

Predominant Aspects of Postmodernism and Feminism:

Understanding Perspectives from Different Novels

Dr. Asra Sultana Mouda

Asst. Professor of English

University of Hafar el Batin

Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Background: The development of understanding among women, related to the rise of consciousness, has resulted in rise against oppression and male domination. Consequently, women have emerged as individuals with greater strength in the context of sexual exploitation, to resist abuse by male prejudiced society. The aim of this research is to explore the construct of feminism within the novels written by Margaret Atwood. Hence, the novels “The Edible Woman”, “Bodily Harm”, “Surfacing”, and “the Handmaid’s tale” are assessed.

Methods: A qualitative research design has been selected for this study by collecting data through selection of the evidences pertaining to the chosen novels for review. Search of electronic databases included GoogleScholar, EbscoHost, and ProQuest to find scholarly books and articles, appraising the selected novels. **Results:** All the novels have portrayed women as the victim of societal norms and prejudice that makes her vulnerable to the dominance of her male counterpart. Women in different contexts in these novels have gone through a long journey to find their identity and invigorate themselves as individuals with right to live without being governed by men and societal customs. **Conclusion:** Atwood has presented a feminist approach in her novels to depict the rise of female rebellion against gender chauvinism.

Keywords: Feminism, postmodernism, women, male domination, and sexual abuse.

Introduction

Oppression and suppression of women in the patriarchy has resulted in an awakening that may cause the emergence of consciousness among women, with regards to expression of their feelings. As a consequence, women have become able to identify themselves and hold a

place in the society, breaking themselves from the manacles of dreadful male domination (Motta et al, 2011). Consequently, women took up writing also referred to as women's writing that concentrated on the issues mentioned above, leading to feminist movement. Considering this milieu, it is worth quoting Marta Caminero Santangelo in "Moving beyond the Blank White Spaces: Atwood's Gilead, Postmodernism, and Strategic Resistance" who supported it by writing. Among one of the crucial issues entrenched in the argument modernism and postmodernism is the apprehension between "mass culture and high art" (Huysen, 1984); both critics and supporters of postmodernism place it at the previous pole.

It is proposed by postmodernism that various factors that impact the perceiver and perceived mediates the reality. Both the object and the subject are constructed by language, with the absence of pre-social object or subject. Linda Hutcheon argues that the practices of postmodernist towards the illustration are ambivalent as they are involved in both the collusion and subversion of the traditional parameters of the representation of culture, while overlooking the present power structures engaged in developing the extremely stratified society. Postmodern aesthetics are in turn facilitated by this regarding the abolishment of progression of cultural depiction as popular culture and high culture, and sub-cultural artifacts and mainstream cultural products. The aim of this research is to explore the construct of feminism within the novels written by Margaret Atwood. Hence, the novels **The Edible Woman, Bodily Harm, Surfacing, and the Handmaid's tale** are assessed.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative research design has been selected for this study because it places emphasis on human's experiences, gathered and investigated through subjective materials (Bowling, 2009). The aim of this design is to explain some characteristics of events, directed towards the elucidation of research topic. It is a central approach leading to the exploration of expressive responses because measuring human emotions is difficult. Thus, the method of secondary qualitative research has been chosen, based on a literature review, as it is a crucial step in research process (Burns & Grove, 2009).

Data collection

The collection of data for this research was performed by selecting the evidences pertaining to the chosen novels for review. Search of electronic databases included GoogleScholar, EbscoHost, and ProQuest to find scholarly books and articles, appraising the selected novels. No limitations of publication date were applied so as to include all the important information. However, different keywords were used that included “feminism”, “postmodernism”, “women”, “male domination”, and “sexual abuse”.

Data analysis

Analysis of the data is performed thematically by identifying various themes that were similar in all the analyzed novels. Thematic analysis is a qualitative investigation enabling the analysis of categorizations and outlines pertaining to the data. It facilitates the presentation of data in a thorough manner by involving diversified subjects through perceptive knowledge. It is appropriate for the research, based on interpretation because it assists the investigation in a methodical manner. The degree of recurrence of a specific issue is compared in the entire content to infer a relevant theme, describing the topic. Accuracy and intricacy are referred to the investigation along with the development of intact connotation of the study (Ibrahim, 2012).

Ethical considerations

It was assured that all the evidences presented in this review are appropriately credited to avert the possibility of plagiarism. The author has ascertained that major themes extracted from the novels are apprehended in their actual context, without deliberately depreciating their original essence.

