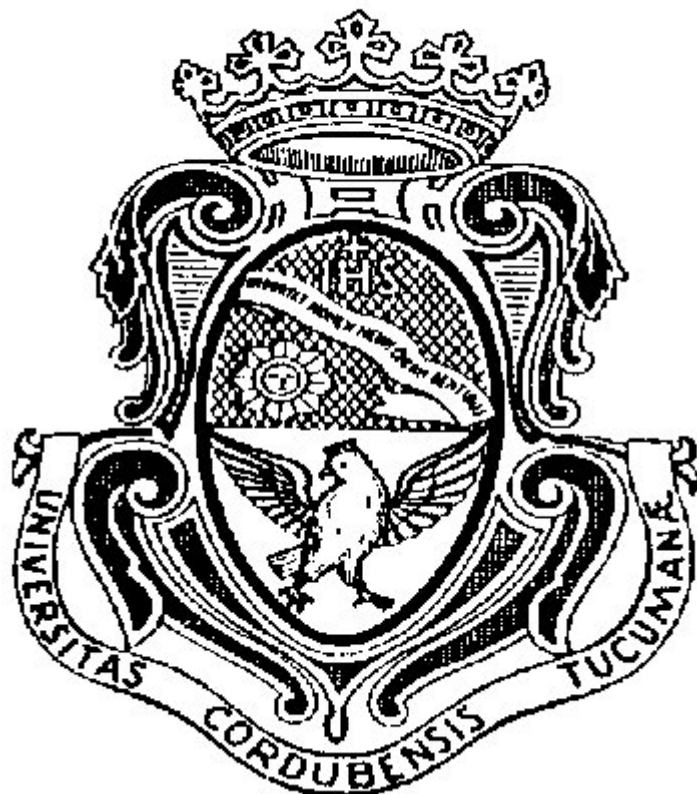


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Maestría en Inglés

Orientación Literatura Angloamericana

Tesis

“The process of identity construction through the discourse of art within the Canadian postcolonial context in *Cat’s Eye* and *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood”.

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PROLOGUE

Since I started to study this Masters Degree the postmodern problematic has captivated me. Delving deeper into the postmodern literary field I found myself attracted by the fact that much of postmodern literature has been giving voice to minority groups. From that moment my interest was directed towards those texts in which minority groups (former colonies and women primarily) occupy an important role within the realm of fiction. I, therefore, delved into many contemporary writers finding the work of Margaret Atwood both attracting and suitable for the study of minorities struggling to have a voice of their own.

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I) INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood, the much acclaimed Canadian writer, has internationally transcended through the body of her prolific literary work. She has explored most of the literary genres: essays on literary criticism, novels, poems, comic strips, television scripts, short stories, non-fiction, children's literature and stage plays. The themes which concern her and, therefore, she has worked in her literature are multiple and they are all relevant to our postmodern era. The self quest in this postmodern fragmented world is explored in at least two of Atwood's novels: *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *Cat's Eye* (1989).

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the concept of identity and the process under which it is constructed by the female characters in Atwood's novels *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye*, who inhabit contemporary Canada, an ex British colony which still needs to get independent from both its past (from the mother country: Great Britain) and its present dominant neighbour (The USA) in order to re-define itself.

The artistic discourse (literary and visual) allows the female protagonists to construct their identities by revisiting their past, re-appropriating their bodies, reconstructing their past relationships and re-positioning themselves in society.

The Canadian national identity is also constructed in both *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* going from a position of dependence on the British empire (basically shown in its past legacy) to a more contemporary critical distance with foreign influences, be them British or Americans.

This work then specifically explores the key role that art (in two of its manifestations: literature and painting) plays in these two works, since both heroines (Iris and Elaine) redefine their identity through their own art. Iris, in *The Blind Assassin*, carries on this task through the writing process of her autobiography where her own narration is told for her granddaughter Sabrina, who Iris expects one day to be able to read it and, therefore, be acquainted with her own version of the family events; and Elaine, in *Cat's Eye*, paints the characters who have influenced her both positively and negatively (Mrs Smeath, her mother, her brother, Cordelia, her teachers, etc) giving them visibility in those paintings and, hence, unconsciously detaching herself from them as a way to discover and reflect on who she has really become. She constructs and deconstructs herself through narrative while looking at her own pictures at her first retrospective in Toronto. Both protagonists, thus, find their own voice in the artistic practices they have chosen to perform either professionally -as it is Elaine's case- or amateurishly -as it is Iris' autobiography.

This analysis takes identities as dynamic and created by the individual with the influence of their own culture. Sarup describes identities as “(...) invented and constructed. They are never finished products.” (40) This work is mainly based on the premise articulated by Madan Sarup in his book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* which says: “it is in the construction of a narrative, the making and telling of a story, that we produce the self. The past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves.” (46) The presence of culture in the process of identity construction of these female characters is mainly traced in the way they place themselves regarding issues of male or colonial dominance.

The ideas discussed in this work consider different theories on female writing, gendered discourse, the oppression of women through discourse as part of cultural practices, fragmented postmodern identities, modes of subjective representations, discursive agency, the theory of the body and postcolonialism. These theories have been discussed by scholars such as Judith Butler, Michael Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Madan Sarup, José Luis Brea, Stuart Hall, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, among others.

We have chosen to approach our theme on the construction of identity in the mentioned protagonists from these diverse theories and branches of thought since on the one hand, the problem of identity is rather complex and Margaret Atwood has explored it in depth and, on the other hand, due to the complexity in Atwood's treatment and the problematization of the self both in *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* we believe it should be approached from different theories and viewpoints.

In general terms it can be said that this work will be carried out following a sociocritic model, more precisely, the model applied by the University of Quebec in Montreal, which applies sociocriticism to issues concerning identity and culture in general. As Morán Quiroz explains in his article "Sociocrítica: ¿versatilidad, caos o complejidad?", this conception defines the study of linguistic manifestations of social phenomena in literature, the arts, media, and all the ways that they are expressed in particular historical contexts as the objectives of sociocriticism. (3).

Chapter I provides the theoretical framework which will serve as the foundations for the analysis of *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye*. Notions relating identity construction as well as the role narrative plays in this process are discussed. Gender issues are also addressed within the frame of the French feminist school of criticism.

The role of discourse, conceived as an active participant in the process of identity construction, is also analysed in this section. As Canada's postcolonial reality serves as the context to set Atwood's work, its former colonial status (and its implications) are also studied in these chapters.

Chapters II and III analyse Atwood's novels *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* within the topic of identity construction in the two female protagonists through two artistic expressions: painting and writing practices. The process of the protagonists' quest for personal identity will be studied together with the process of national identity formation in contemporary Canada.

The conclusion recovers the main issues of discussion bringing them to an ending and ties together the similarities that can be found in the two novels analysed.

A) The concept of identity

“This is one life, my life of daytimes. My other, my real life, takes place at night”

(*Cat's Eye*: 310)

The construction of identity is a dynamic process; it is the consequence of various factors: our own familiar context, the interaction with others, the culture and community we belong to and their practices, the state apparatus, the political parties, etc. As Sarup has repeated several times along his work, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996), “identity is not to do with being but with becoming.” (6) In *Questions of*

Cultural Identity (2002) Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist and sociologist who co-founded the school of thought “British Cultural Studies”, agrees on this dynamic aspect of identities. He states that “they are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (4) also stressing the fact that they “are fragmented and fractured” (4) in these times. He expands his description of modern identities in these terms: “identities (...) are never singular but multiply constructed across difference, often intersecting and antagonistic.” (4)

In the preface of *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler criticizes the historical conception of the passive role of identities. She further claims that identities should be conceived as something more flexible and malleable which incorporates and expels some aspects of themselves according to certain ideals which everyone sets on each other. The subject, she believes, is in a constant process of construction. It constructs itself within a certain culture and in a constant exchange with itself and others, with the inside and the outside worlds.

Accordingly, Sarup continues highlighting the dynamic character of identities. He states that identities “change according to the strength of social forces, the dynamics of class, religion, sex and gender.” (171) These are also his words in the same sense:

(...) we do not have a homogeneous identity but instead we have several contradictory selves. Moreover, I believe that two important features of the human subject are perpetual mobility and incompleteness (...). In a sense, identity is a process; it is heterogeneous. (XVI)

In the same work he proceeds to reinforce the idea that identities are constructed within complex psychological and sociological processes that imply the inner and the outer worlds of the individual:

There are, broadly speaking, two models of identity. The "traditional" view is that all the dynamics (such as class, gender, "race") operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors (...). Identities, our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities. (14)

In this light, we acknowledge the fact that identities are difficult to grasp. They cannot be achieved once and for all; their dynamism makes them fluctuate, move along different patterns and, even, contradict themselves. Identities, therefore, are constantly created and recreated by the subject through their contact with the world which surrounds them.

B) The construction of the female self

“I am the quest of myself”

(Lacan)

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir has coined the transcendental assertion: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (267) In her seminal work *Gender Trouble*¹ in 1990, Judith Butler highlights the fact that Beauvoir is right in attaching the sense of “progression” and of “becoming” to the term “woman” which, in her own words, “is open to intervention and resignification.” (33) Butler continues: “woman (...) is a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.” (33)

¹ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler shifts the focus of feminist critical theory from questions related to the body to postmodernist issues connected to the socially constructed gendered self.

French Feminism has studied the power of discourse in creating meaning taking language as the frame of patriarchal logic. Luce Irigaray, one of the most outstanding exponents within this movement, understands language as a binary system which camouflages the univocal, hegemonic discourse of the masculine, silencing the feminine. She has also claimed in *This Sex Which is Not Mine* the fact that women are a paradox since they are the “sex” which is not “one”. She explains that within a masculine and phallogocentric language women are not represented by it. As Butler comments following Irigaray’s ideas: “ (...) women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignable.”(9) Therefore, for Irigaray, there is only one sex, the masculine and, within the conventional representational system of western culture, women can never be understood as “subjects” since they are the unrepresentable, the excluded, the empty space. The “feminine”, therefore, would be “the signification of lack, signified by the Symbolic, a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference.” (Butler 27)

Monique Wittig, another icon belonging to the French generation of feminist intellectuals during the sixties, suggests destroying the concept of “sex” and in this way, women would assume the status of a universal subject. To achieve this liberation (which Wittig sees only nuns and lesbians have been able to succeed in), she believes, “women” must first assume a particular and a universal point of view.

Wittig understands language as “a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misperceived as ‘facts’.”(Butler 115) She attributes an enormous power to discourse claiming that it even produces “sex”, which is made

circulate “by a system of signification oppressive to women, gays and lesbians.” (113) She goes deeper in her argument stating that the power language possesses on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression. (116) Wittig widens the scope of gender since she believes that bodies are politically and therefore discursively constructed according to sexual difference. In this respect, she concludes: “We are compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us (...) ‘men’ and ‘women’ are political categories, and not natural facts.” (64) Nature, then for Wittig, being a category which has been imposed on us and, in this way, created by society, becomes a construction, an artificial category as opposed to what it was made to represent. The once believed categories of “men” and “women”, therefore, have left the field of nature to be incorporated into another field, they have thus become political categories under this conception, broadening and making the scope of “gender” even more complex.

It is an unquestionable fact that women have been oppressed for centuries. This oppression has not only been practical, i.e., referring to everyday practices, but also symbolical, through the use of language. The sixties, as already shown, has been an active decade for women’s liberation movements in all spheres, including discursive practices. The study of discourse by these French intellectuals has proved that language tended to represent male standards which promoted female submission and repression, thus being hard for women to emerge. For this reason, we speak of female self construction through discourse, since women need to build up their identity from language to create those ‘facts’ Butler mentions (115) and to extend this process to other cultural practices. This is a process of female liberation, of becoming independent from the male norm, which has always been dominant.

C) The construction of the subject through narrative

“Women as subject can only redefine while being defined by language”

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

The term “subject” carries in itself the conception of human reality as a construction, “as a product of social activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious.” (Sarup 118)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romantic philosopher of the XVIII century, was one of the first intellectuals to work on the topic of the self construction through the writing process. In his *Confessions* (1782), Rousseau explores the writing technique of the “self-confession” as a means of self-creation in which the self recognises itself as subject and object. He believed that, for a “me” to emerge, it should be separated from the totality of the world, i.e. what belongs to the realm of “the not me”. In this work he pretends to recast his life and create it as a story arguing that it is through the retelling of the history of the self that the self comes to recognise itself as subject and object.

José Luis Brea, Professor of Aesthetics and Contemporary Art Theory at the Universidad Carlos III of Madrid and one of the contemporary referents in the theory of art criticism, has also studied the subject construction through discourse in his essay “Fábrica de identidad (retóricas del autorretrato)”. In this respect, he has stated: “(...) every text, as an operator of performative potential, is primarily the producer of the

subject it presents: to be sure the text is the subject's most important industry, his/her principal and most effective factory. ”² (2)

Brea believes that within the field of discursive production, the genre per excellence which allows the efficacy of the subjectivity of speech acts is the autobiography. Brea has made use of Decartes' *cogito ergo sum* and applied it to the process of identity formation through writing: “ ‘I write, therefore, I exist’ could be the - *prosopopeic*- principle of the autobiography (...) within it the subject is not spoken of as he/she who is spoken about but as the speaker him/herself, the very agent of speech.”
(3)³ Through the autobiography, then, Brea also believes the subject’s identity is constructed all along the writing process.

Brea has also explored the field of images and in the same article he conceives them as the place where the subject is constituted as such: “The image is made evident as factory identity, as the space in which the subject is constituted in the course of their representations, in the absorption of the succession of its phantasmagorias.”(3) Hence, according to Brea then, both literature and the visual arts (mainly painting and photography) can be considered channels through which the subject identity is produced.

Within the field of representation, the French feminist philosopher, Hélène Cixous, is interested in a form of writing (“écriture féminine”) that would “disturb the notion of individual subjectivity as unified and stable and explore the boundaries of the self.” (Sarup 113) The project of “écriture féminine” challenges the masculine construction of a female voice, her body and femininity.

