

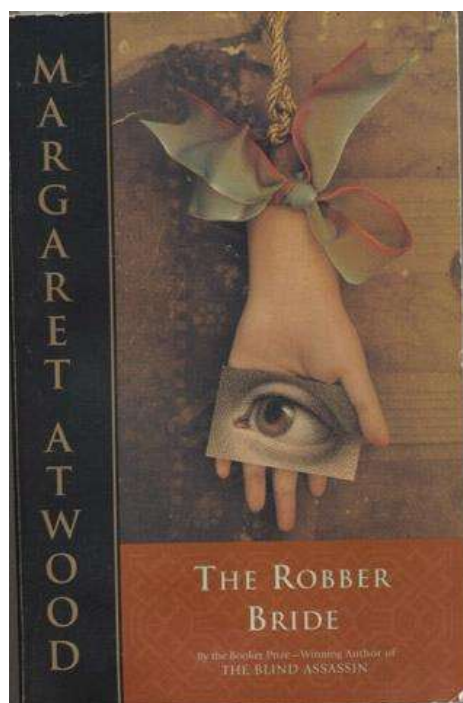
Subversion of Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

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The Robber Bride

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride* (1993) is a postmodern work of fiction which explores and unravels gender as a socio-cultural construct. It deals with how society and culture imprison both men and women into constructed stereotypes of masculinity and femininity attributing both men and women gender specific traits. The novel not only questions essentialist notion of gender identities as fixed and stable but also challenges the differences attributed to men and women owing to their biological sex. These biological differences in sex construct the gap between men and women's position in patriarchal society- exalting men's status and marginalizing women.

Grimm's Fairy Tale - The Robber Bridegroom

The novel is the reversed version 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. *Grimm's Fairy Tale - The*

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Robber Bridegroom is about a robber who was a ‘man-eater’ and trapped women in the name of marriage and murdered them to consume their flesh. In her novel Atwood constructs female character- Zenia as a robber bride, a ‘man-eater’ and a trickster who embodies and represents the traits not only of femininity but also those that are exclusively associated with masculinity. The trickster figure can be defined in literature and legend usually as, “a male, (who) crosses boundaries, disrupts the social order, and embodies contradiction. He is a shape-changer and a liar” (Stein 143). It is emphasized through the character of Zenia that, “the contradictions within the construct of the body, contradictions so acute that they may well make it impossible for anyone to be the sexed woman of conventional representation” (Hite 123). It is through the character of Zenia, that gender identity comes out to be a “dynamic matrix of interrelated, often contradictory, experiences, strategies, styles and attributions mediated by cultures and one’s specific history, forming a network that cannot be separated meaningfully into discrete entities or ordered into a hierarchy” (Garland Thompson 284).



Margaret Atwood

Courtesy: www.poetryfoundation.org

Zenia as Represented by Atwood

Zenia is represented by Atwood as a woman who changes her gender identity according to the type of person she encounters and intends to exploit. Knowing the weaknesses of all three women characters, she projects herself as oppressed and physically abused before Tony, as a cancer patient before Charis and as a religious

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hybrid before Roz to evoke their sense of pity and sympathy and to exploit the same to her own advantage. Thus Zenia's character of displaying co-existence of both masculinity and femininity i.e. , "deft shifting among gender roles" is an example of Atwood's deconstruction and subversion of gender (Sheckels and Sweeney). According to Bouson, Zenia not only "embodies the repressed pasts of the three women who all have survived painful childhood traumas, but also buried aspects of their identities" (19). She proves to be a deceiver and liar but also acts as a trickster which "robs" the three women "of their illusory sense of self coherence" and so called stable identity (Bouson 19).

Performing Feminine Identity

All three women characters Tony, Charis and Rose learn to perform their feminine identity under the influence of their family and other patriarchal institutions like school, college and church. Millett explains the formative influence of family as:

The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament and status. Although slight differences of definition depend here upon the parents' grasp of cultural values, the general effect of uniformity is achieved, to be further reinforced through peers, school, media, and other learning sources, formal and informal. (35)

Role of Family

Therefore it is family that propagates the accepted norms and patterns of femininity which every woman in society is expected to follow. Women abiding the dictated norms of femininity are treated as normal otherwise their normality, sanity and even womanhood is put to question by society.

