

Psychological Manipulation of Zenia in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

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Abstract

Atwood is considered as an asset in the world of Canadian Literature, who has, to her credit, more than a score of books of popularity novels, short stories, a bouquet of poems and a length of literary criticism. The various works of the writer have reached across the globe, winning her paramount glory and honourable awards. *The Robber Bride* turns out to be the eighth novel of Atwood. Atwood's works are noted for her wisdom and strikingly versatile craft of writing that few dares to express in their writing. *The Robber Bride* is shockingly unique and despite a counter part of Grimm's book. The paper aims to give an in-depth reading of the novel *The Robber Bride* which reveals the psyche of a woman, indeed a complicated knot to unfasten. It is usually stated that the most complex phenomenon is human psyche and to unravel its mysteries is a Himalayan task.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, Psychical Wreckage, Womanhood, Female Psyche, Manipulation and Loss of love.

Introduction

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec and Toronto. The daughter of an entomologist, Atwood spent a large part of her childhood in the Canadian wilderness where her father was conducting research. She is the author of various literary works, including novels, short stories, poems and works of literary criticism.

As a critic, she is best known for her, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Globally, Atwood is celebrated for the Candid feminism of her books. From her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, to her masterpiece, *The Handmaid's Tale*, brought the writer paramount glory. Atwood has revealed a great interest in the restrictions that society puts on women and how women overcome it successfully.

After *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood became an international celebrity. She wrote a series of novels dealing with woman's relationships like *Cats' Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. In 1992, *Good Bones* was published dealing about female body parts. Atwood discovers woman's historical roles in other works, including her renowned poetry collection, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and the historical fiction *Alias Grace*. Atwood not only focuses on women and nature, but she also focuses to the taste of children. Her first children's book was *Up in the Tree* followed by *Anna's Pet* and *For the Birds*.

The writer has been recognized internationally for her work through awards and honorary degrees. Throughout her career, she has got various awards and honorary degrees including the Canadian Governor General's Award, Le Chevalier Dans I Ordre des Arts letters in France, and the National Arts Club Medal of Honor for Literature.

Atwood holds an eye-catching place among Canadian writers. Atwood has provided a blended network of relations to capture the complexities of the world. On the surface, the commandeering efforts of strike us a private and strongly individualized personal histories with the female protagonists being obsessed by their private dilemmas and frustrations. Her private female and individual experience outstrip into worldwide. In her works Atwood has always set her themes of womanhood. The assorted images of womanhood are presented through the changes of the social, political, historical and environmental settings she casts her heroine in.

Themes of Atwood

The novels of Atwood revolve around the theme of the search for self- Identity and need to justify one's existence. Atwood like Jane Austen tends to show little interest in the great socio – cultural interest. A deep analysis of Atwood's novel brings out into open that her focus is so much on the inner world of feeling and sensibility. Atwood works has been hailed by feminist critics as a profound portrayal of women's inequality within society and relations between the sexes.

The representation of women in search of an identity for their own selves as well as of their country's cultural identity is an important phenomenon in recent Canadian fiction. In order to analyze the writings of Atwood, the article focuses on her fiction *The Robber Bride* in which Atwood had vividly designed how a woman turns out to be an enemy for another woman. It is noted that the contemporary fiction of today focuses more on individual issues. Atwood's critics have commented that Atwood has moved from largely feminist themes to more humanistic themes.

Canadian Literature

Canadian Literature is a literary output arising out of a confluence of the two main streams in the English language, British and American. Down the years, it gained a unique identity of its own, transcending cultural and racial barriers. Canada is relatively new. The country has a better standard of living. Canada has a bewildering variety of Literature. It enjoys an International ubiquity today, as a whole it developed slowly.

Some criticism of Canadian Literature has focused on nationalistic and regional themes, like the literature of every nation, Canadian writers have produced a variety of genres, and influences on Canadian writers are broad, both geographically and historically. The country's literature has been strongly influenced by international immigration, particularly in recent decades. Some of the important themes of Canadian fiction are human as a part of nature, a bounty of natural resources, fear of an adversarial wilderness, improvement of nature, regret of environmental damage, love and respect of mankind.

Feminism in Canada

Since nineteenth Century Canadian women started to raise voice against inequality and protested for equal treatment between men and women. The women's movement in Canada brought a tremendous change in the life of women in western countries. Canada witnessed a rise in consciousness about women's place in public life. Various books published during the time like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* gave lot of awareness to the public. Margaret Atwood visualizes feminism from a different perspective:

Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights. (Chakravarthy 144)

Analysis of the Plot Summary

The Robber Bride revolves around the story of three friends. The novel exhibits remarkable similarities to Atwood's earlier novels in its preoccupation with split or multiple identities. The character of Zenia is most interesting in this regard and myths of Zenia are present at two levels in the novel. Atwood uses Zenia as a catalyst and focal point for the other three main characters, to analyze and introspect about them.

