

THE MAN-HATERS: THE DEPICTION OF EXTREMIST FEMINISTS IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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Abstract

To challenge the validity of gender dichotomy created by the patriarchal social system, Margaret Atwood, a leading Canadian feminist writer and activist, often creates realistic characters with atypical gender behavior. There are many 'rebellious' women in her novels, who refuse to take on traditional female roles. Some of them fail to transcend the gender dichotomy and achieve selfhood, because, instead of carving out their own space in the society, they simply switch to male roles and start oppressing men in order to avoid being oppressed by them. This paper examines three callous female characters from Atwood's fiction: Ainsley in The Edible Woman, Elizabeth in Life Before Man and Zenia in The Robber Bride. The paper analyses the social factors which make these women ruthless, their impractical subversive strategies and the reasons why they fail to transcend the patriarchal gender system. These man-hating feminists are very important in Margaret Atwood's novels since they, by their downfall, show that Atwood's feminist ideology does not endorse extremist approaches to attain gender freedom.

Keywords: gender dichotomy, patriarchy, transcend, feminism, etc.

Gender stereotypes have given rise to many social theories regarding the typical traits of men and women. For example, Clow discusses a gender theory in which agentic attributes (e.g., assertiveness, ambitiousness, dominance, independence, self-confidence, and competitiveness) are central to perceptions of masculinity, whereas communal attributes (e.g., affectionateness, helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, and sensitivity) are associated with perceptions of femininity. The belief that men and women are essentially different because of their biology and genes fosters gender inequality. Thus, from the origins of humanity, men's biological privilege has enabled them to establish themselves as autonomous subjects. On the other hand, a woman's social position is assigned only by men. A woman has never

imposed her own social rule. In short, “he is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (Beauvoir, 6).

However, the situation is now much more encouraging for those who want to fight against the subjugation of women on the basis of their biological constraints. It is now clearly understood that culture plays a more influential role in gender development than biology. In the light of modern sociological and psychological studies, the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are now used in a more distinctive manner to refer to two different attributes. Sex refers to the biological features that make the male and female distinguishable. This definition encompasses chromosomal differences, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems and other physiological characteristics. In contrast, gender refers to the psychological and sociocultural characteristics of males and females. This definition encompasses the effects of the society and culture on the personality of a person. In a nutshell, “sex is an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned” (Lindsey, 4). This means that gender is a social construct and not a biological destiny.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian feminist thinker and a novelist who has a deep insight into the social construction of gender. A number of her fictional characters, understandably, perform gender roles which do not conform to their biological sex and the cultural stereotypes. By creating realistic characters with such atypical gender behaviors, Atwood effectively challenges the validity of gender dichotomy created by the patriarchal social system. Interestingly, the ‘rebellious’ women who exhibit atypical gender characteristics in Atwood’s novels fall into two categories. The first one comprises the female protagonists who successfully transcend gender duality that broadly sorts all people into males and females or victimizers and victims, and carve out their own space in the society. These women exemplify what can be termed ‘successful transcendence’ as their escape from gender constraints leads to selfhood and dignity. Extensive research has been done into these central characters since they evidently represent Atwood’s feminist ideology. The second category, on the other hand, consists of defiant female characters who do not succeed in transcending the gender duality. Instead of carving out their own space in the society, they simply switch to male roles and start oppressing men in order to avoid being oppressed by them. In other words, in order to avoid being victimized, they become victimizers. Unlike the central characters of the Atwood’s novels, these ‘mannish’ women and their failure to attain selfhood is not studied adequately.

This paper, therefore, aims at examining the female characters in three different Atwood’s novels, who switch to male roles to escape from male domination and exploitation. They have the power to strike back at the patriarchal oppression. However, Atwood does not agree with this type of subversive strategies which resemble some tenets of radical feminism. She does not believe in extremist means of achieving female freedom and independence. Therefore, these characters are clear failures in Atwood’s feminist ideology and novels. Though these women look powerful and rebellious, they do not try to develop the ability to

rise above the gender dichotomy preserved by the patriarchal system, and therefore fail to achieve selfhood and real freedom. These characters are very important in Margaret Atwood's novels since they, by their downfall, show that Atwood's feminist ideology is much more thoughtful and pragmatic than the popular notions of feminism according to which women are supposed to lose their femininity in order to achieve gender equality.

