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Cannibalistic Devastation of Women in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood in her novels and poems both, pens down the image of women as sexual objects. They are reduced to their “bodies” and because of this frequent reduction to their bodies, their sexual denigration and objectification; they are identified as representing sex and not seen as possessing individual identity. They are seen as slut, whore and prostitute and are abused and treated accordingly by the society. They are stereotyped as sexual commodities, cannibalistically consumed and devoured by men. The paper explores in the four novels of Atwood namely; *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Penelopiad* that what factors denigrate women to the status of sexed bodies; what imageries are associated with them and the multifarious ways in which they are sexually objectified and dehumanized. It also brings out that women do not remain moored to their predefined identities rather they subvert the existing binary by becoming oppressor instead of remaining oppressed.

Keywords: gender, sex, consumption, cannibalism, bodies.

“If a woman is food, her sex organ is for consumption...” (Kate Millett, Sexual Politics 297)

There are innumerable reasons accountable for woman’s exploitation and crippling of her identity that denies her any independent space and voice. Of all these, first and foremost is the sexual exploitation that women endure under patriarchy owing to their sexually inferior position. She is treated as the weaker and the second sex, as a cannibalistic animal, where her identity is constituted by her sexual role and her body. On the one side where women have been conditioned to internalize their inferiority and oppression at the hands of men as something natural, on the other side men too are conditioned to display their domination, superiority, sexist and misogynist attitude as something to their masculinity.

Margaret Atwood in her novels and poems both-brings out the image of women as sexual objects. They are reduced to their “bodies” and because of this frequent reduction to their bodies, sexual denigration and objectification they are identified as representing sex and not seen as representing individual identity. They are seen as slut, whore and prostitute and are stereotyped and treated accordingly by men. Atwood’s female bodies are “consumed” by the society, that “seeks to consume them, convert them into consumers in turn, shrink them, neutralize them, silence them, and contain them physically or metaphorically”(Davies 60). The socialization of gender creates gendered stereotypes for women where, “women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men...and internalize a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women” (Mackinnon 531). Thus, “The method that is used to subjugate women

is the objectification of women in sexual terms; the male perspective on society is dominant one... the relationship is founded on gender hierarchy in which men are dominant and woman are subordinate, socially, economically, politically and sexually” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 121).

In the novel *Alias Grace* women are projected as consumable entities existing for the sexual use and consumption of men. Grace witnesses the sexual abuse of women not only in her mother's life but also in her friends Mary Whitney's and housekeeper Nancy Montgomery's life. She encounters sexually demanding and exploiting men at each step of her life: as maidservant faces amorous and sexual advances of her employers, as a prisoner is sexually attacked by guards and as a patient of hysteria is sexually molested by doctors. She is warned of men's nature by her relatives, women employers and co-workers. Mrs. Honey instructs her, “Behave modestly... and not speak to any strangers, especially men” (AG 175). Mary too acquaints her with the ways of men, and their perception of women as sexual commodities. She says, “The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to do anything they want” and warns her, “when you go out to the privy at night, they are drunk then, they lie in wait for you and then it is snatch and grab, there is no reasoning with them”. She instructs her never to trust them unless they promise to marry, and “perform[ed] what they promised and if there's a ring, there must be a parson to go with it” (AG 190).

Grace suffers from sexual harassment not only from her employers but also by other servants, guards of the Kingston penitentiary and doctors of lunatic asylum. They all try to sexually harass and molest her. All these sexual assaults are passively endured by Grace except for few muffled groans of protest. Being accused of murder and having reported by newspapers as the paramour of co-servant McDermott she becomes the target of sexual abuse and “fare game for all” (AG 296). The prison guards remark in a humiliating manner to Grace: “You know why God made women with skirts, it's so they can be pulled up over their heads and tied at the top, that way you don't get so much noise out of them, I hate a screeching slut, women should be born without mouths on them, the only thing of use in them is below the waist” (AG 279).

Thus women are treated as sexual objects for exchange among men. They are seen as fruits growing on trees, as described by one of the guards, “You're ripe enough to be picked, why stay on tree un-tasted, you'll just fall off and rot at the foot of it in any case” (AG 279). Similar comments are passed on her by one of the guests of Kinnear, “were there any more [girls] growing on trees that I[Grace] came from, and if so were they ripe yet”(292)? Through all these sexual harassment by men Grace remains a passive bearer to the extent of internalizing all these humiliations and mal treatment as fate and destiny and hardly retaliates to the oppression caused to her on account of her femininity. Beauvoir remarks:

When it (woman) assumes its feminine function; its transcendence is laid aside and imitates immanence; the eyes no longer penetrate, they reflect; the body is no longer alive, it waits, every gesture and smile becomes an appeal. Disarmed, disposable the young girl is now only an offered flower, a fruit to be picked. (381)