² My own translation.

³ My own translation

Cixous has claimed that speaking is a transgressive act in itself and “writing is a privileged space for transformation.” (113) Cixous has insisted that the body of the woman must be heard. In her text “The Laugh of the Medusa” she has explained: “(women) must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes.” (880) She has conceived women as wholes made up of different wholes through which language is born over and over again.

Similarly, Luce Irigaray has claimed that women, too, need to construct a language of their own (men have already achieved it) which will house them in the process of becoming. She has coined the notion of “women-as-subjects” which highlights the social role women should occupy in society not as merely as a position of enunciation but as a position which should be rooted in social practices, as well.

Along the same line, Madan Sarup has written in the introduction to *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) that the construction of identity highly depends on images and with respect to discourse, Sarup has also stated that when individuals are asked about their identities they immediately start narrating their own life-story. He therefore believes that identity is inseparable of the events that surround an individual's life and that he becomes aware of them through discourse, that is to say, through the narration of those personal events.

Identity is articulated in various modalities according to Sarup: “the moment of experience, the mode of writing or representation (in fiction or film) and the theoretical modality.” (40) He highlights the role of “past” in the subject's self-representation by stating that it is through the representation of the subject's personal memories that they “represent themselves to themselves.” (40) One way of carrying out that self-representation, Sarup writes, is through personal narrative. Accordingly, he argues:

“(…) it is in the construction of a narrative, the making and telling of a story, that we produce the self. The past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves.” (46) Along the same trend of thought, Butler shares Sarup’s ideas and she argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that “The constitutive identifications of an autobiographical narrative are always partially fabricated in the telling.” (67)

Stuart Hall has also theorized on identities and their representation in narrative. In this respect, he writes:

Identities are (...) constituted within, not outside representation (...). They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘saturating into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as in the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field. (4)

He has extended his argument locating identities within both a historical and institutional context (since he understands them as being constructed within discourse). He summarizes his concept of identity in these words: “Identities are (...) points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of the discourse (...).” (6)

In the field of psychology, Lacan states that the subject constructs itself as an entity within language. In other words, the subject becomes conscious of itself as a distinct entity through the entry into languages (i.e. within the realms of the language acquisition process) and, therefore, in society. Lacan sees no separation between self and society, “society inhabits each individual” (Sarup 7). This process, according to him, simultaneously founds the unconscious. As language belongs to the social realm, it is therefore through language that the social enters into the formation of the

unconscious, which is an intersubjective discourse, according to him, comparable in structure to language.

Within the social realm, Lacan claims that individuals get an image of themselves through the eyes of others, but they cannot get a stable image of themselves since there is always a gap, a misrecognition; we can never totally decode the other's response to our image. Hence, Lacan highlights the fact that "there is no subject except in representation, but that no representation captures us completely (...). I am the quest for myself." (Sarup 13)⁴

Discourse, therefore we believe, becomes a key medium in the construction of the subject's identity, a process which is social, i.e., in relation with others. The others (society) play a relevant role since they function as a mirror where the subject can get another view of him/herself, although the mirror might project an incomplete view, as Lacan has stated. Hence, it is through discursive practices (being the autobiography one instance) that the subject's identity is actively built. The language of art in all its forms (as representation), or images, as Brea has written, serves as another means or a detached projection to elaborate the subject's self, constituting it as a "factory identity" (Brea 2).

Moreover, Butler has also exposed Lacan's ideas on personal narratives in *Gender Trouble*: "Lacan claims that we can never tell the story of our origins, precisely because language bars the speaking subject from the repressed libidinal origins of its speech." (67) He points out the subject's act of resistance in order to avoid remembering those elided memories. A paradox, we argue, then emerges: discourse allows the subject to define itself but at the same time it prevents the subject to fully achieve this end. Lacan

⁴ Sarup's reading of Lacan.

continues with his argumentation on the subject's institution as such: "(...) the foundational moment in which the paternal law institutes the subject seems to function as a metahistory which we not only can but ought to tell, even though the founding moments of the subject, the institution of the law, is as equally prior to the speaking subject as the unconscious itself." (67)

When Lacan uses the word "law" he is making reference to "paternal law", that is to say, the universal organizing principle that structures all linguistic signification and therefore culture itself, also termed "The Symbolic". According to Lacan, this law allows the possibility of creating meaningful language and experience repressing primarily libidinal drives. Hence, in Butler's terms and in accordance with Lacan's views, "The Symbolic becomes possible by repudiating the primary relationship to the maternal body." (79)

Kristeva challenges Lacan's theory of narrative –and consequently, Butler's– which states the fact that cultural meaning requires the repression of primary libidinal drives attached to the maternal body⁵: "She argues that the 'semiotic' is another important dimension of language, occasioned by that primary maternal body, which not only refutes Lacan's primary premise, but serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the symbolic." (Butler 80) The semiotic (that "prediscursive libidinal economy") (Butler 80), according to Kristeva, is particularly manifested in poetic language and it cannot be consistently maintained. Under her perspective, therefore, poetic language seems to represent a point of cultural subversion of the paternal law.

When explaining how Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and symbolic work, Butler uses these terms:

⁵ The maternal body for Kristeva bears a set of meanings that precede culture. Culture would therefore belong to the paternal field; whereas, maternity would be conceived as a pre-cultural reality.

If the symbolic and the semiotic are understood as two modalities of language, and if the semiotic is understood to be generally repressed by the symbolic, language for Kristeva is understood as a system in which the symbolic remains hegemonic except when the semiotic disrupts its signifying process through elision, repetition, mere sound, and the multiplication of meanings through indefinitely signifying images and metaphors. (83)

Even though Kristeva points out the existence of heterogeneous forces within language and she particularly stresses the importance of the semiotic, which is disregarded by Lacan and Butler, we interpret that on the whole, it is evident that she shares with the other theorists quoted the perspective that it is through language in general (and in all its discursive manifestations in particular) that the subject emerges as such.

a) Discursive agency

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler poses the question of the location of agency. She explains that agency is usually related to “the validity of the subject where the ‘subject’ is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates.” (142) She proceeds to divide agency as: either preceding the cultural field, or, as being culturally constructed in the process of reflexive meditation. She, therefore, claims that “on such a model, ‘culture’ and ‘discourse’ *mire* the subject, but do not constitute that subject.” (142) Under her reasoning she reached two “falsely” presumptions, according to her:

a) Agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive ‘I’, even if that ‘I’ is found in the midst of a discursive convergence, and (b) that to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by discourse, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency”. (143)

She then, completes her hypothesis by stating that “the culturally enmired subject negotiates its construction, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity.” (143) Butler explains that if identity is established through a process of signification and it signifies within different intertwined discourses, “the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an ‘I’ that preexists signification” (143), that is to say, before culture. She affirms the fact that identity is a signifying practice which is carried out by subjects who are “the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life.” (145) In other words, Butler conceives identities as discursively and thus culturally produced. Butler concludes: “when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity.” (145)

Butler, then conceives the subject as a mere cultural and linguistic product without volition. She sees it as a powerless entity which is manipulated and created by discursive and cultural practices. We agree with Butler in the fact that the subject is a cultural and discursive product but it is necessary to add that it is an entity which produces culture and discourse, that is to say, the influence on culture the subject has exists and it is a significant one. As Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Phillips have expressed in their book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002):

(...) the functioning of discourse –discursive practice- is a social practice that shapes the social world. The concept of ‘social practice’ views action in terms of a dual perspective: on the one hand, actions are concrete individual and context bound; but on the other hand, they are also institutionalised and socially anchored (...) (18)

The subject, then, is a producer and product of his own culture and discourse at the same time. In other words, the subject influences and is influenced by the medium where it exists as such.

Within the topic of agency and discursive constructs, Alison Blunt deals with the notion of “authorship” and “authority” but she seems more concerned with gender difference in the subject construction through discursive practices. In her essay “Mapping Authorship and Authority: Reading Mary Kingsley’s Landscape Descriptions” she accepts that “as long as subjectivity continues to be constructed along lines of difference, and as long as power is exercised by defining, legitimizing and exploiting such differences” (54) it still matters whether the speaking or writing voice is male or female. She further claims that authorial subjectivity is always gendered and “the social construction of gender affects how the writings of men and women are read and the interpretations of texts are influenced by the gender consciousness of individual readers.” (54) She, therefore concludes by stating that it is more “useful to think in terms of author positionality” when it comes to disclose the different sites at which “identities are constructed and contested.” (54)

Blunt’s position, then, does not pose the question of where to place the subject’s construction as the previous discussion was concerned (in the subjective or cultural realms), or as Butler has problematized in *Gender Trouble*, but she complements the concept of agency in terms of the restriction in interpretation the female or male authorship dichotomy gives to the interpretation of a text.

b) The body and discourse

“I don’t listen much to the words but to the silences,
and in the silences these bodies re-create themselves,
are created by me, take form”

(*Cat’s Eye*: 263)

This section assumes the fact that the body is a socio-cultural construction (psychically, socially, sexually and representationally produced) whose orientation in space, in Butler’s words paraphrasing Foucault, “and in relation to other bodies (...) provides a perspective on the world” (229) and, therefore, constitutes the signifying subject as such.

Foucault understands power as a relational force that permeates the entire social body, by means of connecting all social groups in a web of mutual influence. As a relational force, power constructs social organization and hierarchy by producing discourses and truths, by imposing discipline and order, and by shaping human desires and subjectivities. In this context, Foucault sees power as simultaneously productive and repressive: a social body cannot function without it.

Foucault’s works on power, mainly his ideas expressed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), offer a socio-historical perspective on the study of bodies. He believes the body achieves discursive meaning provided it is placed within the context of power relations. However, that meaning, according to Foucault, becomes artificial. He provides the concept of the maternal body as an example of this: “the maternal body (...) would be understood (..) as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female

body is required to assume maternity as the essence of itself and the law of its desire⁶.”

(92)

Foucault has defined the body as “the inscribed surface of events”. He affirms that “the task of genealogy is to expose a body totally imprinted by history.” As an entity which is “in perpetual disintegration”, the body is permanently destroyed by history, he proceeds. And as history produces values and meanings, it requires “the subjection of the body.” (Butler 130) Butler didactically describes Foucault’s theory of the destruction of the body so that culture can arise in these words:

For Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that medium must itself be destroyed –that is, fully transvalued into a sublimated domain of values. Within the metaphors of this notion of cultural values is the figure of history as a relentless writing instrument, and the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for ‘culture’ to emerge. (130-131)

Moira Gatens expresses in her essay “Power, Bodies and Difference” the fact that Foucault’s approach shows an imaginary body which “can be posited as an effect of socially and historically specific practices: an effect, that is, not of genetics but of relations of power.” (299) Being an object of discourse, this body is covered by culture, that is to say, as Moira Gatens has expressed in her essay “Power, Bodies and Difference”, “culture marks bodies and creates specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves.” (231) For this reason, it is necessary to analyse bodies in terms of their discursive, historical and cultural associations. As Gatens points out: “What is clear is that discourses, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis, and social practices, such as marriage, construct female and male bodies in ways that constitute and validate the power relations between men and women.” (231)

⁶ See Butler’s reading of Foucault in *Gender Trouble*.

Following Foucault's studies, we strongly conceive the body in its beginnings as a *tabula rasa* which is later inscribed by cultural discourses therefore becoming the consequence of social and historical practices. Under this perspective, and to summarize this conception, the body, then, becomes a culturally produced metaphor.

D) Postcolonial Canada

“(...) you come from a country that does not exist yet”

(*Cat's Eye*: 332)

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin apply the word *postcolonial* to refer “to all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” (1) In *The Empire Writes Back* (2008) they proceed to define post-colonial literatures in these terms:

(They) emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this what makes them distinctively post-colonial. (2)

As imperial relations can also be subtly regulated through discursal practices, in *Re-Scribing Empire* (1994) Tiffin and Lawson are also interested in analysing discursive colonialism in their own terms:

Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality, both institutionally (...) and informally. Colonialism (...) is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by

incorporating them in a system of representation. They are always already written by that system of representation. (3)

Postcolonialism shares with feminism the conflict between a politics of identity and a politics of difference⁷. Under this light, Stephen Slemon believes that the dual agenda of postcolonial texts continues:

(...) the resistance to (Neo)colonialism through a deconstructive reading of its rhetoric and to retrieve and reinscribe those post-colonial social traditions that in literature issue forth a thematic level, and within a realistic problematic, as principles of cultural identity and survival". (10)

Postcolonial literature, to summarize its key objectives, seeks to interpellate those subjugated colonial peoples who have become independent from their colonizers through the problematization of the consequences the oppression they have undergone has left on their own identity and in this way, try to construct their national selves.

Canada's Constitution originated as an Act of the British Parliament, and remained that way until 1982 when it was finally patriated and renamed (as the "Constitution Act"). What is more, the Constitution Act recognizes the Queen as the head of state, so that sovereignty remains divided in Canada, the British still exercising power over the Canadian.

Hence, the process of independence is long and complex since becoming independent does not only refer to the moment the Canada Act has been passed by the British Parliament and granted Royal Assent by Queen Elizabeth II, but to the process when the peoples feel they can stand on their own and explore who they really are

⁷ Both feminism and postcolonialism seek to achieve their own voice, independent from the dominant discourse (either the empire or the male's), after much subjugation.

detached from their former colonizers.

In relation to this, the following two sections reflect two sides of the same paradoxical Canadian reality, one that still feels attached to a British past and another one which needs to find their own roots in order to start their own identity quest.

a) The symbol of the mirror

Due to its past as a former British colony, Canada has tended to mirror the British culture through its imitation of national and cultural symbols. According to Smith in his book *National Identity* (1991), “the nation is also called upon to provide a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions. By the use of symbols –flags, coinage, anthems, uniforms, monuments and ceremonies- members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging.” (16-17).

