

## FEMALE VILLAINY: A NEW INSIGHT INTO MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE ROBBER BRIDE*

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### **Abstract:**

*Throughout literary history assorted roles have been played by female protagonists. Images of women promulgated in literature are as varied as are the authors themselves. But in general, these female characters have been long engineered on the binary opposition of good and bad. They have been pigeonholed and stereotyped as either holy or monstrous figures. Atwood like other postmodern novelists opposes this dichotomy. Her protagonists equally possess both the qualities of good and evil. She defies the stereotypes and never portrays her women as just the fairly weak spineless group of characters. With the development in literary theories like feminism, that propagates woman's situation as passive, marginalized subject and post colonialism, where the female condition in patriarchal society is regarded strongly similar to that of the colonized subject, the age-old female monsters have been sent into oblivion. Atwood in her works brings back the devilish females.*

**Key Words:** *Atwood, Stereotypes, females, characters, villain, tales revised.*

Throughout literary history assorted roles have been played by female protagonists. Images of women promulgated in literature are as varied as are the authors themselves. But in general, these female characters have been long engineered on the binary opposition of good and bad. They have been pigeonholed and stereotyped as either holy or monstrous figures. Atwood like other postmodern novelists opposes this dichotomy. Her protagonists equally possess both the qualities of good and evil. Atwood portrays her characters in the true colours of human beings, possessing all the human characteristics. Her ladies contest the traditional images of a woman. Commenting upon this aspect Atwood writes in her critical work *Second Words*:

'I will enter a simple plea; women both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character; I would like to be able to show her having emotions all human beings have hate, envy, spite, lust anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy-without having her pronounce a monster, a slur or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary, for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch, goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women. For a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals women merely as examples of gender, perhaps it is time to take the capital W off Women'. (Atwood 227)

With the recent development in literary theories like feminism, that propagates woman's situation as passive, marginalized subject and post colonialism, where the female condition in patriarchal society is regarded strongly similar to that of the colonized subject, the age-old female monsters have been sent into oblivion. Atwood in her works brings back the devilish females. Interview with Susan Flockhart emphasizes the fact that: 'At a time when feminist writing focused on male aggression towards women, Atwood - a feminist, but not a "feminist writer"- was breaking the mould by admitting that females are capable of cruelty towards each other'. (Flockhart)

Atwood refuses to cling to the binary oppositions as listed by feminist critic Helene Cixous. Day/Night, Father/Mother, Activity/Passivity, a hierarchy in which feminine side is always acquiescent:

'In philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity. Every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question; 'What is it?' as soon as there is a will to say something. A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back - to the father. You can even fail to notice that there's no place at all for women in the operation! In the extreme the world of 'being' can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother provided that there is something of the maternal: and it is father then who acts as-is-the mother. Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist..... (Cixous 283)

On this abasement she further comments, And if you examine literary history, it's the same story. It all refers back to man, to *his* torment, his desire to be (at) the origin. Back to the father. There is an intrinsic bond between the philosophical and the literary (.....) and phallogentrism. The philosophical constructs itself starting with the abasement of woman. Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order which appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine'. (Cixous 283 284)

Atwood transposes this dichotomous binary opposition and creates her own characters. Her characters whether male or female cannot be classified into this hierarchy, as Peter Barry in his book remarks: 'In realist fiction.... roles cannot be simply demarcated as 'hero' and 'villain'. (Barry 230) Atwood in her fiction presents her heroines in myriad images from passive, submissive victims to evil monsters and vampires. Earl G. Ingersoll points out: 'Indeed traditional feminists have led their difficulties with Atwood on this very point: Much as she demonstrates that men dominate and abuse women, she will not discount the fact that women are occasionally even worse in their abuse to each other'. (Ingersoll 118)