Grace's identity is reduced to the status of passive, inferior, fragile and weaker sex that permits her no voice of protest. It further bars her from seeking her identity as independent human being. She internalizes the reality of women's destiny saying, “there was never enough

room for me, at home or anywhere” (AG 36). She confines herself in the space constructed by the patriarchal norms and practices of society and culture. Not only Grace but other women characters of the novel are treated as edible and consumable commodities. Dr. Simon’s idea of girls is portrayed as , “As one season’s crop of girls proceeds into engagement and marriage, younger ones keep sprouting up, like tulips in May”(AG 101). Dr. Simon views almost all women as sexual objects. His thoughts of Lydia are mingled with carnal desire. On dining table while dining with others he visualizes Lydia as an object of consumption, “It’s as if she is sculpted out of whipped cream. She should be on the platter, instead of the fish”. He recalls stories of a famous Parisian courtesan who “had herself presented at a banquet in this way; naked, of course. He occupies himself with undressing and then garnishing Lydia: she should be garlanded with flowers- ivory coloured, shell pink- and with perhaps a border of hothouse grapes and peaches” (AG 225). Women are seen as consumable by Jeremiah the peddler too, who comments on Cook and says, “she smelled good enough to eat...gave Cook a hungry stare, and licked his lips, as if she was a delicious cake he longed to devour” (AG 178).

Dr. Simon visualizes other women too as sexual commodities existing for men’s use and abuse. His visualization of Mrs. Humphrey, his landlady goes like this:

His gaze wonders over her...underneath her stiff dress there must be breasts, not starched or corset shaped, but made of soft flesh, with nipples; he finds himself idly guessing what colours these nipples would be... Nipples pink and small like snouts of animals, of rabbits or mice perhaps or the almost red of ripening currants. (AG 336)

Similarly he has illusions about Grace, who while sewing “wet the end of thread in her mouth” and he felt as if “he was watching her undress, through a thing in the wall; as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat”(AG 105). Greer asserts that “the terms of endearment addressed to woman are...soulless and degrading... If a woman is food, her sex organ is for consumption also, in the form of honey-pot, hair pie, and cake or jelly roll...There are cute animal terms like chick, bird, kitten and lamb, only a shade of meaning away from cow, bitch...vixen etc.” (297).

In *The Blind Assassin* Richard associates women with the imagery of fruits considering them as objects of consumption; he said “women could be divided into apples and pears, according to the shapes of their bottoms. I[Iris] was a pear, he said but an unripe one. That was what he liked about me- my greenness my hardness” (BA 390). Whereas at other places women are considered as, “Boats...busted car engines and broken lamps and radio’s – items of any kind that can be fiddled with by men adroit with gadgetry, and restored to a condition as good as new”(BA 83).Richard afflicted his wife Iris’s body with, “bruises, purple, then blue, then yellow” (BA 44). He rejoiced the fact, “how easily I bruised ...prefer[ing] conquest to cooperation, in every area of life.” “He favoured thighs, where it wouldn’t show” (BA 454-455). Iris’s position was that of domestic animal where she was expected to obey all his commands and orders without protest and her, “job was to open my legs and shut my mouth” (BA 407). Catherine McKinnon writes that “it is through social objectification of women that socialization of gender takes place where women are seen as sexual objects meant to satisfy men’s needs” (531).

Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* with his friend Crake in his teenage years, gets addicted to porn movies that add and complement to the, “general demand that encourages the porn movie

market to keep on supplying these movies” (Huisman 21). This clearly highlights how mass media and communication is greatly responsible for sexual objectification and stereotyping of women as sexual commodities. “Different aspects of popular culture such as fashion, films, popular music, toys and other commercial products ... designed in gender specific ways” induce characteristics of the myth of “stereotype” ((Schollhammer 7, 18). It is through these porn sites that Jimmy first encounters Oryx in a child porn video. This sexual identity of Oryx as an object of sexual consumption remains the same throughout the novel.

The image of Oryx is sketched and presented as a sexual commodity. She is sexually objectified and oppressed in patriarchal society owing to her femininity. She is harassed both on account of her sexuality and class and treated as “body” and object. Her femininity is constructed as an object of sexual consumption. Owing to her poor class status she is sold by her family to a rich man named Uncle En who uses her initially as a flower seller and then as sexual bait to trap sexual tourists for money. She is subjected to the reality of the use of women as body since from very childhood. She is explained to be docile and “obedient” to the command of her masters, and “did as she was told” as woman have been “taught only to devote herself to someone” (Beauvoir 596). Her innocence and purity of childhood is tainted with the discourse of sex and its demands by men, “She had a general idea of what else the man might want – the other children already knew about such things and discussed them freely” (OC 153). Thus Oryx is passed from one hand to another and sold into prostitution serving the desires of men. It can be added here that whether in marriage or in prostitution, woman are always exploited, the only difference being “the price and the length of time the contact runs. For both the sexual act is a service; the one is hired for life by one man; the other has several clients who pay her the price” (Beauvoir 569). After Uncle En is murdered she is sold to a man who made porn movies. She is sexually used and exploited not only as a child porn star but also by the movie makers as well. She reveals to Jimmy that the camera man Jack, “wanted to do movie things with her when there were no movies” (OC 165). Her last consumers are Crake and Jimmy, where she is purchased by Crake to exploit her beauty and sex for his personal and professional use. Crake exploits her beauty, simplicity and innocence for the advertisement and sale of his deadly pills. Not only Crake but Jimmy too sexually uses her.