Tony's Identity

Tony's identity as woman is shown to be dormant and crippled owing to the constant marital conflict between her parents. The family trauma and tussle ultimately casts a negative influence and results in her suppressed and dormant sexual identity. Tony is defined to be "disguised as herself, one of the most successful disguises" (TRB122).

Growing up in a home which confines her in the ambience of conflict and discord among her parents, Tony becomes quite practical and tolerant in many ways. Her mother not only detests her father, but also the whole Canadian Culture and finds difficult to come terms with it. She excuses the flat accent of her husband but the same accent is checked and corrected in Tony, being a girl, “Don’t talk like that! She hisses at Tony. She means the accent. Flat she calls it So Tony is a foreigner, to her own mother, and to her father also, because she talks the same way he does, she is -and he has made this clear- not a boy” (*TRB* 145).

Tony is defined as “odd” by the girls at McClung Hall as she “did not go out on dates; she did not have anybody to go with. Therefore to fight against this oddity of hers she is dressed “like a doll” against her dislike, as it is considered abnormal for her to refuse indulging into things that are set as appropriate feminine traits (*TRB* 115). Even her friend West’s extra concern is “found... alarming by her. It is described as, “Tony couldn’t have handled a date with anyone, much less West. She couldn’t have handled the implication, or the hope. Hope of that kind might unbalance her. She didn’t want to get involved with anyone, underlined, full stop” (*TRB* 123).

Identity of Charis

Like Tony, Charis’s (original name Karen) identity too is constructed under the influence of family and other social institutions. She is single- handedly brought up by her maniac mother due to her father’s death before her birth. Her insane mother’s torture teaches her to “smil[ing] even when she didn’t feel like it”(*TRB* 234). During her childhood until her puberty, she is sexually exploited and raped by her Uncle Vern and is never believed by her aunt who calls her “A liar” “like her mother “ (*TRB* 261).

The sexual exploitation of Charis has a devastating effect on her body and mind. In order to escape the physical and sexual affliction and trauma she constructs her new identity named as ‘Charis’, “ He (Uncle Vern) splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of the cocoon, and Charis flies out.” She is powerless in fighting off her uncle’s harassment, and ruptures and dissociates herself from her body, splitting herself into two fragments, one that is physical, weak and at the mercy of her uncle’s lust and other one is a virtual body, her aster projection, created by her thoughts in a state of extreme depression and powerlessness and is defined as:

the feather, light as air. There is no pain in it at all... What she sees is a small pale girl, her face contorted and streaming, nose and eyes wet as if she is drowning – gasping for air, going under again, gasping. On top of her is a dark mass, worrying at her, like an animal eating another animal. (TRB 262).

Beauvoir explains this dissociation of identity as:

Fated as she is to be the passive prey of man, the girl asserts her right to liberty even to the extent of undergoing pain and disgust... she is above all sadistic: as independent subject, she lashes, flouts, tortures this dependent flesh, this flesh condemned to the submission she detests - without wishing however, to disassociate herself from it. (377)

This new constructed identity is named as Charis which is “a less damaged version of herself” (Vickroy 59). Her weaker part i.e. Karen is suppressed and subdued only to emerge at times of extreme depression and helplessness. Charis is strong enough only “to keep her [self] alive” (263TRB) not to fight against her passivity and subordination imposed by patriarchal society that confines her to the gendered space.

