

In the Name of God



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Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's
The Robber Bride

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Abstract

This research examines the difficult journey of women to develop an independent and secure identity that is not defined based on patriarchy's norms. Psychoanalytic theories of Lacan are employed to scrutinize the problematic relationship between son and mother which leads to distorted view of women. Zenia is presented as a femme fatale (following Atwood's the spotty-handed villainesses' tradition) in *The Robber Bride*. She is a gorgeous, deceitful, and deviant man-eater who destroys the life of the other three female characters. Having been experienced a bad relationship with their mothers; all the female characters try to achieve success in their heterosexual relationships. By stealing their men and damaging the image of a happy-ending relationship, Zenia makes them aware of being victimized in patriarchy's clutches. Irigaray's theory sheds light on mother-daughter relationship which she calls "the dark continent of the dark continent" and helps to examine the ways this relationship can help women in the formation of their identity. In the light of Butler's theory the study discusses that women are regarded as "others" and oversimplified by men as either angels or devils. The gender roles and sexual norms that are defined by patriarchal power structures always lead to women's repression. Finding themselves captured in the "masquerade of femininity", the female characters transgress their traditional gender roles and assume new performances, and challenge the masculine discourses. The new identity that women define for themselves crosses the boundaries between men and women, self and other, which becomes a call for bisexuality that Cixous introduces in *The Newly Born Woman*.

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Chapter One

Introduction

General Overview

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, short story writer and author of numerous reviews and critical essays. She has won several national and international literary awards and many honorary doctoral degrees. As she has often said she writes “for people who like to read books” (qtd in Howells, *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* 1). Her novels are bestsellers and have been the subjects of a wide range of courses such as “English literature, Canadian and postcolonial literature, American literature, as well as women’s studies, gender studies, and science fiction courses” in colleges and universities all over the world (1).

Her texts are adapted for films and even performed as plays or operas. Although it is easy to understand her works on a surface level, they are also multilayered, imbued with literary, political and historical allusions, and profound in their use of symbolism, parody, and satire (Wilson xi).

Atwood’s writing style is very personal and she successfully presents each character in a way as if she really were him or her. Many readers and critics are inclined to read her

novels autobiographically and may think what she expresses in her works are her personal views. However it is rather unkind of the reader to automatically think that there is some form of autobiography in a novel as if a good writer is incapable of imagination and invention. In fact, what Atwood depicts in her novels is the way people think at that time not her personal opinion. In the following passage Margaret Atwood confirms this idea and resists attempts to read her works autobiographically:

I think [this confusion between a novel and an autobiography] is the result of several factors. First, it may be a tribute to the writing. The book convinces the reader, therefore it must be true”, and who is it more likely to be “true” about than the author? Readers sometimes feel cheated when I tell them that a book is not autobiographical” that is, the events described did not happen to me.(Of course, every book is “autobiographical” in that the images and characters have passed through the author’s head and in that he or she has selected them.) The writer is seen as “expressing” herself; therefore, her books must be autobiographical...the idea is remarkably tenacious. I was talking about this at a reading one time. I explained that my work was not autobiographical, that the central character was not me and so on. Then I read a chapter from *Lady Oracle*, the chapter in which the fat little girl attends dancing school. The first question after the reading was over was, how did you manage to lose so much weight? (qtd in Kraege 7)

In *Spotty-Handed Villainesses*, Atwood discusses what novels are by saying what they are not. He argues that “novels are not sociological textbooks, although they may contain social comment and criticism” (28), they are not political pamphlets although unavoidably they may discuss politics. She believes that novels are not, chiefly, ethical tracts... but they may contain moral lessons, since they deal with human beings and their behaviors as good and bad. She believes although novels are not what she said above, they are not also “merely a piece of Art for Art’s Sake, divorced from real life” (28). Moreover, she believes that

novels are “ambiguous and multi-faceted” because they attempt to deal with “human condition” through a “notoriously slippery” medium (language) (28).

Graham Huggan devotes a chapter of his book *The Post-colonial Exotic* to “Margaret Atwood, Inc.,” the Atwood industry, and there he presents different explanations for her outstanding success:

First and foremost, hard work and productivity; her ability to function as a spokesperson on a wide range of topics both literary and political; the multiplication of her public roles as writer, feminist, environmentalist, nationalist; the “soundbite quality of many of her public utterances” and the “epigrammatic witticisms” found in her writing (in a word, she is media-friendly); and her launching of subversive attacks on social mores from the position of the middle class.(qtd in Howells, *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* 28-29)

Atwood draws ideas from various traditions in her novels: feminism, nationalism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and many others but she refuses to be classified rigidly as a member of a particular tradition but literary. However, her refusal does not prevent the critics from examining her novels based on such traditions.

