

STORYTELLING AS A PANACEA TO GENDER EXPLOITATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN* AND *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

SHAISTA IRSHAD & KAVITA KAMAL

Visiting Faculty, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology,
Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Atwood remarkably presents her characters both male and female as social and cultural constructions, conditioned and influenced by the norms, patterns and practices of society and patriarchal law. To explain the subordination and exploitation endured by men and women in the society owing to wrong beliefs, perceptions myths and traditional practices Atwood provides the allusion through the storytelling in her novels. The paper will explore that how Atwood uses storytelling as a tool to criticize and challenge the traditional myths, historical and cultural narratives that promote the construction of gender identities of men and women according to the norms of proper femininity and masculinity as well as reinforce powerful cultural images and expectations.

KEYWORDS: Storytelling, Gender, Myth, Culture, Exploitation

INTRODUCTION

The Blind Assassin is a multi-layered story which comprises of three parallel narrative strands i.e. stories within the main story- a memoir, a romance and a science fiction (Sakiel-Norn fantasy). To complement these there are also parallel narratives including reports from newspaper clippings which provide information about the major events of the city Port Ticonderoga in Toronto. The novel presents the “continual blurring of borders not only in fiction and Iris’s real life memoir, but also between the Sakiel-Norn fantasy and the lives of two lovers in Toronto” (Howells 165). Atwood remarkably presents her characters both male and female as social and cultural constructions, conditioned and influenced by the norms, patterns and practices of society and patriarchal law. To explain the subordination and exploitation endured by men and women in the society owing to wrong beliefs, perceptions myths and traditional practices Atwood provides the allusion through the story- the science fiction. The story unfolds and uproots the hollow practices and rituals that imprison men and women to behave according to certain fixed stereotypes that lead to serious repercussions and ramifications. Through her story Atwood not only questions and challenges the universalization of the experience of all women, but also, “the... idea of innate female virtue in *The Blind Assassin*” (Bouson Introduction 68).

The story narrated by Alex to Iris –is a science fiction named *The Blind Assassin* and is about the love story of a blind assassin and a sacrificial maiden. This science fiction forms an important allegory and presents an allusion to the narrative of other two stories. *The Blind Assassin* is a fantasy novel that takes place on a fictional planet Zycron in the city named Sakiel-Norn and is presented as a historical account by Alex. Karen F Stein writes that this fantasy fiction “is the novel’s symbolic center, for it brings to focus the motifs of hiding, blindness, futile sacrifices and silencing” (136). This story indirectly reflects and symbolizes the real events of the main novel, the lives of Iris and Laura, the class conflict, deception, and hypocrisy and other male characters of the novel in Port Ticonderoga in Toronto.

Through Science-Fiction Atwood criticizes and challenges that how traditional myths, historical and cultural narratives promote the construction of gender identities of men and women according the norms of proper femininity and

masculinity as well as reinforce powerful cultural images and expectations, “with the potential of fossilizing in people’s mind as patriarchal conventions” (Koyuncu). Rewriting these myths is an attempt in itself to deconstruct and destabilize traditional images and identities proving them to be artificial social constructions.

The Science- Fiction is about rich and dominating aristocrats called Snilfards and poor and dominated slaves Ygnirods. In Sakiel- Norn, “everything is for sale” (BA 35), Snilfards sold their wives and children to maintain their social position and status. They prevented bankruptcy and their demotion to Ygnirods, “by selling... wife or children to redeem ... debt” (BA 21). The exploitation of Ygnirods on account of class is similar to the oppression of Alex Thomas who is represented as lower class fugitive. “Alex is demonized because he represents a threat to the dominance of the white male moneyed class” (Michael 94), whereas Richard symbolizes the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

