On the Field with Postmodern Feminism and Cat’s Eye:

A Poststructuralist Literary Analysis of Cat’s Eye by Margaret Atwood

Introduction

Cat’s Eye, a novel by Margaret Atwood, published in 1988, coincides in dates with the roots of the third significant transformation in feminism and the rise of poststructuralist concepts of gender and sexuality. This poststructuralist literary analysis of the book relies on the following assumptions of postmodernism as appropriated by poststructuralist feminism:

1) Reality is mediated through language, and the main discourses are produced by the dominant group, (or, according to Michel Foucault , by spread-out centers of power). Therefore, there is a direct connection between power and knowledge. Norms perceived as truths are mere representations produced in order to sustain the existing power relations. There is no absolute truth.

2) Identity is constructed through multiple discourses and interactions, and therefore, the definition of identity produces different meanings in different times and locations. Identity is transitory, fragmentary and shifting. There is no steady natural self, since identity is a construct of social relations.

The question poststructuralist feminist scholars ask is not what an identity is, (thus rejecting essentialism) but how it is constructed. As pointed out by Chris Weedon (1999), Judith Butler’s influential work has contributed to the development of the postmodern concept of a socially constructed identity in relation to women’s experience and gender identity.

With the celebration of diversity in a multicultural world, and in regard to the bond between power and knowledge, poststructuralist feminist scholars turned their attention to all the interrelated asymmetric divisions of power that favor one group over the other or give it the power to exploit market economies. The complex set of feminist concerns came to include lifestyle politics, discourse and language, otherness based on gender, class, race, sexuality, abilities and opportunities, subjectivity, the body, the conscious and the subconscious.

With these notions in mind, I intend to apply a poststructuralist feminist literary approach to Cat’s Eye and produce meanings that privilege feminist interest in understanding and transforming power relations. Due to the limited scope of this work, it will focus on time and identity, psychoanalysis, gender representations, and otherness.

The framework of my analysis lies within the narrated story and the narrator’s experience, and not in the text beyond fiction, or rather in Atwood’s consciousness, conventions and life. Atwood’s text offers a vast field for a discussion of the discourses that constitute gender. The author prefers not to be defined or analyzed personally, and I’ll do my best to respect her wish in the spirit of Roland Barthes's notion of “the death of the author.”

Background

Elaine Risley, the protagonist of the novel, is invited to Toronto, her home town, for the first retrospective of her paintings. The location she hasn’t visited in years and the reflective occasion bring back old memories that shake her now, in the period she considers to be the middle of her life, the middle of a bridge. She embarks on an intense recollection of the past, questioning the philosophical, physical, and emotional meaning of time and identity.

The narrator’s self-exploration involves an examination of social pressures she has suffered in different periods of her life. The process is closely related to feminist psychoanalytical theories that propose such an examination in order to produce change.

Beside living in a patriarchal society, Elaine’s problems involve lifestyle choices, postcolonial aspects of life in Canada, relationships between girls and being doubly “the other” within power relations, all elements that were previously external to the feminist ideology, but are now included.

The Nature of Authenticity

Elaine remembers her early childhood, when her family lived in the wild due to her father’s entomological fieldwork, as a period of happiness and freedom. During this time, her parents’ distribution of work is not strongly structured though slightly connected to the common gender division of responsibilities. They are flexible, caring, and liberal in their communication with the children. Elaine and her brother Stephen participate equally in all the chores, play, learn and explore the wilderness in great unison.

However, everything changes when the research is over, and the family settles down in Toronto. The former flow in life is transformed into a contrived existence in the city. All of them discover or rediscover the traditional social expectations.

The chapters dedicated to the wilderness illuminate the idea that freedom produces a fertile soil for growth. Elaine will always remain full of longing for the liberating power of the closeness to nature. As a grown up, she will believe that during her years in the wilderness she was her authentic true self. Her notion of an authentic self is opposed to the theory of a socially constructed self. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler says that gender does not exist previous to social order, since it’s created by it. This theory is based on Michel Foucault’s ideas of body and sexuality as a cultural construct. The connection both philosophers fix between power and the body eliminates the notion of essentialism embraced by French feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Butler allows no room for flexing the notion that gender identity is not based on biology but on social relations. According to this concept, Elaine’s identity is not inherent, and thus, the true self she remembers with yearnings doesn’t exist.

Elaine understands that the move to the rigid city and the debilitating educational system has put her gender identity in transition. She does not claim for a steady gender identity. But she thinks that in the woods she had been free to be herself.

