

## Subjugation and Exploitation of Female Characters in Shena Mackay's *Old Crow* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Author: Ms. Rani Laxman Nalawade

Co- Author: Dr. Raghunath Kadakane

### Abstract

Women are perceived as helpless, dependent, weak and subordinate. They have been undermined or exploited in patriarchal society. They are deemed as less valuable in society. Due to male supremacy, women are oppressed and discriminated in the male dominated society. Today's woman is working parallel to man. She has created her own identity in every sphere of life. But still her situation is precarious. Still, she is subjugated and exploited physically, mentally, economically and socially.

The present research paper Subjugation and Exploitation of Female Characters in Shena Mackay's *Old Crow* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is aimed to focus on the precarious situation of women and its adverse impact on women and ultimately on social integration. Both these novels examine and experience torments and tortures of individuals which left them helpless to suffer. Shena Mackay's novel *Old Crow* is a heart wrenching story of a pauper woman and her helpless children. It is a devastating picture of society which torments a helpless to such an extent that it compels one to die.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* throws light on woman suffering and mental trauma that woman faces which makes her almost insane. Both the novels depict power and domination, sexual politics, patriarchy, female misogyny, exploitation of women, class consciousness and social disintegration. It is a portrayal of deprived, poverty-stricken, helpless, economically and politically exploited and socially marginalized. She also offers a new insight on how society perceives women. It will also shed light on acceptance, man – woman equality and women empowerment.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, Exploitation, Subordinate, Social Disintegration, Patriarchy, Female Misogyny

### Status of Women in the Past and Present:

The study will exemplify the status and role of women in the society. In order to study women exploitation and subjugation, the status of women from ancient period to till date has to be considered. In matriarchal period, women were given equal rights. In the later period, place of man and his power in the family life became clear. And as a result, patriarchal culture in society became

prevalent. In Vedic period women had right to education. In the post-Vedic period, the status of women in the society started declining. As a result, women education and participation in social life became very narrow. Many restrictions were imposed on women and child marriage and sati practice became prevalent in the society. In the medieval period, right to education for women was taken away. In order to avoid inter-caste marriage, child marriage was

practiced, and widow remarriage was prohibited.

But when we think status of women in the society today, it is still secondary. Women tried to improve their status by working parallel to men. But does patriarchal society treat them equally? It is important to look into this matter seriously.

### **Exploitation and Subjugation in Both Novels:**

The literal meaning of the word subjugation is “bring under yoke.” Subjugation is an act of treating people or their wishes, beliefs, aspirations as less important than other people. Whereas exploitation means using someone or something for one’s own advantage.

Shena Mackay’s novel *Old Crow* portrays the transition of Coral Fairbrother from village beauty to village outcaste. The protagonist of the novel Coral Fairbrother warned by Mr. Thompkin to leave the choir because of her association with Paul Brick. Society doesn’t accept her association with men. She is mentally tortured, publicly humiliated, beaten and often pelted with stones. She is called pauper and outcaste. She is so poor that in order quell her hunger, she eats hawthorn leaves and children search for food in hedges. She is so tormented that finally villagers compelled her to leave her house. It is a distressing picture of her life. It compels us to introspect on the condition of women in the society. The author unveils plight of a woman who once was a village beauty turns eventually a village outcaste. The author perceives women subordination and wants fair treatment to both the genders.

Recent Canadian literature attempts to define self. Portrayal of women characters in the works of Canadian writers

has colonial touch. Atwood has depicted women as colonized, victimized and oppressed by gender and politics. The protagonist of *Surfacing* is the unnamed narrator. In her childhood, she lived a secluded life. Deprived of social communication, her emotional and social growth was hampered. The narrator is deprived of warmth and love in her childhood. Her childhood is blemished by patriarchal dominance which Atwood denounces. The narrator represents other girls of her age. Childhood experiences created a greater impact on the narrator’s later life. The way children are treated in their childhood creates lasting impact on their mind. For example, due to her childhood treatment, the unnamed narrator of Atwood’s novel becomes a submissive wife. It adversely created an inferiority complex in her mind.

### **Financial Constraints:**

Coral’s financial condition is worse. Her cottage is dilapidated. She doesn’t seek any help either from the authorities or from the men who loved her. Parish Council decides to outlaw her and her children. The Parish council refused to rehouse Coral Fairbrother. The decision is taken to rehouse her children and drive her out of town. Coral is worried and tensed about the decision of the council. She uttered helplessly, “The Authorities can do anything.” (Mackay, P.30).

This indicates her mental instability and insecurity about her future. Coral is not willing to send her children to school because she knows that in school they would be insulted. In order to quell her hunger, Coral puts a handful of hawthorns into her mouth. Her children also try to search for food in the hedge. This shows a

single mother faces acute poverty and helpless to survive. The protagonist of *Surfacing* is an unsuccessful artist who experienced unsuccessful marriage, abortion and finally divorce faces financial constraints.