In Sakiel Norn people were blinded by the traditional custom of sacrificing maidens of the noblest Snilfard families to the Goddess believing that, “the welfare of the entire kingdom depended” on the sacrificing and selfless attitude of sacrificial maidens (BA36). Snilfards being upper class aristocrats had power and money to manipulate the custom and prevented their daughters from being sacrificed by mutilating them as, “ It was an insult to the Goddess to offer any[maiden] who were blemished or flawed” (BA 35). These cunning and hypocrite Snilfards, for the same reason also started adopting the female offspring of the slaves and replaced them with their daughters. Here we see that both class conflict and gender oppression are at play. It is shown that with the passage of time the ritual of sacrifice loses its sanctity but still people do not give up sacrificing girls in the name of custom and tradition, “The citizens continued to perform the ancient rituals because they had always done so”(BA 36). The girls are brought up and trained for the sacrifice. The image of sacrificial virgins as, “tongueless,” and “swollen with words”(BA 37) is similar to both Iris and Laura who are symbolically presented as quiet without revolt and protest as if ‘tongueless’ to the injustice done to them. The image of virgins as “pampered society bride” (BA 37) refers to the image of Iris in her bridal costume when she is silently sacrificed in her arranged marriage with Richard to save her father’s business. This highlights the fact that women are sacrificed for entertaining the whim of men in society. “This is an example of irony in the connection between the past and present; throughout ages, women are sexually sacrificed to men, as they are silence, fooled and used as objects” and the connection, “between women of the twentieth century and women of an ancient tale not only displays the repeated sexual sacrifice and passive response of women throughout time and culture, but also the lingering of cruelty in a civilized world” (Allmon 2).

Whereas storytelling in *The Blind Assassin* discloses the truth behind gender construction and women’s exploitation and marginalization giving way to deconstruct and destabilize traditional images and identities proving them to be artificial social constructions, *The Robber Bride* itself is the reversed version the original story of *Grimms’ Fairy Tale’s The Robber Bridegroom*. The title is subverted by Atwood to *The Robber Bride* to elucidate and prove the hollowness, artificiality and instability of gender identity. Apart from this the characters in the novel continuously keep on reversing the gender of all the characters to show the fluidity of gender identities. Roz’s daughters Paula and Erin change the gender of all the characters of their story books from male to female: “They decided that all the characters in every story had to be female. Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said, “he” they would correct her: She! She! They would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female too.” On being questioned by Roz about their calling of stuffed animals as female, they answered, “Can’t you see?” This perception of the twin daughters is explained by Roz as “simply the lack of penises, on the stuffed animals” (TRB 293). According to Freud and other gender theorists masculinity and power is linked with having the symbol of power i.e. penis and women is represented as lack, because of not having penis. The twin daughters’ link femininity with the absence of penis on their soft toys but absence of penis is not associated with the absence of power. The twin daughters’ not only change the gender of

the male characters to female, "opt[ing] for women in every single role", but also the title too i.e. from the *The Robber Bridegroom* to *The Robber bride*. They also argued, "For the control of story- change the ending mom! Make them go back! I don't like this part" (*TRB* 293). Hence they tend to deconstruct the myths, traditional and stereotype of gender promoted through the work of art by criticizing it and replacing it with women characters. Roz brings up her daughters against the accepted ideal of femininity with the belief that, "girls should not be given the idea that being pretty is the only thing that counts- and that other people's opinions of how they ought to arrange their bodies are more important than their own" (*TRB* 356). Whereas Roz daughters are independent, strong and active, enjoying the violent ending of the stories claiming, "somebody had to be boiled", her son Larry didn't like, "violent stories", as they gave him, "nightmares" (294*TRB*). This reflects the total reversal of his gender role.

Atwood uses storytelling in order to deconstruct and subvert the traditional myths and practices that marginalize and exploit woman endowing femininity as something natural and essential. Thus storytelling is a panacea to liberate women and men from the fetters of patriarchy by revealing gender as a product of society, culture, myth and superstitious beliefs.

REFERENCES

1. Allmon, Anastasia.(2006).*Silent Sacrifices of Woman inThe Blind Assassin..* British Literature. 1-10. Web. 6 June 2012
2. Howells, Coral. Ann. *Margaret Atwood*.(2005). 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
3. Atwood, Margaret. (2000)*The Blind Assassin*. New York: Random
4. ---.,*The Robber Bride*. London: Virago, 1993
5. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. (1997).Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley . London: Vintage Books
6. Bouson, J. Brooks.(2010).“Introduction: Negotiating with Margaret Atwood.” *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*. By Bouson. New York: Continuum
7. Michael, Magali Cornier. (2010).“Narrative Multiplicity and the Multi-layered Self in *The Blind Assassin*.” *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*. Ed. J. Brooks Bouson. New York: Continuum
8. Stein, Karen F. “A left Handed story: (2004).*The Blind Assassin*.” *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Wilson. Columbus: Ohio State UP

