



# St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science

ISSN: 2347 - 5331

<http://sjctnc.edu.in/6107-2/>



## Women as Object in the Novel *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood

Mrs. X. Ann Lanka Jeyadharshini<sup>a\*</sup>

M. Lakshmi Devi<sup>b</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Canadian Literature is literature originating from Canada. There are numerous histories of Canadian literature, written in different languages. British and French as well as aboriginal were dominant cultures of Canadian literature. The body of written works produced by Canadians, reflecting the country's dual origin and its official bilingualism, and can be split into two major divisions: English and French. Feminist campaigns are generally considered to be one of the main forces behind major historical societal changes for women's rights. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience.

The present paper gives an overall view of feminism and how it plays a vital role in society is portrayed by Canada's foremost women writer Margaret Atwood. Her novel *The Year of the Flood* deals with this concept and it explains the main consequences faced by women in the world. Women's sufferings and their views on men are clearly given in this novel.

**Keywords:** History, Canadian Literature and Feminism.

History of Canada is partly an account of the slow realization of its own independence, its importance within an international frame work. It has discarded the colonial mentality characterized by the country and its actions after many years. Canadian history shows a service of attempt to unite a land so vast in defying unity. To the present day, Canadians have shown little of the republican sentiment and have to remain a constitutional monarchy.

The women writer's contribution to Canadian literature is prominent and their choice of women as their subjects, rather than creators, is the awareness of feminism. Some of the outstanding women writers of Canadian literature contributed to build a major peaceful world, improving women's life chances. Among all Mavis Gallant's main objective is the development of specific situation and reconstruction of the state of mind and heart of women through her

<sup>a</sup>Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), Cuddalore-01,

Email: lakshmidiviyyar@gmail.com

<sup>b</sup>\*Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), Cuddalore-01,

Email: annlankaa@gmail.com, Mobile: +91 94868 52676

collections like: *The Other Paris, My Heart is Broken, The End of the World and Other Stories, The Transit, and Across the Bridge.*

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights for women that are equal to those of men. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment.

The usual biographical facts in life of Margaret Atwood are well-known. She was born with the gifts that made her a great novelist. These may be stated quite simply. Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a writer of worldwide reputation. Internationally acclaimed as a poet, novelist, essayist and story writer holds a unique position in contemporary Canadian literature. Using such devices as irony, symbolism and self-conscious narrations, she explores the relationship between humanity and nature, dark side of the human behaviour and power as it pertains to gender and politics. Her books have received critical acclaim in the United States, Europe, and her native Canada, and she has been the recipient of numerous literary awards. Atwood's critical recognition is matched by her popularity with readers. She is a frequent guest on Canadian television and radio and her books are often best sellers.

The novel *The Year of the Flood* is not simply the story of the sufferings of two female protagonists but Atwood also exposes the relationship between Toby and Ren and other female characters such as Amanda and Ren's relationship, Ren's relationship with her mother Lucerne. Therefore, this novel also deals with the issue of feminism. Toby, Atwood's primary protagonist, who most clearly exemplifies the subversive potential of the instability of identity by taking on an androgynous persona as a locus of resistance in order to gain autonomy in a world where little is given or acquired by women. In the near-future of this novel, there is no longer a government, since the Corporation has taken over; those who work for the Corporation live in "gated Corporation strongholds" and have little autonomy or freedom, but are safe from the masses of poor in the pleeblands.

Rebecca is another woman who exercises resistance to the hegemonic power regime, but she does so by joining the Gardeners. Rebecca works at Secret

Burger, where Toby works, but she is able to avoid the sexual abuse of the manager because of another power structure, gangs based on race: "Us Jelacks, we're two kinds of folks you don't want to mess with. He knows I'd get the Blackened Redfish onto him, and they're one mean gang... way too much grief!" (YF 35). With this passage, Atwood gives a fleeting glance into another power structure, the pleebland gangs. While the Corporation is viewed as the top hierarchy of power structures, there are shifting power relations that must be contended with. While Ren shifts from Gardener to compound child to spa worker to prostitute, Rebecca, in the little that Atwood shows, shifts from Secret Burger employee to protected gang member to Gardener.