Taking the poststructuralist theory as a guiding rule, two possible hypothesizes can be generated. According to the first hypothesis, Elaine’ early self is a construct of the social forces of her isolated family. Since they have been peaceful, she doesn’t define them now as forces, but they have been social relations all the same. The encouragement and non-conformist codes have given her a sense of self-worth and allowed her to live in harmony with her surroundings and her self, and in peace within her body. In that sense, this is the socially constructed meaning of an authentic identity. The other hypothesis gives Elaine’s perception more room. Despite the basic assumption regarding identity as a construct, the possibility that identity may not be solely limited to it can remain open-ended, in the postmodern spirit of no absolute truths.

Gender Representations

Cat’s Eye addresses gender issues through Elaine’s life. The narrator verbalizes the sexist tendencies of the time, occasionally analyzing them with a cynical tone that conveys her attempted detachment. As time passes, her detachment spreads into other areas in her life and renders her lonely.

Childhood:

The Toronto of the 1950’s has an elaborated system of education based on a patriarchal worldview. When Elaine and Stephen attend school for the first time, they are immediately separated and sent to join an isle of girls and an isle of boys, respectively. Right afterwards, they enter the building through one of the two entrance doors, on which it is written “BOYS” and “GIRLS.” The doors and their beautifully carved letters serve as an identifier for children to recognize themselves as a part of polarized male or female spheres.

Of course, the boys’ door picks Elaine’s attention since it is the first time she is subjected to such a split. She wonders if it feels different to be a boy and pass through the boys’ door. The separation surprises her further when she realizes that boys and girls study together in class.

Already then and there, she is wearing a different school uniform from Stephen’s, because girls are obliged to wear skirts. While living in the wild, she had a certain fascination with such clothes. She even used to draw girls in dresses. Interestingly (and in relation to the discussion of identity in the former section), she and Stephen used to draw different and rather gender-stereotyped pictures, although they weren’t overly exposed to gender division as far as Elaine can remember.

When Stephen and I draw with our coloured pencils, he draws wars, ordinary wars and wars in space. His red and yellow and orange are worn to stubs, from the explosions, and his gold and silver are used up too, on the shining metal carapaces of the tanks and spaceships and on the helmets and the complicated guns. But I draw girls. I draw them in old-fashioned clothing, with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves, or in dresses like Jane's, with big hairbows on their heads. This is the elegant, delicate picture I have in my mind, about other little girls. I don't think about what I might say to them if I actually met some. I haven't got that far (15).

Still, Elaine comes to realize how limiting these clothes are. After a vacation in which she wears her old clothes, she comments: “Now that I have changed back from pants to skirts, I have to remember the moves. You can’t sit with your legs spread apart, or jump too high or hang upside down without ridicule. I've had to re-learn the importance of underwear, which has a liturgy of its own” (43).

School sets to erase Elaine’s past choices of clothes, plays and company in order to unite her with the group of girls. The rules favor feminine similarity not only in appearance but also in conduct. Everything around her conspires to construct a passive, soft, self-restrained child.

It is interesting to find that the Canadian education of the mid-twentieth century, as described by Atwood, is not dissimilar from the education method described in a semi-autobiographical novel by German feminist Hedwig Dohm, published in 1899 and quoted by Weedon:

The boys were lucky. They did gymnastics, they exercised. They were allowed to romp around freely in the streets and squares. We girls didn’t do gymnastics, we didn’t swim, we didn’t row. We weren’t allowed to have snowball fights, not even to skate. Remember, the knitted sock was still in its heyday. (Dohm 1988:24; original 1899)

Hedwig Dohm claims that the restriction of physical activity took its toll on the body, mind and emotion. She, like the poststructuralists theorists, sees difference as a produced material and not as a phenomenon grounded in biology.

Due to her urge to fit in, Elaine observes her colleagues and learns their codes of behavior. By doing so, she seems to be assimilating a foreign language. She stops following her instincts, and instead, starts imitating the girls’ low tone of voice, delicate movements and quiet games. The author conveys the child’s innocence, her inability to criticize the existing social structure or understand the nature and the causes of the girls’ options. Only later will Elaine realize that a lack of understanding and criticism sustains and stabilizes the dominant power.

Elaine’s discovery of the girls’ activities is not devoid of pleasure, however. In previous years, her brother was the leader in their games, mostly conducting war games, races and competitions. Elaine enjoyed the company of her bigger, older and smart brother, and shrugged her shoulders at his choice of games. His age and his aptitude to play by himself made her his follower. She mentions that every once in a while her inability to beat him in his games has caused her some grief.

It remains unknown whether Elaine would have continued with the wild games if she had a more diversified company and the power to choose. Possibly, she would have chosen new games, more adequate to her capacities and talents than to her brother’s. Either way, now, at school, her only option is uncompetitive, easy to perform activities. She is fascinated by the self-deprecating comments offered by girls who want to receive compliments, and by the girls’ imitation of grownups. The undemanding games offer her some relief. After a while, while being somewhat bored, she finds herself wanting things she never wanted before: a dress, a purse, accessories desired by girls. The reader is reminded here of Simone De Beauvoir’s famous phrase: “You are not born a woman, you become one.”