A national identity, continues Smith, “is fundamentally multi-dimensional.” (14) He defines a nation “as a human population sharing a historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.” (14)

In the first chapter of *Survival*, Margaret Atwood uses the metaphor of the mirror⁸

⁸ The metaphor of the mirror creates both self-awareness and awareness of the other.

suggested by Germaine Warkentin to describe the process in which the reader takes a book to see himself reflected. Atwood then transfers this metaphor to the field of nationalism claiming that “If a country or culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind.” (23) Concentrating on Canada's reality as a former colony, she even leads her argument further writing that the image the mirror portrays might also be distorted if “the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself.” (23) She continues writing that the mirror will not only get a transformed image of what reality is but also of “what other people are like” (23) and from this point she proceeds with the field of self-knowledge, which is deeply connected with nationalism. In this respect, Atwood writes:

(...) it is hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found who you are. Self-knowledge, of course, can be painful, and the extent to which Canadian literature has been neglected in its home territory suggests, among other things, a fear on the part of Canadians of knowing who they are; while the large number of mirror and reflection images contained within that literature suggests a society engaged in a vain search for an image (...). (23)

Margaret Atwood, a writer who has been concerned for a long time in contributing to the foundation of a national identity and the constitution of a literature which can help shape the identity since very young, produces a literature which serves as that mirror in which the Canadians can look at themselves and understand or see the reflection of what they are like, and eventually can discover the remnants of submission towards their mother colony and its culture or any other foreign influences that do not allow Canadians to fully construct their own identity by themselves.

b) Margaret Atwood and “CanLit”

“(…) all we are saying is ‘We exist’”.
(*Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations
with Margaret Atwood*: 67)

CanLit is a contraction which stands for Canadian Literature. It asserts the belief that Canada has its own distinct literature. The term “CanLit” was coined in the late 1960’s when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau fostered an atmosphere of independence in Canada and, therefore, during this period Canada was able to establish a stronger identity of its own.

Margaret Atwood is considered a Canadian national writer since most of her novels approach local themes and they take place in her own country and the places in her fiction are described with absolute accuracy showing a nationalist impulse. That is the reason why most of her novels were labelled “autogeography”, as Cooke explains in *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (2004), “fiction grounded in a place described with absolute precision” (10). Accordingly, in an interview compiled in Ingersoll’s book *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood* (2006), Atwood confessed : “I find it necessary, in order to write about a place, to have actually been there. I can invent characters, but I am absolutely dependent on the details of the material world to make a space for my characters to move around in.” (Ingersoll 41)

Since Atwood has argued in many of her interviews and texts the fact that Canada is an unknown territory for Canadians, and by means of “Canada” she means a “state of mind”⁹, not the territory, she might have felt it her mission to uncover what that Canada

⁹ See *Survival* (2004) to have a more complete view on this aspect.

is and what it represents in her literature. Under this light and, returning to the symbol of the mirror developed in the previous section, she argues:

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been (...). For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (26-27)

In many interviews Margaret Atwood mentioned the fact that during her formal education “there was no nationalist consciousness” (Ingersoll 66) in Canada and that Canadians “were taught very little Canadian writing or history.” (66) For example, in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (“Travels Back”) Atwood recalls the content she had to study during her school years:

We had no Canadian poetry in high school and not much of anything else Canadian. In the first four years we studied the Greeks and Romans and Ancient Egyptians and the kings of England, and in the fifth we got Canada in a dull blue book that was mostly about wheat. (31)

Also, in *Survival* Atwood has explained the fact that at school she was “taught to sing “Rule, Britannia” and to draw The Union Jack” (37) but she was 21 when she discovered her Canadian roots at Victorian College.

As it has been mentioned before, Atwood has become an icon of Canadian national identity. She has researched Canadian literature in order to find its own literary roots independent from any French or British tradition. The product of this research was named *Survival: A Thematic guide to Canadian Literature*, whose title symbolizes the efforts of Canadian literature and; by extension, of Canadian identity to stay alive and mirror itself. In this respect, she confessed in *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations with Margaret Atwood*: “Survival was a hard book to write. It was too close to home (...). The literature of one’s own country is not escape literature. It tells truths, some of them hard.” (31)

Both the USA and the UK have influenced Canadian culture and economy. Both nations have their own symbols which represent them. For example, the symbol for America is The Frontier. It suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded. The corresponding symbol for England is The Island, an insular structure which contains the microcosm of the Body Politic¹⁰.

However, the symbol for Canada is that of survival, "*le survivance*", whose main implication has been that of staying alive and enduring (among the influence of the two powerful nations mentioned above). The image of Canadian literature (i.e. the notion of "survival") has its central character: The Victim (being considered an "oppressed minority", or an "exploited" group) (45). The position of the victim, according to Atwood in *Survival*, is dynamic, thus generating four "Victim Positions" present in Canadian Literature, which allow any possible variations: 1st to deny the fact that you are a victim; 2nd to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim; 3rd to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable and 4th to be a creative non-victim. (46-49) Canada's role, then, is that of a "collective victim." (45)

Time has passed, however, Atwood continues to believe Canada still remains a colony manipulated mainly by their threatening neighbour, the USA, with whom they share "the longest undefended border in the world." (Ingersoll 127)

In *Waltzing Again* she expressed her thoughts as regards this issue: "Canada is still a colony, although now it has recognized its own colonialism (...). Canadians have had the books on colonialization, but most of the industry is still owned by the USA." (77)

¹⁰ See the poem "The Purple Island" by Fletcher.

Having stated the fact that Atwood is considered a nationalist writer, this work will show how Canada -and the notion of “home” that derives from it -which is a way of constructing a national identity- is present in her two works: *Cat’s Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*. The construction of Canada as a recently born country parallels the self quest process the protagonists of these two novels undergo and the eventual incompleteness of their identity.

In *Second Words* Atwood has expressed the fact that Canada has traditionally had and, thus, internalized the female role in relation to the dominant, male land to the south (389), and so the figure of the female becomes appropriate to represent the Canadian identity. In the itinerary of their own self-quest, each protagonist will deconstruct the “givens” in their society and in this way, they will deconstruct hegemonic narratives that place them as “victims” or subdued subjects, as regards their gender (their bodies, roles, agency) as well as their cultural location (as national subjects or being part of minority groups).

This work will also spot and analyse instances (mainly in *The Blind Assassin*) which reflect that internal struggle generations of Canadians have had between belonging to an extinguishing empire (the British one), which still gives them pride and prestige and, at the same time, feeling they are part of a newly born independent country, Canada, which still has to learn to stand on its own.

II) *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

“I see feminism as part of a larger issue: human dignity”.

(*Margaret Atwood: Conversations*: 102)

While developing the three stories intertwined in *The Blind Assassin*, which in the end will become one, this novel deals with the process of writing as a self-quest technique used by the elder Iris Chase to narrate her own history (i.e. the events concerning the Chase family and the atrocities performed both by Richard and Winifred in the context of the historical events that took place in the 20th century).

In this multi-layered and, therefore, complex novel issues concerning the subject as well as the national Canadian identity, the female body and the role of literature are tackled.

A) Textualization of the awakened female body

“I offer the truth, I say. I’m the last one who can.

It’s the only thing in this room
that will still be here in the morning”.

(*The Blind Assassin*: 452)

Hélène Cixous has fervently put the role of women writers and their bodies at stake in her much acclaimed essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976):

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies (...) Woman must put herself into the text -as into the world and into history -by her own environment. (875)

It could be said that following Cixous' demand, Iris Chase's fictional autobiography (*The Blind Assassin*) is an act of self representation in itself. Hence, reflecting on the act of self representation through the practice of writing, Iris wonders: "For whom am I writing this? For myself? I think not" (46), although she metafictionally confesses to the reader much later the fact that at the beginning of the process of creation: "I wanted a memorial. That was how it began. For Alex, but also for myself." (529) The text, then, is conceived as a memorial which transformed itself into the narration of Iris' own life. This act of self-representation, eventually finding a shape in Iris' autobiography, echoes Brea's belief that the literary genre which most accurately allows the efficacy of the subjectivity voice is the autobiography. (2)

After a life of much silence, Iris' voice awakens proving to be eager to tell her own version of the events once and for all. Her body, therefore, becomes political. The narration of Iris' own history is transformed into the same act of representation which founds her own identity.

Now she needs to find an interlocutor (a delayed one in time at least) in Sabrina, her granddaughter who barely knows her: "What is it that I'll want from you? Not love: that would be too much to ask. Not forgiveness, which isn't yours to bestow. Only a listener, perhaps: who will see me." (537-538) In this way, Iris is somehow telling Sabrina about who she has struggled to be, leaving her granddaughter a written legacy in her autobiographical testimony and therefore finding a purpose in Iris' last stage of life.

Using Fiona Tolan's words: "Atwood, like Cixous, manages to unite the anti-essential metaphor with the physical essentialism of the body, embodying the text as much as she textualizes the body." (267) In other words, while constructing her text, inscribed on an ageing body thirsty of identity, Iris Chase constructs herself in the

narration process. Literature, and more specifically the practice of writing, will therefore serve as a means to revise past events in order to construct the subject's self. Recovering Sarup's words in relation to this: "(...) it is in the construction of a narrative, the making and telling of a story, that we produce the self. The past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves." (46)

Female bodies in *The Blind Assassin* struggle to find their own voice, to speak for themselves. After having suffered male control and being silenced for a long time, female bodies eventually gain visibility when they are written by Iris.

In chapter four of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Madeleine Davies claims that "Atwood's writing of power relationships finds one expression in her writing of the various female bodies who tell their tales." (61) The marks Richard's beating left on Iris -which she describes to the reader of *The Blind Assassin* in the following way: "It was remarkable how easily I bruised, said Richard, smiling" (383)-constitute a text. Following Foucault's conception of the blank body imprinted by culture, those marks need to be read and decoded, as Iris herself narrates: "I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if there were a code, who held the key to it? I was sand, I was snow -written on, rewritten, smoothed over." (383) Iris, therefore, is presented as a *tabula rasa*, as a blank text which is written and rewritten by others. She has no volition, no power over her own body and neither has she on the "words" etched on it, she has no "key". Even in her own writing Iris still seems powerless. It is not herself, but her disembodied hand the one who writes for her: "(...) sometimes it seems to me that it's only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me." (385) By attaching

entity (a Gothic supernatural element) to her hand, Iris moves from the passive position of being a victim of patriarchal discourse to taking up an active role (once her hand has been liberated she cannot stop it: it will tell Iris' story). Iris' memoir, therefore, moves her to assume a powerful role within the patriarchal culture which has silenced and victimized her for years. Her own story, then, becomes a subversive act in itself since on the one hand, it unveils a life of carefully kept family secrets and, on the other one, it places its female characters within a power position they have not had before. It is through her writing that Iris gains power and moves from the position of the victim to the position of the autonomous victimizer, indirectly being responsible for both Richard's and Laura's deaths. Discourse, as Brea has pointed out, serves as a means to build up the subject's identity. Iris' autobiography, then -and one more time, following Brea- is written at the same time as her identity is constructed.

Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* (1975) focuses on the spread of discipline mechanisms since the 17th century in different institutions such as factories, schools, hospitals, the army, etc. in order to silence bodies. In his work, Foucault shows how discipline is exerted on the body in order to create and normalize docile bodies. In the same work Foucault has pointed out the fact that different discipline methods serve to control various operations of the body and, therefore, impose a relation of docility-utility. He continues explaining the fact that when the body becomes a victim of these disciplinary practices, coercion takes places exploring and rearranging the body. As regards discipline, in part two, chapter one, Foucault explains how a new strategy emerged which consists in closing up bodies into a protected place - such as in various institutions- where they can be coerced. As Sarup comments in relation to Foucault's work: "(...) discipline, as a procedure of subjection, does indeed tie each individual to an entity, (...) the body is connected with processes of meaning: it is tied to an

identity.” (73)

In connection to Foucault’s disciplinary theory, it is worth noticing that Laura’s body is enclosed and manipulated; it undergoes dreadful violence when she is sent to a clinic (“Bella Vista”) on a mental diagnosis, according to the information provided by Richard and Winifred. There she becomes the victim of powerful and violent techniques such as “the mumbo-jumbo” (an obscure ritual), “I mean, and the pills and machines” (501) to repress and silence her. While moving forward on the pages the reader becomes acquainted with the real events taking place at Bella Vista. Laura eventually informs Iris at Diana Sweets Café: “They do extractions. They conk you out with ether, like the dentist. Then they take out the babies. Then they tell you you’ve made the whole thing up. Then when you accuse them of it, they say you’re in danger to yourself and others.” (501) Richard, then, uses his power to close Laura up at Bella Vista in order to erase the traces left on Laura’s body (the baby) of his sexual abuse. In this way, through her internal mark (both in her womb and mind) that the abortion has left in Laura her body speaks, accusing Richard of the crime he has committed.

In *The Blind Assassin* -and agreeing with Foucault’s claims on the cultural body one more time- female bodies eventually get to have a voice, they unleash secrets. Although at the clinic people tried to get Laura’s body silenced, she can finally get rid of the lock imposed on her and indirectly speak about it through different clues she will create for Iris to decode, which will be later analysed in this section.

Another form of control displayed in *The Blind Assassin* is the one Iris undergoes at home, exercised by both her husband, Richard, and his evil sister Winifred. This control is depicted in the novel the moment Iris, after meeting in secret with her sister Laura, has to make up excuses for not returning home with her car (since Laura has

abruptly taken it when she learns about her sister's affair with Alex and Alex's eventual death in war):

I walked for several blocks, concocting stories. I couldn't tell Richard and Winifred what had really happened to my car (...). I'd say instead that I'd had a breakdown and the car had been towed to a garage, and they'd called a taxi for me, and I'd got into it and been driven all the way home before I'd realized I'd left my purse in the car by mistake. (504)

Iris, still being influenced by the control exercised at home, feels the need to make up reliable excuses to please both Richard and Winifred. Still being self-centered, she cannot stop a moment to worry about Laura's fate. This event will bring about a chain of dreadful consequences (starting by Laura's death) to the life of most of the characters and it will haunt Iris all her life: "You can't buy unconsciousness quite so cheaply." (392)

The Blind Assassin provides innumerable references to instances of female silence as a consequence of the male repression women suffered for the purpose of disciplining them. One example of female silence in the novel by Atwood which can be offered is the moment when Iris describes her routine on a business trip with her father and Richard:

After the day's business was done, all three of us- Father, Richard, and myself [notice how she uses capital letters to refer to males but not herself]- would have dinner at a restaurant. On these occasions I would say nothing, because what was there for me to say? (230)

Being a woman, Iris has no place within the business talk between Richard and her father. No word is expected from her mouth, her role is only decorative.

