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Childhood trauma and the identity quest in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye

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Abstract---Margaret Atwood, an iconic Canadian writer in many of her novels has dealt with the power politics and its consequences especially in her women protagonists' life. In her novel Cat's Eye, the power games are played exquisitely by little girls. As it has been done previously by Graham Greene and William Golding in their works, Atwood has effectively captured the complex relationship between the school bully and victim, through her characters. Like Atwood's earlier novels, Cat's Eye is a novel which is not only against to restrictive idealism, it is also against to authoritarianism manifesting in several forms. According to Atwood, women suffer not only at the hands of rigid patriarchy; even female folks indulge in bullying and torturing the less privileged of their own gender. In this novel, Elaine Risley was a victim and a protagonist. She is victimized by her three classmates at her school-Cordelia, Carol and Grace Elaine Risley persecuted from her child age and in her young age it increased a lot. Due to her itinerant life, she became homeless among her peers. Consequently, she became a victim to the surroundings. Her traumatic memory had always been a source of pain for her but she tried to reconcile herself through the assistance of her art.

Keywords---authoritarianism, victimization, pre-adolescent, Cat's Eye, nomadic upbringing, haunting memories.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is an iconic and versatile Canadian writer. With her literary critique, books, and well-plotted fiction which examined the women's oppression

and persecution, Atwood received a global fame. She is the author of eighteen novels which includes *Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin* and *The Testaments*; her compilations of poetry includes *Double Persephone*, *The Circle Game*, *The Animals in That Country*, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *The Door and Dearly*. Atwood is a two time-Booker winner and has been honoured with many awards and accolades for her sheer creativity and prolific output.

Atwood is noted for her feministic ideas and mythological themes. She is acclaimed for her talent for exhibiting both subjective vision and global concerns in her works. The novel concentrates on the crises of women which they articulate through the art. In this retrospective narrative, she explores childhood cruelty, abuse and betrayal among young women. Atwood Portrayed about feminism in this novel. As a bildungsroman, the work deals from the childhood to the adult period in Risely's life. Since the work traces the artistic growth of Risely, it could also be claimed as a *kunstlerroman*. In the novel, Atwood views the process of victimization starting from childhood.

This article attempts to explore the relationships among females. It examines the convolution of relationship, in which women often repress themselves. *Cat's Eye* (1988) is a novel about the nature of memory and identity written by Margaret Atwood. Elaine, the protagonist of the novel is conscious of how memory can be uncertain can be and how past experiences can color our present lives. The novelist focused the life of Protagonist Elaine, who tries to confront the trauma, personal problems, insecurities in her life, in order to save her own identity in the society.

Surviving childhood victimization/childhood trauma

Childhood has been often painted as an angelic state by poets like Blake and Wordsworth. But in reality, children too could be cruel and indifferent to their fellow children. In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley mostly thinks about her past life and her connection with Cordelia who is her childhood friend/tormentor. In fact, thinking about her past life, helps her to find individuality and identity. The novelist clearly showed the past and present life of the protagonist simultaneously. And the speech of protagonist perfectly encapsulates Atwood's imaginative vision.

"Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimension of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once" (*Cat's Eye*,3).

Cordelia and Elaine's relationship reveals the game of power-politics game where Cordelia has dominated Elaine since they were children. Cordelia subjects Elaine to self-scrutiny: "Cordelia brings a mirror to school ... She takes it out of her pocket and holds the mirror up in front of me and says 'Look at yourself! Just look! voice is disgusted'" (quoted by Jordison). Throughout the novel, Dominance and oppression are seen as separate from age and gender. Cordelia, Carol, and Grace who are Elaine's classmates always urged her to do what they wished and

did not give any respect to her individuality. They always have the upper hand and make her do what they want. Elaine is aware that she is being victimised by these girls, but she is unsure how to get out of it. Critic Molly Hite commented on Elaine's victimhood:

"Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category 'girl' and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of patriarchy here literalized in the authority of their own fathers"(137).

Elaine wants to eliminate Cordelia as she is a part of her identity. Elaine is victimized by her three female companions, the worst among them is Cordelia, even in critical times, she is helpless as she confesses:

"Now she's harsher, more relentless. It is as if she's driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She is backing me towards an edge, like the edge of cliff: one step back, another step and I'll be over and falling" (171).