In *The Penelopiad* the maids are like toys and pets in the hands of Telemachus, “We were his pets and toy things, mock sisters, his tiny companions”. Mary Wollstonecraft rightly remarks on the condition of women at the hands of men as, “She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle and it must jingly in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (qtd in Greer 67). Penelope chooses twelve of the maids to spy on the suitors in order to keep track of their conspiracy and to help her weaving of the shroud of her father-in-law. They are described by Penelope as “pleasant girls, full of energy... They had lovely voices, all of them, and they had been taught well how to use them” (TP 114). These maids are badly treated at the hands of suitors “Several of the girls were raped others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist” (TP 115). They are sexually used as a “part of good host’s hospitality” where host magnanimously offers his guests “their pick of girls”. In the court, what is objected is not the rape of the maids, but the rape “without the permission of the master of the house” (TP 116). The sexual abuse and humiliation of maids is neither protested nor questioned rather it passes muster as a routine work by men. Penelope’s suitors not only exploited and “gobbled up” and use the edibles and animals. But also ‘raped’ and “seduced” several of the maids (TP 115). They “helped themselves to the maids in the same way they

helped themselves to the sheep and pigs and goats and cows” (TP 116). They are described as, “vultures when they spot a dead cow; one drops, then another, until finally every vulture for miles around is tearing up the carcass” (TP 103). These suitors who were of the age of Penelope’s son treated her as no better than sexual commodity. In modern day Hades, Penelope questions Antonius’s intentions in proposing her:

Tell me the truth. It was hardly my divine beauty. I was thirty five years old by the end of it... You suitors weren’t born when Odysseus set out for Troy, or else you were mere babies like my son... I was old enough to be your mother... you longed to have me share your bed and bear your children, yet you knew perfectly well that I was all but past child bearing age. (TP 101)

Antonius replies, “Widows are supposed to be consumed with lust (TP 102), and you could probably still squeezed out one or two little brats” (TP 101). Thus we see how women whether princess or maid, they all hold one position in the eyes of men, that of sexual commodity and are sexually objectified and humiliated by them. . Gods are shown to be raping one woman or the other. Penelope comments on these myths related to gods, “There were lots of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn’t seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or the other” (TP 20).

Atwood’s women characters do not remain confined to the stereotyped sexual image rather they subvert the imposed sexed identity by revolting and fighting in their own way. While in *Alias Grace* many women succumb to the exploitation, Grace is able to fight back by surmounting and transcending the passive, submissive, silent feminine identity. She plays dexterously with the perception of Dr. Simon’s idea of women. It is through her discussion and dialogic exchange of thoughts that she reconstructs her identity. Speaking in Mary’s voice she verbally attacks all those men who treated her and other women no better than sexual objects. She attacks Dr. Jordon publically and avenges his perception of her as sexual commodity. In *The Blind Assassin* by narrating her story Iris not only liberates herself but also intends to set the ground for her grand daughter Sabrina to explore her identity and space. By writing her memoir and getting it published under Laura’s name she defames Richard and accelerates his downfall and ultimate doom and death due to brain hemorrhage. In *Oryx and Crake*, Oryx refuses to be an object of sexual consumption for Jimmy, “She let him lick her fingers for her. He ran his tongue around the small ovals of her nails. This was the closest she could get to him without becoming food” (OC 371). Thus Oryx remains, “beyond the absolute control of male protagonist (Jimmy) ... and beyond the grasp of scientific ‘male’(Crake) control” (Huisman 22). By evading Jimmy’s request of disclosing her past exploitation she refuses to be pinned down by him (OC 128). Penelope in *The Penelopiad* deconstructs mythical and traditional beliefs by providing the other side of the story and narrating the other version through the voice of twelve maids. She unravels the truth behind the myths handed down to us by society and culture through discourse and endorses them to be false and baseless.

Thus we see that how Atwood’s women protagonists are constructed as cannibalistic entities serving as sexual food for men in the society. They are reduced, confined and fettered within the image of being consumed, are exploited and annihilated, satiating men’s hunger for lust and female flesh. These women are endowed with the power to fight against the binary imposed on them that marginalizes them to the periphery. They identify the power imbued in them and are able to exploit it to incapacitate men from mutilating their identities further. They

not only bring disgrace to their oppressors but also are instrumental in bringing their doom and death. Instead of remaining oppressed they transmogrify into oppressors proving gender identities as socio- cultural product.

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