Another instance when Iris remains silent is the moment when her father displays his arguments in favour of her marriage to ruthless Richard after Captain Chase's

financial collapse during the Depression. She repeats these words “I said nothing” several times, therefore, reinforcing the fact that she is not able to utter a word in response since she had no choice, she had become “the exchange object between two capitalists” (Gillett 9):

“A certain amount of resolve might be required. A certain amount of courage. Biting the bullet and so forth”.

I said nothing.

“But naturally”, he said, “whatever decision you make will be your own concern”

I said nothing.

“I wouldn't want you doing anything you were dead set against”, he said (...) There was nothing behind me but a wall.

I said nothing. (232)

Silenced women become a motif in the homonym story within the novel *The Blind Assassin*, whose authorship has been attributed to Laura Chase. There “Girl children had their throats cut and their blood drained out to replenish the five waning moons, so they would not fade and disappear forever.” (30) Also “(...) it became the practice to cut out the tongues of the girls three months before they were due to be sacrificed. This was not mutilation, said the priests, but an improvement –what could be more fitting for the servants of the Goddess of Silence?” (31). Thus, the message underlying this abhorrent practice can be read in this way: it is a desirable aim for a civilized culture to have women without a voice of their own, women who are spoken by the males, a message which goes hand in hand with Cixous’ idea that, as it has been already developed, women need to create a language of their own in order to liberate from men’s control and manipulation, subtly exercised through the patriarchal use of language.

Similarly to the girls in the story, neither Laura nor Iris has had a voice during their lifetimes. Both sisters have suffered the abuses Richard has exercised on them

without being able to communicate them. However, Laura has managed to communicate symbolically through her notebooks:

History was blank, except for the photograph Laura had glued into it – herself and Alex Thomas at the button factory picnic, both of them now coloured light yellow, with my detached blue hand crawling towards them across the lawn (...). *French* had had all the French removed from it. Instead it held the list of odd words Alex Thomas had left behind him in our attic, and that –I now discovered– Laura had not burned, after all. *Anchoryne, berel, carchineal, diamite, ebonort ...* A foreign language, true, but one I'd learned to understand, better than I ever understood French.

Mathematics had a long column of numbers, with words opposite some of them. It took me a few minutes to realize what kinds of numbers they were. They were dates. The first date coincided with my return from Europe, the last was three months or so before Laura's departure for Bella Vista. (516)

Right here Iris realizes the fact that Richard has raped her sister several times: “How could I have been so blind?” (517). Laura's channel of communication with her sister has been through messages that need decodification. For example, on the occasion when Iris meets Reenie at Betty's Luncheonette to talk about Laura's whereabouts, the latter says:

“(...) she wanted me to say she left you a message”.

“A message?”

“She left it before they took her off to that place. You'd know where to find it, she said”. (459)

Laura might have used this method either because Iris does not trust Laura completely (“Laura could be fabricating (...) Laura could be suffering from delusions” (458)) or due to the fact that Iris, according to Laura, needs to discover truth by herself, otherwise she would have never understood her sister: “How did it happen?' I whispered. 'Who was the father?' Such a thing called for whispering. 'If you don't already know, I don't think I can tell you', said Laura.” (501)

Iris has also found Laura's messages “although not in words” (464) (but in pictures) before but only while reading her sister's notebooks she seems able to fully

decode them.

Laura manipulates photographs in order to express herself. As previously stated, Laura has found this method of communication more efficient in the long term since Iris tends not to believe her, as in the moment when Laura confesses Iris the fact that Mr. Erskine “only wants to put his hand up my blouse (...) “Or under my skirt. What he likes are panties” (169) and her sister suspects: “she must have made it up, or misunderstood.” (169)

Laura’s main concern, then, in altering the colours of the pictures is to attach a transcendent signification to what photographs merely depict, especially to make Iris open her eyes to reality. She adds different colours to the pictures she takes in order to show the real self, the soul of the people represented in them. As Michelle Hoefhan Lin has written:

In *The Blind Assassin*, the photograph does not reflect memory and reality; instead, it alters both. In other words, the photo can become detached and independent from reality, or independent from a reality, supposing there is a pre-existing reality. Through these alterations, the novel challenges the photographic medium as a reliable imitation of the world. (16)

Laura has altered two photographs of Iris’ wedding: one shot has been taken at the wedding party and the other one is the formal shot of bride and groom. In the first one, Winifred and Richard “had been coloured a lurid green” (464) symbolizing their shared greed and their conspiracy in Richard’s rape of Laura, Iris had been given “a wash of acqua blue” (464) signifying her blindness to what has been taking place in front of her eyes (i.e. Winifred and Richard’s evil deeds) and Laura is “a brilliant yellow” (464), representing her innocence and untouched nature. However, when seeing the transformed photographs Iris fails to interpret those added colours: “What did it mean, this radiance? For radiance, it was as if Laura was glowing with within, like a

glass lamp or a girl made of phosphorous.” (464) In this respect, Hoefhan Lin also explains:

Since color refers to, as opposed to conferring, meaning, it runs the risk of being misinterpreted because it can represent a multiplicity of meanings. Iris does not interpret yellow as innocence. Iris' failure to decode this message is not simply an indication of her blindness, but it is also indicative of the failure of the visual medium alone as a vehicle to convey messages, to convey any set of codes, to represent the truth. This failure also demonstrates the subjective process of vision: what one person sees in the photo, the other may not. (23)

In the second photograph where only Iris and Richard appear, “Richard’s face had been painted grey, such a grey that the features were all but obliterated. The hands were red, as were the flames that shot up from around and somehow from inside the head, as if the skull itself were burning.” (464) In this picture many symbolic features can be observed and decoded: Considering Laura’s attachment to religion, the flames can be related to Richard’s evil nature and the fact that the flames come from the skull may describe how deep Richard’s evilness is rooted in him. His grey face and features might mean Richard’s dark nature and his red hands tell about his crimes (not only Laura’s rape, but her later hospitalization in a mental clinic and abortion as well as his implication in the burning of Chase’s button factory and eventual business collapse). As Iris wisely writes: “Laura had strange but very definite ideas about which colours were required (...). If there was a picture of someone she disapproved she’d do the face purple or dark grey to obliterate the features.” (161) Although Iris here seems closer to an accurate interpretation of colours, she still seems not able to fully understand what colours refer to in Laura’s pictures.

Another prominent message-photograph in *The Blind Assassin* is the one Elwood Murray has taken at the button factory picnic. The description of the original photograph taken by the journalist appears in the “Prologue: Perennials for the Rock Garden” of the novel *The Blind Assassin*. It describes Laura, Iris and Alex (although the

names are not yet revealed) “sitting under a tree” (6), Alex being in the middle of both sisters. Later in the novel, the photograph is deconstructed by Laura, attaching different meanings to it. It becomes fragmented: one with Alex and Laura, and the other one with Iris and Alex. The only remaining body part of the missing sister in each of these fragmented pictures is the intruding hand: “The sight of Laura’s light yellow hand, creeping towards Alex across the grass like an incandescent crab, gave me a chill down the back of my spine.” (225) Both sisters’ intruding hands mark the triangle among the three characters, i.e., Laura is implicitly present between Alex and Iris, and Iris is too, interfering between Laura and Alex, even though Laura’s love for Alex is apparently unreciprocal. Again, the examples analysed show photographs as a female resource to voice family secrets which could not have been transmitted otherwise, since the female voice has not been taken into account.

Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray agree that women can resist and subvert patriarchal control by using female writing (a poor translation for “*écriture féminine*”). According to these critics, women can deconstruct the order and law of the gendered masculine language by breaking their silence and express themselves through writing. Accordingly, Cixous believes that it is through discourse that women refuse to be confined. She agrees with Sarup and Brea in the fact that it is through discourse that identity is constructed (as a form of female liberation). Thus women can liberate themselves from the male gendered space through their own voice in writing. In Cixous’ own words:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (881)

Neither sister has been able to be a complete speaking subject until Iris has shown courage to use her “old stiff and clumsy fingers” (46) to etch her own story (in the literary form of autobiography) for the first time in her life and, in this way, she seems capable of both defying female silence and getting in control of her own subjectivity. She feels her text has been made in collaboration with her dead sister Laura: “Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together” (530) since one sister becomes complete with the other: “It’s a left-handed book. That’s why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it.” (530) This quote also refers back to the “intruding hand” in the deconstructed picture of the picnic previously described.

Iris feels she is in a hurry to complete the task of writing her own life-story. Time expires for her and she eventually manages to finish her autobiography just before dying. The fact that while Iris’s body extinguishes her text becomes more plausible seems a paradox. The reader is aware that time is marked by the progression of Iris’ narrative and that her body will not leave her until she finishes her objective: to complete her autobiography, to construct herself: it’s a slow race now, between me and my heart, but I intend to get there first. Where is there? The end, or *The End*”. (228) “The end” of her life and “The End” of her autobiography (i.e. body and text), thus become one, they are inseparable. Her natural ageing process and the process of writing herself, her own identity, take place at the same time. As Madeleine Davies notes in her essay “Margaret Atwood’s female bodies”:

As Iris's body gradually decomposes, it simultaneously composes her text, and her narrative can thus be seen in terms of a writing down of the body before it ceases to be. Iris empties her body of all its words, memories, sensations, and secrets (...). without her body there is no text, but it is also true that without the text there is no body. (68)

Iris finally achieves transcendence and a voice through her writing practice and the text, at the same time, becomes the only source where to find Iris (“By the time you

read this last page, that –if anywhere- is the only place I will be.”) (538). No one can repress or silence her anymore, her text has made her free. She is thus able to claim subjectivity (since she has constructed herself all along the novel) through the writing of her book, her own literature: “Then, I’ll tell you a story. I’ll tell you this story: the story of how you came to be here, sitting in my kitchen, listening to the story I’ve been telling you.” (537) As opposed to a modern idea of a fixed identity, the one she used to embrace in her childhood when she believed in the idea of eternal beauty, Iris now has learned the fact that the self is permanently made and re-made, and this is what she wishes to transmit to Sabrina, this is the other legacy to her granddaughter: “You’re free to reinvent yourself at will.” (530) By liberating herself through her autobiography Iris also encourages Sabrina to explore her identity reconstructing herself independently of who she has been told to be by Winifred.

B) Fiction and reality in the construction of identity

“They just put those stories around so they’ll be left in peace”

(The Blind Assassin: 355)

The Blind Assassin contains different genres and types of text within itself (science fiction, biblical references, classical myth, romance, autobiography, newspaper clippings, epistolary, and detective fiction), therefore becoming a complex multilayered text. These patterns let the reader, on the one hand, grasp a whole perspective on the events narrated in the novel and, on the other, their interaction allows a dialogue between art (myth and literature taken basically as belonging to the fictional realm) and reality. This dialogue allows Iris to slide the terrible truth about her past and the events

that shaped her identity both as subject and subject subjugated by patriarchal ideology and decisions.

Fiona Tolan has argued the fact that the female is constructed through myth and legend in Atwood's protagonists. Accordingly, she claims: "the numerous allusions to mythical and fantastic women can be presumed to connect with a female reality." (259) One example can be found in the mythical narrative of Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which Laura and Iris have translated for their Latin lessons. In it, the origin of the name "Iris" is rediscovered by Iris herself through one of the mythological characters in this myth. She has always believed her being plainly called after the flower: "The botanical motif, for girls, had been strong in my mother's family" (515) and after being acquainted with her name in the myth she has felt more transcendental, an active protagonist herself. Also, a series of connections between fiction and reality can be unclosed through this myth: "Dido has stabbed herself on the burning pyre or altar she's made of all the objects connected to her vanished lover, Aeneas, who has sailed away to fulfill his destiny through warfare." (514) Can Dido refer to Iris' sacrifice of remaining alive in death after her lover, Alex, was killed in war? Has Iris used the story about the blind assassin as an altar made up of Alex's memories in order to defy death? Has literature, then, been used as a means to transcend? The myth in *Aeneid* continues:

Then powerful Juno felt sorry for her (Dido's) long-time sufferings and uneasy journey, and sent Iris from Olympus to cut the agonizing soul from the body that still held onto it (...). So now, all misty, her wings yellow as a crocus, trailing a thousand rainbow colours that sparkled in the sunlight, Iris flew down, and hovering over Dido she said: As I was told to do, I take this sacred thing which belongs to the God of death; and I release you from your body. (515)

As it has been stated in the previous section, in browsing Laura's school notebooks, especially right after re-reading this myth and coming across the Mathematics one with

the dates, places and crosses indicating the moments when Richard has abused Laura, Iris realizes that her sacrifice in marrying Richard has exposed her sister to the “pedophilic attentions of her status-hungry husband” (Gillett 10): “That was the whole story. Everything was known. It had been there all along, right before my very eyes.” (517). Again, Laura’s indirect communicative method of leaving hints for Iris to discover the truth about her evil husband helps Iris find the truth, although quite late since by that time Laura has been already dead and atrocities have already been committed.

Apart from myth accounts that help Iris herself to learn about hidden truths, the reader discovers other meanings and narratives with alternative stories. Sometimes there is also a juxtaposition between reality and fiction in the novel *The Blind Assassin*, such as is the case of the tales of Sakiel-Norm told by Alex Thomas in a Scheherazade fashion, which, according to Tolan, “carry thinly disguised polemics on society and political relations” (258), connected to the Canadian political and economic situation during the Depression era as well as international affairs.