### **Social Aspects in Both Novels:**

Women having an extra marital affair or relationship with men has always been taboo. Socially, it is unacceptable. On the other hand, men are allowed to have many relationships. In patriarchal society men are not restricted to anything. The novel *Old Crow* depicts the same. Due to Coral's association with many people, Coral and children denied to social acceptance and they are subject to exploitation and insult. They are not allowed to participate in public gatherings or live life with dignity. They are always insulted, undermined, taunted, and driven away from village. On insistence of Dennis, Coral attends village fete but there also a woman calls her "pauper and pariah." Mr. Thompkin called Coral's family "a dirty family."

In village fetes also Coral is pelted with stones. Especially, she is often insulted by women. She neither gets help nor is she allowed to live in the village. She is tormented by employing various ways. Sometimes her drainage pipes are blocked, sometimes the mob of village attacks her family.

Atwood's *Surfacing* also delineates the same issues. The protagonist becomes alienated from society and people of her family. Her father, brother, her fake husband and her present lover Joe, dominate her one or the other way. David, in the absence of his wife, tries to seduce her. In her childhood also she is tormented by boys of her age. Family and society are

equally responsible for her suffering, alienation, mental trauma and guilt.

### **Female Misogyny: Women who hate Another Women**

Patriarchy means a privileged position of men. A social system in which human relationships, values, behavior, decision making power etc. are predominated by men. But sometimes not only men hate women but also a woman who hates another woman. In the novel *Old Crow* also Mackay has portrayed women characters who are against a woman protagonist Coral Fairbrother.

Coral pleads Stella Oates why she is tormenting her? On this Stella expressed her contempt, "I don't know really. Perhaps it's because you're an outrage to public decency but I don't think so. You're just anathema to me." (P.63) This shows severe contempt of Stella Oates. Being a woman, Stella Oates should have supported her. Old Mrs. Fairbrother also denies help to Coral and her children. Stella Oates threatened Coral that she would batter down her walls and pull down her house and build three bungalows in its place. Stella tells her son to block up drainage pipes of Coral's house. This and many other instances show that a woman is enemy of woman.

Stella Oates and many other women should have helped Coral. All women in the village should contributed to Coral's empowerment. She should have emotionally, economically, socially been supported. But does this happen? Rather these women are responsible for her tragic end. And that is why Dennis encouraged Coral to run away when she was attacked by the mob. He warns her, "You don't know what those women are like. They will tear you to pieces. Go!" (P.150) These women

torment Coral by employing various ways. Their main objective to outcaste Coral from village.

### **Social, Economic and Emotional Exploitation:**

Mackay portrayed female protagonist Coral Fairbrother and her children as pauper, outcaste deprived of basic needs. Coral lives with her children in the slum. Due to her association with Paul Brick, a vagrant painter, Dennis Blake and many other people, she is denied her involvement in public gatherings. In village fete when Coral's name was announced for prize, public called her mental and denied her selection "and Coral, shielding the baby, fled backstage, pursued by old annuals, shoes and a cricket ball (P.46). In this way, her social presence is denied. Atwood's *Surfacing* also portrays the unnamed protagonist who, deprived of social communication and gatherings from her childhood, becomes alienated from society. She finds no meaning either in marriage or in society. She doesn't want to mingle in society.

Coral is a single parent to look after her children, and lives in a dilapidated house. Children with bloodless lips wandering aimlessly on the outskirts of village, denied any support. Old drab rags, broken chairs, withered bulrushes, and stinky smell indicates they are poverty – stricken.

Sometimes, financial and social issues don't affect as much as emotional torture. And the protagonist of the novel, Coral Fairbrother is no exception to it. The unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood's novel also gets mentally tortured from her childhood. She remembers her school days when she experienced colonialism in a

masculine world. The protagonist remembers the incident where an emotional exploitation was experienced. "The boys chased and captured the girls after school and tied them up in their own skipping ropes. I spent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me; later I became an escape artist of sorts, experts at undoing knots." (Batra, P.172) Fighting and arguments with her brother were withdrawn by her because she knew that she would never win. After marriage she became an ideal, submissive wife.

### **Identity Crisis:**

Today also women are restricted to basic needs like right to food, health, care, education, decision making power etc. The gender issue is prevalent in society by ages. And it adversely impacted women. Though women are equally working in every field parallel to men, still they are subordinated.

Coral Fairbrother, a single parent, taking responsibility for three children, harassed, tortured and eventually meets to tragic end. Society treated her as if she is not a human being. She is driven away from society. Being pauper and outcaste, Coral faces identity crisis. Though tortured, humiliated, she is an embodiment of inspiration, hope, struggle and perseverance. Margaret Atwood's unnamed narrator also struggles to seek her own identity. From her childhood, she was denied freedom. After marriage also she is a submissive wife. But gradually, she realizes her own self which encourages her to fight against male domination and imposed restriction.

### Conclusion:

Shena Mackay and Margaret Atwood's novels rightly delineate women exploitation and subjugation. Physical violence, humiliation, mental and social exploitation are explicitly depicted in both novels. Mackay has shown poor and

helpless also have right to freedom and expression. Margaret Atwood nicely portrayed the gradual evolution of the unnamed protagonist who eventually attains freedom. Female Characters of both the novels are embodiment of struggle, perseverance and inspiration.

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