The first female character who is going to be examined in this paper is Ainsley, Marian's friend and the flat-mate in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. She shares Marian's aversion to the restrictive nature of the man-made social system. In fact, in the beginning of the novel, Ainsley expresses her hatred for the social constraints much more explicitly and wildly than Marian. She is extremely annoyed by the nosy and meddlesome landlady and says, "*The old bitch.....Why can't she mind her own business?*" (The Edible, 7). Sometimes she speaks like a social reformer: "*How is the society ever going to change....if some individuals in it don't lead the way?*" (44). However, this seemingly 'emancipated' character is given a comic flavor by Atwood by making her a parody of an earth-mother. Ainsley, ironically, adores women's biological destiny. She says, "*Every woman should have at least one baby.....It fulfills your deepest femininity*" (43).

"Ainsley is fond of paper-back books by anthropologists about primitive cultures: there are several of them bogged down among the clothes on her floor" (The Edible, 43). By describing Ainsley's leisure interests in this way, Atwood, as Howells points out, is trying to hint that Ainsley is "evidently a devotee of Margaret Mead" (Howells, 23). A well-known American anthropologist, Margaret Mead studied the cultural behavior of the non-literate people of Oceania and has written on various topics like cultural conditioning of sexual behavior, natural character, women's rights, child bearing and sexual morality. Her definition of the female role, understandably, is popularly construed as a glorification of motherhood and childbearing. She believes that modern western women should also uphold the same 'earth-mother maternity'. As an ardent fan of Margaret Mead, Ainsley is driven by a 'scholarly' fascination for the notion of 'earth-mother' and yearns to fulfill her biological destiny. She passionately discusses with Marian the importance of breast-feeding. "*Any woman left to her own devices would automatically breast-feed as long as possible. I'm certainly going to*" (The Edible, 42).

Atwood further complicates this modern earth-mother character by making her a man-hater. With a yearning for motherhood and a hatred for men, Ainsley is a person with ill-assorted principles. She says, "*The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands*" (The Edible, 42). She is so cynical and contemptuous about men as to think that women are prevented from breast-feeding their babies by men who are jealous. "*North American men hate watching the basic mother-child unit functioning naturally; it makes them feel not needed*" (42). Ainsley, therefore, does not believe in marriage. Nor does she seem to be interested in any uncommitted sexual relationship with any man for having physical pleasure. Her "programme is entirely ideological and in a curious way academic and theoretical"

(Howells, 26). She just wants a healthy man to impregnate her so that she can be a single parent. For Ainsley, it is just a social project. As Gupta points out, “she wants a child by her choice, not as a chance product of emotional hours spent in bed” (111).

Such a derogatory attitude towards men and fatherhood makes Ainsley appear a staunch, man-hating feminist in the novel. Moreover, she is as cunning as a fox. The way this ‘scheming super female’ feigns youthfulness and naivety while pursuing Leonard Slank, “*a lecherous skirt-chaser*”(The Edible, 103) who has a strong desire for young and inexperienced girls, is one of the most comical elements of the novel. It has to be noted here that Atwood skillfully inverts the conventional seduction scheme and it is Len, the man, who is cleverly seduced. Ainsley, therefore, takes up the ‘dominant male’ position here. However, by making Marian, the central character in the novel, dislike and reject Ainsley’s stand on men and fatherhood, Atwood, apparently, indicates that extremist feminism is unrealistic and undesirable.

Once pregnant, Ainsley’s ‘outwardly’ strong feminist determination to be a single parent is readily abandoned as she is deeply influenced by a psychologist’s lecture on the importance of a father for the healthy upbringing of a child. Subsequently, she uses her usual ‘scheming’ nature to persuade Len to marry her, but Len, a man who has always enjoyed uncommitted sexual relationships with young girls, is appalled by the idea and turns his back on her “*goddamn fertility-worship*”(The Edible, 268). As a dispassionate alternative arrangement, she chooses to marry Fischer Smythe, a graduate student who has a passionate fascination for the archetypal womb symbols and who is consequently enchanted by the pregnant Ainsley. This ruthless schemer finally gets assimilated into the patriarchal system. Ainsley’s impractical approach to the attainment of individuation finally traps her into being a slave to traditional social values.