The story narrated is set in planet Zycron and in the city Sakiel-Norm where the dominant group of aristocrats (the Snilfards) openly oppress the slaves (the Ygniroids):

If a Snilfard should become bankrupt, he might be demoted to an Ygniroid. Or he might avoid such a fate by selling his wife or children in order to redeem his debt. It was much rarer for an Ygniroid to achieve the status of Snilfard, since the way up is usually more arduous than the way down: even if he were able to amass the necessary cash and acquire a Snilfard bride for himself or his son, a certain amount of bribery was involved, and it might be some time before he was accepted by Snilfard society.

I suppose this is your Bolshevism coming out, she says. I knew you’d get around to that, sooner or later. (18-19)

Behaving as an objective narrator, Alex, however, tries to detach his beliefs from the events narrated in the story he tells, claiming that there is evidence about them in

ancient history: “On the contrary. The culture I describe is based on ancient Mesopotamia. It is the Code of Hammurabi, the laws of the Hitties and so forth.” (18-19)

No matter what his arguments are, this allegory told by Alex, Iris’ lover, a man socially committed to the conflicts of his own time and a communist sympathizer, mirrors, at a macro-level, the structure of the capitalist society in which he lives where the dominant class exploit the oppressed lower classes and at a micro-level, it also describes the “story” of the last period of the Chase family when Iris’ youth has been “sold” in marriage to Richard in order to save the family business and their social status and prestige.

Iris, being fully aware of these connections between the story Alex tells and her life, has no will or strength to assume them at that moment and, therefore, says: “Don’t give me chapter and verse today, please (...). I don’t have the strength for it, I’m too limp. I’m wilting.” (19)

Alex Thomas’ life and struggle (as a communist sympathizer, a labourer organizer and in his roles during both the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, in which he eventually dies) are represented in the character the blind assassin, since the latter, as Alex himself in his revolutionary missions:

(...) feels nothing about the death he is about to inflict, nor does he care to know. Who is to be assassinated and why is the business of the rich and powerful, and he hates them all equally. Who took away his eyesight and forced themselves into his body by the dozens when he was too young to do anything about it, and he would welcome the chance to butcher every single one of them. (135)

Iris, on the other hand, is both represented as the sacrificial virgin of the story “The Blind Assassin” (obediently marrying Richard to save the family factory, as asked by her father) and as the blind assassin (being an unconscious or “blind” accomplice to

Richard's sexual abuses to her younger sister Laura). Her profile, therefore, changes along the novel, from being the victim to becoming the victimizer.

Another similarity between reality and fiction appears in connection with the disruptive events that have taken place in Port Ticonderoga due to the "closure, strike and lockout at Chase and Sons Industries Ltd" (126), which, was believed, had been manipulated by "outside agitators" (126), and Alex's story "Horses of the Night" told to Iris during one of their love encounters immediately after the description of the week's turmoil in "The Mail and Empire":

A people of Joy have encamped a day's march from the city (...). Tomorrow, or the day after that -depending on their speed and on the watchfulness of the enemy -they will have to fight, and this time they may not win. True, the fiery-eyed messenger who spoke to the Fist of the Invincible One promised they will be given victory if they continue to be pious and obedient and brave and cunning, but there are always so many ifs in these matters. (129)

One more time, Alex's fiction depicts his people's (the working class') struggle to defend their own rights after so many years of oppression.

Storytelling then, becomes a masculine activity in *The Blind Assassin*. The male lover is the tale-teller. No matter how many interruptions his female listener makes to try to deviate the focus of the narrative, he is the one who eventually commands it. However, there comes a moment when Iris becomes tired of listening passively to so much cruelty and violence in the story about the blind assassin and she eventually decides to be in control of the narration (as an attempt to be in control of her life):

But they will be killed by the wolves, he says. And if not by them, by the dead women with curvaceous figures and ruby-red lips. Or she'll be killed, and he'll be forced to fulfill their unnatural desires till the cows come home, poor fellow.

No, she says. That's not what will happen.

Oh no? Says who?

Don't say *oh no*. Says me. Listen – it's this way. The blind assassin hears all the rumours, and so he knows the real truth about those women. They aren't actually dead at all. They just put those stories around so they'll be left in peace. Really they are escaped slaves, and other women who've run away to avoid being sold by their husbands or fathers (...). (354-355)

Although requested, Iris' female voice has not got enough weight to be accepted by the original narrator, Alex, to provide another version of the story. Her version, then is quickly discarded.

In her childhood, when Iris was told about her own "family histories" (Reenie being the other storyteller in Atwood's novel) she was interested only in romance and happy endings where everybody lived happily ever after, being in line with those believed feminine preferences. She "didn't want realism anyway: I wanted things to be highly coloured, simple in outline, without ambiguity." (70) However, time has passed and life has taught her the fact that romance and happy endings are not exactly as she has expected them to be in real life.

As both the author and the male figure, it is Alex the one who is the narrative authority in the story about the blind assassin and provides his own version, discrediting his listener's one. After that, Alex starts a discussion on literary theory, specifically about realistic characters: "But I like my stories to be true to life, which means there have to be wolves in them (...). All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel." (356) Iris finally accepts his vision on literature and evil characters adding that "I think the story about you telling me the story about wolves isn't about wolves." (356) With this last metafictional and clever comment Iris makes, she reinforces the idea that literature makes use of elements from reality as its raw material.

Fiction, then, expressed through the rich mosaic of text types in this novel, becomes on the one hand, the means to recover past events and in this way construct

female identity (as was seen in the section devoted to Iris' autobiography, and, in the references to myths that include a character with her name), and on the other hand, it is a vehicle to communicate, to uncover long-kept secrets. In other words, through fiction some characters in *The Blind Assassin* can both express themselves, being able to disclose a hidden truth or send a message which otherwise (in their real lives) would not be sent and find their own voice to create and claim subjectivity.

C) The Canadian national identity and past

“Home is where the heart is, I thought now (...).
I'm heartless, I thought. Therefore I'm homeless”.
(*The Blind Assassin*: 460)

Canada's past as a British colony is present in Iris' recollections of her childhood days. *The Blind Assassin* examines its past legacy (seen in the novel through the lens of older generations who experienced the time of Canada being part of the British Empire) in order to detach Canada from the mother country and in this way, construct its own national identity.

British monarchy is proudly welcomed in the novel when any of its members happened to visit Canada at the beginning of the 20th century. Accordingly, Iris describes a photograph in which her grandfather appears next to the Duke of York “during his tour across Canada in 1901.” (54) Also, Iris' grandmother expresses her pride towards England by naming her home “Avilion” since “Avilion was where King Arthur was to die”. (64) Its name has been written by Tennyson in “Guinevere”: “The island-valley of avilion/ Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow.” (64) Grandmother Adelia longed to travel to Britain again to enjoy her English third cousins' “golden life, with wide lawns” (64) but her husband “didn't want to be dragged into a crowd that

would sneer at him for his button manufacturing, and where there might be unknown pieces of cutlery lying in wait, and where Adelia would feel ashamed because of him.”

(65) From this extract, it can be inferred that for a selected Canadian elite at the beginning of the 20th century, the British have represented the ideal and unreachable stereotype to imitate in manners, customs and social standards: “Such people were not to be found in Port Ticonderoga.” (64)

Local newspapers and magazines also bow to British customs in *The Blind Assassin*. The article called “Royal Style at Royal Garden Party” appearing in *Mayfair*, June 1939 accounts for this admiration for the British monarchy:

Five thousand honoured guests of Their Excellencies, Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir, stood spellbound along the garden walks at His majesty’s birthday party at Government House in Ottawa, as Their Majesties made their gracious rounds. (468)

However, Lady Tweedsmuir, one of the hosts and representative of the local new nobility, shows a hint of Canadian identity through the clothes she has carefully chosen to wear for the occasion: “Her all-white ensemble, enhanced by fox furs from Canada’s Arctic, was set off as a splash of turquoise in her hat.” (468) Through this subtle gesture, Lady Tweedsmuir might have started to mark a shift (already somehow present in that newly-born society) towards choosing national icons (in this particular case in clothes) and not imitating or importing what comes from abroad, mainly from Europe.

As opposed to this generation which has grown up being a proud part of the Empire, Callie Fitzsimmons, Noval’s girlfriend, as well as her own contemporary colleagues (mainly artists) show hints of rejection towards their British roots: “Callie Fitzsimmons said the design was old-fashioned and banal, with all those droopy flowers and leaves- *Victorian*, the artists’ worst insult in those days.” (153) At the time of Iris’s

grandmother the adjective “Victorian” would have been prestigious but its connotation seems to have changed in the middle of the 20th century when Callie pejoratively uses it.

At the very turn of the 20th century, Canada’s contemporary submission to an expanding new imperial force might be found in Iris’ account of Halloween’s celebration:

Sheaves of dried Indian corn have appeared on the choicer front doors; on the porches the jack-o’-lanterns have taken up their grinning vigils. A week from now the candy-minded children will take to the streets, dressed as ballerinas and zombies and space aliens and skeletons and gypsy fortune-tellers and dead rock stars, and as usual I will turn out the lights and pretend not to be home”. (207)

Canada’s neighbour’s cultural dominance is depicted in this extract. It shows how permeable Canada has been along its recent history, being both dominated firstly by the British and more recently by the USA, hence sharing some common historical features with many subjugated Latin American countries.

The concept of the nation (and, in consequence, of the national identity projected by the idea of belonging to a nation) is close to the one of home. *The Blind Assassin* reflects on the meaning and implication these notions have through Laura and Iris Chase:

“There’s no place like home”, Laura said one day (...). “Reenie sings that. I think it is stupid.”

“Look.” She wrote it out as an equation. *No place = home. Therefore, home = no place. Therefore home does not exist.*

Home is where the heart is, I thought now (...) I had no heart any more, it had been broken; or not broken, it simply wasn’t there any more. (460)

Both sisters have not been able to find their own place in the world, in other words, their home. They have been stranded by the male characters in their own lives (their father and Richard). This isolation has permeated their identity, as Iris puts it: “I’m heartless, I thought. Therefore I’m homeless.” (460)

Atwood's novel, then, depicts how different generations of Canadians live their national identity either within the realm of the British Empire (or lately the USA) or on its margins trying to detach from any present or past cultural dominance and finding out first of all who they are and where they belong, and in second place what it is to be Canadian.

Close to the concepts of location and home and as a resource comes the notion of "autogeography". In *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*, Nathalie Cooke has argued that an "autogeography" refers to fiction grounded in a specific geographical space described with absolute accuracy. In other words, it is an autobiography of a region.

Atwood's novel, *The Blind Assassin*, contains this nationalist impulse being mainly set in Ontario's fictional town of Port Ticonderoga¹¹ during the 20th century. The town is described in full detail in the novel:

Port Ticonderoga has two rivers, the Jogues and the Louveteau (...). the Louveteau with its swift current was the attraction for the first mills, and then for the electricity plants. The Jogues on the other hand is deep and slow, navigable for thirty miles above Lake Erie. Down it they shipped the limestone that was the town's first industry, thanks to the huge deposits of it left by the retreating inland seas (...). most of the houses in town are made from this limestone, mine included.

The abandoned quarries are still there on the outskirts, deep squares and oblongs cut down into the rock as if whole buildings had been lifted out of them (...). (52)

Avilion, Iris' childhood house, and the Button Factory, both her grandfather's achievements, have a privileged location. Avilion is set on "the east bank of the Louveteau River, at the confluence with the Jogues". (60) She believes it combines "a

¹¹ In spite of the fact that the name of the town alluded in the text is fictional, all the geographical references are established in relation to the real Ontario geographical region so an accurate and realistic cartography is constructed in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*.

romantic view of the George with a safe mooring for sailboats.” (60) The Factory “is on the east bank of the Louveteau, a quarter of a mile upriver from the Gorge”. (53)

The history of the town (inserted as part of a more general historical context, i.e. the historical events in the world that took place during the 20th century) is also revised in Iris’ local account which shifts from past to contemporary Canada, including its first inhabitants and their origins. Canada, in Iris’s eyes becomes a “multicultural mosaic of ethnicities¹² and languages with an elusive identity¹³”:

His forebears had come up from Pennsylvania in the 1820s to take advantage of cheap land, and of construction opportunities- the town had been burnt out during the War of 1820, and there was considerable rebuilding to be done. These people were something Germanic and sectarian but fervent crossbred with seventh-generation Puritans- an industrious mix that produced, in addition to the usual collection of virtuous, lumpen farmers, three circuit riders, two inept land speculators, and one petty embezzler-chancers with a visionary streak and one eye on the horizon. (56)

By means of “using her knowledge of the early twentieth-century Canada as she charts her heroine’s journey through her life” (24), as David Staines expresses in his essay “Margaret Atwood in her Canadian Context”, Atwood reconstructs history and places the reader within the Canadian socio-historical context she has created, since she has once remarked that “by discovering your place you discover yourself”¹⁴. Location and identity, according to Atwood, become closely entangled since nobody can construct their own self in isolation.

In the same essay Staines divides Atwood’s method towards approaching her country (Canada) and her national identity in three phases during her prolific and

¹² It should be noted the fact that Canadian reality is not only made up of a mosaic of ethnic cultures but also a mosaic of geographical regions, each having its own conception of identity. Canadian identity, therefore, exists in a dialectic of regional and ethnic tensions. See Cojocaru-Fletcher (2004) for further references to this aspect.

¹³ See Eleonora Rao in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* 86-97.

¹⁴ See *Travels Back* p.48

successful writing career: in the first phase Atwood considers Canada “a country to be explored, examined and explained” (25). In the second one, where Atwood “developed and defined her position as a writer” (22), according to Staines, “she moved beyond the discovery of ‘our existence as Canadians’ to a confrontation with the larger world in which we live.” (25) In the third one, she raises Canada to an international level equating it with other countries and literatures. He, therefore, places *The Blind Assassin* in this last phase, being a novel which brings “her (Atwood’s) country’s literature to the eyes of the world”, (25) acquiring an international standard through the Booker Prize this novel has won.

