

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

October 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-V

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Social Conditioning: A Politics of Gender in *The Blind Assassin*

Pallavi Thakur

Assistant Professor, (English)

Sharda University

Greater Noida

Abstract:

Margaret Atwood stands amongst the compendium of feminist writers. Her novels embody Canadian society and illustrate that the real locus of power lies in the hands of patriarchy. The dynamics of the Canadian society depicts narrow human doctrines decimating women's rights to existence. Her novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000) bespeaks the Canadian women's defiance of repressed condition which snubs freedom of expression and decision-making. Her novels are a bouquet of thematic diversity and are imbued with feminism. They exhibit issues like gender, myths, odious facet of male power structures, fractured marital life and sexual exploitation of women in Canadian society. Her protagonists overcome the overwhelming odds. The present paper examines the effects of social conditioning on the development of a girl-child.

Key Words:

Social conditioning, inequalities between genders, unfulfilled desires, social structures, gender discrimination, suppression, chauvinist society, mother-daughter relationship, father-daughter-relationship, parental attitude, women's rights suppression, silence, suppression, self-abnegation.

The Blind Assassin is a literary masterpiece of Margaret Atwood. The complex structure of the novel carries a collage of characters. It touches the issues related to women's rights which became a mainstream issue in 1960s in Canada. Atwood specifies, "I live in a society; I also put the society inside my books so that you get a box within a box effect." (28). During this period, Canadian women became aware of their status of a sycophant in the family. They were expected to be docile, servile, mute companions whose main objective of the life was to serve the male counterpart and children. They can be summed up as humans without basic rights. 1960 is the period of inception of the civil rights in Canada which marks the beginning of debates and free speeches. The period witnessed the propensity of the society to favour gender discrimination and suppression of women's rights. The women's movement in Canada provided many novelists like Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Margaret Gibson, Margaret Atwood who highlighted women's predicament and oppression. They have depicted the conventional social dictates which strangle the healthy development of a female. The rearing process of a girl teaches her to be docile and submissive to men. Since childhood they learn to imbibe silently the stereotypical roles prescribed by the society which leads to identity crisis in adulthood. The same conflicts are visible in the novel, *The Blind Assassin*, where the protagonist due to her rearing process faces identity crisis in adolescence. Atwood has poignantly depicted the ubiquitous influence of male power structures which enable women repression. They are aware

of the exploitation experienced by them but withstand it as naïve observers due to social conditioning. Unable to control the overt hostility of male chauvinism they experience severely restricted lives. We find Atwood's protagonists on a voyage exploring self-definition. The internal dialogues of the characters exhibit them as passive pawns who blindly endure their assassin's dictates. Atwood exhibits the true facet of the Canadian society during 1960s which brutally assassin not only the physical but also the mental capabilities of women. She states in *Evading the Pigeonholes*: "[...] novels have people; people exist in a social milieu; all the cultural milieu gets into the novel" (137).

Iris Chase Griffin, 82 year old women, is the protagonist of *The Blind Assassin*. Iris, the narrator, makes the reader acquainted with the present situation and also with her family history. As an old woman, she is eagerly waiting for her granddaughter Sabrina whom she had hardly met before. While living a solitude life, she writes an autobiographical note, penning down the history of her family which includes her parents and grandparents. Gradually, as she unfolds the history, the saga of suppression and exploitation emerges.

Benjamin Chase, her grandfather, owns a button factory and becomes an affluent man. His inheritors, the three sons, do not enjoy the same luck. Benjamin loses his two sons in the First World War. His third son, Norval Chase, remains the sole inheritor of his assets. Norval Chase does not lead a healthy life as he too was seriously injured in the First World War. His factory gets seriously affected due to worldwide depression. Norval Chase loses his wife leaving behind two daughters – Iris and Laura. The two girls witness an honourable and affluent family collapsing and crumbling in the shadow of war. Norval finds it difficult to manage his collapsing factory. His health deceives him and goes from bad to worse. He marries his eldest daughter Iris with Richard Griffin, a rich manufacturer in order to give his daughters a safe and sound future. However, after Norval's death, Richard shows his chauvinism, which destroys the lives of Iris and Laura.

