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**Association of Self Fashioning and Circumstances in
Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin***

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Abstract

In this paper, the association between style of dressing and the natural circumstances in *The Blind Assassin* is described. Many novelists consider clothes as constructive performance to narrate a particular incidence or circumstance. In Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, one can see the association between the variety of clothes and the circumstances of the character.

This novel is a type of Novella. It can be treated as Science Fiction. The technique is post-modern and the theme is search for self assertiveness. The association of different types of attribute with that of self fashion is clearly established in this article.

Major Characters

Laura Chase, Iris Chase, Richard Griffen, Alex Thomas, Reenie.

Introduction

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Iris the narrator's grandparents Benjamin Chase and Adelia had three sons. They are Norval, Eddie and Perci. Eddie and Perci went on expedition to South America in search of gold. Norval Chase helped his father in running the button factory, at Port Ticonderoga.

The marital relationship between Benjamin and Adelia is so beautifully described by Atwood. Adelia married money and she was expected to refine the money like oil. They lived in Avilion which was christened by Adelia. She died in 1913 due to cancer. After the demise of Benjamin Chase, Norval Chase reestablished the button factory.

The major characters of the novel is sketched and shown in figure 1 by the authors. Norval Chase and his wife Liliana have two daughters namely Iris and Laura. Liliana loved Laura more than Iris. The death of Liliana when Iris was 9 years old made her to take up the responsibilities which include taking care of Laura.

Begins with a Tragic Incident: Interpreting the Context

The novel is introduced with the tragic incident, the death of Laura Chase. She killed herself when she drives a car over an embankment. However the car belongs to her sister Iris. It catches fire and she is killed immediately. People suspect the death of Laura as suicidal. Laura was wearing white gloves on her hands. It symbolically tells that she is very much careful while driving and her forthcoming death.

Since she is wearing the gloves, it could be predicted that she likes warmth during her travel. She had a pinned chignon, a shirtwaist with tide collar and the dress is neat with sober colour during the crash. She is always serious and likely to attract the attention of others. The entire story centers on Laura, her relationships and her eccentricities. According to Iris, the white gloves denote the gesture. "The white gloves: a Pontius Pilate gesture". She was washing her hands of me and all of us.

White gloves are being associated with death and departure.

Hat and Veil

At this instance, Iris would need gloves and a hat with a veil to cover her eyes because to avoid the press reporters interview. The circumstances reveal that a hat with a veil protects a person from embarrassing situation. Then she enters into her dressing room to wear black dress and a hand-kerchief. This shows that there is traditional attire during mourning. The Button factory was flourishing and the Button factory picnic introduces a new character, Alex Thomas, who is an orphan. His parents died in the war, he was brought up by Presbyterians. He has no family ties. The incident clearly pictures that

when a man died because of war, he is not being taken care by the Government Agencies. Alex Thomas was sent to an Orphanage in those days.

Iris and Richard

When Norval Chase lost his business, due to economic depression of World War I, he has decided to hand over the factory to Richard Griffen. Norval decides that at the age of 18 Iris should marry Richard whose age is 35 in order to save his prestige. Richard's sister Ms. Winifred prior also accepted the proposal. Hence, Richard Married Iris. Richard and Iris went on tour.

During this period, death of Norval Chase occurs and the information is given through post. Richard was tearing nearly five postcards, denied to tell the death of Norval Chase to his wife. This instance focuses on the pleasure and enjoyment of Richard over Iris. When father Norval died, Laura was only 15 years old. Richard conquers everything of Norval Chase.

Iris is pregnant and she delivers a girl baby, Aimee. Before this good news she suffered two miscarriages. It is to be noted that Aimee is not Richard's daughter, but daughter of Alex Thomas. Iris was searching for love and respect from Alex Thomas. Iris was grateful to Laura; she had never seen Aimee because she would have known right away that Aimee was daughter of Alex Thomas.

Iris leaves Richard after Laura's funeral. Iris is seen cherishing the photo of her and Alex Thomas at the button factory picnic. Just before her death, Iris has a last day dream. It is of reuniting with Sabrina, Aimee's daughter.

Towards the end of the novel, she longs to see Sabrina – as a listener and it ends with the death of Iris.

The novel is open-ended and Sabrina's arrival is left to the reader's imagination.

The Button House: Costumes of the Past

According to Iris, The Button house (p.63) is a symbol of prosperity. Her grandfather is wearing a frock coat and top hat in a portrait. This clearly indicates the richness in style to welcome delegates in Canada.

“The machines are run by men, in eyeshades and vests, their sleeves rolled up”; “the workers at the table are women, in upswept hairdos and pinafores”. The sleeves rolled up indicate that men are hard workers. The workers at the table are women. This indicates

that the female workers are employed in soft nature work. There is an association between the style of clothes and the place of work.

Assuming Gender Traits

Patrick C. Hogan(1990), has cited an example in Atwood's *Surfacing*. "Men tend to assume that they have masculine traits, women that they have feminine traits". Thus the masculine and feminine traits attribute to the nature of the work. And also the style of dresses attribute to kinds of work. Vanitha (2007) has studied 'Shifting balances in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Mariamma Chacko (2001) has reviewed Margaret Atwood's novels.