Identity of Roz

The third woman character of the novel and friend of Tony and Charis is Roz who is born to Catholic mother and Jewish father. Roz’s identity is constructed under the cumulative influence of gender as well as racial segregation that leads to her suffering and marginalization not only because of her sex, but also because of her skin colour. She suffers both gender and cultural bias and also the religious strife - between her catholic and Jewish identity, “Whereas once Roz was not Catholic enough, now she isn’t Jewish enough. She is an oddity, hybrid, a strange half person” (TRB 344). The feminine identity is imparted to Roz by her mother, who herself is portrayed as imbibing and following all the norms of womanhood of patriarchal society. Beauvoir explains:

Mother saddles her child with her own destiny... even a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child’s welfare, will as a rule think that it is wiser to make a ‘true woman’ of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done...the treasures of feminine wisdom are poured into her ears,

feminine virtues are urged upon her, she is taught cooking, sewing, housekeeping along with care of her person, charm and modesty. (309)

Femininity is associated with being “saint” (*TRB* 319) which is despised by Roz, “If Roz’ mother was a saint, Roz did not especially want to be one” (*TRB* 319). After returning from war her father dominates and overpowers all, “filling the kitchen with is bulk, his loud voice his multilayered smell; filling the house with it, filling up all the space” so that both her mother and she herself are “pushed off to the edge” so that almost no space is left for them. Her mother, “who is so unbending, bends” before her father, “she abdicates” (*TRB* 332). For all the decisions she says, “Ask your father”. Roz detests her mother’s abdication before her father. Holding her mother being herself responsible for her subordination she justifies her exploitation thinking that her father’s attitude “serves her right” (*TRB* 333). Despite her husband’s infidelity, Roz’s mother, passively forgives him, accepting her fate without any protest

Role of Religion

A very large part is “played by religion in the life of woman”. As in “Western religions God the father is a man, ... Christ is still more definitely a man of flesh and blood ... angels have no sex, according to theologians; but they have masculine names and appear as good looking young men. God’s representatives on earth: the Pope, the Bishop, the Priest who says Mass... - all these are men.

Catholic View

The catholic religion among others exerts a most confused influence upon the young girl... Mary Magdalene lies at Christ’s feet, washing them with her tears and drying them with the hair of her head, her woman’s long hair” (Beauvoir 317). In the novel the inferiority and silence of women is compared to Virgin Mary. Roz contemplates about the position of Virgin Mary with God:

who sat on the left hand of God? There must have been someone because God had a left hand as well as a right hand and nothing about it could possibly be bad because God was perfect, and Roz couldn’t see that side being left empty (And where was the Virgin Mary in all this) (*TRB* 327)?

Greer comments:

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The Church also acknowledged one head, *a locum tenens* for God Himself. The man was the soul, and the woman the body: the man was the mind and the woman the heart; the man was the will and the woman the passions. Boys learnt their male role from father and girls their female role from their mother. (246-47)

Computing perfection with God and hence man, Roz well establishes man as representative of God and woman as representing Virgin Mary. This is shown through her mother who, “looks at Roz’s father mutely, the same kind of mushy cow-eyed look the Virgin Mary gives the baby Jesus or the holy spirit in the pictures; she dishes up his food and sets the plate before him as its some kind of offering” (*TRB* 332). Roz’s painful hybrid identity is pacified by her mother’s comment, who says that, “religion didn’t matter so much in a man” (*TRB* 322).

Privileging Son over Daughter

Roz’s father’s attitude of privileging son over daughter becomes quite apparent when he tries to compensate his desire of having son by treating Roz as a son, “You’ll be my right hand man, he would tell her.” (*TRB* 306). Here Roz denies being:

A son. She didn’t want to be a man at all, right hand or otherwise. Such a strain, being one, from what she could see; such a pretence of dignity to maintain. She could never get away with her witless frivolity act if she were a man. But then, if she were one she might not need it. (*TRB* 306)

Concurrent Subversion of Identity

It is seen that all the three women characters in the novel display subversion of identity, deconstructing and subverting the stereotypes of gender. According to Judith Butler gender identity is explained to be a performance that is reiteratively done which is “at once a reenactment and re-experiencing a set of meanings already socially established” (*Gender Trouble* 140). These repetitions are unstable and produce different meanings under different context and times resulting in the subversion of dominant norms.

Butler’s argues in this context as, “if the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural possibility, i.e. new

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possibilities for gender, that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible (145).