The major factors of social conditioning which are responsible for demarcating limitations on women are – rearing process of a girl-child, marriage which is perceived as the ultimate goal for women, gender discrimination, restriction associated with puberty, inculcation of self-abnegation, inculcation of femininity, and imitation of archetypes. A woman's life is circumscribed by these factors of social conditioning. K. N. Bishnoy writes in *Plight of Child Labour*:

A girl child is not merely a child with the biological signs of the female sex. She is made into one by social construction. This relates to the gender roles she has to play practically by birth. A girl child is hardly prepared for the political and economic participation on which 'gender empowerment is measured' (40).

Girl-Child Rearing

A girl-child gets acquainted with the feminine traits in her infancy. Social conditioning generates the traits of femininity which lacerates and hinders her healthy development. The society demands women of unquestioning obedience to men which develops gross inequalities between genders in the society. Simone De Beavoir writes in *The Second Sex*:

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate

between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an other.”(8).

Canadian social construct seems to be quiet similar to Indian society in the context of girl-child upbringing. Atwood exposes the Canadian society, during the period of First World War, which discriminated between the sexes. It expected women to be submissive creatures satisfying the desires of the chauvinistic society. Atwood reveals, through Iris and Laura Chase, a conservative way of developing girl children. “In the embedded narratives, Iris and her sister Laura are physically fed, but mentally hungry children and their hunger drives them forward to unfortunate events and places (Lahikainen 230). They were strictly reared within the four walls of the home with the least space for social contacts. The outer world was a mystery for them as very less opportunities of tours and excursion were given to them. Iris reminisces, “The two of us on our thorn-encircled island, waiting for rescue; and, on the mainland, everyone else” (BA 43). Iris and Laura find out their own way of meeting with the world outside ‘Avilion’ (their house). Iris says:

“When we weren’t with these tutors, we were supposed to stay at Avilion, either inside the house or on the grounds. But was there to police us? The tutors were easy to elude, they didn’t know our secret pathways, and Reenie couldn’t keep track of us every minute, as she herself pointed out. Whenever we could, we would steal away from Avilion and roam the town, despite Reenie’s belief that that the world was full of criminals and anarchists and sinister orientals with opium pipes.... waiting to snatch us away and hold us to ransom for father’s money” (156).

Iris, being the elder of the two siblings, was expected to look after her younger sister Laura. Iris faces the repercussions of birth order dynamics. Many researchers believe that an individual’s birth order influences his personality and social behaviour. The eldest of the sibling is expected to be more mature, understanding and is given more responsibilities. Handling too much of stress due to overburdened responsibilities is associated with rivalry, competition, emotional turmoil, anxiety and traumatic relationships:

The first born or oldest child is given a good deal of attention until the second child is born; then it is suddenly dethroned from its favored position and must share its parents’ affections with a new baby. This experience may condition the oldest child in various ways, such as hating people, protecting him-or herself against sudden reversals of fortune, and feeling insecure. [...] If the parents handle the situation wisely by preparing the oldest child for the appearance of a rival, the oldest child is more likely to develop into a responsible, protective person (Hall 137).

As a child grows, he or she develops likes and dislikes and has an intense desire to explore the world. It begins to understand, as an individual, its environment and self-identity. “This is the time when one wishes to define what one is at the present and what one wants to be in the future” (Hall 2009: 201). Iris feels a void in her life as she is perceived not as an individual but in terms of her relationships. Being a female and the elder of the two siblings creates hostility rather than amity in her relationships. The rearing process crumbles her inherent qualities and pushes her into the abyss of destruction.

The social construction assigns the gender roles to women since their birth. In *The Blind Assassin* we find the bond of love and affection lacking between Iris and her mother. Iris, as a child, craved for her mother's attention and love. Her mother's long absence because of her charity work for the Armenians increased her craving for mother's love. Iris is always overburdened by her mother to be a good daughter and sister. She is not free to express her anger and resentment for anything which is not liked by her. This goodness is imposed on her by her mother. She is always expected to complete her duties as a daughter and as an elder sister. Her mother does not care about her feeling and does not provide space to express her real emotions, even in front of her mother. Her mother does more efforts to help the Armenians but she forgets about the love and care required by her daughters. Due to lack of mother's guidance Iris faces many unpleasant and intolerable situations in her life as she develops no understanding of human relationships.

