



MARGARET ATWOOD AND HER ART OF NARRATION: A BRIEF NOTE

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Abstract

“Margaret Atwood and her Art of Narration” attempts to project Margaret Atwood as a noticeable and well-known modern novelist who has established herself as one of the leading women novelists writing in English today by contributing a lot to Canadian literature in the current literary scenario. This paper beautifully discusses how Atwood as an extremely versatile writer has taken up the conventions of a different narrative form in each and every novel like Gothic romance and fairy tale and how her novels are abundant with many allusions to other texts, revealing her literary inheritance making her contribution different from her predecessors, with an ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, fictive artifice and moral engagement.

Margaret Atwood, born in Ottawa, Ontario in 1939, has established herself to be one of the most noticed and appreciated women writers who took up writing as a profession and portrayed the aspirations of the ‘New Woman’ who wanted freedom from all kinds of dominations and restrictions in the male-dominated society. Having been a writer in Residence at several Universities and taught in many Universities like the British Columbia University and Sir George Williams University, Atwood is said to have received many awards like The Booker Prize and several Honorary Degrees including the Canadian Governor General’s Award. Through the publication of such novels as **The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, the Handmaid’s Tale, the Blind Assassin**, Margaret has established herself as one of the world leading women novelists writing in English today.

Being an extremely versatile writer, Atwood takes up the conventions of a different narrative form in each and every novel like Gothic romance, fairy tale, spy-thriller, science fiction or history working with those conventions and reshaping them. Her close attention towards people and relationships in a particular historical and social location gives her novels the appeal of traditional realistic fiction. Atwood challenges through her novels the conventions of realism and she never pretends that words and stories offer an unproblematic access to the real world.

Atwood’s novels are criss-crossed with many allusions to other texts, revealing her literary inheritance and at the same time marking her significant differences from the predecessors. In **Bodily Harm**, witty comedy changes to something more threatening and realistic portrayal of the female protagonists dreading of male violence, which is a kind of shift from fiction to real life. This kind of shift between Gothic romance and realism operates as ironic critique of both modes, exemplifying Atwood’s narrative method which induces double vision in her readers.

Atwood’s novels are characterized by their refusals to invoke any final authority or decision in the end of the novel. Their open endings resist conclusiveness, offering, instead, hesitation, silence, or absence while hovering on the verge of new possibilities. Their indeterminacy is a kind of challenge to the readers, for they are confronted with the problem of finding a critical language to describe Atwood’s ‘border like fiction’ with its ironic mixture of realism and fantasy, fictive artifice and moral engagement.

Atwood’s fiction draws attention not only to the different ways in which the story may be told but also the function of language. The slipperiness of words and the double operation of language serve as symbolic representation and agents for changing the reader’s mode of perception.

“Atwood apparently uses a kind of language, a physical descriptive expression with a codified meaning-psychological, interior-that extends both to the situations through which the novel runs as well as the personality. Development of the protagonist” (Martin 147)

The sense of isolation is the basis of Atwood’s realism. She writes about the Canadian cities and small towns, its wilderness with forests and lakes. She continues to give updated versions of the city of Toronto from the mid 1940’s to the present. In her fiction, Atwood has closely charted Canada’s story with its political as though a novelist is engaged in an ongoing project of cultural representation. Though she is internally well-known, Atwood never forgets where she comes from, for she has maintained her active engagement with Canadian literary and cultural politics. But at the same time, the meanings of her novels cannot be restricted to a Canadian frame of reference, for stories are fabrications made out of language and its narrative conventions transcend self-conscious political ideologies.



Atwood's novel give the pattern as that of a comedy which begins in social disruption, sends its characters into a healing 'green world' and returns them to society capable of restoring it to wholeness. A marriage or a birth often symbolizes this new capability. Atwood's characters however, face a different kind of healing from that of the traditional comedy for their task is more to heal them than to heal the society. Her comic structure is said to resemble the Shakespearean sequence of social order, exile into a healing green world, reintegration to society and return to natural order. Her goal in writings is not to change the society but to change the individual woman, often minimally to survive with some integrity.

The Edible Woman is a skillfully structured novel where the subtle monitoring of the narrative mode provides an index to Marian's progressive evolution. The novel is divided into three unequal parts, each of which projects a particular stage in Marian's fictional journey towards self-actualization. In the first part, Marian narrates the tale in the first person indicating a subjective perspective of her experiences. In the second part, the narrative changes to the third person mode and suggests Marian's objective and enlarged perception of her situation while in the third part, the narration once again changes over to the first person mode to imply a re-discovery and a re-vision of self. The skillful monitoring of 'voice' in **The Edible Woman** indicates that it is a work of a writer who is not only in full command of her material but also is a versatile tactician. The reversion of the first person narration at the end of the novel signifies the return to position zero. She comes back to full circle; to the place where she was at the beginning of the novel,

"**Bodily Harm** appears to have an extremely dense and deceptive texture due to its unusually flexible spatiotemporal Boundaries; its merges of the present events and characters with those of the past; and its almost patterned shuttling between first and third person narration" (George 163-164)

The narrative structure of **Bodily Harm** follows a pattern similar to Atwood's other novels. As the action of the plot unfolds, memory and association trigger flashback sequences. The novel opens with the promise of a very specific narrative location and a distinctive narrative voice, "This is how I got there, says Rennie" (*Bodily Harm* ii). The story begins with a crisis, for the protagonist returns home to find that an intruder has broken into her flat and has left one sinister clue, a coiled rope lying on her bed. This kind of beginning gives the appearance of a detective novel.