While Ainsley’s extremist feminist strategies make her lose her sense of self to marital obligations, Elizabeth, in *Life Before Man*, tragically loses her family because of her dominant nature. She comes over in the novel as an aggressive woman who mistreats her male and female companions. Elizabeth is a special projects administrator at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum. She marries Nate with a ‘feminine’ expectation that he, being a man, will be able to protect her from all kinds of hardships. To her disappointment, she comes to know that it is Nate who needs financial and emotional security from her as he is emotionally weak and financially ruined. Obviously, Elizabeth’s expectations of her husband are shaped by patriarchal standards according to which men have to support women. In this regard, she seems to be very practical. On the contrary, Nate gives up his profitable job as a lawyer and starts making wooden toys, a profession which cannot make him a successful ‘breadwinner.’ He does not seem to have any qualms about financially depending on his wife. Besides, Elizabeth is maddened with his cold impersonal behavior. Frustrated, Elizabeth becomes very indifferent to Nate. Her conjugal life is devoid of warmth and love. She fills the vacuum in her life with a number of rules according to which she and Nate share the domestic

responsibilities. The rule-bound life with her annoys Nate who thinks that “*living with Elizabeth involves a maze of such legalities*” (Life Before, 147).

Nate’s extramarital affair infuriates Elizabeth, and as if to even the score, she becomes involved with Chris who works in her office. She draws comfort from her relationship with Chris because he, unlike Nate, is emotionally sincere. In addition, it is an apt retaliatory act which helps Elizabeth to punish Nate for being unfaithful. However, Elizabeth, being devoted to her children and the family life, wants to have a restricted affair with Chris, but Chris’s unbounded affection for her, understandably, alarms her. She rejects his pleas to leave her children and home for him. Elizabeth feels she is being overpowered by Chris’s sincere love. “*She hates it when anyone has power over her. Nate doesn’t have that kind of power, he never had. She married him easily, like trying on a shoe*” (Life Before, 23). This reveals that Elizabeth is a hardhearted and self-seeking woman who is not capable of loving and being loved. She treats Chris the way men treat women and Chris, humiliated by her apathy, kills himself in a very violent way. As Prabhakar points out, Chris does not die for love but he wants to be ‘an event.’ Grieving over his death, Elizabeth laments:

“You wanted me to cry, mourn, sit in a rocker with a black-edged handkerchief, bleeding from the eyes. But I’m not crying. I’m so angry. I could kill you. If you hadn’t already done that for yourself” (Life Before, 11).

It seems Elizabeth does not miss Chris and his profound love but is only incensed by the guilt complex that his suicide has left in her. Despite her suffering after the death of Chris, Elizabeth wants to rebuild the marriage for the sake of the children. She asks Nate: “*Can anything be saved*” (Life Before, 88) from the ruins of their conjugal life? But Nate has made up his mind to leave her and the children for his new lover, Lesje. Elizabeth sacrificed her affair with Chris for the sake of her children and her marriage with Nate, whereas Nate is ready to forgo the family for his extramarital affair. Life seems very unfair to her. Consequently, Elizabeth becomes even more cruel and nasty in her dealings with people. She is “*the lady with the axe*” (41), who is ruthless in her relationship with both Nate and Chris. The pair of leather gloves that she wears and removes methodically is symbolic of her dominance.

By and large, Elizabeth’s character is the one which is detested most in the novel, not only by the other characters in the novel but also by the readers. Her sexual relationships with men are mere tests of her dominance and power; she does not care about them and their feelings. She skillfully seduces William, Lesje’s former lover. She willingly allows herself to be raped by the travelling salesman of women’s underwear. Atwood (1990) says that Elizabeth has no interest in ethics whatsoever. Even women are not spared from the ordeal. “There is also an element of voyeurism in Elizabeth’s relationship with Nate’s lovers.....her manipulation of both Martha and Lesje is almost sexual in its cruelty” (Rigney, 82). Lesje classifies Elizabeth as “*a shark; on other days it’s a huge Jurassic toad, primitive, squat, venomous, on*

other days a cephalopod, a giant squid, soft and tentacled, with a hidden beak" (Life Before, 245). Without a doubt, the self-seeking approach in her dealings with others makes her a villainous character in the novel. Indeed, for Elizabeth, the title of the novel, *Life Before Man* "means that her own life is given priority over any relationship with a man" (Atwood, 1990:123).