Results and Discussion

The Edible Woman

In the novel, **The Edible Woman**, the principal apprehension of Atwood is the deconstruction of gender politics. The novel has been precisely described by the author as “proto-feminist”, while John Lauber examines it from the perspective of “consumer society” (Lauber, 1978, p. 20). The title of this novel itself suggests that The Edible Woman represents a simple woman, the protagonist Marian McAlpin, suffering from an eating disorder, anorexia. As the title itself suggests, The Edible Woman is about a simple woman, the protagonist Marian McAlpin, who feels that she is being eaten once she

approves to marry her boyfriend Peter. A dissimilar ambience of approach is gradually seen to her disparagement and disappointment.

Metaphor of Body. Gradual loss of appetite experienced by Marian can be attributed to her denial of the self; it could be possibly inferred that loss of independence has led her into frenzied wilderness. A kind of abomination to a non-vegetarian food has developed due to her gradual appetite loss, leading to psychological disenchantment. Eating disorder of Marian is in reality, a dreaded complex, experienced and expressed in diverse stipulations. Bouson (1993) says in “The Anxiety of Being Influenced: Reading and Responding to Characters in Margaret Atwood’s **The Edible Woman**” that “Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women” (p. 230).

Marian has defined her position as above “matter” but below “mind”. Salat (1994) appropriately articulate in “A Delicious Fair: Margaret Atwood’s **The Edible Woman**, “Marian’s problematic of “becoming” constitutes and expresses Atwood’s feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society..... The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mindless body” (p. 96).

Male domination. Generally, the world has delicate nature and men like Len and Duncan emerge to create their inscriptions and paths in their own manners. The company of her colleagues, Millie, Emmie, and Lucy, who are called “office virgins”, does not make Marian feel contend and comfortable. The role of victims is occupied by them in Survival. A fright grasps them; as they reject the fact that they are victims of the patriarchal society for “fear of losing privileges they possess” (Atwood, 1969, p. 36).

The example of irrationality of human conditions is represented by a truly postmodern woman, Ainsley, as she deviates from the normal life. She wants to get pregnant and have a baby, but does not have belief in the sacred institution of marriage. It is revealed by a private and close conversation between Ainsley and Marian that Ainsley is resolute with definite set concepts which are not practicable and amiable for a normal woman. Ainsley with her anti-marriage mind-set expands on mother-image, father-image, and breast feeding.

“‘Every woman should have at least one baby’. She sounded like a voice on the radio saying that every woman should have at least one electric hair-dryer. ‘It is even more important than sex. It fulfils your deepest femininity’.” (Atwood, 1969, p. 35).

Therefore, the novel **The Edible Woman** is a representative fiction that emphasize on the themes of female anguish trapped in the maze of loathsome male domination, being condensed to a consumable object, when there is a culpable surrender and obstinate subservience by woman. Thus, connivance of woman in the male supremacy has been incriminated by Atwood.

Bodily Harm

Bodily Harm also unambiguously affirms the risks and perils in developing and trafficking fatal weapons, the perils prone to women in the strange soil. **Bodily Harm** was Atwood’s fifth novel, written in the year (1981), proclaiming her universal acknowledgment, fame, and recognition.

Female exploitation. As described aptly by the title, several layers of meanings are evoked by **Bodily Harm**. It presents ‘body’ as a subject exposed to excessive victimization and torture, both psychological and physical; for which no solution is present, except the assertion of identity and autonomy by the repressed victim. In the patriarchal society, women are usually completely powerless. It is a society in which she is a prey of diabolic crude craving of man to subordinate. It directs towards prosaic lust, lust for personal, and political control. Atwood was herself a student of philosophy, enabling her to weave the manifold themes so scrupulously that the text is abounded with philosophical and didactic views.

Mutilation of the protagonist’s body is also denoted by **Bodily Harm**, as she has to undergo mastectomy, resulting in removal of one of her breasts. It consequently resulted into the loss of her lover Jake, as he abandoned her. The moral is that the identity can be lost due to the mutilation of body which is the locus of adoration and power. This is exclusively a theme related to postmodernism that has been dealt with delicacy by Atwood. The central character Renata Wilford, is an archetypal determined White Canadian journalist, who is enthusiastically resolute at revealing the unseen lifestyles. Atwood describes through a male

artist in **Bodily Harm**: “what art does, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it” (p. 208).

Female body as an object. Concurrently, a segment of active feminists is also present; who considers the presence of extensive gap between the actual reality and the plights of women, a critical role is played by family harmony and social stability by structuring the role of women in society. In this context, female body becomes the center of empowerment resulting in either glorious survival or surrenders to male supremacy.

