as well. As Rosemary Sullivan points out, "Margaret had begun to see the novel as a vehicle not only for [feminine] self-expression, but also for social observation" (132).

Margaret Atwood is an author whose main concern has always been with the feminine, female and feminist issues. However, in her novels she has not created a secluded women's world but has set her stories against a wider cultural, social, political backdrop. She uses her female characters to point to the problems of humankind as such through the paradigm of relations such as the relations of women to their own selves (*The Edible Woman, Surfacing*) or to other women (*The Robber Bride*) or through presenting women in their relations to the male dominated society (*The Handmaid's Tale*), society in relation to women, women as the representation of humankind (*Oryx and Crake*), and so on. In her novels Atwood has provided a complex network of relations to capture the complexities of the postmodern world. On the surface Atwood's novels may strike us as private and strongly individualized personal histories with the female protagonists being obsessed by their private dilemmas and frustrations. However, Atwood's ambition is to give us more. Her private, female and individual experience transcends into the universal and the global.

The varied images of womanhood are presented through the changes of the social, political, historical and environmental settings she casts her heroines in. Thus while her perspective may be perceived as feminist, the major argument of Atwood's novels is wider – social, political, ecological, religious – demonstrating also her sensitivity to the catastrophic consequences of the excesses of humans if carried to the extreme.

The Edible Woman, written in the 1960s, introduces to us a proto-feministic heroine named Marian McAlpin, who stops eating to demonstrate her dissatisfaction, seemingly with her relationship with Peter. But metaphorically it expresses female/human discontent with the consumer attitudes of the society Marian perceives in relation to herself. The consumers are the men who run her life and devour her. The character of Peter suggests another theme that Atwood will deal with in her later novels (*The Handmaid's Tale, The Robber Bride*) – violence and aggression against women.

The Edible Woman follows Marian deep into a self-exploration symbolized by her rejection and then eventual re-acceptance of food. Marian gives up food in her search for a place in society and to find out who she is and what her true persona is. She parallels her body with the food she eats and for fear of being consumed as well she stops eating. The loss of her appetite is a metaphor of the loss of her sense of self and her place in the society.

In the male-dominated society in which Marian lives, there are two options: eat – or be eaten. Both, however, pose a single alternative to a woman. In this novel the heroine, representative of the early feminism, is set in an antagonistic relationship with the male world, where the woman is clearly victimized by the male world. This is a recurring formula of Atwood's novels, the basic perspective from which Atwood's women are seen in her early novels. This novel, however, in spite of the limitations Marian may have as a feminist icon, suggests the non-conformist role women might play in society.

As mentioned above, Atwood's women usually epitomize and/or reflect more complex issues than the private ones. Today Marian might well be diagnosed as suffering from anorexia. Atwood's prophetic insight into the female world is clearly demonstrated through Marian's anorexia. Anorexia, one of the major medical problems of contemporary women, is dealt with as a tool of woman's self-expression and self-liberation. While in Atwood's novel anorexia is presented as a protest against the demands of the male world threatening female independence and identity, anorexia practised by women today rather shows their compliance with the male demands on a female figure.

The Edible Woman in general expresses woman's uncertainty of her place in the society. Marian, freeing herself from the clutch of Peter's hand, says "Once I was outside I felt considerably better. I had broken out from what, or into what I didn't know" (78). Although Marian as a character presents a strong case for feminist argument, Atwood does not allow her to enjoy her flight from the restrictive male world. To regain her personal balance she starts eating again and looking for a new job – she becomes a consumer, thus accepting male dominance. Her only hope for survival is in her merging with the social order she has raised her protest against. In this Atwood is defying the conventional female role that most females were expected to play during the 1960s.

In *Surfacing* we have a seemingly similar formula. The central unnamed, anonymous heroine – everywoman – undertakes a self-explorative journey to regain her sense of identity. However, this time Atwood shifts her perspective of the protagonist more to the realm of the universal and global. Our heroine is nameless, her individual identity is irrelevant. Her quest to find her own self, although conveyed through the relationships with men (father, husband, lover figures), is treated through ecological issues. Atwood's perspective moves here from the relation of the woman to society to the relationship of a woman and to more particular social problems presented through ecology. As the female identity is less individualized, she acquires a more universal human nature. Her heroine says "The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human" (130). She becomes a "human voice" rather than a female one, and yet paradoxically we get a deeper insight into woman's psyche. Atwood expresses the female's power in terms of her ability to give voice and power to her life and feelings so as to win an emotional response.

The individual self-preservation is metaphorically portrayed through the preservation of nature, the Canadian wilderness. In *Surfacing*, Atwood argues for the relevance of the environment as a condition for human happiness, presenting women as those who are more concerned. "That is the real danger now the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, we can no longer cope. They would never believe it' s only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on the beach with washed hair waving like scarves;

not this … A new kind of centerfold" (190). Through the heroine's final merging with nature Atwood points to the other dimension of human existence represented by ecological issues, foreseeing the problems humanity will face in the last decade of the 20th century.