Negating Expectations of Patriarchal Ideology

Tony not only subverts gender norms of ideal feminine image, she also negates the social and cultural expectations of patriarchal ideology, by opting History and War as subjects for her study and career. In the gendered society, the subjects too are gendered - the career in war and history are pre-labeled as masculine and women are discouraged from pursuing their career in the same. Millett reveals that:

Patriarchy enforces a temperamental balance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between “masculine” and “feminine” subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female- and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. (42)

Tony’s interest in something as morose and morbid as war is forbidden not only by men but her women friends Charis and Roz, also discourage her in spending, “so much of her time on something as negative as war” (*TRB* 25). “Male historians think she’s invading their territory and should leave their spears, arrows, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes and bombs alone. They think she should be writing social history, such as who ate what and when, or Life in feudal family.” Not only males but female historians too encourage and strengthen gender role stereotyping. Though few in number they all, “think the same thing but for different reasons. They think she ought to be studying birth; not death, and certainly not battle plans. Not routes and debacles, not carnages, not slaughters” (*TRB* 21, 22).

The Modern History professor, despite being a man “is more interested in economics than he is in bloodshed” and instructs Tony that war is not “an appropriate subjects for girls” (*TRB* 169). Tony being a history professor too finds, “As a rule her (own) students are mostly men: not a lot of women find themselves deeply attracted to

such courses as Late Medieval Tactical Blunders or Military History as Artefact” (TRB 23).

Thus Tony believes and proves that though “Women are not usually called upon to commit such cold- blooded acts(like men) but this does not mean they are incapable of them” (TRB 405). Tony as a history professor “unflinchingly investigates the atrocities and cruelties of history which proves that gender roles are artificially designed and constructed to confine and restrict women to the gendered spaces” (Vickroy 56).

Like Tony, Roz too suffers in opting her father’s business: being a businesswoman instead of businessman. Whereas Roz has grown up thinking “business was something mysterious, something way beyond her, something her father did behind closed doors. Something only fathers did, that girls were forever too dull-witted to understand.” But when she handles the business she finds that she could “do it better. Better than most. Most of the time” (TRB 93).

Being a businesswoman Roz suffers from the behaviour of woman employees of office. Whereas the domination and superiority of men is easily accepted by both men and women, woman’s domination is not easily digested by people, particularly women. Roz cites the example that, “If she were a man she could get away with a brief nod; but she is not a man, and she knows a whole lot better than to try acting like one” (TRB 88). She further comments:

It’s complicated being a woman boss. Women don’t look at you and think Boss. They look at you and think *Woman* as, in *Just another one, like me, and where does she gets off?* None of their sexy little tricks work on you, and none of yours work on them; big blue eyes are no advantage. .. Whereas the same very women would fetch and carry for a man boots, no question... bring his slippers in her mouth, overtime no problem. (TRB 88-89)

Deconstruction of the Myth of Sexual Passivity

The myth of women’s sexual passivity and inferiority is deconstructed in the novel through Roz’s multiple “love affair(s), or rather... sex affair(s)” where for her “the sex was great and it was “something she was good at.”

Tony's childlike appearance and her dress is described as having purchased from "children's section at Eaton's" and is explained by Murray as, "at least in part, a refusal to take on the dress codes of the adult world, and with it the world of gendered sexuality." Tony not only refuses to be assimilated into feminine stereotype of gender but also subverts other things associated with feminine image of society, "She is not shown to be specially attractive to men, and does not enter into the illusory magic of make-up, feeling that" (1V). "Lipstick is alarming on her... With her big glasses and her big eyes behind them and her too skinny neck, the effect is street urchin crossed with newly hatched bird" (TRB 17).

Simone de Beauvoir claims that:

The social significance of the toilette allows women to express, by her way of dressing, her attitude towards society. If she is submissive to the established order, she will assume a discreet and stylish personality. Here there many possible nuances: she can present herself as fragile, childlike, mysterious, frank, austere, gay, sedate, rather bold, demure. Or if, on the contrary, she scorns the conventions, she will make it evident by her originality. (*The Second Sex* 547)

Therefore women can refuse to be assimilated into the conventions of feminine norms "by an audacity of dress that emphasizes her nature as sexual object, therefore her dependence" (Beauvoir 547).