Both women alter their identities and this enables them to shift from one situation to another. Although Rebecca is protected from the abuses that seem to go along with working at Secret Burger, she still has to answer to the power structures of the gangs, so she flees to the Gardeners. This is where Rebecca shifts her identity from weak and helpless pleebland woman to tough gang member to a reverent and intelligent Gardener chef and thus shifts her power relation. While the Gardeners are another power structure, with rules to follow, Rebecca feels it is the best place for her to live: "they are good people... what comes just comes, so what I say is, Relax" (YF 47). Rebecca demonstrates how identities are unstable and easily subject to change and can be adapted in order to resist the hegemonic power structure. Rebecca changes who she is in order to fit into each group that she joins and by following the Gardeners and then the Maddadam group, Rebecca survives the Waterless Flood.

Toby provides the most violent example of women being objectified by men in this novel. Toby's situation is common in this world and more pervasive, although not unheard of in our world. Blanco, Toby's boss at Super Burgers is a man who thinks two things of every woman: either she is his play thing to do with as he likes and then discard, which usually results in death, or she is not worth his time or energy. No woman is worth his respect, and he overtly treats women as his objects. Based on his previous career as a bouncer at Scales and Tails, which he was fired from for roughing up the "talent," Blanco thought working at Secret Burger was,

a big comedown and he was bitter about it – why should he suffer because of some slut? – so he hated the job. But he figured the girls were his perks. He had two pals, ex-bouncers like himself, who acted as his bodyguards and they got the leavings. Supposing there was anything left. (YF 36)

Toby explains her immediate, surface level reactions when she says, “day by day she was hungrier and more exhausted. She had her own bruises now, like poor Dora’s. Despair was taking her over: she could see where this was going, and it looked like a dark tunnel. She’d be used up soon” (YF 38). Toby has completely surrendered to the objectification and seems willing to let herself die rather than resist. Thus, she forms a weak identity as Blanco’s woman, since she does as he says. Toby puts up with his abuse for a little less than two weeks.

but [Toby said] it felt like years. [Blanco’s] view was that a woman with an ass as skinny as Toby’s should consider herself in luck if any man wanted to stick his hole-hammer into her. She’d be even luckier if he didn’t sell her to Scales as a temporary, which meant temporarily alive. She should thank her lucky stars. Better, she should thank him: he demanded a thank you after every degrading act. He didn’t want her to feel pleasure, though: only submission. (YF 38)

After the Waterless Flood, Toby keeps the respect and social power that she gained as a Gardener; however, she begins to loosen the strict rigidity of her asexual, androgynous self. Atwood only gives a few pages at the end of the novel to depict an implication that Toby’s identity is beginning to change again. Toby desires to perform an identity that commands respect, agency and social power, but one that is also feminine; in doing so, she subverts the ruling regime that does not condone such an identity. Toby was unable to construct this identity for herself under the earlier power structures, but after the Waterless Flood, the Gardeners and the Corporation no longer exist and Toby is outside of the existing power structures.

The language used here demonstrates Blanco’s thought process and how the women were viewed as objects and playthings to him. He assumed that it was his right to pick a woman and “play” with her.

It is possible to see these women in Atwood’s fiction as tricksters. The figure of the trickster is very much used to talk about Atwood’s protagonists. Instead of the hero, who saves and sacrifices, the trickster is able to affect and create his or her own reality. On the role of the trickster, Wilson states that “Atwood’s survivors are trickster creators, using their verbal magic to transform their worlds” (Introduction XII). Oryx does not survive and is unable to actually tell her story, but Toby and Ren in some way are able to comment on her story too by presenting their own stories of exploiting and commodification. Ultimately, they survive the system and even though they still face predatory men in the post-apocalyptic scenario, are willing to change the environment, to protect each other and build a new reality for them.

What *The Year of the Flood* exposes is the extreme capitalization of the image of women that are part of society now and what might be the impacts of such images that usually portray women as passive beings or even glamorize violence perpetrated against them. The space of hope is found in their ability to tell their own stories and to appropriate other stories, making thus their own survival possible.

## REFERENCES

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge. 1990. Print.
3. *Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
4. Rigney Hill, Barbara. *Margaret Atwood*. London: MacMillan education, 1987. Print.