The Robber Bride, however, fully analyzes the liberating possibilities of humanistic ideal of subjectivity. Zenia takes immense pleasure in story - telling and manipulating others. In addition to the different life histories that Zenia fabricates, the narrative presents another set of images that serve to subvert the kinds of cultural myths about women. Zenia's ability to exploit the lives of other women is pictured neatly by the writer. *The Robber Bride* contains a deep analysis about how the self is structured and how powerful those constructions are.

The Robber Bride – Book with A Villainess

The women characters in *The Robber Bride* are a clear-cut example of the efforts that Atwood has given while penning down her characters. The novel is an absorbing, high speed read, the prose burnished with the author's characteristic nerve, wit and insight. The novel examines the incongruity of woman as villain by presenting three engrossing, nice and well – behaved women. It is only when the villain Zenia enters the scene that they come to view their own lives of self – deception, becomes less agreeable, change and grow as individuals.

Zenia bewitches people by using her beauty and her artificial charm. Zenia aims for her victims to be submissive to her whims. She demands to be worshipped and inspires sentiments of guilt and sympathy. The three women characters in the novel Tony, Charis and Roz fall for Zenia's sob stories, from which she acquires sympathy. The readers are able to sympathize with her victims and comprehend the way Zenia is cunningly capable of evoking pity. Zenia is a master crackerjack, who knows how to successfully have an upper hand to acquire information and pinpoint a person's vulnerabilities.

Through Zenia, the villainess, Atwood attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics. *The Robber Bride* is a book with a villainess in it, a villainess who knows how to make an entrance. It is the story of three women. The second has psychic leanings and complex past and the third one is a business dealer with gambling tendencies. The novel can be called as a form of female gothic romance, the returns of the demonic woman from the dead in the story about transgressions betrayals and omens of disaster, until the final defeat of the Zenia by three friends when the villainess Zenia's body is burned up and its ashes scattered over the deepest part of Lake Ontario.

Simon De Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* about women's situation and their behaviour toward each other and some woman's feelings:

They had power and can make everything agreeable for themselves and so with many tricks entered other woman's mind and changed their way of life, and in this way are like devil and make many mistakes in the style other woman like. (Beauvoir 282)

Atwood compares Zenia to the Moon, the leading attribute of the White Goddess. Like the moon, she vanishes and recurs suddenly throughout the novel. Atwood's fiction portrays individual's consciousness and her view of reality is characterized by a shifting of artistic focus from the individual to the social, from female to human, from past to present, from present to future. Atwood is an author whose main concern has always been with the feminine, female character to point to the problems of humankind.

Her private female and individual experiences transcend the universal and the global. In her novels, Atwood has provided a complex network of relations to capture the complexities of the postmodern world. Analyzing the novels of Atwood, we can comprehend that their primary concern with women's lives is communicated to us through varying perspective of her view of a female world and the transformations of the positions of women in Canada and the world as well.

The varied images of womanhood are presented through the changes of the social, political, historical and environmental settings she casts her heroine in. In all her works Atwood has always set her themes of womanhood into wider social frameworks and gradually extended her initially feminist concerns into global human concerns. The prevailing motif of victimization of women so typical in her early novels transcends into the motif of victimization of humankind in her latest novels.

To receive a stronger impact upon her readers but also to give her challenging stories a more universal significance, she tested her stories and characters in different political and historical settings. Her series of works extends from the mid – sixties to the present day. *The Robber Bride* decenters the myth of pure woman and shows how even an evil woman can be a normal woman. Through Zenia, the villainous, Atwood attempts to transform gender relations and concepts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics. Zenia's character of displaying co-existence of both masculinity and femininity is an example of Atwood's deconstruction and subversion of gender. The female characters are analyzed psychoanalytically, in order to find their psychological neuroses. In psychoanalysis, the concept of splitting stems from the instability of one's mental concept of self.

The very first state of female psyche with its ups and down, psychical tension equated to surface tension with an imbalance of secure and insecure feelings and the darker side of life gets exposed in the character of the first of Trio, Tony, the History Professor, when they have just seen the dead Zenia coming alive. Tony felt safe this morning, safe now. Everything has been called into question. The state of mind of a woman is still water at surface level and turbulent undercurrent.