Stereotyping Gender Role

Along with gender role stereotyping the novel also examines how sex role stereotyping subjugates and confines women to their bodies as sexual objects and commodities. Atwood deconstructs this myth to show that both gender and sexuality is socio-culturally constructed. Gender identities are proved to be fluid and unstable where "femininity and masculinity are not essential universal categories but discursive constructions" therefore "the cultural construction of subjectivity per se" is concerned with "a range of possible masculinities and femininities" (Barker 25).

This is displayed efficiently by Tony, who under the influence of Zenia overcomes her childlike and sexually cold temperament and becomes sexually free and

independent. She is inspired by Zenia's boldness to face the truth of her emotions for West which she had long suppressed.

Charis, due to her sexual exploitation by her uncle in her childhood, finds it almost impossible to enter into sexual relation with any man. But in order to discard the traditional myth prevalent in society that women's "anatomy compels her to remain clumsy and impotent like a eunuch" (Beauvoir 398), leaving her passive and sexless, Charis, "slept with several (men)" as "she didn't want to be considered uptight or selfish about her body, and she's even lived with one man, although it hadn't lasted. He ended by calling her a frigid bitch, as if she was doing him some injury or other" (TRB 209). Charis's sexual frigidity is explained to be the outcome of her childhood sexual abuse, not the result of her biological identity. On being called as "frigid bitch" by men, she questions herself "Hadn't she been affectionate enough. Hadn't she nodded her head when he talked, hadn't she cooked the meals and laid herself down compliantly whenever he wanted her to, hadn't she washed the sheets afterwards, hadn't she tended him? She was not an ungiving person" (TRB 209). Beauvoir discloses the reason of sexual frigidity of women to be "resentment" (413).

Charis's boyfriend Billy represents the common perception of society about women being sexless. According to Irigaray, "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (23). Billy finds the 'abnormality' of Charis as normal. "He thought women were like that: without urges, without needs. He didn't pester her about it, he didn't question her, he didn't try to fix her, as the other men had done- tinkering away at her as if she was a lawnmower" (TRB 209). Her own experience during her physical relation with Billy was like:

she felt...like a trampoline with someone jumping up and down on it... as it was she merely detached herself, floated her spirit off to one side filled herself with another essence – *apple, plum*- until he had finished and it was safe to re-enter her body...Once in a while she cried, which Billy seemed to find normal. Her tears had to do nothing with Billy. (TRB 208)

On learning about Zenia's concept of sex as "fun" Charis is amazed, as according to her knowledge women are as sexually naïve and sexless, and her own experience with

sex “was either nothing or it was painful, or it was overwhelming, it put you at risk” (*TRB* 426).

Luce Irigaray explains the reason behind the sexually passive identity of women to be the mistaken belief of men, “Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language... And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure” (77).

Kate Millett explicates the sexual dominance of men and subordination and passivity of women i.e. ““sexual behaviour” is almost entirely the product of learning”... as the “product of a long series of learned responses - response to the patterns and attitudes, even as to the subject of sexual choice, which are set up for us by our social environment” (32).

Imposed Passive Sex Role

Mitch’s imposed passive sex role on Roz is performed by her to maintain the myth of sexual inferiority of women. Roz describes, “Mitch would never have forgiven her if she’d jumped on him in public, or even given him a big smooch during the kiss- the- bride routine. He’d made it clear by then that there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kisses, and he was to be the former and she the later” (*TRB* 312). Beauvoir highlights man’s perception of woman’s sexuality, “that she should be in no way independent, even in her longing for him”. And woman is “obliged to offer man the myth of her submission, because he insists upon domination.... Since she can only *be not act*” (397, 381).