Surfacing is also a meditation on love and the wounds men and women inflict on each another. This is present here through the abortion the heroine undergoes and her decision to conceive another child as part of her healing process. Atwood is translating the trauma of abortion into an act of self-exploration the heroine goes through to recover and regain her identity.

The protagonists of both *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are still females who are unstable, mentally disturbed and unsure of themselves. Their pilgrimage to the new identity is long and painful. Their transition from a victimized position to a non-victim is still possible only in relation to a man.

The case of *The Robber Bride* is different. Atwood now changes her perspective of a victimized woman as a protagonist of her novel and she introduces the character of "a strong woman", a femme fatale who deals with women the way the male characters often act in their relationships with women. Zenia is a "she-devil" – malicious, manipulative and aggressive, bringing total havoc into the lives of her female friends. The novel is again a complex and multi-layered book. It explores and seeks answers to questions of identity, evil forces, partnership relations, war and history set against the notion of victimization. "Of all the novels, *The Robber Bride* (RB) most fully explores the role of the other in the constitution and continuance of the self. The plot is driven almost exclusively by a struggle for supremacy between the characters" (Mycak, 212).

Atwood has shifted her perspective of the victim: the main heroine does not fight with a man or the society but with other women. Men, who in other novels play more significant roles, become either "just pawns in the chain of events" (Mycak 212) or tools, and as this is warfare the women are drawn into it as the ammunition Zenia uses against her friends. Beside the war the four women are waging, there are real wars present in the story (World War II, the Gulf War, the Vietnam War), giving the private stories a familiar Atwoodian wider social and historical context.

Atwood moves from the tensions between a protagonist and the social order to the forces and means that people use to create tension. Violence, aggression, the betrayal of trust are the means which Zenia uses in her battle for supremacy. Thus in this novel Atwood sees a process of self-exploration of a woman not through challenging the social order or established codes but through fighting an individual enemy. Through encounters with Zenia, the other three women, Tony, Charis and Roz, after their initial vulnerability, almost paralysis, create a strong relationship that serves as a substitute for their lost male partners and at the same time allows them to recognize who they are in relation to themselves and Zenia, and consequently to regain control over their own lives.

In *Surfacing* the language becomes one of the building elements of the heroine's self-exploration. The nameless heroine must separate herself from the language of her lover and friends to tell her own story about herself, not what other people say about. In *The Robber Bride* Tony, too, constructs her own language. In this novel the power of the protagonist is in her ability to spin an intricate web of conflicting stories about herself. She assumes the role of a trickster,

the creator of illusions. It is the language by which Zenia destroys her opponents. The complexity of the narration in the novel is created also by the stories the other three protagonists give to recreate themselves.

While in the previous novels Atwood concentrated more on the act of separation, in *The Robber Bride* she analyzes human relations through interactions, violent and aggressive, as the base for the development of self/consciousness.

When reading the novel *Oryx and Crake* we are immediately reminded of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as both are dystopias. Both novels are evidence that Atwood is an author that does not concern herself only with contemporary problems but her view of reality is a "long distance" view warning us of the consequences of our present-day actions.

The evil force the novel deals with is the societal hunt for personal gain, the abuse of political power supported by technological innovations, in this case especially bioengineering, combined with the moral depravity of a scientist, which brings humankind to a cataclysmic end. In *Oryx and Crake*, in contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood changes her position from a politically conscious feminist to an ecologically concerned human of the earth, which connects this novel more to *Surfacing*. Her feminism is very mildly represented by Oryx, a girl from a pornographic film, who is a unique female character in the whole gallery of Atwood's women as she represents the opposite of the traditional Atwood female characters, being completely complacent about her status as an adult entertainment star. She is a dramatic contrast to the heroines of the previous novels – intellectual women searching for independence and dignity. On the other hand, she is more unknowable than other less individualized heroines of Atwood's novels.

Although Oryx (who is hired by Crakers, the products of genetic engineering and perfect creatures, to educate the new breed of humans) becomes the Madonna figure for the Children of Crakes, she is not the main character. Once again Atwood has changed her view and made Jimmy/Snowman, the last human among the Crakers, who adores Oryx, her protagonist. Like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Surfacing*, *Oryx and Crake* remains open-ended, although in this novel Atwood decided for a more explicit and bleak rendering of her message to us. At the end of the novel Jimmy/Snowman discovers the other survivors. He watches his fellow human beings from a distance and says: "Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go" (433). Although we can sense a strong speculative undertone in the novel it does allegorically bear a distinctive message about human loss of control over scientific experiments affecting fatally the environment and human life.

In her works Atwood has always set her themes of womanhood into wider social frameworks and gradually extended her initially feminist concerns into global human concerns. The prevailing motif of victimization of women so typical in her early novels transcends into the motif of victimization of humankind in her latest novels. To achieve a stronger impact upon her readers but also to give her challenging stories a more universal significance she tested her stories and characters in different political and historical settings. The variations of her themes and characters have developed from the individual to the universal human and global, where the gender and geo-political settings no longer matter.

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