

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2018.2.6.33>

Margaret Atwood: Voicing transition in the Conscience of Women

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood, a prominent Canadian novelist, in her novels has proficiently and subtly voiced transition in the conscience of contemporary women. Through her vivid female characters and poignant themes, she has explored various shades and aspects of – not only mind but also of body— of a woman. The inside turmoil, thoughts, frustrations and anxieties, have been adeptly dealt in narratives of the novels, and have been depicted through various external disorders that occurs at mental and physical levels caused by inner dissatisfactions. Through the journey of her female characters she not only, assertively, presents the internal as well as outer condition of women, but also proposes solution to end the overshadowed state of existence of women by men and society. Atwood impressively delineates in her stories – the changed ‘conscience’ of women— that also support and propagate the concept of “New Woman”. The paper aims at locating the points where the breakthrough in the stereotyped feminine conscience occurs, paving way for the origin of new women in the selected novels of Atwood.

Keywords- *Transformation, Change, Empowerment, Female Body, Conscience*

“Food, house and clothing are mine forever... I need not hate any man. I need not flatter any man” - Virginia Woolf

Introduction

The emergence of this new voice in women has its root in the changed socio-economic condition of her which subtly and gradually changed her perceptions about her existence that was earlier predominantly defined by the patriarchal set of rules. Till the nineteenth century, women in general were mostly domesticated, who was made to believe that a woman’s fulfilment lies in expressing tribute to man’s courage and strength, making her see herself as a weak sex, establishing a stereotyped image of a woman in their family. It was their duty to follow the socio-cultural norms and fit into the

image of good wife, good mother, an excellent house-keeper, etc. In sharp contrast to this, the modern women are desperate to gain freedom from the patriarchal mind-set of limiting them to hearth and home. In the second half of the present century particularly, this changed attitude gained momentum for various socio-economic reasons and critics conceptualized this phenomenon as rise of “new woman”. The adventures undertaken by new women, her physical and mental capacity and her social freedom became the fresh topic for women writers. Who through their literary works proficiently sketched what goes inside a woman’s mind. What it is to live in a socially dominated condition and never to dominantly oppose it. Asserting that a woman’s existence is not confined around man’s only, her identity is much more than what society gives acceptance to. They brilliantly depicted her inner turmoil, of being unrecognised and unaddressed in a society, where she also exists.

Among those literati, one of such novelist is Margaret Atwood, who was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. She is the daughter of a forest entomologist, and spent part of her early years in the bush of North Quebec. She moved, at the age of seven, to Toronto. She studied at University of Toronto, then, took her master degree at Radcliffe College, Massachusetts, in 1962. She is Canada’s most eminent novelist and poet, and also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children, her works having been translated into over 30 languages. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books.

However, she is best known for her novels, in which she creates strong, often enigmatic, women characters and excels in telling open-ended stories, while dissecting the attitude and psyche of the contemporary urban life she lives and sexual politics she endures. In her various novels she has skilfully depicted various shades of conscience a woman have with different settings and situations. Taking some of her novels -- *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *The Edible Woman* (1969) in account to navigate how she has depicted the transition in the conscience of females from the stereotyped good women to the new women?

Surfacing (1972), primarily deals with a woman’s investigation into her father’s disappearance, who has vanished mysteriously from his ‘Cabin’. In the course of finding her father she encounters locked up pieces of her memories and experiences an inner struggle within her conscience and identity. It is a first person narrative by an ‘unnamed’ young, attractive, sensitive, commercial artist from Toronto. She has come to this remote island in Laurentian shield country in Quebec to search her father, where she has spent her childhood. But lot has changed in nine years around there. She has kept no contact with her parents after she moved out from there, except for the one visit she made to her dying mother in hospital. Because her new life involved love affair with a married man, her getting pregnant, his refusal to marry her, and the forced abortion she had to take. Which her simple parents with perfectly innocent and intact set of moral values, could not have

understood and accepted. She had no courage to tell them the truth; hence, *she changed her experience drastically, modified it appropriately for their world*, and sent them a postcard. The new version of the story had a wedding, a child, a divorce, and the loss of the child to the husband through the divorce. The modification of the truth clearly tells that the narrator though was bold enough to experience what she wished but not completely out of the shadow of the traditional image of good woman hence preferred to lie to fit into the image. She somewhere felt guilty for trodding on different path, for taking control of her life and body, for disobeying what society approves of.

With this kind of narration and story, Atwood has shown the sharp contrast between— what a society wants from a woman and what a woman wants from herself. Narrator's dwindling between the two worlds— one of her own, one of her parents, who represented society with their expecting attitude for perfect moral women, clearly delineates a woman is not solely what one expect of her to be. She has her own desires and wants to experience life around her. But as society can never accept her wanderings she is forced to behave according to their norms. Atwood has beautifully depicted the mind of a woman that is in process of liberation, in form of the narrator, who has courage to enact her will; but still is anchored to the society. The striking aspect of the novel is that the narrator has 'no name'. So while reading the story it feels that one is reading into her conscience. Given the time the story was published it had lot resemble with the transitional force driving the society for women.