Subversion of the Belief of Women’s Passivity

Atwood subverts the belief of women’s passivity by giving power to Tony in reversing the name of her husband from Stewart to ‘West’ (*TRB* 14). By reversing the hands and letters- from right to left, Tony constructs her own language. By doing this she not only rejects the Patriarchal language but also laws of patriarchy. Irigaray argues, “Women, by writing in a language... resists the dichotomies founded in an order, a grammar of gender” (Parsons 91).

Reversion of Gender Stereotypes

In the novel not only names, but gender stereotypes are reversed as well. West, as opposed to the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity, displays femininity and appears more “frangible” and “subject to breakage” than Tony (*TRB* 9). He is dumped and ditched by Zenia twice and projected as “poor-angel; man-like” depending on both Zenia and Tony for his survival. Tony’s friends Charis and Roz “make him nervous” (*TRB* 168). He is seen as “a baby” who is “incapable of handling practical issues of life,” and is “fond of sacrificial gestures” and is so vulnerable and delicate that Zenia is afraid of “getting him dirty” (*TRB* 173).

Judging from the socio-cultural parameters of gender ideology, all the traits embodied by West can be stereotyped as feminine. He is shown as so vulnerable that “one contemptuous flick of her (Zenia’s) hand could splatter him all over the sidewalk” (*TRB* 173) certifying that not only can men befooled women, “women can make fools of men ... even if they weren’t fool to begin with” (*TRB* 175). Zenia exploits West as well as Tony, blackmailing her for money and also snatching West from her after her marriage. Whereas later on Tony is able to “reconnect with the regenerative powers”, West is left desolated and frail, “West’s desolation is palpable. It envelops him like a cloud of midges...It’s as if he is blind” (*TRB* 175-176).

Zenia challenges West’s sexuality and strength and defeats him on sexual grounds proving his masculinity and virility as powerless in comparison to her feminine sexuality. She traps West by concocting a story of her as sexually frigid owing to her “sexually abused... childhood, by a Greek Orthodox Priest” and “challenge[s]” him to “Warm up the ice maiden”. She even tells him that, “she was faking orgasm to please him” (*TRB* 406, 407).

Zenia defines sex as, “a huge plum pudding, a confection of rich delights” and discards West as sexually “boring” (*TRB* 407). Whereas Billy is sexually dominant, he is shown to be depending on Charis for his survival. Charis not only supports Billy financially, but also lends him moral support “his very existence depends on her” (*TRB* 210). “She understood his emotions which came at her in a deluge- watery chaotic, a melancholy blue in colour, like a great wave of tear. He was so lost, so wounded, how could she refuse to offer him whatever comfort she had” (*TRB* 214)? This dependency of Billy on Charis subverts the myth of masculinity as independent, active and supporting.

Mitch's hegemonic masculinity is challenged by Zenia who leaves him weak and powerless. Deconstructing the concept of women as oppressed and men as oppressor, she leaves Mitch helpless and powerless before herself. Mitch is "not used to getting dumped, to being betrayed, because it never happened to him before" (*TRB* 376). After being deserted by Zenia, Mitch is also not forgiven by Roz, "she's always depended on him, not to lose his nerve. But now there is a crack in him, like a crack in glass; a little heat and he will shatter. But why should it be Roz's job to sweep up?" She tells him, "you can't treat me like a rest stop",... "not any more" (*TRB* 379, 380). Mitch is so much devastated by Zenia that at last he commits suicide.

Zenia embodies the traits of both the sexes, performing both masculinity and femininity quite dexterously according to the victims she encounters. She is explained to be "on no side but her own" (*TRB* 185) and performs both as oppressor and oppressed as and when required.

Dissolution of Gender Boundaries

Through the character of Zenia Atwood dissolves gender boundaries as well as gendered spaces proving it to be porous and fluid. As a women character she narrates her past life history, and manipulates it to evoke admiration or pity of the listener. To Tony she presents herself as positive shadow, with her sexually exploited childhood at the hands of her Russian mother who sold her in prostitution when she was just five, "It must have started when I was five, six, earlier may be. Really I can't remember a time when I didn't have some man's hands in my pants" (*TRB* 164). Despite her sufferings she comes out to be an independent woman with "a touching gallantry, a steely courage in the face of adverse destiny" (*TRB* 167). Thus Zenia represents herself as an epitome of identity free from the shackles and fetters of gender and sex role stereotypes and is imitated by all the three friends.