As an ecological writer, Atwood is concerned with nature, people, the planet and its possible destruction. As a postcolonial writer she is preoccupied both by the situation of Canada as a colony and by women’s empowerment. As a Gothic writer, she employs irony, horror and myth to undermine social structures and draws especial attention to how people, values and events can be vulnerable and threatened.

Atwood’s fictions are full of duplicity, cruelty and monsters. Karen Stein states that in 1994, Atwood for the first time introduced the writer as a “trickster-figure”, a character who does not respect boundaries and transgresses traditions. Therefore, open endings,

tricky language, dubious characters, and multiple interpretations in her writing, should not surprise her readers (Cited in Kerskens 2). Her witty and playful language, her exploration of the individual's dilemmas and open and deceptive endings can be attributed to the influence of postmodern tradition in her novels:

Atwood as postmodern trickster invites us to listen to a narrator or see with a focalizer whose vision seems plausible and pleasing to accept, but then Atwood reveals how foolish we have been in not thinking for ourselves. The shifts of vision and the independent thought required of the reader make these stories unsettling, yet the discomfort is part of the process of transformation that these stories set in motion. (Bloom 77)

As a feminist writer, Atwood deals with representations of women. She has been interested in power relations between men and women, and she has examined how women use power and how power is exercised on them. She has discussed various feminist themes in her novels: the objectification of women, the female victimization, the mythical images of women, female friendship, and the issues of gender and identity. "Perhaps it could be said that in her all literal works Atwood explores the unequal sexual politics that shape and restrain the lives of her protagonists" (Sipila, 43). In fact, she has been recognized as a novelist for whom all forms of oppression, sexual and cultural, are of concern.

In her thesis, *The Femme Fatale: Theorizing Female Power and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace and The Robber Bride*, Shelly Kulperger quotes from Goldman that Atwood's texts "reflect a belief in the power of fictions to forge escape routes" for women in order to make them free from being either an innocent and weak victim to an all-powerful patriarchy or an evil femme fatale. Atwood aims to deconstruct the polarized view of women, either as an angel in the house or as an evil femme fatale.

One strategy to achieve this end is combining various types of female subjectivity in order to achieve something new:

Quilting as an allegorical/bricolage practice that “makes do” with scraps of material is a model for postmodern power and subjectivity. The trope of quilting fits in with a textual practice that engages with the faded, forgotten scraps of material history and blends the hard lines separating and monitoring boundaries of feminine selves which have polarized the femme fatale and the proper lady. (Kulperger 51)

It is a mistake to simplify Female subjectivity to a type or define it under a universalizing feminist discourse. Cixous warns that: “both the witch and hysteric woman have a rebellious and conservative role at the same time” (6). She believes both of these typical characters are harmful to the woman’s image; therefore they “must disappear: the newly born woman may only impersonate them” (6). Atwood is strongly against this polarized construction of female subjectivity and deconstructs virgin/whore, good/bad, and wife/mistress dichotomies in her fictions.

Several of Atwood’s novels, explore the female characters’ understanding of their individual female identity—one that has not been shaped by patriarchal ideology; perhaps the most successful story of female growth is *The Robber Bride*¹ (1993), Atwood’s thirteenth published work; in which the female characters cannot speak for all women but, rather, map out possible spaces for transformation- “escape routes” - and illuminate the fluid dynamic of gender and power. The issue of gender is discussed as the central problem for a female individual struggling for an autonomous selfhood and identity.

In the novel, Atwood tells the life stories of three women, Tony, Charis, and Roz, who are drawn together through their interactions with a woman named Zenia. In the

¹ *The Robber Bride* will be referred to as *RB* hereafter.

course of the novel, Tony, Charis, and Roz all learn their own individual strength and explore their hopes and desires. Through their friendship, the characters emerge as strong, independent women who do not subscribe to patriarchal rules and are able to come to terms with the traumas in their lives.