However, this character is very complex and Rigney rightly remarks that "Elizabeth cannot be so easily categorized and dismissed. For one thing, she is subject to unexpected expressions of tenderness, towards her children especially, but also towards Auntie Muriel whom she has good reasons to hate" (83). Elizabeth is certainly a paradox and by examining her awful childhood, we slowly start to understand that she is a casualty of the oppressive patriarchal social system. Her father was a selfish and immoral person who abandoned his wife and children. Her mother, who was meek and faint-hearted, was left completely destitute. She became an alcoholic to forget about her miseries. Her mother's ruinous situation was ruthlessly exploited by Auntie Muriel, a childless woman, who induced her mother to sell her daughters to her. Under the control of Auntie Muriel, the young Elizabeth had to undergo all kinds of harassment. The unpleasant and the undignified life in Auntie Muriel's house made Elizabeth to detest her very much. This hatred gave her the mental energy needed to become a forceful and dominant woman. Gradually, Elizabeth started doing to others what had been done to her.

The repressive upbringing by Auntie Muriel and the pathetic deaths of her mother and sister certainly make us feel sympathy for Elizabeth who is totally unsympathetic towards the men and women in her life. According to Grace, Elizabeth is the only character whose past losses and traumas seem commensurate with her present negativity. Atwood (1990) says, "She [Elizabeth] is ruthless in her dealings with other people, but then people have been ruthless in their dealings with her. Violence begets violence" (Atwood, 1990:125). Nevertheless, it has to be noted that Elizabeth's character does not emerge triumphant in the novel. Owing to her oppressive nature she loses all her relationships except the one with her children.

Like Ainsley and Elizabeth, Zenia in *The Robber Bride* is also a rebellious woman who takes on a male role and holds sway over the men and women she comes into contact with. Atwood uses Zenia's character to explore how the lack of rightful social power can launch some women into "guerrilla warfare" (Howells, 17). The merciless exploitation by the male-dominated society does not make Zenia a submissive victim; it makes her a fierce animal that strikes back at the patriarchal system. In fact, *The Robber Bride* is a parody of *The Robber Bridegroom* by Grimm Brothers. The main purpose of Atwood in this novel is to subvert the sex role stereotyping portrayed by Grimm Brothers. The Robber Bridegroom is a conventional fairy tale of an attractive young man who entices young innocent girls to come to the wood and then chops them and eats them. Atwood has feminized this patriarchal tale

and created 'Zenja,' the central character in the novel, a cunning and beautiful woman who traps men into losing their dignity to her and finally kills them.

For Zenja, the power comes from her sexuality. She uses her body and slyness to bring men to their knees. However, unlike Elizabeth who engages in extramarital affairs to maintain gender equality, Zenja preys on men to maintain her dominance. She uses sex as a strategy for exercising power in the society. She is a merciless fighter who rebels against male sexual dominance which is well established in the patriarchal society.

Zenja was a fatherless child and was brought up by her mother who was renting herself and her daughter to men as sexual commodities. She was also sexually abused by a Greek Orthodox priest. Life was very tough for her as a child but she obeyed her mother to protect the family from dying of hunger. She also loved her mother who was sick: "*I loved her, I adored her, I would have done anything for her! I didn't want her to be sad*" (The Robber, 164). However, she fled home leaving her sick mother alone. Her aunt brought her up by giving her a good education. Unfortunately, the death of her aunt left Zenja emotionally disturbed and she once again started facing difficult time in life. However, Zenja remained undeterred by the hardships of her life. She went to England and tried to be a freelance journalist, but things turned from bad to worse and she left for Canada where she was once again dragged into prostitution. She also became a drug addict because of the frustration she had to put up with. The difficulties and the disappointments that Zenja suffered in the patriarchal society finally turn her into a ruthless woman who proclaims a war against male domination. In other words, like Elizabeth, she is a lady with the axe. However, from gender perspective, Zenja's impoverished brought up has freed her from the clutches of gender norms. Zenja says, "*There's one thing about being an orphan, though,... You don't have to live up to anyone else's good opinion of you.*" (The Robber, 197). The anger at the way men treated her and the lack of conventional gender socialization make Zenja behave like a male hunter.

