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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is tied with a red ribbon and a wax seal. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder provides a warm, ambient light. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a small wooden object. The overall scene evokes a sense of traditional scholarship and research.

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A Study of Margaret Atwood and Her Poetic World

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Abstract

Atwood's poetry on a level focuses on the question of identity with as much fashion as Neruda and Walcott did in their works. In her works, we find her capability in playing with word and language. A recessive reading of her poetry can highlight these further. Atwood actually before a novelist, considered himself first as a poet. In her life a spiritual and mental growth are found as her journey from innocence from experience came after her confrontation with Canadian Wilderness, middleclass norms, ideals of Christianity and stark materialism of North American Society. And she shows a journey through a spiritual wasteland before they can reach maturity. In this paper I have attempted to show her poetic world as well as different themes, symbols and motifs through some of his well known verse.

Key Words: Identity, Vision, Imagery, Language, Symbolism.

Introduction:

Margaret Atwood has deeply involved with nationalism and the rise of independent cultural values in Canada. Although she has spent a lot of time in America but she has never thought herself as an American poet. She is a poetess with different attitude. She shows the status, position and life of woman but she never wants to call herself a feminist poet. Actually she is a passionate observer of Canadian life and shows man-woman relationship, sense of alienation, civilization vs. wilderness, mortality, savage land and identity crisis in her poetry. And to express all these, she needs constant change into other forms to attain what she desires.

If we look at her collection of poems then we find a gradual change of theme in her poetry. In her 'The Circle Game' (1966) she wanted to show the

deceptive ordinariness of daily life and the continuous problems that we receive due to technology. In her 'The Animals in That Country (1968)', we find poetry of conflict and contrasts between familiar and unknown, civilization and wilderness, man and animals. In her 'The Journals of Susan Moodie (1970)', she took a peculiar way to show Canadian history as she here told us everything from the viewpoint of famous pioneer woman, Susanna Strickland Moodie. Here she wanted to show Canadian identity, brutality of civilization, awe of the landscape, forest and uprising terror with a difference between sinister and picturesque. In her 'Procedures for Underground' (1970), she dealt with haunted past, fear of death, oblivion and loss. In her 'Power Politics' (1971), she showed her feministic

attitude and suffering, bitter treatment and subjugation of woman. In 'You Are Happy' (1974), she wanted to overcome her suffering, despair and wanted to seek happiness and fulfillment in life. In 'Two-Headed Poems' (1978), she dealt with female body, heart, bloodiest incidents in Canadian history. In her 'True Stories' (1981), she raised the issue of political oppression and environmental devastation. So in these volumes, she dealt with various themes and issues. Discussion of some of her poems will clear this very well.

Atwood in some poems raises issues and problems regarding child depression to show greater problems. In her 'A Sad Child', she wants to show us the pathetic condition of child who takes pills in sadness and out of depression. Sadness is also needed in life so that we can appreciate the happiness and it is also shown. Also she wants to show sadness as a part of life and not as a tragedy and one has to move on in spite of all these. She seems to offer a somewhat disquieting source of comfort to an otherwise unfair world ruled by favoritism and sadness. As she says:

"You're sad because you're sad
It's psychic. It's the age, It's
chemical
go see a shrink or take a pill
or hug your sadness like an
eyeless doll
You need to sleep." (A Sad
Child)

Contemporary society, feministic and didactic attitude are also part of Atwood's poetic world. In 'The Moment', she shows how man's claim

to retain the ownership of earth, the inherent folly behind the notion of ownership and finally shows the reason the reason for man's inability to capture earth. Only Mother Nature with her animate and inanimate object will continue to live and dictate terms. Actually a deconstructive reading shows that it is a poem which appeals to the environmental activism, the history of Canada and European imperialism. As she says:

"You own nothing
you were a visitor, time after
time
climbing the hill, planting the
flag, proclaiming
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way
round." (The Moment)

Atwood's poetic world also consists of myths and allusions. And it is shown in her 'Siren Song', a very clever, concise and darkly facetious poem. Here the speaker is one of the three sirens which allude to Greek mythology. She here changes the point of view in her revision of the Siren song and examines a side of the story that has never been explored before. It is a poetry that criticizes men who are greedy, not so smart and fade in comparison to the woman's mind. Here also the obvious bias in characterization put on woman now is changed as here men are trapped. She says thus:

"This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:
the song that forces men
to leap overboard an squadrons

even though they see beached skulls.” (Siren Song)

Atwood’s poetic world is also full of imagery, symbols as she uses a variety of literary devices to explain her poems. One such is ‘Flying Inside Your Own Body’. Here she uses imagery of lungs filling and spreading themselves like ‘wings of pink blood’. Here the wings are the symbol of freedom. The bones are hollow and represent the outline of human body. A close reading of the poem shows that one can only be free and have happiness in her sub consciousness. But after weakening, one is sure to be subdued by the pain, sorrow and harsh reality of life. As she says:

“ The Sun’s a hot copper weight
pressing straight
down on the think pink rind of
your skull.
It’s always the moment just
before gunshot.
You try and try to rise but you
cannot.”
(Flying Inside Your Own Body)

In her career, she often talks about love and the need of it. As in ‘February’, she talks about her negative experience with that particular month. As February is a month associated with love and she has no one to share her love. But the concluding lines show her optimism as she has set out her journey to find her love. As she says:

“You’re the life principle
more or less, so get going
on a little optimism around here
Get rid of death. Celebrate
increase. Make it be spring.”
(February)

Pat memories also haunt her and gave her pain. In ‘Bored’, she adopts a

childish, resentful tone and says that she would be bored with nothing significant to do and linger in the shadow of her father. But now she feels that she thinks foolishly that time and wants to go to that workless world again. As a postmodern writer, she also makes satirical impersonations of modernist writers. Actually she wants to tell us that we should find joy in small things also. As she says:

“I could hardly wait to get
the hell out of there to
anywhere else. Perhaps though
boredom is happier. It is for
dogs or
groundhogs. Now I wouldn’t be
bored.
Now I would know too much
Now I would know.” (Bored)

Atwood illustrates a remarkable determination and strong will to face death which is a recurring theme in many poems like ‘Another Elegy’, ‘Marrying the Hangman’, ‘Time’, ‘Bedside’, ‘Flowers’ and ‘Morning in the burned house’. In ‘Morning in the burned house’, she says that nothing remains here as everything has been damaged by fire and smoke. As she says:

“No one else is around
where have they gone to, brother
and sister,
mother and father?” (Morning in
the burned house)

In ‘Flowers’, the speaker feels pity and sad for her dying father. The speaker realizes that one day she will also die as man is mortal and death is common to all. As she says in the concluding lines:

“...even the memory of how I
brought them from a garden,
I will no longer have by then,

And put them beside my dying
father
Hoping I could still save him.”
(Flowers)

Feminism is also present in her poetic world or cosmos. In ‘Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing’, she shows that woman’s beauty and sexuality at one level control and dominate man’s desirability and on another level, it makes her into object in the eyes of men. So the poem raises a question about how women should perceive their sexuality and whether it is a source of power or something hidden. The concluding lines what men miss and what they do in order to think a woman in his way:

“I hover six inches in the air
in my blazing swan-egg of light.
You think I’m not a goddess?
Try me.
This is a torch song.
Touch me and you’ll burn.”
(Helen of Troy Does Countertop
Dancing)

Atwood also comments on love in her poetry and judges it with reality and truth behind it. In her ‘Postcards’, she shows many things through the elements of love. The pictures on the postcard are inappropriate representations of reality as they are merely delusions. The last few lines show that the emptiness and hollowness in the postcard and love. A deconstructive reading however show that here Atwood experiments to conflate between internal and external landscape and also the painful reality of love. As she says:

“Turn you over, there’s the
place
for the address. Wish you were

here. Love comes
in waves like the ocean, a
sickness which goes on
and on, a hollow cave
in the head, filling and
pounding, a kicked ear.”
(Postcards)

Atwood’s poetic thought sometimes captures several issues in one single poem. As in ‘You Begin’, the world, our views of it, freedom, limitation, perception, bias all issues are present. We restlessly attempt to understand the world and paradoxically comprehend the incomprehensible. But with the growth of age, men learn. Here Atwood shows her mastery over words and their uses as she uses the word ‘hand’ metaphorically:

“The word hand floats above
your hand
like a small cloud over a lake
The word hand anchors
Your hand to this table
Your hand is a warm stone
I hold between two words.”
(You Begin)

In her ‘This is a Photograph of Me’, she shows feminism with identity crisis. In patriarchy, males are creating woman’s stories. Like the blurred photograph, a woman’s contribution to society is shadowed. It is also a poem about Canadians who tend to remain in the background and have centrist politics. But the poet does not want to historicize the time of woman’s exploitation. As she says:

“but if you look long enough
eventually
you will see me.” (This is a
Photograph of Me)

Search for identity, quest and warning are found in her ‘Procedures for

Underground'. In this poem, she issues a dire warning to those who are listening to her as she talks about the country beneath the earth. Underground here may be considered as Hell but Atwood conjures up the procedures a person may adopt to go there for the knowledge of human consciousness. Here a deconstructive reading shows that the journey is about the search for human identity. And she says that traveling to the underworld may not be a simple victory, for the traveler is cautioned:

“You will find
those who were once your
friends
but they will be changed and
dangerous.” (Procedures for
Underground)

Atwood in some of her poems like ‘The Animals in That Country’ also reveals the ugly deeds of her country men and his ancestors. She refers to the people of England who established their colony in Canada, a place where oppression has been rampant for years. They haunted the natives like sly, predatory animals. Now these people are in power in Canada and engage in the bloody sport of provoking and then killing animals to provide immense joy. Actually Atwood does not want to forgive the colonizers who have destroyed her country’s civilization and thus thrust the so called modern civilization on the natives. As the concluding lines show that the natives have no identity of their own:

“In this country the animals
have the faces of
animals.
Their eyes
flash once in car headlights

and are gone
Their deaths are not elegant
They have the faces of
No-one...” (The Animals in
That Country)

Atwood in her poetry makes a lot of comparisons. In her ‘In the Secular Night’, she shows her anger and regret for not escaping from the imprisonment of the strong loneliness. She has also compares childhood life with present life. Actually she wants to show that people who are in a great depression often lose their principles and belief. And ultimately they pull themselves further away from their faith and expectation from God is almost vanished. Here she also plays with words, languages as aphorism is also shown here:

“There is so much silence
between the words,
You say. You say, The sensed
absence
Of God and the sensed presence
Amount to much the same thing,
Only in reverse.” (In the Secular
Night)

Atwood is humorous also as it is shown in ‘The Landlady’. Here she also plays with words like the bossy landlady’s slamming the doors about the house which tantamount to slamming the lodger’s days, the days she would have spent in productive work. Search for identity is also here as it is often difficult to recognize or accept what one already is. Here are the lines which show her mastery over words with satirical humour:

“Over a vast face
which is the land-
lady’s.
. . .

She stands there, a raucous fact
Blocking my way.
Immutable a slab
Of what is real,
Solid as bacon.” (The Landlady)

Her ‘Spelling’ is a poem which shows how language and image reveals and conceals the problems and issues for feminist discourse. With apparent subjectivity, imperialism in the form of man’s sexual domination, feminist ideals, sexual identity with cultural politics she gives a new outlook and thought in this poetry. She even personified language here:

“the word
splits and doubles & speaks
the truth
the truth and the body
itself becomes a mouth.”
(Spelling)

Atwood in his poetry in a very skillful way shows Nature and parents in a peculiar and parallel way. In her ‘Night Poem’, she shows how Nature continuously protects our lives and relates real aspects of life to the parts of nature. Weather is here shown in parental figures. As the opening lines show:

“There is nothing to be afraid of
it is only the wind
changing to the east, it is only
your father the thunder
your mother the rain.” (Night
Poem)

Conclusion:

So in the concluding lines it can be said that Atwood presents various voices, cultures, issues, images and symbols that make up the grand mix of American identity and she is descended from the settler’s who made the New World possible. Atwood focuses on social and psychological questions of contemporary life, but still she manages to provide the mythic and cultural resonance. What she believes is that a poet raises voice in a continuous way from a private and cultural consciousness. And it is difficult to distinguish Atwood as a poet or novelist or publicist because we have created various Atwood in our imagination to satisfy our cultural needs. Actually she is a feminist, satirist, mythological poet, nationalist and formulator of critical theories.

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