A woman is always strong enough to maintain this poise eternally, however turbulent her inner being is. But in the case of man, however strong he is, with his rock like frame, maintaining an exterior turns out to be a futile attempt; he makes it transparent. The so-called physically weak woman has a strong psyche, unfathomably intricate to anybody, including her own men. Each of this trio has lost her psychological balance, each differently on different occasion. In the hotel scene, Zenia tells each of the women in turn who they are and how false their perceptions about themselves and people around them are to Tony:

You always were the most awful two-faced hypocrite, Tony. A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions. You think you have some kind of an adventurous mind but spare me! At heart you're a coward, you hole yourself up in that bourgeois playpen of yours with your warped little battle-scars collection, you sit on poor West as if he's your very own fresh-laid fucking egg! (TRB 414)

To Charis:

[Billy] thought you were a cow, if you must know. He thought you were so stupid you'd give birth to an idiot. He thought you were a stunned cunt, to be exact. . . . I know you, and I can guess how you've been spending your time. Dressing up in

hair shirts. Playing hermits. Mooning around after Billy. He's just an excuse for you; he lets you avoid your life. Give him up. Forget about him. (TRB 427)

Atwoodian Strategy for Writing a Woman's Life

Past-centered notion of selfhood is deeply resonant with what Atwood engages with in much of her fiction, which is Atwoodian strategy for writing a woman's life. The narrative structure of the novel is shaped around the way in which Zenia mirrors each character's anxieties and confusion about their personal and cultural origins and fills in the gaps in their individual life narratives. In telling the stories that they want or need to hear, Zenia manipulates her way into other character's life narratives.

It is her role as an interloper played so aptly by Zenia that renders her such a powerful and dangerous presence in the novel. Zenia is the other woman, the bad woman, the one who steals the good women's husbands, the one who is sexier and smarter and faster. She does not just steal the men; she quite explicitly steals their souls. She lies, she makes herself up. Tony and Roz manipulate their men, keep secrets from them and do not tell them the whole truth about their pasts. Charis does not manipulate but her relationship with Billy is largely imaginary anyway.

The Robber Bride brings out to light the incongruity of woman. The three women characters in the novel Tony, Roz and Charis acts like a support system in-order to please their men. Though the villainesses Zenia deceives them and steal their men, only through her the female characters analyse about their self- deception. The eighth novel of Atwood opens at a posh restaurant Toxique, where the three friends meet for lunch. Though there is nothing much in common among the three friends they share one similar emotion, all have lost their love to the she-devil Zenia. Then in *Black Enamel* they look to the past through flashbacks and their memories to relate how Zenia entered each of their lives and the devastation with which she left them.

Conclusion

The novel is written in segments, from the victim's perspective and with flashbacks, which gives insight to the readers. Each victim has her traumatic story written in a separate section. Atwood writes in the third person for each victim in such a way that each one remains distinct. All three women cling on to each other for moral support. It is their friendship which helps them to confront and combat Zenia. Each one strengthens the other, so that they are able to conquer Zenia individually. The solution offered by Atwood is that in order to combat malicious dominance, it is necessary to exorcise the oppressor, most of all from one's mind.

In the beginning of the novel Zenia who appears like a phoenix, returning from the dead, by the end of the story dies for real, and this time her three enemies actually get to see her body floating in a hotel fountain and then to scatter her ashes in a happy ritual over water. But that's not the end of her says the writer Atwood. The characters and events in the novel *The Robber Bride*, portrays how women live in a good and happy society. It is Satirical how, despite putting in effort to change their position in society, the three major protagonists are incomplete, unfulfilled and unhappy. Although Tony, Roz and Charis enjoy ambition, success and satisfaction in certain spheres of life, they cannot function as complete human beings without each other's help, friendship and filling of the emotional void.

At the end of *The Robber Bride* the spiritual wins over the rationalist when Tony, the most rational character in the novel, the rigorous academic requiring a proof and a rational explanation for everything, finds this approach to the role of Zenia in her life inadequate. She is one of the three women to suggest a ritual burial and a wake for Zenia a year after her death, she even requests all three of them to wear black before they scatter Zenia's ashes into the lake halfway between the mainland and the Island, where Charis has her house:

She wants to do Zenia justice; . . . She craves some idea of ceremony of decorum; . . . What she herself would like is a little gunfire. A ritual canon shot, the flag lowering to half-mast, a single bugle note quivering in the silvery air. Other fighters get that, so why not Zenia? (TRB 466-468)

The issues which Atwood takes up to address in her novels are quite realistic and can benefit the women folk immensely to be their real and true self. The death of Zenia remains a mystery to the end. Hence, in *The Robber Bride* the woman-heroes and villainess all lack true love and happy childhood; they portray the fragmented identities waiting to be acknowledged by their real-self.

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