As a response to male sexual dominance and insincerity, Zenja adopts male sexual practices, seduces men and humiliates them. As Prabhakar says, "her power is the power of female sexuality. She uses her body as a weapon to humiliate men by flaunting her sexuality" (391). In the novel, she robs Tony, Roz and Charis of their men, money and their self-confidence. Tony is described as an unattractive woman in the novel. She is unable to see herself as sexual being and to project herself into such a scenario. Because of her sense of inadequacy, Tony is always afraid of losing West, her boy friend. West is very immoral and interested in having relationships with other women. Zenja seduces him, wears him out and shows him the power of her sexuality and his inadequacy. She finally dismisses him. West is so terrified and humiliated by Zenja that he stops looking at other women. Zenja certainly makes a greater impact on Roz who feels that she is not sufficiently rewarded for her role as a loving wife. Zenja disillusions her regarding the insincerity of her husband Mitch. Besides, Zenja makes Roz understand the futility of men-women relationship:

Men don't see you as a person, they just see the body, and so that's all you see yourself. You think of your body as a tool, something to use. God, I'm tired of men! They're so easy to amuse. All you have to do to get their attention is take off your clothes. After a while you want a bit more of a challenge, you know? (The Robber, 437)

Zenia plays the same enlightening role in Charis's life, a woman whose childhood was as miserable as Zenia's. Like Zenia, Charis was fatherless, beaten and raped during her childhood. However, unlike Zenia, Charis has not been disillusioned about male love. She loves Billy and remains dedicated to him. She believes that Billy loves her and is faithful to her. Zenia attends Charis's yoga classes for her feigned cancer and detects Billy's weakness for women. She effortlessly persuades Billy to run away with her, leaving her wife behind. She sexually exploits him and finally rejects him, a humiliating experience for Billy, which makes him kill himself. With the help of Zenia, Charis is able to see the true nature of people, especially men:

People can have deceptive exteriors. Men especially. They can put on a good act, they can make you believe they are model citizens and that they are right and you are wrong. They can fool everyone and make you seem like a liar (The Robber, 261).

However, in spite of the edifying role that she plays in the novel, Zenia is an evil element that wreaks havoc on the lives of Tony, Roz and Charis. She cheats all of them and is undeserving of their affection and trust. Families are destroyed and individuals are humiliated and killed by Zenia's merciless strategies. By presenting Zenia as a loathsome character (despite her intelligence and her pitiable childhood), Atwood illustrates the practical effects of radical feminist thinking about gender relation in the modern society. Instead of trying to carve an individualistic identity for herself in the society, Zenia follows male strategies of domination and control, an idea often advocated by radical feminists. Atwood does not make Zenia triumphant at the end of the novel. Tony, Roz and Charis defeat Zenia in their own private battles with her and Zenia finally dies. As Praphakar points out, "what Atwood envisages here is that both patriarchy and matriarchy are two extreme standpoints. Hence the novel drives home the message that heterosexual relations ought to be voluntary, egalitarian or equalitarian, just and holistic but should not be exploitative, alienating or oppressive" (391). In other words, "Zenia represents a powerfully transgressive element, which continues to threaten feminist attempts to transform gender relations and concepts of sexual power politics" (Howells, 127).

For Atwood, selfhood involves only the rejection of the cultural stereotypes of traditional and desirable femininity. It does not however mean rejection of femininity. In her novels, the female protagonists who triumph over patriarchal domination do so without rejecting their feminine power. On the other hand, women like Ainsley, Elizabeth and Zenia take on male roles to liberate themselves from patriarchal oppression. It is worth noting here that these

oppressive women do not evoke any admiration in the minds of the leading female characters of Atwood's novels. Instead, they only evoke fear and hatred in the novels. Moreover, these oppressive women, who represent male domination, finally bite the dust, indicating that extremist ways of achieving women liberation do not work.

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