III) CAT'S EYE

In *Cat's Eye* the painter Elaine Risley vividly reflects at midlife on her childhood and teenage years once she is in Toronto after much time for the first retrospective of her own art. The city and the pictures exhibited in the retrospective will trigger memories of her past ghosts which will help Elaine put the pieces together to start a self-quest process through the narration of her own history. This section will explore notions of identity both at the subjective and national levels, the role that self-representation (through Elaine's pictures and her first-person narration) plays in identity formation, the postmodern conception of time, the female body and the implications fashion has in this postmodern world.

A) Canadian identity in *Cat's Eye*

“The new national flag flutters there as well (...).
I still think of this flag as new,
although they have changed it long ago”
(*Cat's Eye*: 340)

Cat's Eye is permeated by references which tell about Canada's present and past subjection to both British and American imperialism. This silencing of Canada has been carried out by adopting a victim position which restricted its self expression.

In the novel *Cat's Eye* Atwood describes the anglophilia present in Canadian school days during 1950's. One example of this admiration for the British culture can be found in the Scottish decoration of Elaine's high school -which complements its teachings (“We are encouraged to think of this castle as our ancestral home, and of

Dame Flora as our spiritual leader.” (228)): “I think all this Scottishness is normal for high schools, never having gone to one before; and even the several Armenians, Greeks, and Chinese in our school lose the edges of their differences, immersed as we all are in the mist of plaid.” (228)

Another icon of the remains of the British empire in Canada is present in the teaching methods Elaine’s school teacher, Miss Lumley -an advocate of English rule and supremacy- uses with her students: “Things are more British than they were last year. We learned to draw The Union Jack, using a ruler and memorizing the various crosses, for St. George of England, St. Patrick of Ireland, St. Andrew of Scotland, St. David of Wales.” (86) Miss Lumley’s frequent attempts at teaching her students to feel they are “Britons” are evident: “Every morning, after Miss Lumley blows a thin metallic note on her pitch pipe, we stand up to sing “God Save the King”. We also sing, Rule Britannia, Britannia rules waves; Britons never, never, never shall be slaves”. (86) However, Elaine distrusts this last statement. She knows they “aren’t real Britons, because we are also Canadian.” (86) In this excerpt, Atwood introduces the topic of Canadian identity. Elaine, belonging to another, younger generation than Miss Lumley’s, sees herself as Canadian, not British.

Miss Lumley’s devotion to the British empire is supported by the whole educational system in general terms and also by Elaine’s school’s symbolical decoration specifically:

The schoolroom is high-ceilinged, yellowy-brown, with black boards at the front and along one side and tall many-paned windows above the radiators on the other side. Over the door to the cloakroom, so that you feel you’re being watched from behind, there’s a large photograph of the King and Queen, the King with medals, the Queen in a white ballgown and diamond tiara. (85)

In this respect, Fiona Tolan highlights the fact that this post-colonial reality present in *Cat's Eye* “is experienced as a mild but insistent inferiority complex: a sense of internalised alienation” (203), which reflects the British empire’s deep symbolical influence in Canada at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Southern neighbour’s powerful cultural influence is also described in *Cat's Eye*. In her childhood, Elaine was used to reproducing the American celebration of Halloween’s door-to-door routine with her friends:

Black cats and paper pumpkins gather on the school windows. On Halloween, Grace wears an ordinary lady’s dress, Carol a fairy outfit, Cordelia a clown suit (...). We walk from door to door, our brown paper grocery bags filling with candy apples, popcorn balls, peanut brittle, chanting at each door: Shell out! Shell out! The witches are out. (114)

This routine performed on Halloween seems to have no meaning on its own in the narration of *Cat's Eye*; it is not apparently questioned; it is described as a mere procedure, void of any cultural implication. It looks as a commodity blindly (and naively) bought from their closest neighbour: the USA by the average Canadian citizens. However, Atwood, by means of this minor example, is addressing the cultural colonization the USA has exerted over Canada.

American cultural influence is also shown in the massive circulation of the American film stars who were in vogue during Elaine’s childhood:

We colour in Grace’s movie star coloring books, which show the movie stars in different outfits, doing different things (...) Grace’s favourite movie star is Esther Williams. I have no favourite movie star –I’ve never been to a movie- but I say mine is Veronica Lake, because I like the name. The Veronica Lake book is paper doll cutouts, with Veronica Lake in her bathing suit and dozens of outfits you can stick onto her (...). (58)

The film industry seems to have belonged to the Americans, the Canadians imported American celebrities whose fashion and style were imitated.

In this regard, being interviewed, Atwood has called this type of cultural incorporation an “imported god”, which she believed is fake since it is not intrinsically part of the Canadian culture, revealing one more time her nationalist beliefs and her sense of belonging to her own cultural icons : “(...) what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else (...) it is like importing your culture from somewhere else. The only good, authentic thing is something that comes out of place where you are, or the reality of your life¹⁵.” (17) In other words, becoming free from seeing what comes from abroad as better than what one has is what *Cat’s Eye* indirectly and almost unnoticeably highlights.

Stuart Hall (2002) has argued the fact that national cultures construct national identities by producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which individuals can identify; these are contained in the discourses which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it. Accordingly, when strolling the streets of Toronto Elaine describes the statues which represent the dead Canadian soldiers during the South African War:

I continue east along Queen Street (...). Right here there’s a group of statues, coppery-green, with black smears running down them like metal blood: a seated woman, holding a scepter, with three young soldiers marching forward grouped around her, their legs wound with bandagelike puttees, defending the Empire, their faces earnest, doomed, frozen into time. (339)

Canadian soldiers have died “defending the Empire”, an act Elaine seems to disagree with, which becomes more evident in the use of the condemnatory tone in the words “doomed” and “frozen in time” she has chosen.

¹⁵ See Graeme Gibson’s interview to Margaret Atwood included in *Waltzing Again*.

What Atwood is problematizing in this novel is, then, the fact that the process of de-colonization in postmodern times basically implies the de-colonization of the mind (i.e. to dispose of all those colonial traces which have influenced the Canadian culture) since Canada *has* already gained independence from the Empire.

As Ramona Cojocar-Fletcher poses in his article “Coming out of Oblivion: History and Identity in *The Blind Assassin* and *Alias Grace*”:

(...) in the case of former colonies, like Canada, the appropriation of the national cultural legacy, the understanding and the coming to terms with one's past are constitutive elements of the assertion of a cultural identity. This process of self-assertion is, in its turn, a pre-requisite for the successful dislodgement of the silencing dominant discourse (...). (3)

In this respect, Atwood tries to construct a narrative that rescues the notion of the nation. By applying the metaphor of the mirror studied by Lacan, Atwood's narration is able to look back in its own history (and acknowledge the British legacy) and later place itself in the historical period it belongs to in order to re-define its own national identity. The reflection projected by the mirror will always be partial, incomplete. Hence, the national identity it attempted to re-define will be fragmented.

a) Dislocated Identities

“He's a creature more like myself: alien and apprehensive”.

(*Cat's Eye*: 143)

In *Cat's Eye* Atwood has created characters (victims of immigration, nomadism or social displacement) whose dislocated identities make them feel they do not belong. However, in order to survive in their social context, which at the same time has expelled

them, they struggle to create their own selves, to reinvent themselves, showing in this manner the nonfixity of identity.

Cat's Eye's Canada is then presented as a multicultural country, a mosaic of socially constructed others, a refuge for split selves, displaced subjects from various origins who, once reunited in this host country, need to construct themselves from the margins they still belong to.

Postcolonial features¹⁶ are manifested in *Cat's Eye* through the adherence to minority groups some characters experiment. Elaine, as well her father's Indian postgraduate student, Mr. Banerji, are portrayed as displaced subjects. Elaine feels attached to Mr. Banerji since both belong to minority groups who have to survive in a culturally wild atmosphere in which people tend to regard them with contempt: "my wish to see him is anxiety, and fellow feeling. I want to see how he is managing, how he is coping with his life, with having to eat turkeys, and with other things." (176) Elaine evidently takes Mr. Banerji as a model who can indirectly (by imitation) help her to survive in that hostile atmosphere her school days provide: "But if he can deal with whatever it is that's after him, and something is, then so can I. Or this is what I think." (176)

Likewise, Elaine has felt displaced during her lifetime on many occasions. On her childhood days she has felt displaced by her friends who have psychologically tortured and neglected her:

Carol is in my classroom, and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day. They're there at recess, and in the cellar at lunchtime. They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way

¹⁶ As described in *The Empire Writes Back*: "A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. (...)The alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image which this displacement produces" (8-9) can be often found in postcolonial literature.

home from school I have to walk in front of them, or behind. In front is worse because they talk about how I'm walking, how I look from behind. "Don't hunch over", says Cordelia. "Don't move your arms like that." (131)

Later, being an adult and a respected artist herself, she has also felt displaced in Toronto, where she has spent most of her childhood and teenage years and, therefore, is much acquainted with: "In my dreams of this city I am always lost." (15) Even at the end of the novel she still feels oppressed by Toronto: "It is the city I need to leave as much as Jon, I think. It's the city that's killing me¹⁷." (410) Inevitably and although she has come to Toronto as a middle-aged respected artist, Toronto triggers on Elaine the most abhorrent images of her cruel childhood friends and memories she has believed to have forgotten.

Elaine's displacement as a child has made her bond with other minorities. Apart from Mr. Banerji, Elaine has also felt close to her Jewish neighbour, Mrs Finestein, for whom she has worked babysitting her son. What attracts Elaine about this woman is the fact that she pays no attention to the prevailing ideas of what a mother should be at the time. Mrs. Finestein feels free to tell Elaine how overwhelmed she feels with a little son at home as well as her desire to pay for an hour of silence on her own:

Mrs. Finestein clops down the stairs carrying Brian, who is zipped into a blue bunny suit with ears. She gives him a big kiss on his cheek, joggles him up and down, tucks him into the carriage, snaps up the waterproof carriage over. 'There, BryBry', she says. 'Now Mummy can hear herself think' (...). she's not like any mother I've ever seen. (147)

Elaine's unprejudiced nature allows her to enjoy Brian's company: "I like him: he's silent, but also uncritical." (147) However, her scornful friends soon would show

¹⁷ In the next section called "Home and homelessness" the oppression of Toronto will be discussed.

her the implications of being a Jew (as Mrs. Finestein is) in a postwar atmosphere, or better a *kike*, as Carol decides to refer to them.

Another displaced subject who has become part of Elaine's life is her college teacher and lover Mr. Hrbik, who "was shunted around in four different countries, because of the upheavals of the war, and got trapped behind the Iron Curtain and lived on garbage and almost starved, and escaped during the Hungarian Revolution." (306) He is cruelly called D.P by his students: "(...) which means *displaced person* (...). It was what you called refugees from Europe, and those who were stupid and uncouth and did not fit in" (306). For these students the fact that Josef belongs to a country which does not exist any more makes him stand at the same level as stupid people or barbarians. However, Elaine "feel(s) sorry for him." (306)

Also, Miss Stuart, the Scottish sensitive teacher with "accent" Elaine has in Grade Five makes Elaine empathize with other displaced groups of people by means of providing a wider vision of them. As opposed to the previous monarchical teacher, Miss Lumley, who has tended to look down on other cultures which are not British, Miss Stuart makes her students learn about different cultures through the exploration of art. With her, Elaine has her first contact with plastic art, which she absolutely enjoys and leaves a mark on her for the rest of her life:

I like these foreign pictures because I can believe in them, I desperately need to believe that somewhere else these other, foreign people exist. No matter that at Sunday school I've been told such people are either starving or heathens or both (...). Miss Lumley saw them as crafty, given to the eating of outlandish or disgusting foods and to acts of treachery against the British, but I prefer Miss Stuart's version. (180)

Elaine will later use painting to visualize her dislocation and her past and present reality and see herself through them. In other words, in her art Elaine will capture herself and the people who have influenced her and will gain independence from them. Her art will give Elaine the key to deconstruct and construct her own self as a different

entity from her past influences, although it will fail to give her unity, she will remain fragmented. Her art, therefore, will make her autonomous, it will help her to see partly who she is. This process of self-discovery will be captured in the first person narration of *Cat's Eye*.

B) The re-creating power of art

“(…) I can no longer control these paintings,
or tell them what to mean.
Whatever energy they have come out of me.
I'm what's left over”
(*Cat's Eye*: 447)

Art, as Molly Hite writes in her essay “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*”, “can exceed conscious knowledge; most significantly, it may provide a more complete and more merciful representation than consciousness intends.” (146) Throughout the novel *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley deconstructs her own history and recreates herself through her own art since; as Sarup has stated: “identity construction is increasingly dependent on images.” (XV)

Elaine's narrative (constructed by means of giving the name of one of Elaine's paintings to each chapter), as an autobiography¹⁸, is both self-construction and self-deconstruction as well, and as Fiona Tolan reinforces in her essay “Connecting theory and fiction: Margaret Atwood's novels and second wave feminism”, it is “haunted by the impossibility of bounding the self” (194), of completing her self quest.

The artistic language is seen as a way of constructing oneself differently and of deconstructing what has been culturally inherited in order to stand not only in a new

¹⁸ According to Tzvetan Todorov (1990), “autobiography is defined by two identifications: the author's identification with the narrator, and the narrator's identification with the chief protagonist.”. (25)

place of enunciation but also in a social position located elsewhere in the culture. In other words, the act of finding her own voice is a clear way for Elaine of politically positioning herself.

