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Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* - A Study of the Impact of War on Historical and Economic Aspects of the Society

S. Joy Isabella, M.A., M.Phil. & J. Sundarsingh, Ph.D.

Abstract

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian poet, novelist and critic, is noted for the feminism and mythological themes. Her texts derive from the traditional realist novel, where the female protagonist is victimized by gender and politics. Atwood's fiction is often symbolic and she has moved easily between satire, fantasy and suffering. In the year 2000, Atwood earned the Booker prize, Britain's top literary award for fiction through *The Blind Assassin*.

In her novels, Atwood creates women characters that are forced to reconstruct themselves in a more self reliant and courageous form as they seek to establish their relationship to the world and to the individuals around them.

This research paper throws light on the History of War and its impact on economy of Canada based on the novel *The Blind Assassin*. This study examines historical evidences by analyzing the records and survivals of the past in the novel. History and Fiction are discourse system of signification by which one can capture the essence of the past.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a prolific Canadian poet, short story writer, novelist and a critic. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, appeared in 1969. Later she wrote *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Dancing Girls*, *Life before Man*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Negotiating with the Dead*. She is an international literary celebrity whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages and published in twenty five countries.

The highpoint of Atwood's literary career has been the award of the prestigious Booker prize in the year 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*. A Canadian and feminist writer, Margaret Atwood is internationally acclaimed as an accomplished novelist, poet, short story writer, and literary commentator. Her novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) is highly regarded as a provocative work of feminist dystopian fiction that examines the cultural construction of female identity, language, and historical memory.

A Review of Research

Vanitha (2007) has studied 'Shifting balances in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*'. Mariamma Chacko (2001) has reviewed Margaret Atwood's Novel. Subhadra Bhaskaran (2003) has narrated Intersection of history and fiction in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Joy Isabella and Sundarsingh (2010) have published a paper on Association of Self Fashioning and Circumstances in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*.

Ideological Extremism – the Focus of *The Blind Assassin*

The Blind Assassin is primarily concerned with the problems of ideological extremism, historical interpretation, and most importantly the contribution of women in family and economic growth.

Margaret Atwood depicts life as a process, a journey into one's self which results in self-realization, self assertion and reconciliation. The broken relationship portrays the universal problem of survival of the human race which reflects the radical influence of colonization. The portrayal 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. Atwood's vision of life centres on the Psyche, the soul and the consciousness of man. The women as portrayed by Atwood suffer from personal victimization which has its roots in the colonial pattern of destruction.

A Story of Two Sisters

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The Blind Assassin is about two sisters, one of whom, Laura Chase, dies in a car accident in 1945 under ambiguous circumstances. Iris Chase, wife of Richard Griffin, an industrialist lives alone in Port Ticonderoga. In her middle nineties, Iris' life oscillates between her uncertain present and mysteries of her past. She recollects the past and the mysterious death of her sister Laura in the novel.

Family History and National History

The family history is entangled with the national history in "The Blind Assassin". It is apt to quote "The progress of critically examining and analyzing the records, and survivals of the past is called as Historical method. The imaginative reconstruction of the process is called Historiography". Gottschalk, (p. 48).

The Chase family came to Port Ticonderoga from Pennsylvania in the 1820's and they built the town which had been burnt out during 1812 war. (P.66). Readers are exposed to the destruction of war. In the Year 1870, Benjamin, the Grandfather of Iris had built the Button factory which gave an economic progress in the region. (p.66). It is interesting to note the history of buttons. The first buttons were made from wood and bone, and the fancier ones from cow horns. (p. 66).

The War and the Economy

The population of the country was expanding at an enormous rate. He used the necessity of the people and made buttons cheaply and sold cheaply. When the war began, a sixth of the workers had been women. By the end of the war the number has increased to two thirds. This indicates that the men were old or partially crippled or they were unfit for button factory. The impact of war was greater in men and hence affected the economy of the family.

"The Chase Industries: A History", a business chronicle, was published in the year 1903. (p. 68). This indicates that during the olden days when business was established it was being known through bulletin or chronicles. These chronicles are presented to the business associates to highlight about the economy of the company. This is a type of advertisement to expose the company's status.

History reveals that Avilion – a merchant's palace, with a curved driveway leading to it, a stumpy gothic turret, and a wide semicircular spooled verandah overlooking the two rivers, where tea was served to ladies in flowered hats during the languid summer afternoons at the century's turn. (p.72). It was dedicated in the year 1889 and christened by Adelia, the grandmother of Iris Chase. Historically Avilion is not a good name, since Avilion was the place where King Arthur went to die. The name signifies that Adelia is hopeless and helpless.

The Devastation Due to War

The war began in the month of August, 1914. All the three brothers of Chase family joined the Royal Canadian Regiment. Adelia used political influence to receive orders for the button factory to supply the troops. War was good for the button trade. So many buttons were lost in a war, and have to be replaced. (P.88). They're blown to pieces, they sank into the ground, they went up in flames. This clearly reveals that many lost their lives due to war.

In the year 1916, first week of June, Iris was born. (p. 91). In the same month Percy, brother of Norval Chase was killed in the war. In the month of July, Eddie of Chase family died. And in the month of August grandfather was affected by stroke. The continuous sufferings made Iris' mother to manage the button factories in order to sustain the family.