Iris and Laura never get an opportunity to go to school. Whatever education they had, it was from home tutors. It seems Norval was too much sensitive about the security of his daughters. Iris recalls, "Instead of school, Laura and I were provided with a succession of tutors, men and women both" (BA 156). Iris and Laura's indifference towards their tutors shows the effect of constricting life on them. Norval feels his utmost duty is to save the girls from the greedy eyes of society. Hence he confines his two daughters to the limited walls of Avilion. He forgets that this act is throttling the growing capabilities in them and has made them powerless.

Marriage

Atwood suggests that marriage often tethers women to the conventional feminine traits leading to their subjugation. They keep on oscillating between their self-identity and the fetters of feminine roles.

Iris and Laura were supervised to become good ladies, so that they could get good match for themselves when they grow up. Norval starts taking interest in the physical appearance of Iris when she reaches her adolescence. He wants her to appear simple, docile and obedient. Norval seems to be rearing his daughters for marriage. The rearing of Iris and Laura shows that Norval is preparing them for their prospective grooms. Simple and austere living could easily help them to acclimatize themselves without questioning in a new family after marriage. Marriage seems to be the only prospect for girls. A girl keeps on redefining herself on the basis of the relationship she adheres to. He forces them to develop the values which were cherished by him. Iris carefully analyses her upbringing:

I became thirteen. I'd been growing, in ways that were not my fault, although they seemed to annoy father as much as if they had been. He began to take an interest in my posture, in my speech, in my deportment generally. My clothing should be simple and plain, with white blouses and dark pleated skirts and dark velvet dresses for church. Clothes that looked like uniforms [...]. My shoulder should be straight, with no slouching. I should not sprawl, chew gum, fidget, or chattels. The values he required of the army : neatness, obedience, silence and no evident sexuality. Sexuality, although it was never spoken of, was to be nipped in the bud. He had let me run wild for too long. It was time for me to be taken in

hand (162-163).

Iris becomes jaded about the advices given to her on female and femininity. She experiences a disciplined childhood where too much of restrictions destroy her identity in infancy. She learns to follow others' dictates mutely. She is made to imbibe the traits which nourish her femininity. Iris becomes tired of the continuous moulding of her personality. She feels sad for her sister, Laura, who also endures the continuous hectoring of Norval. She contemplates:

Laura came in for some of his hectoring too, although she had not yet reached the age for it. What was the age for it? The pubescent age, it's clear to me now. But then I was merely confused. What crime had I committed? Why was I being treated like the inmate of some curious reform school? (163)

A girl's consent is not taken while placing her in the institution of marriage. A girl is born to get married and hence it becomes the only means of existence for a girl. There is no role of emotions and feelings. As we see in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris is a sincere care-taker for Laura and a source to get her father's property for Richard Griffin : for one price to two (Iris and Laura). Atwood also explores the plight of a helpless woman through Iris who has no way to escape from this unpleasant and unwanted situation. She is tied up with her womanly qualities who do not allow her to say 'no' in any worse condition. She explores her predicament after her engagement with Richard. She states:

I knew I could never reverse it, regain the track, get back to where it was warm; I knew I was directionless; I knew I was lost. [...]. It was God, looking down with his blank, ironic searchlight of an eye. He was observing me; he was observing my predicament; he was observing my failure to believe in him. There was no floor to my room : I was suspended in the air, about to plummet. My fall would be endless-endlessly down (BA 233).

She and Laura were continuously groomed to suit the needs of their prospective groom. Atwood has portrayed the violence and insensitivity of incompatible marriages with a rare insight in her novels. Richard and Iris act as two separate groups in the institution of marriage. He acts as a colonizer and is not at all ready to give a logical culmination to his supremacy and Iris becomes a sotto voce.