Cordelia even goes to the extent of tossing Elaine's hat into a ravine and forces Elaine to retrieve it. Elaine undergoes a traumatic experience, thanks to the hostile climate. Snow fills her shoes; she has a miraculous vision of Virgin Mary which instills confidence in her to reach back to safety. Later, the girls move to different schools. Elaine shows her academic superiority over Cordelia and it is the latter who suffers from mental illness and arouses pity as the novel progresses. In spite of her attaining maturity and intellectual superiority, Elaine is unable to exorcise the ghosts of the past. The memories of her sad past are only able to be put to rest after many years through her passion for art.

The novel exposes not only childhood problems; it also highlights masculine bias against women's artistic achievements. Elaine Risley is a professional artist. She travelled to Toronto, where she previously resided, for a retrospective exhibition of her work. Elaine's retrospection of her own life from childhood to the present day is depicted in this real and metaphorical voyage. She demolished the patriarchal art history myth that art is the domain of male dominance through her inventiveness, and she attempted to open up a new vista for female artist. The novelist also demonstrates how patriarchal power politics has suppressed women artist and how their history has been ignored by the patriarchal power structure. *Cat's Eye* heralds the dawn of a new era by focusing on feminine artistic sensibility while also presented a powerful vision of feminist consciousness.

Elaine understands that women artist is suppressed by the male artists. Despite the fundamental value of their work, they are considered as second grade artists. As a result, in addition to delving into the complexity of Elaine's connection with Cordelia, the novel also serves as a forceful statement against the patriarchal structures that fail to honour female ingenuity.

The Retrospective becomes a central metaphor in the novel. A retrospective is a sign of completion, a point of arrival, or a plateau that offers a view of the past; it isn't easy for Elaine to talk to her brother because she feels he, as a man, because a man cannot understand the feelings of women. And it is tough for Elaine to

communicate with her mother because of the distance. She says “is a gulf, an abyss that goes down and down. It is filled with wordlessness” (CE98).

Elaine instinctively seeks out ways to escape such as staying in home from school, pretending to be ill, fantasizing as she is invisible, and wantonly fainting because she hates to stay lonely. “There’s a way out of places you want to leave, but can’t. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it’s late. Time has gone on without you” (CE183).

Elaine’s main source of sufferings is due to the profession she have selected, but yearns for acceptance and acknowledgement from the society. Atlast she came to the conclusion that painting profession is not suitable for the young girls. During the realization she thinks “Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized” (CE125).

Elaine falls in love with Jon, a painter, after her unsuccessful relationship with Josef. When she learns about Jon’s extramarital affair, her idyllic life with him is shattered. Elaine’s victimization is exacerbated by her two husbands. So she decided to divorce her husband, after that she went to Vancouver with her daughter Sarah. The novel *Cat’s Eye* is the portrait of inner struggles and identity. The novel is an effort by Margaret Atwood, in which she tries to emphasise women’s brilliance. The novelist also demonstrates how the arts can be used to combat oppression in all of its forms.

Atwood has been possibly influenced by Mary Alcott’s *Little Women* and Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*. Alcott’s *Little Women* deals with the coming of age of four sisters. Though the story is mostly positive, the four sisters have to overcome certain challenges to become healthy adults; “The sisters strive to help their family and improve their characters as Meg is vain, Jo is hotheaded, Beth is cripplingly shy, and Amy is materialistic” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Women)

On the other hand, the school girls in *Cat’s Eye* are related only by their ‘friendship’; not by blood. So, the real togetherness one can expect among siblings is missing in Atwood’s girls. Also, there are interesting parallels between Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*. In *To The Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe starts as a young painter of unproven talents. She attempts a portrait of Mrs.Ramsay and James. She suffers from doubts of her artistic abilities, both self-inflicted and created by the chauvinistic assertion of Charles Tansley, a character according to whom women can neither paint nor write.

In the climax of the novel, during the trip to the light house, Lily attempts to complete her painting. She recollects memories of her past; her ultimate impressions on Mrs.Ramsay and life as a whole. This retrospection brings in, an illumination which helps Lily to finish her painting. In her completion of the painting, she finds a real fulfillment (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_the_Lighthouse). Elaine resembles Lily in many respects; the artistic talents have been long suppressed by the patriarchal society which inflicts self-doubts and all sorts of crises in both the artists; both

the artists finally succeed in exhibiting their artistic talents, realize their artistic mission and achieve an identity of their own as artists.

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