A quite easygoing and casual attitude is presented by Jake. “If you don’t like the road, don’t go, said Jake, smiling at her. I am not too good at life-time goals. Right now I like the road” (p. 125). All insulting torments and attacks are bared patiently by Rennie without any offense that is being perpetrated deliberately by Jake on her. She faces denial at one point when she expressed her feelings of having babies. It was abruptly snubbed by Jake, “I am not a mind man, I am more interested in your body, if you want the truth” (p. 104).

Howells (1987) scrutinizes it as, “**Bodily Harm** shows that female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered and coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Berger epigraph” (p. 120).

Thus, it was observed by Howells (1996) in her book **Margaret Atwood**: “**Bodily Harm** is another version of writing the female body..... from the point of view of a woman whose own body is damaged by cancer and mastectomy. From the ‘post-operative’ angle she scrutinizes social myths of femininity, medical discourse on breast cancer and, the rhetoric of pornography; this novel is emphatically not about bodily pleasure but about bodily harm” (p. 106).

The ambience of the circumstances has been depicted adroitly by Atwood, as at one point the author presents “sexual mutilation”, while on the other, Jake is enchanted in peripheral absurdities, when nude pictures “like thighs” are furnished in Rennie’s room. This is in harmony with the sexual fantasy of Jake. The intent of situation is exacerbated by sexual fantasies of Jake while Rennie was concurrently experiencing an extremely solemn matter like breast cancer and its surgery.

Sexual politics. The game of power commonly prevalent in the society also entered into the relationship of Rennie and Jake. It became difficult for Rennie to differentiate between the actual tyranny and sadomasochistic game of her lover:

“Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat, and she really did stop breathing. Danger turns you on, he says. Admit it. It was a game, they both knew that” (p. 207).

As mentioned by Bouson (1993) regarding **Bodily Harm**, “focuses on the contrast between affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics” (p. 111).

It is difficult to forget about past, particularly if it is dreadful, as evident that Rennie continues to hallucinate about Jake even after she meets Paul in the Caribbean, though this man understands Rennie. She is no longer treated as a forfeit of emotional urge and feels at ease with his love of comfort and soothing touch, nonetheless, the vision of Jake, with coil that he used continues to intrude:

“Rennie is dreaming about the man with the rope, again, again. He is the only man who is with her now, he has followed her, he was here all along, he was waiting for her. Sometimes she thinks it is Jake...; sometimes she thinks it is Daniel.... But it is not either of them, it is not Paul,.....The face keeps changing, eluding her, he might as well be invisible, she can't see him, this is what is so terrifying, he isn't really there, he is only a shadow, anonymous, familiar with silver eyes, that twin and reflect her own” (p. 287).

It has been stated by Howell (1987), “Jake's rapist fantasies are similar to “the early 1980s feminist anti pornography position which asserted strong links between pornography as misogynist power fantasy and male violence against women” (p. 121).

Rennie has been viewed as a double victim by Rubenstein (1985) who stated:

“Some of Rennie's anxieties about invasion and violation can be understood through the cultural attitudes towards both the female flesh and cancer; Rennie is a double victim, of both disease and exploitation. Men worship the breast, and women internalize the

male over-valuation of this aspect of their anatomy. Because it is also associated with the actual and symbolic qualities of nurturance, the loss of part or all of a breast effects a woman's sense of procreative capabilities, after her operation, Rennie wonders and worries whether she'll be able to bear a child" (p. 264).

Self-revival. Another imperative feature and quintessence of life is optimism. The statements of Rennie have reinforced this aspect. Carrington (1983) has argued that the name of Renata Wilford suggests being "born again" and "crossing over", is explicitly a manner in which she has revived following the adverse experiences she had in the Caribbean island. She tries to find shelter in a fictional place, Caribbean island, where atrocious experiences are encountered by her that encompassed imprisonment and vicious treatment by the police guards.

According to Irvine (1988), **Bodily Harm** exemplifies paradoxically, "inscription of the female body and, by connecting hospital room and jail cell, dramatically presents the injury to the female body that results from its confinement" (p. 96).

Surfacing

In the year 1972, Atwood wrote her second novel **Surfacing**. A plausible end is evident in the struggles and feministic individual concerns of the two central characters in **The Edible Woman** and the **Bodily Harm**. Both the characters reach the same endpoint from where they have begun their journey. However, the protagonist in **Surfacing** begins a never ending journey that does not end at its starting point.

It has been often commented by Atwood (1982): "The difference between them is that The Edible Woman is a circle and Surfacing is a spiral..... the heroine of **Surfacing** does not end where she began" (p. 34).

Atwood (1982) has remarked in **Second Words**, "..... My heroine's choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning" (p. 370).