Roz and Zenia

Roz gets the strength from Zenia, to discover the power she already had, that helps and prepares her in the upbringing of her children which is free from constraints of gender stereotyping. Roz tells herself:

You are woman, with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. The Zenia's of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies, they have done it themselves. They have slipped sideways into dreams, the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women. Just as they are for men. (TRB 392)

A Fair Glittering Edge

The daughters of Charis and Roz are described as “have [ing] a fair glittering edge to them. None of them is what you would call self-effacing. All three would be at home on horses, riding astride, hair flying scouring the plains, giving no quarter” (TRB 402). All three daughters are constructed as independent and active betraying the feminine ideal of culture and society. Tony perceives the:

Confidence, their straight ahead level gazes, their humorous but remorseless mouth. They have none of the timidity that used to be so built in for women. She hopes they will gallop through the world in style, more style than she herself has been able to scrape together... and the twins have become so gigantic; gigantic and also careless. Tony is slightly afraid of them. They might step on her by mistake. (TRB 402)

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).

From the *The Robber Bridegroom* to *The Robber Bride*

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" (294TRB). This reflects the total reversal of his gender roles as, "masculine behaviour" is believed to "spring from a root of possible violence" and to be women is to be "weak, futile and docile" (Beauvoir 354, 359).

Portrayal of Gay, Homo- and Hetero-Sexuality and Role of Patriarchy

Roz's son Larry and her assistant Boyce are presented as gay. Boyce's himself reveals his identity to Roz at the very beginning, "I am gay as a grig, but I won't embarrass you in public. My straight act is impeccable" (TRB 90). Here being 'straight' is mentioned as an 'act' rather than biological trait. This reflects the theory of gender given by Judith Butler who assertively describes gender as "a corporeal s t y l e, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative", where "'performative' itself carries the double-meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential' " (*Performative Acts* 521-22) and can be defined as, "that discursive practice which enacts or produce that which it names" (*Bodies That Matter* 13).

The comment of Rachel Alsop is quite apt in this regard, "By appropriating the symbols of masculinity and exaggerating them macho/gay men are exposing the artificiality of normative heterosexual masculinity. What gay men's looks suggest can be even more 'masculine' than their heterosexual counterparts, thus challenging claims that only heterosexual men are real" (148). Thus Boyce's both the identities -of gay and

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straight as performance undermines “heterosexism and homophobia at the heart of hegemonic masculinity” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 132). Like any woman he even is good at “mother[ing] and tak[ing] care of her[Roz]”(TRB 89). It is explained that as long as he ‘performs’ his gender identity well it is not possible to make out whether he is gay or straight, whether “he hates women”...or “he wants to be one” (TRB 90).

Therefore according to Butler, “Gender is a set of free- floating attributes ... constituting the identity it is purported to be... It is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.”(24-25).

Homosexuality like heterosexuality is shown to be artificially constructed. Roz “sometimes thinks he’s a surrogate son; on the other hand, he might be a surrogate daughter” (TRB 89) who is successful in “bring[ing] out the lady in her” (90). Similarly Zenia’s identity too is put to question because of her performance of both masculinity and femininity. Boyce questions if, “she was really a woman. It could be a man in a dress” (TRB 436). Thus Butler states:

The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally does not seem to follow from gender- indeed where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. (*Gender Trouble* 135-36)

The gay relation of Boyce and Larry is accepted by Roz’s daughters quite easily while she herself needs sometime to accept this relation. This is due to the fact that homosexuality is considered as biological anomaly; an “arrest of development” by the society that ostracizes homosexuals as abnormal (Beauvoir 426). On the same account Larry is blackmailed by Zenia.