Argument

Although other critics have discussed the issue of women and female identity in Atwood's work, they have not addressed some of her most recent novels and have taken a very limited approach to reading and understanding Atwood's version of the self. This study opens up a literary conversation about Atwood's self that is more comprehensive (as compared to other critical arguments) in its understanding through using different branches of theory and thought to reach a number of conclusions. This new viewing of Atwood's representation of the self is significant, because instead of using one approach, the study will look at the self as defined by several different branches of philosophy and thought. Though most of my analysis involves close readings of the primary texts, I also explore Atwood's work through the psychoanalytic criticism of Lacan, and the feminist criticism of Irigaray, Cixous, and Butler. I hope to come to a broader conclusion about Atwood's female identity. In short, I will discuss Atwood's self in ways that others have not, and I will discuss one of her more recent works that have not often been analyzed in this way. I have chosen this diverse range of theorists and ideas because the self has many definitions and Margaret Atwood's self is complicated and cannot be truly understood from only one branch of thought.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the principal theme of Atwood's novel, *The Robber Bride*, women's search for a specific female identity. All the female characters try to find a stable concept of identity. Each character in the journey of self-realization confronts with the other, an evil woman who due to her transgressive behavior is classified as unfeminine by patriarchal society. The Other woman is threatening to the concept of female identity defined by patriarchy, a docile and passive angel in the house, who is obedient to patriarchal gender roles. The Other woman is the incarnation of the negative side of femininity, and plays a very essential role in helping the female characters building an independent female identity, the one which is integrative, neither angel nor evil. The study argues the female characters have to be courageous enough to face the unconscious side of femininity, and to uncover those parts of their selves which are not in agreement with society's standards. To fulfill this mission they have to give up the feminine roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system, the roles which demand women to be weak, passive, mute, and obedient or else they will be classified as fallen and femme fatale. To escape this dilemma there should be born a new woman who is responsible for her own destiny and is qualified enough to develop an equal and constructive relationship with men and other women. The moment the female characters find their roles suffocating and stop playing the role of a victim, they trigger the creation of an independent woman whose identity is not defined according to gender ideology, a self who is not relying on the other/man and the loss of her man does not lead her to self-destruction.

The dual categorization of women into two groups of angels and devils by men, their useless attempts to fulfill their desire for self-completion by changing their female partners, the women's desperate attempts to own a man, their exhaustion of the feminine

roles ascribed to them, and their will to change their destiny are key elements of the novel. Answering the following questions will be supportive to the central theme of this study, which is the loss of the real or authentic self and subsequent development of a new or other self. Using the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, and the feminist theories of Irigaray, Butler and Cixous I answer the following questions:

- 1 - Why are women considered as “Other” to men?
- 2 - Why are women categorized into two groups of angels and demons?
- 3 - What is the significance of femme fatal character in the novel?
- 4 - What is the effect of mother-daughter relationship on women’s formation of subjectivity?
- 5 - What is Zenia’s role in the other women’s process of individuation?
- 6 - What is the role of gender in the masquerade of femininity?
- 7 - How much are the performances of the female characters limited by patriarchal gender roles?
- 8 - Why are all women desperately in search of a man?
- 9 - What is Atwood’s definition of victimization and how women contribute to their own victimization?
- 10 - What strategies do the women resort to in order to escape the masquerade of femininity?
- 11 - How does female friendship save women from total self-destruction?

Literature Review

The primary source of this research is one of the recent novels of Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (1993). Besides, there are secondary sources and this research covers the most famous explanatory sources in the form of books, articles and theses about the novel. It also includes some critical books and articles about the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Survival is a survey of Canadian literature, a work of literary criticism by Margaret Atwood. It deals with Atwood's belief that in the early 1970s, Canadian literature was still looking for grounding in a national identity that would be comparable to that of Great Britain or the United States (*Survival* 3). It is an introduction to what is Canadian about Canadian literature for readers as citizens of Canada. To Atwood the central image of Canadian literature is the notion of survival and its central character the victim. Atwood describes different forms of victimization in her book which is very enlightening about patriarchal victimization of women.

"Spotty-Handed Villainesses" is an essay by Margaret Atwood, as its subtitle says it is about the problems of female bad behaviors in literature. Atwood argues in this essay why bad female characters should be presented in literature and what the functions of female bad characters are in creation of literary works. She goes on to categorize the bulk of bad female literary characters she has known. Moreover, she talks about what novel is and what it is not.