Elaine's artistic production, displayed chronologically in her retrospective triggered her most precious discovery: "the recognition that her art has rescued her from the spiritual death of a lifetime wasted in anger and resentment¹⁹." (24) Art, under this view, can be also conceived both as liberation and exorcism. Her pictures have put into words what Elaine has been unable to communicate: her conflicts and childhood dilemmas. This liberating transformation has been mainly achieved in the artistic representation of two hatred and feared characters: Cordelia and Mrs Smeath.

Mrs. Smeath, Grace's mother, plays the role of the "muse" in Elaine's paintings, standing for the most abhorrent image of who a woman should not be for Elaine. Her hypocrite attitude towards Elaine serves her as a feminine model not to follow: "She is not especially pleased with me. I can tell this by the line between her eyebrows when she looks at me, although she smiles with her closed lips, and by the way she keeps asking whether I wouldn't like to bring my brother next time, or my parents?." (136) Her religion has taught her to spread Christ's Word to the heathen unchosen ones, a category which, according to Mrs. Smeath, fits with the Rinsley family:

"What can you expect with that family?" says Mrs. Smeath. She doesn't go on to say what's wrong with my family. "The other children sense it. They know".

"You don't think they're being too hard on her?" says Aunt Mildred. Her voice is relishing. She wants to know how hard.

"It's God's punishment", says Mrs. Smeath. "It serves her right". (199)

¹⁹ See Ingersoll: "Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Re-Viewing Women in a Postmodern World".

This overheard conversation causes “a heavy thick hatred” in Elaine, a hatred which will be represented in the series of paintings she will produce of Mrs. Smeath in her future career:

Torontodalisque: Homege to Ingres, because of the pose, and the rubber plant like a fan behind her. She sits behind of a mirror with half of her face peeling off, like the villain in a horror comic I once read; this one is called *Leprosy*. She stands in front of her sink, her wicked paring knife in one hand, a half-peeled potato in the other. This one is called AN. EYE.For. AN.EYE.

Next to this is *White Gift*, which is in four panels. In the first one, Mrs. Smeath is wrapped up in white tissue paper like a can of Spam or a mummy, with just her head sticking out, her face wearing its closed half-smile. In the next three she’s progressively unwrapped: in her print dress and bib apron, in her back-of-the-catalogue *Eaton’s* flesh-coloured foundation garment (...) and finally in her saggy-legged cotton underpants, her one breast sectioned to show her heart. (383-384)

However, when looking at another of her paintings after much time (some time before the opening of her retrospective) Elaine is able to empathize with Mrs Smeath for the first time in her life. Her art (and the perspective she has acquired during all those years) have helped Elaine see Mrs. Smeath in another light. Agreeing with Hite: “Painting has served Elaine as a means of vision and revision”: (143)

It’s the eyes I look at now. I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was. (443)

The eyes are popularly described as “the mirror of the soul”, they are a symbol of transparency. Through her own picture of Mrs. Smeath Elaine can see an aspect of Mrs. Smeath she has not been able to see before: they both belong to the realm of “the displaced”. In reference to the series of pictures on Mrs. Smeath, Elaine says: “But these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration. But I put light into them too (...) I

have said *Look*. I have said, *I see*.” (443) Elaine has therefore moved from being the painter to being the analyst of her own work. In Hite’s words:

The oxymoron of “autobiographical fiction” in *Cat’s Eye* (...) authorizes (...) a reminder that the self of self representation is always seer as well as seen, and that both seer and seen are implicated in the social construction of how one looks. (150)

In the picture Elaine has done of Cordelia, called *Half a Face* –“odd title, because Cordelia’s entire face is visible” (249), Cordelia seems to show fear towards Elaine, although Elaine wanted to paint “that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers.” (249) In this picture Elaine subconsciously changes roles with her feared friend: “I’m afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I’ve forgotten when.” (249) Although Elaine insists she cannot recall the moment they “have changed places”, (249) in their relationship power has shifted the moment they go to high school: “I make fun of her favourite singers. ‘Love, love, love’ I say. ‘They are always moaning’. I have developed a sneered contempt for gushiness and schmaltz”. (259) Cordelia, therefore, in *Cat’s Eye* works “as her (Elaine’s) unconscious double” (195), as Tolan has defined. Creating Cordelia in Elaine’s narrative serves to create her own self:

She will have her own version. I am not the center of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her. (450)

Elaine, by offering her own interpretation of Cordelia, seems to agree with Lacan when he stresses the fact that “there is no subject except in representation, but that no

representation captures us completely. I can neither be totally defined nor can I escape all definition. I am the quest for myself (...). We can only see oneself as one think others see one²⁰.” (13) The other’s gaze, therefore, completes us.

A powerful painting permeated by unconscious elements is Elaine’s self-portrait, called *Cat’s Eye*. It is interesting that she has decided to portray her head “only from the middle of the nose up: just upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outward, the forehead and the topping of hair.” (446) In the background, a mirror is represented. However, while the foreground shows a mature Elaine: “I’ve put in the incipient wrinkles, the little chicken feet at the corners of the lids. A few grey hairs” (446); the pier glass reflects a younger, more innocent Elaine: “in it, a section of the back of my head is visible: but the hair is different, younger.” (446) Elaine is not alone in her self-portrait, Carol, Grace and Cordelia are represented as well, but their appearance is blurred as if they have been partly erased from Elaine’s mind (she has to continually fight back her amnesia in order to recover the memories of her past): “At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow.” (446) The image of snow might represent the fact that Elaine has forgiven her old tormentors, their cruel actions seem not to hurt anymore. In this picture, Carol, Grace and Cordelia appear to belong to a frozen, still past which Elaine has eventually learnt to overcome in her autobiographical account.

In his essay "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire", Lacan argues that we begin to construct a sense of self by looking ourselves in a real or symbolic mirror (usually called ‘the mirror phase’). On the basis of this (mis)recognition of the image of the self the individual begins to see himself as a

²⁰ Sarup paraphrases Lacan in *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (1993)

separate person, as both subject (self that looks) and object (self that is looked at). The 'mirror phase' marks the moment of entry into a kind of the individual's subjectivity Lacan has named "the imaginary" (in which we make false identifications based on the images we look at). These misidentifications allow the individual to support a fictive sense of the unitary and coherent subject.

In this respect, Elaine misidentifies herself with the stereotypes she has met in her past and the incomplete image of herself and, thus, she constructs a fictive version of who she is. Art, therefore, in the two manifestations which appear in *Cat's Eye* (painting and autobiography) have helped Elaine, on the one hand, to construct and deconstruct herself, and on the other hand, to free herself from her past ghosts (Cordelia and Mrs Smeath, mainly) who have been haunting her all her life:

I'm headed for a future in which I sprawl propped in a wheelchair, shedding hair and drooling, while some young stranger spoons mushed food into my mouth and I stand in the snow under the bridge, and stand and stand. While Cordelia vanishes and vanishes. (451-452)

The end of her retrospective marks Elaine's most precious achievement: a rebirth, since she has been able to free herself from the contradictory feelings of hatred/love towards some characters of her past life and at the same time she has realised the fact that her own art has reinvented her.

C) The concept of time

“(…) time cannot exist without space and space-time without events and events without matter-energy”
(*Cat’s Eye*: 361)

Atwood opens *Cat’s Eye* with a postmodern reflection on the concept of time²¹: “Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once.” (3) Some time has passed after Elaine has heard this statement by his brother Stephen (it seems no coincidence that her brother shares his first name with Hawkin’s one) when she realizes that time occupies a space: “(…) I began to think of time as having a shape, something you could see” (3). From this conception of time as a place backed up by Stephen Hawking’s epigraph (“Why do we remember the past, and not the future?”) taken from his book *A Brief History of Time* (1988), Elaine starts building up her own repressed past in the autobiographical narration of *Cat’s Eye*. Her artistic visual mind allows her to see time as having a shape: “You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.” (3) This statement Elaine utters on the first page allows the reader to grasp a preliminary image of her unconscious mind –drawing a parallelism with scientific events about the universe-, which will reveal the reader in a postmodern patchwork fashion her past: “(…) the past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across water, like postcards.” (329) In other words, Atwood uses the conception of time-space to be able to move back and forth between Elaine’s past and present life,

²¹ A postmodern conception of time conceives it in a non-linear fashion. It is presented as fragmented and disrupted.

which gives a sense of a fragmented past illustrating the fact that Elaine remains postmodernly fragmented, even at the end of the novel, still unable to fully complete herself. Stephen's lecture "The First Picoseconds and the Quest for a Unified Field Theory: Some Minor Speculations" reinforces this idea of a fragmented and scattered past: "When we gaze at the night sky (...) we are looking at fragments of the past." (360) Elaine's fragmentation is also reflected in the structure of the novel (discontinuous and unchronological narration of the events in Elaine's life bound by emotions and associations which the reader has to follow and complete), which reinforces the impossibility of closure to Elaine's dilemma or, according to Tolan, "the impossibility of completing and containing the self" (195): "I walk the room, surrounded by the time I've made; which is not a place, which is only a blur, the moving edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself, like a wave²²." (447) In addition to this, Madan Sarup reflects on the postmodern crisis in our experience of space and time in these terms: "(...) Symbolic orderings of space and time provide a framework for experience through which we learn who or what we are in society." (99) Elaine, therefore, needs the category time-space on which to place and elaborate her own representation both in her pictures and in the autobiography we have access to: "This is the middle of my life. I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over." (13) The fact that time has passed for Elaine means she has become a multiple layered subject, much more complex than she used to be in her childhood. As a subject influenced by time, then, Elaine is a subjective composition, a construction of herself.

²² Notice the addition of the definite article to emphasize that it is not any time the one she is speaking about but the time she has created to place her own past.

a) Home and homelessness.

“You are my country now”

(*Cat's Eye*: 325)

Since *Cat's Eye* conceives the notions of time and place as belonging together (“time as having a shape”. (3)), we believe they cannot be disentangled in the analysis of this novel.

Places are sources of personal and national identity where subjects bound and project deep emotional and psychological ties. One of the most powerful ‘places’ for identity is the concept of ‘home’. Home is our location, it is where we belong, what is familiar and offers security; it is the point of understanding from which we orient ourselves in the world. The contextualized self (set in time and place) becomes created and re-created by its own identification with place(s) through the contribution of memory.

In *Cat's Eye*, even though when the first time Elaine’s family has moved to Toronto the young protagonist states: “This name means nothing to me” (34), Elaine recalls the paradox of feeling at a loss, insecure and humiliated every time they came back from the wild to the metropolis, therefore, feeling homelessness: “In my dreams of this city I am always lost.” (15)

Indeed, whereas Toronto offers oppression, repression and lack of freedom to Elaine, the wilderness with all its familiar components, “a sawmill, a hill of sawdust, the teepee shape of sawdust burner; the smokestacks of the copper smelters, the rocks around them bare of trees (...)” (71), means home to her, the refuge where she can freely be herself and where she belongs. She will say: “We drive north. Toronto is behind us (...) I began to feel not gladness, but relief. My throat is no longer tight, I’ve stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed

partially.” (158) Duality does not accompany only Elaine, her father’s identity also changes the moment he reaches the north and disposes of his urban “disguise”: “Our father has shed his city clothing, turned back into himself.” (72)

The threat Toronto has always meant for Elaine is attached to the subconscious implications this city and its mainstream society bears for her. Fiona Tolan has considered Elaine’s last visit to Toronto for her own retrospective as the entry into the symbolic²³ (echoing Kristeva’s concept²⁴), an entry which is marked by the contradictory feelings of fear and desire. Toronto here serves as a trigger for Elaine’s childhood memories, which have been subconsciously repressed, to come out.

Whereas Elaine, on the one hand, is eager to come across Cordelia during her return to Toronto by means of imagining their encounter recurrently (“I haven’t seen her for a long time. I wasn’t expecting to see her. But now that I’m back here I can hardly walk down a street without a glimpse of her, turning a corner, entering a door. (6)”), the city, at the same time, activates the old fear Cordelia used to cause in Elaine when they were children. In this respect, following Kristeva, Tolan writes: “This contradictory experience of loathing and desire mimics the wish to return to the pre-linguistic, semiotic state of identification with the mother.” (193)

Toronto (with its memories of her past) has triggered in Elaine sour feelings that move her to wish to reach an emotionally stable place. During her last minutes in Toronto, Elaine decides to visit the bridge where her friends have played hard on her making Elaine almost freeze to death. Her desire to return to the maternal, safe womb

²³ See Tolan, F: "Connecting Theory and Fiction: Margaret Atwood's Novels and Second Wave Feminism."

²⁴ In *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva describes the symbolic as the space in which the development of language allows the child to become a "speaking subject," and to develop a sense of identity separate from the mother. This process of separation is known as abjection, whereby the child must reject and move away from the mother in order to enter into the world of language, culture, meaning, and the social. This realm of language is called the symbolic and is contrasted with the semiotic in that the former is associated with the masculine, the law, and structure.

(as she has already felt that day in her childhood when Virgin Mary revealed to her) is represented by the mixed emotions caused by her fantasy to see Cordelia before leaving the city:

I know she is looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear (...).

But I am older now, I'm the stronger. (459)

D) The political female body

“I haven't thought much about grown-up women's bodies before. But now these bodies are revealed in their true, upsetting light: alien and bizarre, hairy, squashy, monstrous”
(*Cat's Eye*: 99)

Monique Wittig²⁵, following a materialist feminist approach, has discarded the idea of the natural female body and worked on the notion of the female body as political: “We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us” (1) since she continues, “the basis of women's oppression *is biological as well as historical.*” (1) As regards female identity she fervently believes that “one can constitute oneself as a subject (...), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one's own identity. There is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal

²⁵ Wittig, M. “One is not born a Woman”

motivation for fighting (...).” (4) Wittig, then, calls for the re-appropriation of the female body as the site of contestation of various power interests.

Cat's Eye, then, connects the essentialism of the feminisms of the 1970s concerned with what they believe is the true unchanging essence of the body (essentialism); and the constructionism or anti-essentialism of the 1990s which claims that the body, usually called the “acculturated body”, is a historical and political construction.