Her protagonists are modern heroines, who reject standard feminine roles propagated by the recent trends. She defies the stereotypes and never portrays her women as just the fairly weak spineless group of characters. In an interview on her novel *Cat's Eye* Atwood states: 'But if you mean that I see all women as good and all men as bad, then the answer is no'. (CE 573) In her fiction women are portrayed with the various shades of human attributes, they confront us with the women who are feeble and vulnerable, along with the multifarious evil forms of female power. Sadistic characters like Mrs. Smeath, and Nancy Montgomery who inflict torments on the others in turn of their own victimization in the patriarchal society, enigmatic character like Grace, transfigured as treacherous and deceptive by the colonized society or Zenia, the pure personification of evil. These arrays of female characters that are tinted with satanic features prove Atwood's uncanny wit in handling her characters. Commenting upon the portrayal of such characters in Atwood's stories Yael Shapira in her article writes:

The traditional portrayal of the unruly woman as voraciously pursuing her own desires remains in these stories, and it is even foregrounded-a now-permissible quest for success, recognition, power, money, sexual pleasure. (Shapira 64)

Atwood keenly examines the psyche of such women and accentuates the fact that suffering of women is not only because of men but women are also equally capable of bestowing cruelties on another women. In an interview with Danita J. Dodson Atwood states: '...we need to understand that women are not homogenous, just as men are not all the same. You can't say woman with capital W. This is a cookie cutter approach to women, much as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I've always liked variety. (Dodson 103) Atwood substantiates the fact that women, too, enjoy and take delight in cruelties. When Nancy in *Alias Grace* reads, 'The Lady of the Lake' to Mr. Kinnear, he comments, ..... it was well known that Sir Walter Scott had put so many corpses into his books for the sake of the ladies, because the ladies must have blood, there is nothing delights them so much as the weltering corpse. (AG 330)

Atwood's earlier works revolve around the theme of gender politics where men were devils. Emma Parker in the article, 'You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood', points out this diabolical role played by men in Atwood's earlier fictions: 'Relationships between men and women in Atwood's novels are vampiric. The male characters live like parasites sucking the life, strength,

and energy out of their female partners'. (Parker 125)

Though her earlier works focused on the evil of the male power that aimed at exploitation and victimization of women still they portrayed the female characters that are as wicked as are men. She portrays the trickster figures like Aunt Muriel in *Life Before Man* who teaches Elizabeth the skills of trickster, Lora in *Bodily Harm* who victimized Rennie with trickster power and Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale*, who represents the various form of female evil. With these minor devilish characters in her works Atwood has from very beginning stated the notion that feminine side is not necessarily nice one. But in her later works she has firmly established the thought that women are not just victims but they are also victors, they can be everything men can be, even vampires. In the two novels under detail analysis female vampire motif has been powerfully apparent.

In *The Robber Bride* Atwood transforms the Brother's Grimm grisly fairy tale, 'The Robber Bridegroom' (about a demonic groom who lures three innocent maidens into his lair and then devours them) into a statement about women's treatment of each other. The tale revolves around the three middle aged friends Tony, Charis and Roz, not friends in the real sense of the word, but brought together by their mutual destruction and betrayal at the hands of femme fatale Zenia, who befriends and betrays each of the women, one in a decade, respectively. Tony is a military historian, somewhat dispassionate, living with her low-spirited husband West. Charis, scatty new ager, wrapped in the new age philosophies struggling to deal with her college age daughter. Roz, the corporate business woman, is the mother of three, a teenaged son and twin high school aged daughters. Set in the present-day Toronto, the novel begins with three middle aged women having lunch at a restaurant, when they confront supposedly dead Zenia, this event retraces their respective encounters with Zenia.