Margaret Atwood is a book edited by Harold Bloom. It is a complex critical portrait of one of the most influential writers in the world. It involves bibliographic information that

directs readers to additional resources for further study. It is a useful chronology of the writer's life and a collection of essays on different works of Atwood.

Cambridge companion to Margaret Atwood by coral Anne Howell is a companion with essays by twelve leading Atwood critics, providing the most comprehensive account of Atwood's novels, short stories, poetries and essays. The chapters cover biographical, textual, contextual issues emphasizing Atwood's Canadianness and her international appeal as an imaginative writer. The introduction contains an analysis of dominant trends in Atwood criticism since the 1970s, and the essays consider Atwood's themes, language, humor, and narrative techniques.

Susan Elizabeth Trigg in her thesis *Mermaids and Sirens as Myth Fragments in Contemporary Literature* examines three works: Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. The female characters in these novels embody elements or myth fragments of mermaids and sirens. Using feminist psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks, the thesis identifies the existence of the siren/mermaid myth fragments that are used as a means to construct the category of the "bad woman".

Elzbieta Korolczuk, in her article, "One Woman Leads to Another—Female Identity in the Works of Margaret Atwood", examines the central theme of Atwood's writing, that is a specifically female search for identity, she devotes the scope of her study to two novels of Atwood, *The Robber Bride* and *Cat's Eye*. She argues that the female characters in these novels in the course of their struggle are often confronted with the Other, an evil woman who is often also the protagonist's double, or her monstrous mother. She believes these

other women are usually threatening to the woman's self, because of their transgressive and unfeminine behavior.

Shelly Kulperger in her thesis, *The Femme Fatale: Theorising Female Power and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace and The Robber Bride*, argues that much of Atwood's recent work looks to the historical foundations of good and bad femininity, of angels in the house and femme fatales. She claims mapping and spatial boundaries dominate much of *The Robber Bride*, apart from it being set in Toronto and referring to real places within the city, the text focuses on distinctly differentiated homes and workplaces. The differentiation between public and private spaces informs the women's different productions of self and encodes conservative line between transgressive and proper female identities.

The basic theoretical framework of this thesis lies in psychoanalytic theories of Lacan; Irigaray's concepts of mother-daughter relationships and masquerade of femininity; Butler's feminist and gender theories, and Cixous' notion of bisexuality.

Homer's *Jacques Lacan* introduces some of the most influential elements of Lacan's work. The chapters cover many key terms of psychoanalysis today, but Homer's focus is on those ideas that have been widely used in literary and cultural studies, such as the imaginary, symbolic and the real, the mirror phase, the subject of the unconscious, the unconscious structured like a language, the phallus, fantasy, jouissance and sexual difference. Each chapter concludes with an example of how these ideas have been applied to literature, film or social theory.

McAfee's *Julia Kristeva*, *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* edited by Jean-Michel Rabate, and Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* were of a great help to

the better understanding of Lacan's concepts. However, the researcher wonders if she understands Lacan's theories. According to Homer, Lacan's books are dense, complicated, oblique and apparently incomprehensible even by the standards of contemporary literary and cultural theory. It is partly because "Lacan was first and foremost a clinician and then a teacher" (Homer 8-9).A further difficulty with reading Lacan is that, when he introduces a concept he keeps the term in his writing but gradually changes its meaning. Therefore, Lacanian terms do not have a certain definition since they function differently in Lacan's three orders of imaginary, symbolic and real.(10) To some extent the difficulty of Lacan's style is due to his desire to resist any simplification of his ideas:

It is rather well known that those *Écrits* cannot be read easily. I can make a little autobiographical admission – that is exactly what I thought. I thought, perhaps it goes that far, I thought they were not meant to be read. (qtd in Homer 11)

In *This Sex Which Is Not One* Luce Irigaray criticizes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, regarding the question of female sexuality. She critiques the masculine definition of female sexuality and proposes descriptions from a woman's viewpoint. Irigaray explains that within female sexuality, there is an opposition "between 'masculine' clitoral activity and 'feminine' vaginal passivity" in which "the clitoris is conceived as a little penis" and "the vagina is valued for the 'lodging' it offers the male organ" (23).Moreover, she describes what the "masquerade of femininity" is, and says "in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade" (62). As a result, she changes into the man's object as "he seeks his own pleasure" and "she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants" (25).