Gender Discrimination

Social conditioning and gender discrimination are the two factors which make girls accept their inferiority to men strengthening the secondary status of women in the patriarchal society. Suppression of girls in childhood casts its shadow in adulthood, making them timid, vulnerable and open to violence after marriage. Atwood's novels depict the craving of the society for male progeny. She also exposes through her novels that the girls who have no brothers have to bear the brunt of being born as a girl. *The Blind Assassin* discusses the pain, trauma and humiliation of girl-children due to gender-discrimination that is prevalent in Canadian society.

Iris, being the eldest, could easily smell her father's unfulfilled desire of possessing a son. Callista, his friend, warns him for being too hard on girls. She admonishes:

"You're being too hard on the kiddies", said Callista.

“They’re not boys.”

“Unfortunately”, said father (163).

Atwood has realistically portrayed the father-daughter relationship in *The Blind Assassin*. The status of the father in a conventional family is that of a master. He becomes the guardian of the family whose sole aim is to provide the basic necessities of life to the family members. Fathers are more concerned about the future of their sons whereas the daughters are left to be looked after by mothers. Sudhir Kakar illustrates:

The preference for a son when a child is born is as old as Indian society itself. Vedic verses pray that sons will be followed by still more male offspring, never by females. A prayer in the Atharvaveda add a touch of malice : ‘The birth of a girl grant it elsewhere, here grant a son.’ (Atharvaveda quoted in Das, 1962). He has further illustrated about Aitareya Brahmana which like their ancient texts “probably refers much as anything to the economic facts of life when it states flatly that a daughter is a source of misery while a son is the saviour of the family (47).

Hence in most of the cases, the daughters assimilate themselves with their mothers. Daughters know every corner of their mother’s life whereas father’s life remains an untouched chapter. The daughters see their fathers through the eyes of their mothers. The mother supplements the daughter with the information related to their father’s life. Iris and Laura also have very less idea about their father, Norval. It becomes difficult for Iris to understand the physical and psychological condition of her father after the death of her mother. She could assess her father with the maturity which an adolescent girl can possess. She remembers her mother telling that Norval loves them as a father. Iris recalls:

She said, “Underneath it all, your father loves you.”

[...] But parents were supposed to love their children, so I must have taken this thing she said as a reassurance, despite appearances, my father was as other fathers were, or were considered to be (105).

It was difficult for Iris and Laura to understand their father as he seldom approached them. As Iris grows up, she starts giving shape to the blurred image of her father. She tries to assess their importance in Norval’s life. She sums up her father’s love as a rusted iron which is chained around her neck:

[...] it may also have been a burden. Even if love was underneath it all, there was a great deal piled on top, and what would you find when you dug down? Not a simple gift, pure gold and shining; instead, something ancient and possibly baneful, like an iron charm rusting among old bones. A talisman of sorts, this love, but a heavy one; a heavy thing for me to carry around with me, slung on its iron chain around my neck (105-106).

Puberty

Atwood also discloses the trauma associated with puberty. As a girl grows up, she is made to feel different and conscious about her femininity. This treatment is also a part of the collective male response towards anything feminine. The physical development becomes a horrifying experience for her. She starts hating her womanliness and despises the people who make her

aware of her femininity. Simone De Beauvoir says:

From infancy to puberty the girl has grown: day after day her body was always a present fact, definite, complete, but now she is ‘developing’. The very word seems to be horrifying (42).

She further expands:

Very often the parental attitude seems to inculcate in the girl a sense of shame regarding her appearance [...]. This feeling of shame leads the girl to act awkwardly and to blush incessantly; this blushing increases her timidity and itself involves a phobia (44-45).

Iris also has a horrifying experience when she reaches puberty. She gets “ a cup of chamomile tea, which tasted the way spoiled lettuce smelled” (BA 159). The “spoiled lettuce” symbolizes ‘change’: childhood which is spoiled by the stains of blood. “The unsatisfactory taste marks the bewilderment in front of menstruation: fear and disappointment towards one’s body and life altogether. The smell of lettuce confirms that is ruined: now she’ll never be like a boy” (233).