Male domination. Clearer outline of the enemy has been presented in this novel, which is the male, fiscal/technical supremacy configuration that dictates and exploits everything and everyone, people, nature, and its resources in common while women to be

precise. This organization or the hierarchy is opposed by the heroine of this novel, embarking a journey in search of the values intrinsic in intact nature. The heroine also explores her psychic depths with an unseen strength unlike in any other novels of Atwood. However, **Surfacing** is to some degree comparable to the other novels, as it also creates a set of confusions, or dichotomies, presenting a collision of principles. It depicts the forces of darkness that are to be definite; the USA, being the enormous capitalist, and its evil technology, violence, corruption, war, and death. The victims of this domination are presented on the other perspective including women, life, peace, animals, Canada, and nature (Banurekaa, 2012).

Religion, Postmodernism, and feminism. The social phase of expanding generational gap and rising secularization is marked by **Surfacing**. Religion is deemed as more of a social dictatorial power than a certainty by Atwood. For instance, the religious authorities are exploited by the village priest, as he implements an austere dress code for women. Christianity has also been labeled by the narrator as a mechanism of social control that is learned at a young age and remains persuasive throughout maturity. A false ideal has emerged in the name of religion, in the novel **Surfacing**, and disapproval of Christianity by Atwood marks an extensive social propensity towards secularization. Simultaneously, an increasing gap between generations has been explored by Atwood. The older generation has been casted as crippled by an inflexible intellect of principles. Hence, a lacuna between the liberal younger generation and the conservative older generation has been documented by Atwood, through this manner (Sankar, 2014).

In the novel **Surfacing**, survival can be achieved by the protagonist, unlike the character Offred, by being repulsive against both spiritual and physical powers symbolized in Western civilization. It is established in the Western society by giving up language that has been imposed upon at her by colonialism/Canada to annihilate her individuality. This is also a type of estrangement/inferiority (Zidan, 2013). The protagonist has rejuvenated herself from the remains of her dead soul:

“I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. ... The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented,

withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (Atwood, 1972, p. 206).

The Handmaid’s Tale

Women in Vicious society. Disestablishment and displacement of women as well as countries is common. Both the fertile lands and weak bodies of women are dominated and raped. In **The Handmaid’s Tale**, the character Offred, is relocated out of her innate surroundings. Her name has to be ignored that can also be considered as a sort of distortion of identity and denial of history and culture of the person:

“My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it’s forbidden. Name is like your telephone number, useful only to others” (Atwood, 1985, p. 79).

A kind of possession and violation is conveyed by this, as stressed out by Offred regarding her sufferings all through the subsequent extract:

“My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. ... I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter. Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England” (Atwood, 1985, p. 93).

Sexual exploitation. The portrayal of a repulsive societal state is presented in this novel where priority is given to body instead of the personality. The manner in which a woman is used by a man for his utter sexual pleasure, as an object that can be bought and thrown away after being deliberately exploited as also the confinement of women within societal boundaries or to be precise the precincts created by the narrow mindedness of male supremacy, are presented drastically in this novel. It is not less than captivity of female bodies, and female sexuality has been the recurring theme in all the novels of Margaret Atwood. In the present world, in which technology and science has made tremendous advance, when there is a strident cry for education and liberation of women, the impact of oppression, and subordination on the victims by male prejudiced actions has been mirrored

by **The Handmaid's Tale**. It has shed light on the societal perspectives of women's fertility as being a necessity for stabilizing man's status in the society (Zidan, 2013).

Conclusion

The feminist perspective of Atwood is 'moralistic', 'anti-militaristic', and 'holistic', as presented through characters created by the author. She is a pro-woman who has paved way for an equivalent traction of woman with her male counterpart in the society. The author holds a 'survivalist' philosophy that supports for the integration of eminence like self-assertion in women, a vigor that reinforces them in struggle against the odds created by the male prejudiced society.

Novels written by Atwood present the gender prejudice of the aesthetic, social, dominant, and narrow structures of gender and identity that appallingly persecute women. Oppression is the consequential impact of geographic, religious, cultural, and social variants that exploit the victim's weakness. An individual might become a victim of industrialization, emotional insularity, patriarchy, cultural inadequacies, capitalism, and consumerism while most vital among all, intuitive brutality and malice.

It can be perceived that there has been alteration in the concept of Atwood, regarding the limited opportunities, accessible in Canada during the early sixties, to a young, educated woman, reflected through her heroines. The expansion in the psychological viewpoint of the author can be traced through the heroines of her later novels. Elaine Showalter has influenced the writing body of the author, as the three chief stages of writing by women have been distinguished by Showalter (1991), as cited below.

“First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on its social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values including demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery* a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (p. 274).

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