Aftermath of War

Armistice Day was celebrated on November 11, 1918. The war is over. The guns are silent. The men who are left alive look up at the sky, their faces grimed, their clothing sodden; they climb out of their foxholes and filthy burrows. Both sides feel they have lost. (P.93). Even though many support the war, the final ending is not a victory. But many people, the entire humanity suffered during the war.

Norval Chase, father of Iris, had been wounded at the Somme. He missed the jubilant welcome for the returning troops at Halifax. But there was a special reception at Port Ticonderoga for him. He emerged from the train. He had one good eye and one good leg. His face was gaunt, seamed, and fanatical. Farewells can be shattering, but returns are surely worse. (p. 94). The author clearly describes the aftermath of the war. The return of the hero is not joyful. Her father became an atheist. War changed the spiritual belief of Norval Chase.

In Seeking Loneliness

Chase would climb up into the stumpy turret of Avilion, saying he wished to smoke. Really it was an excuse to be alone. Up there he would talk to himself and slam against the walls, and end by drinking himself numb. (p. 97). This clearly indicates that the war affects the psychology of a person. As soon as the war was over, the women had stepped aside or else been pushed and their jobs had been filled by the returning men. But there weren't enough jobs to go around. All over the country there were shutdowns and layoffs. (p. 99).

The aftermath of the war was so pathetic. There were no jobs across the country. Severe recession prevailed in country's economy. The bank has Roman pillars, to remind us to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, such as those ridiculous service charges. (P.175). Atwood symbolically reveals that the Bank was in existence over a long period but the service rendered by the bank was poor.

Emergence of Women

Two bronze statues were commissioned by Chase family. One was Colonel Parkman (1885), a veteran, who fought of the decisive battle in the American Revolution. The other one was a Weary Soldier. The sculptress was Callista Fitzsimmons. Even in those days the veterans were remembered by erecting statues. The statue designer was a woman. This shows that after the war women exhibited their professionalism. The war memorial was unveiled in the November of 1928, on Remembrance Day. "My father laid the first wreath, Laura and I watched, hand in hand; Reenie cried." (p. 181).

The war veterans were mourned by men through wreath and by women through drops of tears. In 1934 of September, Monday, Labour Day was celebrated. (P.206). Thus workers were honoured for their hard work and labour.

Comprehensive Coverage

In the year 1935, the button factory was empty, its interior charred and shattered. This shows that the economy of the button factory declines. There was a conference in the city, the subjects were economics and politics, the Depression, the situation in Europe; the worrisome advances being made by World Communism. Atwood presents her thought on History, Economics, Politics and Finance.

The downfall of button factory made the family to be economically handicapped. The flow of money became standstill. Hence Iris(18) was forced to marry Richard who is 35. This shows that if the economy of the country or family becomes worsen then people suffer a lot especially women and children. Civil war began in Spain during the spring of 1936. King Edward was abdicated in that year;

Intense Human Suffering

The intensity and aftermath of the war was so cruel. The war made the men in camouflage gear with scarves over their mouths and noses, the drifts of smoke, the gutted buildings, the broken, weeping civilians. Mothers carried their limp children and their faces were splashed with blood. Oldmen were bewildered. They cart the young men off and murder them, intending to forestall revenge, as the Greeks did at Troy. Hitler's killing of Jewish babies is reminded by the author.

“Keep the home fires burning”, was one of the old war slogans. (p. 583). The same sounded in the year 1939. The war went on and on, a relentless motor. Gasoline was rationed. (p. 587). Thus the mobility of day to day life is curtailed. Around the outskirts of towns and cities, bulldozers rampaged and trees were toppled. Great holes were scooped in the ground as if bombs had been dropped there. The streets were gravel and mud. The repercussion has the negative impacts over the region. War affected the ecology of Canada.

The Tragedy of Economics

Iris’ mother Liliana died. Her father taught the principles of economics. He also discussed with Richard about economics and politics, the depression, the situation in Europe, the worrisome advances made by World communism. Richard was of the opinion that Hitler had pulled Germany together from the financial point of view. He had approached to make an investment in a new fabric, the Italians were developing. When Chase lost his button business, Richard wanted to retain the button factory and proposed to marry Iris. The marriage was fixed like business. After her marriage she felt very lonely and empty. She says, “I felt as if I’d been picked up and set down in a foreign country, where everyone spoke a different language. (p. 393).

Iris also believed “Love is giving, marriage is buying and selling”.(p.518). Due to the depression, Iris lost her self-identity. The impact of war shows even people lack self-confidence and self-identity.

Conclusion

Atwood powerfully displays the impact of war on the society. The elements of war affect history and economy of the society. Through the novel *The Blind Assassin* one can understand the aftermath of the war. War changed the history of Canada. It also affected the economy of the nation. People lost faith in religion. Valuable lives had been lost. Men became invalids and the financial burden was experienced by women. War changed the personality of a man and spiritual belief of people. It also affected the ecology of entire landscape. Due to the downfall of button factory and economic situation of the family, Iris was forced to marry Richard. As a result, Iris lost her self identity.

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