Zenia, a villainess of demonic proportions, is another incredible accomplishment by Atwood that exhibits the worst in a woman. This multifaceted 'femme fatale' is the potent embodiment of evil, a villainess in the true sense of word. Atwood at the end of the novel states about her fascination for female villainy that inspired her to change the Grimm's fairy tale, 'The Robber Bridegroom' into *The Robber Bride*. She says, 'Well, I was sitting around one day thinking to myself, "Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone? Gone to Ophelias, every one, leaving the devilish tour-de-force parts to be played by bass-baritones." Or, to put it another way: If all women are well behaved by nature - or if we aren't allowed to say otherwise for fear of antifemaleism - then they are deprived of moral choice, and there isn't much left for them to do in books except run away a lot. Or, to put it another way; *Equality* means equally bad as well as equally good'. (RB 697-98)

Hence, Atwood creates dastardly Zenia, an enchanted vixen, who with her vampiric powers creates havoc in the life and relationships of the three other women, robbing them of their men and money, leaving them annihilated. 'She likes hunting. She likes hunting anything. She relishes it.' After Tony loses West to Zenia next is Charis, when she loses her man to Zenia, Tony thinks, '.....Zenia like challenges. She likes breaking and entering, she likes taking things that aren't hers. Billy, like West, was just target practice. (RB 413)

Zenia with her multiple past and enigmatic present remains a conundrum, her origin, her real name, reasons for her demonic deeds and even the cause of her death, 'accident, suicide or murder', all are mystery. Zenia is also a puzzle, a knot. She enjoys being deceptive and treacherous that furthers her incursion into the personal life of others and eventually helps her fulfil her own interests. One easily becomes the victims of her lies. Tony contemplates about this skill of Zenia, 'Or she would lie. She would lie earnestly, with a catch in her voice, a quaver of suppressed grief, or she would lie haltingly, as if confessing; or she would lie with a cool, defiant anger, and Tony would believe her. She has before'. (RB 3) She possesses the shrewd ability to deceive others with the various versions of her life, which makes her identity evasive:

"Maybe it was because her mother was stoned to death by Romanians, for being a gypsy," says Charis.

"What?" says Tony. "No, she wasn't! She was a White Russian in exile! She died in Paris, of tuberculosis!" (RB 414)

She had different origins to bluff them. She claims to Tony to be a White Russian refugee, child prostitute brought up in Paris, to Charis, she pretends to be a Romanian Gypsy whereas, to Roz she pretends to be a half Jewish war orphan. She knits her stories in a fashion that replicates the life of the three women, pretending to have endured the same hardships suffered by her victims.

To Tony she tells that she had a heartless mother that abandoned her, which reminiscences Tony of her indifferent mother Anthea. She manipulates Charis' power to heal, making her believe she was dying of cancer, while she has simply cut out vitamins as she is suffering from scurvy. And to Roz, claims that she was saved from Nazis by Roz's father, turning her rogue father into a hero in Roz's eyes. In the article, 'The Pleasures and Danger of Story Telling in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', Ellen McWilliams states: Zenia has a particular talent for storytelling, for empathizing with other character's victimhood and exploiting the uncertainties of their individual histories. This is most extravagantly displayed in the way that she presents each character with a veiled version of their life in the telling of her own. (MacWilliams)

Even her burial is fake, she returns from dead, she seems capable of appearing and disappearing at her will. Even in her last confrontation with the three of them she does not try to evade them, in fact she's more than pleased to see her victims. She still has various stories to tell them as fugitive messenger, AIDS patient and when they don't let her in again into their life she tries to blackmail them. She rules by fear:

"Which would you rather have?" said Zenia. "From other people. Love, respect, or fear?"

"Respect," said Tony. "No. Love."

"Not me," said Zenia. "I'd choose fear."

"Why?" said Tony.