The narrative sequence soon disintegrates as the focus shifts from 'I' to 'She' and time and space become dislocated with the introduction of numerous memory fragments and the protagonists flight from Toronto to the Caribbean Islands. By the end, it is understood that this is actually a prison narrative but a sense of awkwardness and unease is there from the opening section till the end. Sections are separated fragmented text. Though the narrative is shifted from the first person to the third, a technique familiar from **The Edible Woman**, the reader soon becomes aware that this account of external reality is not told by an omniscient narrator but is being shaped by Rennie, the protagonist's disturbed consciousness, for the narration is refracted through a lot of dreams and memory flashbacks.

In **Bodily Harm**, much happens before the first page opens. All that information is revealed during the course of the novel, partly by constant, non-chronological third person flashbacks, some of which are in the present and some in the past, and partly by the first person monologues of Rennie and Lora. These monologues always begin as "Rennie says" or "Lora says" but without the indication as to where they are and to whom they are speaking, although "says" puts the reader in the past. The sections dealing with the prison are in the present tense while the section dealing with the release and the journey back are all governed by the verb "will". Rennie's narrative can be considered as a series of separate stories about herself that co-exists in different time frames. Not only the reader but Rennie herself has difficulty in negotiating between what is going on inside and outside her own head as her narrative shifts from one crisis point to another. Her narrative comes from the border line territory between fantasy and reality as she sits in the prison cell beside the brutally wounded body of Lora. Her narrative is a laborious reconstruction and reinterpretation of the fragments of her life.

Imagery plays an important role in Atwood's fiction. There is so much of Gothic imagery like that of dismemberment, imprisonment, trick mirrors, dungeons, mazes, disemboweling etc in her earlier novels. In **The Edible Woman**, Marian is subtly revealed through various images and through the reflects she sees of herself in various objects. While dining with Peter, she watches her upside down reflection in the bowl of the spoon, which reveals the state of uncertainty for her image is in a state of flux. The next reflection she sees in the three reflection of herself in the tap of the bath-tub, which reveals her inner, alienated self. Next she sees her own reflection between her dark and blonde dolls. The dark doll symbolizes her inner self while the blonde lone, her social self.



The maze imagery is the prominent one in Atwood's fiction. Marian enters the maze three times, of which twice accompanied by Duncan. The first one is through the labyrinthine corridors and large halls into the Egyptian Mummy room; the second time, her intoxication during the party, gives her a sense of wandering through long corridors and rooms whose centre is the last room with "no more doors" and the third encounter with the maze in Rosedale valley clay quarry. The protagonist's encounter with the maze in Atwood's novels indicates the descent into the 'maze' of their personal unconsciousness. There is also the imagery of three death-like settings in **The Edible Woman** and they are the mummy Room, the Hotel room with its "icy desolation" and the descent into the frozen ravine. The fear of being trapped in marriage is shown through these images. Another significant image in **The Edible Woman** is that of Peter as a hunter and Marian as the hunted. Marian recognizes herself with the animals when Peter narrates his hunting stories. Peter with the camera in the party, appears to Marian as though he is a hunter with a gun. This image represents the 'helpless' state of women in a male-dominated society.

In **Bodily Harm**, the faceless stranger is an image of threat and fear of Marian throughout the novel, which is revealed through her various vague and scary dreams. Rennie thinks she has solved the riddle of the faceless stranger when she sees the brutality of the policemen in the prison yard but then the identity of a faceless stranger when she sees the brutality of the policemen in the prison yard but then the identity of a faceless stranger turns out to be plural. Paul, when she meets him first is a faceless stranger wearing his sunglasses. Finally, the faceless stranger is Lora when she has been battered out of all recognition. Atwood's novels are filled with metaphorical representations. The main metaphors in **The Edible Woman** are eating and locomotion. Throughout the novel, one can find that Marian tries to run away from various places indicating that she wants to escape the uncertain situations of life. The very title of the novel enforces the central metaphor of woman as food or object which prevails through the novel till the end. Marian's rebellion against the social system of marriage is carried on through the 'body language' in which the body makes is impossible to eat one thing after the other and it is in this sense that the significance of the food metaphor can be felt. In the end of the novel, when Marian bakes the woman shaped cake, she is symbolically presenting to Peter 'the edible woman' that he all along wanted. Marian's eating of the cake also symbolically represents the empowerment of women and their refusal to be edible objects for men. Duncan's response to Marian's cake, where the novel closes saying:

'Thank you', he said, licking his lips.
It was delicious' (The Edible Woman 281)

It indicates that the novel too is delicious as a delicately structured novel. In **Bodily Harm**, Griswold symbolizes a place without compassion. It stands for the conventional, Calvinistic Canada with its uncompromising morality and values. Just as **Bodily Harm** is an anti-thriller, so is '**The Edible Woman**' an anti-comedy.

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