Girl-child rearing gradually erases the true identity and rusts the inherent qualities in a girl. She becomes dependent on men both physically and psychologically. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* reveals the qualities of women which make her an ideal woman – devoted, silent, religious and deferential to men. According to her our society is responsible for inculcating the feminine qualities. She defines in *The Second Sex*:

Thus the passivity that is the essential characteristics of the ‘feminine’ women is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society (19).

Self-Abnegation

Atwood presents a mute self-abnegation through her protagonist, Iris, in her novel *The Blind Assassin*. When Norval feels that his factory is going from bad to worse, then he marries his eldest daughter Iris to the rich manufacturer and his big rival, Richard Griffin with a deal to save his factory and to give protection to his daughters. Atwood portrays the quality of self-abnegation of women, through Iris. A girl’s consent is not taken while placing her in the institution of marriage. A girl is born to get married and hence it becomes the only means of existence for a girl. There is no role of emotions and feelings. As Simone De Beauvoir compares the position of genders and remarks that a girl is:

[...] given in marriage by her parents. Boys get married, they take a wife. They look at marriage for an enlargement, a confirmation of their existence, but not the mere right to exist, it is a change they assume voluntarily (151).

As we see in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris is a son for her father, a sincere care-taker for Laura and a source to get her father’s property for Richard Griffin : for one price to two (Iris and Laura).

Atwood also explores the plight of a helpless girl through Iris who has no way to escape from this unpleasant and unwanted situation. She is tied up with her feminine qualities which do not

allow her to say 'no' in any worse condition. She explores her predicament after her engagement with Richard. She states:

I knew I could never reverse it, regain the track, get back to where it was warm; I knew I was directionless; I knew I was lost. [...]. It was God, looking down with his blank, ironic searchlight of an eye. He was observing me; he was observing my predicament; he was observing my failure to believe in him. There was no floor to my room: I was suspended in the air, about to plummet. My fall would be endless-endlessly down (233).

The silenced childhood has a severe impact on the psychology of Iris and Laura. *The tale of Blind Assassin* describes handmaids whose tongues are removed before being sacrificed before God. "This was not mutilation, said the priest, but an improvement" (37). Similarly, Iris and Laura were silenced for all the harms done to them. Laura, sexually exploited and blackmailed by Richard, finally communicates her agony. Iris sums up, "I found the message, although not in words...Richard's face had been painted grey. The hands were red" (551).

Blind Assassin is truly a saga of repression of girl-child due to social conditioning which is truly a politics of gender. Women are expected to produce identical conventional feminine traits in females through which men retain their domineering status. The qualities of subjugation, self-abnegation and silence are developed in a girl to satiate the desires of men. This process of conditioning erases all the traces of individuality and right to expression in women. The discrimination between male and female is an age old phenomenon. It seems difficult to dissolve or to bridge this gap because it has seeped into the foundation of each and every society. If the rearing process of girls is changed, then an immense change can be perceived in the subordinate position of women in the society. The need is to give support and encouragement to girls so that they become confident and independent. A society which gives equal space to men and women is the dream of the feminists which is hard to achieve as it needs a massive change in the attitude of the society towards female and femininity.

Works Cited:

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. Anchor Book : New York, 2000.
- Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*, ed. and transl. H. M. Parshley, London: Four Square Books Ltd., 1961, p. 8.
- Bishoyi, K.N. *Plight of Child Labour*. Discovery Publishing house: New Delhi. 2003. p. 40.
- Fitz Gerald, Gregory and Kathryn Crabbe. "Evading the Pigeonholers." Margaret Atwood: Conversations. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. Princeton: Ontario Review Pub., 1990. p.131-39.
- Kakar, Sudhir. "Feminine Identity in India." *Women in Indian Society*. Ed. Rehana Ghadially. 7th ed. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996. p.47.
- Kaminski, Margaret. "Preserving Mythologies." Margaret Atwood: Conversations. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. Princeton: Ontario Review P, 1990. p.27-32.
- Lahikainen, Johanna. "You Look Delicious". Food, Eating and Hunger in Margaret Atwood's Novels. A dissertation. Dept. of Humanities. University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä University Printing house, Jyväskylä, 2007. p.230.