In *Je, Tu, Nous*, Toward a Culture of Difference Irigaray explains mother-daughter relationships and genealogies, linguistics and gendered language, motherhood in feminism, and more. She believes that women and men are biologically different and that this sexual difference is a crucial part of human life and culture. “To demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison” (4), legitimizing something outside of women (especially men or masculinity) rather than women themselves as a metric for their own value. Instead, “what we do need...is for men and women to have equal subjective rights--equal obviously meaning different but of equal value.” (61)

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler attacks the notion of classifying women as a unified and homogenous group. She explores the relationship between power and categories of sex and gender. Butler argues that gender is performative and no identity exists behind the acts, and these acts construct the illusion of gender identity. She believes that there is no solid and universal gender and gender is always “contingent” and open to interpretation. In the preface of her book, she mentions that: “I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity” (vii). As a postmodern feminist, she deconstructs the previous classification of human beings as “male” and “female” and she believes that gender is not an inborn and natural fact, but it is constructed within the current social and cultural discourses. Her theories of gender, performance and identity are recurrently used in the thesis to examine the gender identities of the main characters of *The Robber Bride*.

In *The Newly Born Woman*, Helene Cixous discusses the masculine structure that has been imposed on women through a study of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. She proposes a

definition of bisexuality to define the feminine and claims that contemporary writing is also of a feminine nature. The duality of activity and passivity, where woman is always passive, marks all philosophical discourse as an absolute constant. Cixous writes that “either woman is passive or she does not exist” (349). In order to threaten the stability of this masculine structure, Cixous states that it is urgent to question the solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism. She asserts that both sexes are trapped within a predefined ideological system that go back to ancient history. She proposes that “there is no invention possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without there being in the inventing subject an abundance of the other, of variety” (351).

Cixous goes on to propose a new definition of bisexuality. There are two opposite ways of imagining the possibility and practice of bisexuality. The first is the fantasy of a complete being replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference, or the “two within one, and not even two holes”(352) and the second define bisexuality as a location within oneself of both sexes, a non-exclusion. Cixous uses this second definition of bisexuality when she defines woman as bisexual.

The so-called sources are some of those assisted the researcher to fulfill the aim of writing this thesis. The following section introduces the theoretical framework of thesis.

Approach and Methodology

In *The Robber Bride*, on the surface the male characters are hunted and stolen by a seductive female character, Zenia. It seems that they have no power against Zenia’s temptation therefore there is no blame on them for their disloyal behaviors. For instance, Mitch, one of the male characters, constantly chases attractive young women. Once he

achieves his goal he tries the next one because he does not feel the satisfaction he is looking for. This behavior masks a desire for self-completion. We can understand this behavior by reference to Jacques Lacan, who wrote about the “Desire of the Mother”, which includes the desire of the child for the mother as the being that satisfies its needs. Lacan recognized that the unresolved desire is so significant that it remains a powerful force into adulthood. He discusses the impact of the infant recognizing its separate identity from the mother, thereby creating a rift that leaves the individual always searching for, but never finding, self-completion.

The male child’s tendency to identify itself as “other-than-the-mother” leads to a devaluing of all female attributes and a distrust, or even fear, of women. Thus men are in danger of being torn between desire and fear. The fear leads to the tendency to attempt to control women as a means of reducing their power. Therefore the issue of the monstrous female is highly pertinent in *The Robber Bride* in which, Zenia is variously described as a monster and a wild beast.

Language in Lacan’s theory becomes the necessary tool for the human being to enter the symbolic order and to become a subject. One more important prescription of Lacan’s psychoanalysis is that language belongs to man and “the woman doesn’t exist” (Homer 96). However, the feminist theorists try to undermine such a conclusion and to prove the existence of the woman. I shall refer to the theories of Luce Irigaray, who in her works insists on the invention of a new language between all women and underlines the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, which was overlooked and replaced by the mother-son relationship in classical psychoanalysis.

Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* is inspired by "The Robber Bridegroom," a wonderfully grisly tale from the Brothers Grimm in which an evil groom lures three maidens into his lair and devours them, one by one. But in her version, Atwood brilliantly recasts the monster as Zenia, a villainess of demonic proportions, and sets her loose in the lives of three friends, Tony, C Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* is inspired by "The Robber Bridegroom," a wonderfully grisly tale from the Brothers Grimm in which an evil groom lures three maidens into his lair and devours