Thus patriarchal ideology privileging heterosexuality victimizes not only women but men. Hornacek reveals that the patriarchal system is equally exploitative for men and they not only “benefit from patriarchy but are also hurt by it” (qtd. in Hooks 74).

Therefore “rigid sex roles” have been identified as “the primary source of their [men’s] victimization” (Hooks 80). Gay sexuality is presented by Atwood as normal, and not a biological abnormality asserting that “the fences so firmly in place around the gender corrals are just a bunch of rusty old wire” (*TRB* 454). Describing sexuality as a discursive construction, Parsons argues that “Sexuality of the body thus cannot be abstracted from its actual situation in history, since it has no meaning apart from the ways in which it is defined within particular discursive practices”(72).

Atwood’s Women Characters - Atwood Subverts and Destabilizes Gender Categories

Atwood enables her women characters to explore and discover the truth of their existence and identity by breaking silence, subverting their identity and expressing themselves in their own language. Cixous argues that in order to liberate themselves from patriarchal ideology, woman needs to reject male, rule- bound language by having their own female discourse, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”(334). She further suggests that, “only when women inhabit their bodies fully and write from them can they produce a female language and female texts capable of challenging historical and political constructions, of subverting the dominant linguistic order, and of representing themselves”(Davies 59). Therefore by adopting ‘écriture feminine’ or feminine writing, “women can struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of binary opposition and revel in the pleasure of open-ended reality” (Moi 106).

Tony’s left hand becomes her strength which is treated as wrong by others. It is by reversing hands and letters that she creates her own language and a powerful identity which is quite contrary to her real identity. She claims, “despite its good performance her left hand was scorned, but her right hand was bribed and encouraged”... but “tony continued to write left handed” (*TRB* 138). By reversing hands and letters she rejects patriarchal language and creates her own language, “this was her language, so its rules and regularities were at her mercy” (*TRB* 116). Thus “writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures”(Cixous 337).

Like Tony, Charis too is able to reunite with her disjointed identity Karen and is able to confront the truth of her suppressed identity by identifying herself with Zenia. Zenia, on entering in her life as helpless, emaciated cancer patient merges first with Karen and then with Charis, finally returning her words to Charis. For Charis words are described as, “pictures”... and then “screams and moans, and then the smell of rotting meat, and of burning, flesh, and then physical pain” (*TRB* 64). Thus Charis finds her voice, “seize[s] the occasion to speak” (Cixous 338) and becomes “who she is ” (*TRB* 50).

Roz too is projected as passive and silent to the subordination of her husband Mitch enduring all without protest. She suffers from the disintegration of her identity shifting and changing names, from “Roz Greenwood to Roz Grunwald and later to Roz Andrews after her marriage with Mitch.” The changing of names decipher “Roz’s transformations and her upward mobility” along with “her insecurities, for everyone of her identities is shadowed by the others” (Howells 95). In order to adjust and adapt herself to her displaced identity and passivity under patriarchy she “learned to keep her big fat mouth shut” (301), there was “no room... for a yes or no”(301*TRB*). Under the influence of Zenia she learns a new language i.e. “adds layers of language to herself, sticking them on like, like posters on a fence” (345) and is able to fight back her husband’s exploitation.

All the three friends Roz, Tony and Charis are able to fight against their artificially constructed gender identity by subverting and destabilizing the constructed gendered space by encountering their suppressed identities in the reflection of Zenia; who transcends the boundaries of socially constructed gendered space and lives a life free from all restraints. It is dealt efficiently in the novel that along with femininity, masculinity too is performative and power is linked with one’s sex rather it can be displayed by person of either sex. According to Somacarrera, “For Atwood and Foucault power is unstable because it is diffused throughout all social relations rather than being imposed from above” (44-45). Atwood herself questions the reality of power as, “power after all is not real, not really there: people give it to each other” (*Power Politics* 16).

Thus we see that Atwood subverts and destabilizes gender categories as discursively constructed in society and culture. By subverting gender boundaries Atwood

liberates not only her women characters but men characters too from the imprisonment of gender stereotypes.

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