Her novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) voice more clearly the surfacing of the inner poignant desires which were long moulded and suppressed by patriarchy in the name of morality and femininity. With her treatment of body and mind dualism she has explicitly explored, perhaps, every shades of woman's mind and the concept of 'space' of woman's body and woman in society, through the myriad experiences of protagonists - Joan Foster in the *Lady Oracle*, and Marian Mac Alpin in *The Edible Woman*, who live within a phallogocentric society.

Through mind/body dualism, Atwood tries to distinguish between the two 'selves' of a woman— one that is 'true inner self' and the other 'self' is what our body or corporeal frame suggests. And society purviews woman on the basis of her other self — corporeal frame, only. Not bothering about what her inner-self whatsoever. They desire woman for themselves, according to themselves and that too in the 'space' which they provide to her. They mostly consider and accept her as mere a body in the socially approved figure, having no mind of her own, for they believe mind and femininity is a mismatch concept. This concept can be clearly seen in the conversation between Joan and Polish Count that occurs in the *Lady Oracle*:

You have the body of a Goddess", the Polish Count used to say....."Do I have the head of one too?" I replied once archly. "Do not make such jokes", he said. (142)

The Polish Count is amused at the idea of women having 'the mind'. For him "...the mystery of a man is of the mind... whereas that of the woman is of the body" (166). According to Count, of course, 'the mind' is thoroughly incompatible with femininity, which clearly represents how patriarchy pervades existence of a woman.

In another scene of *Lady Oracle*, in Joan's depiction of Diana's statue at Ephesus as Goddess of fertility and childbirth, the whole concentration is on the body as her head is separated as if aloof from the body further asserting the mind-set that even in Goddess femininity and mind doesn't exist in unity. Probably this is one of the reasons that a woman's body become centre of patriarchal control and suppression. The scene according to Molly Hite is a fine example of, 'a paradigm of the patriarchally controlled female body' (135).

She had a serene face, perched on top of a body shaped like a mound of grapes. She was draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws: little breasts at the top and bottom, big ones around the middle. The nipples were equipped with sprouts, but several of the breasts were out of order. I stood licking my ice-cream cone, watching the goddess coldly. Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not anymore. My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible. I was not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself. (253)

Joan detaches herself from the figure, acknowledging her own limits and desires, and rejecting the being Goddess of house, rather accepting being a *woman only*. This detachment is very crucial, where a woman realizes her own needs, desires and no longer is ready to be worshipped and manipulated by man for her body and his desires. That also asserts that now she is also mastering the courage of not only desiring something but also asserting what she desires boldly without harbouring any guilt for being herself.

Marian, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, also attempts to resist the patriarchally encoded female body but in the beginning she struggled to keep up with the contemporary set of patriarchal demands. When Marian gets engaged to her partner, Peter, her family felt relieved as they were afraid and concerned that under the influence of her university education, she might have done something drastically unfeminine:

Their fear about the effects of her university education, never stated but always apparent, had been calmed at last. They had probably been worried she would turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt... or that she would undergo some shocking physical transformation, like developing muscles and a deep voice or growing moss.... But now, their approving eyes said, she was turning out all right after all."(174)

Her family clearly endorse the idea that it is important for a woman to stick with feminine virtue. Marian, nevertheless, struggled to emancipate herself from such patriarchal victimization throughout the novel and succeeded at last. Atwood has depicted her inner suffering in form of food disorder that occurs due to her psychological rejection of her female body because she feels that it's only her body men want, not her entirely. A female body is a source of pleasure and centre of domination simultaneously for men. As men approve certain shape and figure of female body, similarly they praise certain kind of the female existence that remains with the established social bounds and act as complimentary to her manhood.

Marian at last fully comprehends the social politics that controls and shapes the sexuality of a female to meet patriarchal concerns. In a scene of *The Edible Woman*, she confronts Peter and finally breaks the engagement:

'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you', she said. 'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork', she added somewhat prosaically. (271)

She also understands that solution to have full authority over her life lies not in rejecting her female body but in embracing it, as Margaret Sanger wrote in 1922 that "no woman cancell herself free who does not own and control her own body. . . .It is for women the key to liberty." (533). She only becomes whole and normal again when she breaks her engagement with Peter.

Women need to be in full control over their existence 'to reshape and re-write it by re-writing culture' – a concept personally endorsed by Atwood. Perhaps this is the reason Atwood present such an openly oppressive culture endorsing subtly the patriarchal mind-set, hoping that it might be refuted by both: her protagonist and her readers. She emphasises that a woman should assert her true-self, disregarding what other thinks of her. A 'self', that is not, in even slightest possible way, is overshadowed by men. Thus skilfully depicting in her novels, myriad shades of a woman that is alive, wanting and asserting in nature. Through enigmatic female protagonists has voiced not only the transition that has occurred in the women's conscience over this past century from wanting to fit into the stereotyped image of good woman to women who are becoming more aware of their inner self and wants and not afraid to express themselves, the new woman.

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