Youth

Elaine graduates from school in the sixties and goes to an art school in Toronto. Despite the sexual liberation, prejudice against women continues and there is hardly any change in gender representations. She registers several conversations that demonize or deprecate women. She is now aware of the strategies of communication that express gender stereotypes through humor or classical (hierarchical) references.

At first, she sees herself as different from the other women who study with her and even superior to them, because of her former intimacy with her brother and his friends. She adopts the men’s opinions and wants to be one of them. But she is gradually affected by men’s off-putting attitude:

Marjorie and Babs go home. They have husbands, and are not taken seriously. The boys call them “lady painters.”

“If they are lady painters what does it make me?” I say.

“A girl painter,” Jon says, joking.

Colin, who has manners of sort, explains: “If you’re bad you are a lady painter. Otherwise, you’re just a painter.” They don’t say “artist” (147).

She observes her male colleagues with a growing resentment: “In any case they are boys, not men. Their pink cheeks and group sniggering, their good-girl and bad-girl categories, their avid, fumbling attempts to push back the frontiers of garter-belt and brassiere no longer hold my attention” (147).

Later, when she organizes an exhibition with women colleagues, a photographer provokes them, trying to expose a strident streak:

One newspaper sends a photographer in advance who says, jokingly, “Come on girls, burn a few bras for me,” while he is taking our pictures.

“Pig,” says Carolyn in a low voice.

“Cool it,” says Judy. “They love it when we freak” (176).

The ideas of women’s liberation that spread these years with the second wave feminism settle in Elaine’s mind. She is aware of the binary polarization and the repression of women, the objectification and the demonization of those who try to find a voice. She distances herself from prejudicial, sexist communication by judging the men as ridiculous or immature.

Adulthood:

More than ever, Elaine is conscious now about the objectifying pressures that have constructed her relations to and through her body. But while she knows it is acculturated and not beneficial for her self-worth, she is unable to ignore the tension her body’s aging causes in her due to “the tricks it plays.” Her alienation from her body has started in her childhood, as discussed in the upcoming section about time. The distance has diminished or grown during the years, but never disappeared. In fact, the body connects Elaine to the critical gaze of society. She would like to manipulate her body and thus manipulate her status in the world’s eye.

Otherness

Early feminist discourses attempted to restore or build the power of marginalized and subordinate group of women in the face of the dominant men. In patriarchal society members who were not “universal”, that is, men of a certain economic power, race and place were “the other.”

Other variables of otherness have been examined by poststructuralist feminist scholars. They have recognized that beside sexuality and the body, factors such as race, class, culture, gender, abilities, religion, and location determined power relations. They have also applied these determiners to relations between women.

Atwood is interested in the latter, and writes a lot about the cruelty of women and girls. Here, she goes from Cordelia, a child who bullies Elaine, and her two collaborators, Grace and Carol, to Mrs. Smeath, Grace’s mother who knows that Elaine is being abused but doesn’t intervene. The mother, like Elaine’s child torturers, treats Elaine as an inferior creature who deserves punishment for being different. Later, she appears in Elaine’s pictures the way Elaine’s unconscious self depicts her.

Obviously, Elaine doesn’t enjoy any solidarity among girls. She is “the other” in the object-subject social relations within a group that is already “the other” in relation to another center of power. When the author refers to the concept of sisterhood, it has possibly a relation to the celebrated idea of sorority in the sixties. Elaine doesn’t see it as a blessing: “Sisterhood is a very difficult concept for me because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not” (345).

Elaine’s unusual upbringing made her feel and seem out of place in Toronto and among girls. Her colleagues, who were raised according to the conservative concepts of that time and place, saw her through the lens of the only social representations available to them. Elaine tries to fit in, but she remains an outsider and an observer. Beside her internal difference, she is a member of an undefined social class of wonderers. She will learn that other parents look down upon her because they don’t keep the same appearances.

Her first friend, Carol, is excited by Elaine’s “exotic” ways. Her attitude surprises Elaine, but she accepts it. Her second friend, Grace Smeath, is shocked to find that Elaine’s family doesn’t attend church. She engages in changing Elaine, taking her to church, Sunday school and Sunday dinner. She also teaches her common games for girls like gluing clothes to men and women’s figures.

Elaine is reasonably settled until Cordelia joins the group. Cordelia detects Elaine’s awkwardness and vulnerability right away. She observes Elaine’s habits, family, and efforts to belong, and starts a two-year torture. From now on, the girls name Elaine’s inadequacies and criticize her every movement, act and word, in the name of her improvement. The three girls adopt the common social codes as their point of reference, thus representing what is right and superior. It is unclear whether they make a cynical use of the social discourse or whether they truly believe in their mission.