"It works better," said Zenia. "It's the only thing that works." (RB 277)

'Zenia's pattern has been to attack her victims at the point of most vulnerability and the most vulnerable point is the one most prized'. (RB 504) and most vulnerable point of these ladies are their men. She is extremely skilful in using "war between the sexes" as the best tool to serve her purposes. The stalemated relations of Tony, Charis and Roz with their men help Zenia in achieving her goal. She is 'the man eater'. She is irresistible to men; all she does is not for love, but for fun. Roz wonders: 'What is her secret? How does she do it? Where does it come from, her undeniable power over men? How does she latch hold of them, break their stride, trip them up, and then so easily turn them inside out?' (RB 559) Hilde Staels comments on Zenia's Power, 'Her power is the power of female sexuality, and the figure of Zenia relates directly to contemporary social myths about femininity; it also relates to male (and female) fantasies about the feminine and in addition it challenges feminist thinking about gender relations'. (Staels 168)

She robs the men and leaves them dismissed, sacked, destroyed and soulless. Roxanne J. Fand points out, 'In the power struggle between women, as opposed to one between women and men, Atwood demolishes gender distinctions in another way, showing that a struggle between women is as dangerous as one between men, although the methods and the turf may be culturally reversed so that the booty is the man instead of the woman and the weapon is female seductiveness to ensnare that booty instead of physical combat between the adversaries. In this case, the booty also includes gender-neutral money, and the weapons are gender-neutral cunning, of which Zenia is a master'. (Fand 72-73)

Tony considers her vampire, as she mentions that 'Zenia cannot enter her home unless invited' (RB 168) Charis believes her to be 'a ghost around somewhere' (RB 73) and Roz finds 'Zenia a cold and treacherous bitch'. (RB 554) Her reputation at McClung Hall also defines her well as, 'Brilliant and also fearsome Wolfish, feral, beyond the pale'. (RB 185) J. Brooks Bouson points out, 'Arriving on a wind like the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz, Zenia is vampiric, both a projection of, and feeder from, other's fears. Like a vampire she has to be invited in, transforming herself into the shape and problems these women wish to nurture, help, and relate to, undermining them, embodying their weak spots. (Wisker 20)

Donna Bontatibus, in the article, 'Reconnecting with the Past: Personal Hauntings in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', compares Zenia to the folkloric figures of the Bluebeard story, about a caper, the dark man who inhabits all women's psyche, the innate predator and The Robber Bridegroom, a wicked maiden-devouring monster. She comments: 'As a conglomeration of folkloric figures, Zenia represents the predator, robber, stalker, shadowy figure that appears in the interior and exterior lives of Roz, Tony and Charis'. (Bontatibus)

The spite, malevolence and 'Zenia-ness of Zenia' make her a threat to the others. By the end of the novel Zenia's character remains enigmatic, her true self remains ambiguous. As in the last section of the novel Tony thinks, 'The story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless, a rumor only, drifting from mouth to mouth and changing as it goes'. (RB 675-76)

But Atwood identifies her as a 'male fantasy'. Atwood insinuates that it's the patriarchal society responsible for her Zenia-ness:

'The Zenia's of this world have studied this situation and turned it to their own advantage, they haven't let themselves be moulded into male fantasies, they've done it themselves. They've slipped sideways into dreams; the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of a different kind.

Her tactics and deceptive schemes are just the means of survival in a male dominated society. She turns into an evil marauder, not to satisfy male desire but to over power them. It's her defensive strategies against the male power and society's expectations for women that transform her into the men eating monster, Tony finds Zenia's life at war: '...wherever, else Zenia had been in her life, she had also been at war. An unofficial war, a guerrilla war, a war she may not have known she was waging, but a war nevertheless'. (RB 687) Sharon R. Wilson rightly remarks: '...characteristically Atwood's villains are ultimately unveiled as vulnerable human beings'. (Wilson 183)

Atwood's analysis in both the novels probes deep into the interior of female psyche in resonance with contemporary realities. It is also significant to note that Atwood's portrayal of female criminal psyche shows clearly how such abnormal human behavior is the outcome of repression, victimization and callous social system. Forming nexus between past and present she presents a wide spectrum of contemporary situation and lays bare the psyche of notorious women and their mental illness.

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