The body has been constructed by different discourses. The political body in *Cat's Eye* becomes represented by the grotesque in that it seeks to make a statement, that is, to show that which does not fit cultural beauty standards or inner beauty and to present the unfit in the context of exclusion. The grotesque body has been associated with the identity process since it is the body of becoming²⁶. It stands for the incomplete body shaped in history and culture. It was in the discursive domain of the plastic arts where the the differences between the classical and grotesque body was first established trying to set aesthetic limits for the body. The classical figure embodies the tradition of proportionality, containment, and idealization; whereas the grotesque body is defined by protrusion, openness, and materiality.

Within the field of literary studies, Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic, has also theorized on the grotesque (basically in his study of Francoise Rabelais' work²⁷), positing that a grotesque body must expand beyond its own natural limits to subvert typically established norms. This section will analyse instances in which the body is depicted as grotesque in *Cat's Eye*.

²⁶ See Jill Kestenberg's essay “Bounded by our Bodies: a Theoretical Essay on Female Identity and Gender Deconstruction”.

²⁷ In *Rabelais and His World* (1993).

Fiona Tolan²⁸ defines the grotesque body in *Margaret Atwood's* fiction: *Feminism and Fiction*: "(...) the grotesque body is the lived reality behind the acculturated classical body, and it is in its repression by the social order that it comes to resemble what Freud termed the unconscious and Kristeva called the Semiotic." (188)

In *Cat's Eye* the grotesque is present as a political body constructed in two ways. First, it appears as the site of repugnance, hence, in the way it effects revolt in classical standards of beauty (according to the Bakhtinian proposal); second, it shows as the site of the hidden, the dark and repressed feelings (according to Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach), which seeks to relieve subjects –especially marginal, displaced and dislocated— of that which is not allowed or particularly welcome in society.

Unifying both Bakhtin's and Kristeva's approximations to the concept of the grotesque body, *Cat's Eye* offers several instances in which Elaine subconsciously projects her repulsion and hatred towards Mrs Smeath in the description of Mrs Smeath's grotesque appearance:

Over her dresses she wears bibbed aprons that sag at the bosom and make it look as if she doesn't have two breasts but only one, a single breast that goes all the way across her front and continues down until it joins her waist. She wears lisle stockings with seams, which make her legs look stuffed and sewn up the backs. She wears brown Oxfords. Sometimes, instead of the stockings, she has thin cotton socks, above which her legs rise white and sparsely haired, like a woman's moustache. She has a moustache too, though not very much of one, just a sprinkling of hairs around the corners of the mouth. She smiles a lot, with her lips closed over her large teeth; but, like Grace, she does not laugh. (63)

Mrs Smeath's whole materiality shown through her enormous breasts -depicted as only one-, her haired legs and the moustache on her face add to this idea of repulsion Elaine manifests in the description of Mrs Smeath's grotesque, disproportioned body. Descriptions of Mrs Smeath permeate *Cat's Eye*, for example, the protrusion of some of

²⁸ Tolan reads the grotesque following Kristeva's approach.

her body parts is highlighted in most of her paintings: “I paint Mrs Smeath. She floats up without warning, like a dead fish, materializing on a sofa I am drawing: first her white, sparsely haired legs without ankles, then her thick waist and potato face, her eyes in their steel rims.” (367) Therefore, and in accordance with Tolan, “anything which transgresses moral or physical boundaries, which recalls the vulnerability and corporeality of the body, allows the semiotic to break the surface of the symbolic, and prompts both disgust, or abjection (...) and repressed desire.” (193) Mrs. Smeath’s grotesque body painted by Elaine triggers feelings of disgust and repressed feelings of rage in her.

However, Elaine not only allows her repressed subconscious to appear in her descriptions of Mrs Smeath’s repulsive body but also in her accounts about Cordelia, her childhood monster and the both feared and desired character in *Cat’s Eye*: “Cordelia (...) you made me believe I was nothing.” (219) Tolan explains: “the pull towards the grotesque, the abject and the semiotic is ever present in Cordelia, and it is this that makes her such a dangerous person, and what eventually draws her towards madness and suicide.” (194) Cordelia functions as Elaine’s subconscious alter-ego who will continue to haunt her. Elaine is permanently waiting for Cordelia to appear at the retrospective or in the streets of Toronto since, coming back to Toronto may be read as Elaine’s entry into her unconscious, her repressed past, from where she constructs herself through her narrative: “(...) it’s time for Cordelia to appear, but she has not appeared. Disappointment is building in me, and impatience, and then anxiety.” (451)

Cordelia, Elaine remembers, is obsessed with the female body: “Breasts fascinate Cordelia and fill her with scorn.” (99) Scatological knowledge about the female body attracts her and also gives her power among her younger friends Carol, Elaine and Grace: “Cordelia, her voice lowered, her eyes big, passes on the truth: the curse is when

blood comes out between your legs. We don't believe her. She produces evidence: a sanitary pad, filched from Perdie's wastebasket. On it is a brown crust, like dried gravy." (99)

Elaine's body is also shown, at times, in a repulsive state as a consequence of rejection and exclusion and it usually becomes a victim when she inflicts physical pain the moment she cannot put into words the atrocities her friends tend to make on her:

I gnawed the cubicles off from around my fingernails, leaving welts of exposed, oozing flesh which would harden into rinds and scale off. In the bathtub or in dishwasher my fingers looked nibbled, as if by mice. I did these things constantly, without thinking about them. But the feet were more deliberate. (124)

Although she remains silent at home in order to protect herself, Elaine's body speaks letting her mother suspect what she has been undergoing: "My mother sets down the bowl and puts her arms around me. 'I wish I knew what to do', she says. This is a confession (...) she is powerless." (174) Her body as well as her art overcome that repressed silence (one of her first sources of escape) and communicate the most hidden truth: "little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-seized." (129). Elaine is aware that her mother cannot do anything to interfere with her friend's malicious behaviour towards Elaine and for this reason she forgives her. Later Elaine learns to faint discovering she can split herself and watch her own body as if it was not part of her anymore: "I begin to spend time outside my body without falling over (...). My eyes are open but I'm not there. I'm off to the side." (191).

Self-splitting separation of her subjectivity and her body is replaced by her repression of her memories: "I've forgotten things, I've forgotten that I've forgotten them." (221)

Even as an adult (and being pregnant with her first daughter) Elaine continues to torture her body: "When no one is around, I bite my fingers. I need to feel physical pain,

to attach myself to daily life.” (367) She feels detached to that body of hers, to her own reality: “my body is a separate thing. It ticks like a clock; time is inside it. It has betrayed me, and I am disgusted with it.” (367) The feeling of fragmentation increases in Elaine. Her body does not belong to her any more since now it has a life inside. She feels as disembodied as she felt when she was a child tortured by her school friends. Her maternal body, therefore, has become an independent entity.

In connection to the maternal function, in *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980) Kristeva has highlighted its importance in the development of subjectivity and access to culture and language. Kristeva argues that maternal regulation is the law previous to the Paternal Law. Kristeva calls for a new discourse of maternity (apart from the one religion and science offer) that acknowledges the importance of the maternal function in the development of subjectivity and in culture. Religion, mainly Catholicism (which makes the mother sacred), and science (which reduces the mother to nature) are the only discourses of maternity available to western culture, Kristeva argues. Neither of these two discourses of maternity pleases Elaine. She is acquainted with both of them since she has been influenced by science through her father and by religion through Mrs. Smeath. Elaine’s maternity circumstances do not fit Mrs Smeath’s teachings (religious maternity sacredness). For this reason she punishes herself for making the mistake of getting pregnant: “Whatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me.” (367) It is in this moment of her life when “one picture of Mrs. Smeath leads to another. She multiplies in the walls like bacteria, standing, sitting, flying, with clothes, without clothes, following me around with her many eyes like 3-D postcards of Jesus you can get in the cheesier corner stores.” (368) Mrs. Smeath’s omnipresence still haunts Elaine. Her subconscious has allowed Mrs. Smeath to still exercise power over her life and to

judge her one more time. Mrs. Smeath's penetrating gaze knows Elaine's secret (her pregnancy) and it tortures Elaine following her wherever she goes.

French feminism has also been interested in the artificial body's social and cultural signifiers of gender, mainly costumes and appearance. Fashion becomes a recurrent motif in *Cat's Eye*. Apart from its obvious connection to sexual difference, fashion is articulated in the novel as disguise.

As Elaine has stated: "I want to please." (132) She therefore makes use of different clothes as disguises and masks in order to fit in her own social context, although she is aware that her "tastes are not fashionable, and so I pursue them in secret." (356) With her school friends she discovers that "Most of my clothes, which are not many in number, are pants and jersey tops. I have two dresses, one for summer and one for winter, and a tunic and a wool skirt, for school. I begin to suspect that more may be required." (54) At college Elaine also tries to fit in her class mates' clothing style:

To the first class I made the mistake of wearing a plaid jumper and a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar, but I learn quickly. I switch to what the boys wear, and the other girl: black turtle necks and jeans. This clothing is not a disguise, like other clothing, but an allegiance (...). (301-302).

Although Elaine blatantly says "this clothing is not a disguise" (302) by wearing it she does not show who she really is, she hides inside it.

Preparing her clothing for the retrospective, Elaine strolls the streets of Toronto until she enters The Sleek Boutique looking for an appropriate "disguise" to wear in this opportunity in which she will be the centre, which intimidates Elaine: "What I'd like is

to be transformed, which becomes less possible. Disguise is easier when you're young.”
(48)

These disguises and masks work similarly to the effects of time upon the dislocation of her subject and contribute to the dynamics of multiplication and social construction of her female subject.

VIII) CONCLUSION

Atwood's novels *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* explore the themes of identity, postcolonial issues such as dislocation, displacement and cultural independence, and the theory of the body with an emphasis on discursive and political approaches. These themes have been thoroughly studied in the course of this work.

As Sarup has written in *Identity Culture and the Postmodern World* : "It is through representation that we recognise ourselves." (45) Both in *Cat's Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood's heroines (writers or artists) are engaged in acts of self-representation. Elaine and Iris simultaneously write and rewrite their own life stories and in this way, they construct and deconstruct their individualities. In both novels the narrator undergoes a "talking cure" which serves as a journey towards the construction of her own split and dislocated self, whose product is the narration of her life (the relationship between fiction and reality). Since the subject is in a constant state of self-quest, the outcome will never lead to an absolute closure. Conversely, it will show fragmented and fractured identities which will eventually remain incomplete.

As, according to Blunt, it matters whether the speaking or writing voice is male or female, in both novels female narrators are in control of discourse. In *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* there is a process of empowerment of the female self by means of writing and painting, as narratives that deconstruct cultural dominations (patriarchal, religious, scientific) and re-construct a new self.

Discourse, then, is inseparable from identity processes. As Sarup has stated, one becomes aware of them through discourse, that is to say, through the narration of those personal events. (42) Hence, the past in these novels, expressed through those memories

the narrator has consciously or unconsciously chosen to recover, plays an important role in the subject's self-representation. Stuart Hall shares this perspective; he, therefore, explains: "Identities are (...) constituted within, not outside representation (...). They arise from the narrativization of the self." (4)

Lacan's metaphor of the mirror, which explains the fact that the subject receives an incomplete image of himself through the eyes of others ("since we can never totally decode the other's response to our image", (13)) has been applied in this analysis to show how the characters in these novels see themselves through the reflection they get from the significant others, and also to present Canadian literature, as a mirror that reflects, on the one hand, what still needs to be done and, on the other one, it returns a vision of Canadian locality through the resource of the "autobiography".

Both Iris in *The Blind Assassin* and Elaine in *Cat's Eye* invoke place-based memories that re-examine their lives from childhood to their own present time (Iris eventually dies). These, apparently, arbitrary memories become political, as Monique Wittig, defines the category in connection to silence and empowerment, since the narrators seek to expose the discourses and subjects that cause their under-estimation and submission and those memories also serve to give voice to their silenced female bodies which have a story to tell. They also provide a renewed sense of their selves through the self-quest performed during each writing process; as Cixous has claimed: "writing is a privileged space for transformation." (113)

Elaine can recover and reconstruct her self only when she is able to take control of the gaze of the others (especially her childhood tormentors) as well as being gazed while looking again (in some cases after a long time) at her paintings at her own retrospective. The retrospective of Elaine's paintings and memories is the source from which the readers have access to the reconstruction and self-recovery of her self. The

act of finding her own voice through the narration of her own art and past is a clear way for Elaine of politically positioning herself.

Iris constructs her identity through the narration process of her multi-layered autobiography, which works as the legacy she will leave to her granddaughter Sabrina, which she expects to read after Iris dies: “By the time you read this last page, that –if anywhere- is the only place I will be.” (538) Her body, therefore, will finally become her text after Iris’ death.

Not only does Iris’ body function as the text where her own history is inscribed; Elaine’s body also speaks through the marks left by her self torture, it becomes the only channel of communication since “Even to myself I am mute.” (128)

Canadian’s past submission to the British empire and its actual American influence shape the reflection this country gets of itself. The context in these two novels belongs to different Canadian historical periods, however, they sometimes overlap, which bridges the similarities between both novels.

On the one hand, *The Blind Assassin* revises the historical events that took place from the 20th century to contemporary times (both regionally and internationally). On the other one, *Cat’s Eye* also foreshadows Canada’s recent history and its actual status as a cosmopolitan country which offers refuge to displaced subjects who struggle to construct their own place in the world.

The process of construction of Canadian national identity resembles the self quest process the protagonists of these two novels go through and the eventual incompleteness and fragmentation of their identities. The passage into “liberation” the protagonists undergo (from victims to “creative non-victims”) echoes any process of independence, encouraging Canadian national identity to grow.

In conclusion, Atwood skilfully explores the complex process of identity construction in the lives of the protagonists of both *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye*, who make use of their own artistic practices to re-examine their own history and, therefore, reaffirm their personal identities. These novels re-define Atwood as a cultural Canadian icon since in them visions of Canadian literature and Canadian national identity are problematized.

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