The group is divided between predators and their victim. Elaine starts observing herself through their gaze, identifies with their point of view and changes into a powerless, terrified girl. Her subordination keeps raising the girls’ cruelty to new levels. She suffers in silence:

I lie with my knees up, as close to my body as I can get them. I'm peeling the skin off my feet; I can do it without looking, by touch. I worry about what I've said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time (66).

Elaine is a perfect victim since she internalizes the discourse of the group. She comes to believe that she ought to be punished for a shameful inadequacy. Her voice becomes null, as she attributes to herself the concept of “nothing.”

During the hard period, Elaine feels vaguely that something is wrong, but she is not aware of any options of liberations. She is ashamed to involve her parents, whose awareness of the situation is unclear. In regard to Stephen, she thinks: “Against girls and their indirectness, their whisperings, he would be helpless” (173). He, unlike her, hasn’t learned the social conduct of girls. For two years, she remains in the power of Cordelia, Grace, and Carol.

The development of these relations clarifies that “the other” needs to become aware of the false assumptions of the dominant discourse in order to contest them. Only then, does the abused part become conscious of the possibility of action, of reaching out in order to step out of the existing framework. For instance, when Carol suffers abuse from Cordelia and Grace, she doesn’t accept it the way Elaine does. She is so alarmed that she sobs and protests. The other two girls surrender immediately, afraid to be exposed. They turn their attention back to Elaine and include Carol in her oppression. It is made clear, then, that a voice others can hear has the power to change the equation.

When Elaine finally liberates herself from the girls’ dominance, following her banishment into the freezing ravine and her miraculous survival, she simply drops out of their company. The experience brings a new realization that everything said and done has been false: “I can hear this for what it is. It's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation of someone much older. It's a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them” (108).

At that point, Elaine accepts her individuality. It will take her a long time to overcome her anger and pain, but she breaks free from the guilt of being different.

Time, Space and Psychoanalysis

Elaine’s brother, a physics enthusiast, teaches her in her early years that time is not linear but an infinite space where she can exist in two places at once. She remembers:

I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time, but down through it, like water. Sometimes, this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away (191).

There are no fixed boundaries in this flow of time. She can be Cordelia, for instance, or a woman of any age. Her childhood trauma weighs in this sense of eternal change in the self. She studies her image in the mirror and can’t place herself in time both literally and metaphorically: “Even when I've got the distance adjusted, I vary. I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty” (2).

In her childhood, she believes that shutting off her body will release her. She says: “Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you” (189).

Her will to be shut off is close to a death wish, since she negates her own existence. When she faints, she is encapsulated in a spot outside time and place, disconnected from her body and from the girls who exercise their power over her, free from misery. When she gains consciousness, however, she is back on the field.

Margaret Atwood uses the field concept as a metaphor for Elaine’s mind. Distinct parts of her life, experiences lived in different times, places and changing belief, educational, social and political systems are continuous and interconnected in this fusion of time and space.

The field concept also exists in feminist psychoanalytical theories according to which the recognition of relations of domination woven into the fabric of the self causes new interactions that facilitate an emancipatory change.

The attempt of self-understanding while interpreting social relations opens the way for deconstruction and may relieve the self. along with the personal effect, an examination and reconstruction of discourse and gender representations throughout history offer the same possibility of change and relief for marginalized groups and society as a whole.

Chris Weedon, a feminist scholar working in the poststructuralist tradition, suggests that feminism as a politics of the personal and the social should be based on a strong analytical theory. According to her, poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, discourse and power offer methods for understanding women’s experiences and relating them to social powers without limiting the identity to any fixed notion.

Elaine’s fragmentary experience and gender identity couldn’t have found support in the early psychoanalytical theory restricted to sexual difference. However, the Foaucaouldian approach, adopted by Judith Butler, examines the construction of subject-positions across multiple discourses.

The memories that float into the surface of time are experiences that have transcended their individual and brief existence, shaped and constructed her gender identity. Elaine has become detached and lonely, but now that she accesses and interprets her experiences, she has a better chance for a liberating change.

Conclusion

In the making of this paper, it became clear that Cat’s Eye and the post structural feminist ideology share a field of interrelated concerns. Some ideas displayed in the book challenge the basic assumption regarding the existence of identity only in the social context. These ideas create a debate that offers a further discussion of political and theoretical notion.

Other ideas, such as the weight of gender representation and the abuse of power by dominant groups, dialogue with feminist theories with a greater sense of agreement. The author fosters the analysis of relationships, social institutions, power relations and the fragmentary constitution of identity while keeping with the feminist goal of fixing meanings that allow for social change.

Clearly, my interpretation of the text has been influenced by my own circumstances of time, location, gender, race and class, and it is therefore transitory and relative. But however flitting it is, the understanding of women’s experience through Margaret Atwood’s fiction is a true privilege.

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