"There's a snapshot of my mother at the Normal School, in London, Ontario, taken with two other girls; all three are standing on the front steps of their boarding house, laughing, their arms entwined. My mother is wearing a sealskin coat; from underneath her hat the ends of her fine hair crackle. She must already have acquired the pince-nez that preceded the owlsh glasses I remember – she was near – sighted early – but in this picture she doesn't have them on". (p.84).

The Sealskin Coat

The novel high-lights the sealskin coat specially worn by the teenagers during winter season. This attribute reveals the association between self fashioning and the nature. Adelia is always practical and has a foresight of future developments.

"They stand on the railway platform. He's in his uniform; his medals are like holes hot in the cloth, through which the dull gleam of his real, metal shot body can be seen. My mother is there in her best dress, a belted affair with lapels, and a hat with a crisp ribbon. She smiles tremulously". (p.84).

The Medals and All

The medals on his shirt reflect the bravery award bestowed on him. This shows Atwood's brilliant narration which links the style of wearing uniform and the circumstance of serving the nation. It brings out the patriotism of Norval Chase. Adelia is proud of her husband's valour.

She's sewing on a button, torn from one of my dresses: I am said to be hard on my clothes. (p. 100).

Her dress is sky blue, with a broad white collar and white cuffs edged in piquet. Here Atwood indirectly refers the proverb “Stitch in time saves nine”.

Cautious about Dressing Style

The characters are very cautious in dressing style. It also reveals the relationship between the mother and daughter. Sewing the button symbolizes the love and affection between two individuals. Mother was dead. It was made of sealskin, and still had Mother’s handkerchief in the pocket. (p.167) and then the coat was given away to charity.

The used stylish dresses are contributed to the charitable organizations after the demise of a person. This relates the dresses given to charitable activities were followed by the Royal Canadians. It is to be noted that Alex Thomas is from such a charitable organization. After the demise of the mother, Reenie becomes the care taker of the children of Norval Chase.

Flowing Robe-like Garments

Callista, Norval Chase’s friend wore flowing robe-like garments in bold swirling prints: fuchsia, heliotrope and saffron were the names of the colours. She told me these designs were from Paris and were inspired by White Russian émigrés (p.178). Canada a post-colonial nation provides ample ground for emigrants. Here one can understand the link between garment business and emigration. Callista always likes artificial clothes in order to attract the attention of Norval Chase.

“Callista was overdressed for the picnic”. (p.210). As I watched, she stopped and lifted one foot and peered back over her shoulder to see if there was something stuck on her heel. I thought how nice it would be to have such lovely clothes, such wicked new-money clothes, instead of the virtuous, dowdy, down at heels garments that were our mode of necessity these days”.

“I became thirteen. My clothing should be simple and plain, with white blouses and dark pleated skirts and dark velvet dresses for church. Clothes that looked like uniforms – that looked like sailor suits, but were not”. (p.193).

Her father insists on the style of dressing which is a hindrance to Iris’s self fashioning. She loses her identity by denying self fashioning and one can label the authority of Norval Chase over his daughter Iris.

Religion and Garments

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Atwood's fiction is marked with religion. The above sentence pictures the family towards the regular attendance in the church. Thus the association between dresses and the religion is established in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. "For the picnic we both wore our blue dirndl skirts and white blouses from the summer before. Laura had my hat from three seasons ago; I myself had last year's hat, with the ribbon changed".

Class Character and Dressing Styles

As a Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has imbibed the mythical and marvelous aspect of the Canadian landscape and linked it with self fashioning. Renee was searching for Laura during the picnic. Laura was sitting on the grass under a tree, talking with a young man – a man, not a boy – a darkish man, with a light coloured hat. His style was indeterminate – not a factory worker, but not anything else either, or nothing definite. No tie, but then it was a picnic. A blue shirt little frayed around the edges. An impromptu, proletarian mode. A lot of young men were affecting it then – a lot of university students. In the winters they wore knitted vests, with horizontal stripes. (p.215). Alex Thomas looks like working class. His dressing clearly depicts he is affected by the style of University students.

Camaraderie in Dressing?

Laura is wearing blue skirt and the young man is also wearing a blue shirt. Thus the dresses lead to matching of a male with that of female in Atwood's theory to attribute the similarity between their likes.

Laura and I did not have proper dinner dresses. We had dresses, however. They were the usual dark-blue velvet, left over from when we were younger, with the hems let down and a black ribbon sewn over the top of it worn hemline to conceal it. They'd once had white lace collars, and Laura's still did; I'd taken the lace off mine, which gave it a lower neckline. These dresses were too tight, or mine was. (p. 223).

Economy Constrains Fashioning

Due to financial and political catastrophe, the style of dresses is minimized. Thus the correlation exists between the self fashioning and economy.

"That evening Winifred wore a black dress, simply cut but voraciously elegant, set off by a triple string of pearls. Her earrings were minute bunches of grapes, pearl also but with gold stems and leaves. Callie by contrast was pointedly underdressed.

For a couple of years now she'd set aside her fuchsia and saffron draperies, her bold Russian émigré designs. Now she went in for slacks in the daytime and V neck sweaters and rolled up shirt sleeves; she'd cut her hair too and shortened her name to Cal. Woman like Winifred represents pretentious nature and she wants to pose like a high class Canadian woman.

Father wore his dinner jacket, which was in need of pressing. Richard Griffen wore his, which wasn't. Alex Thomas wore a brown jacket and grey flannels, too heavy for the weather; also a tie, red spots on the blue ground. His shirt was white, the color too roomy. His clothes looked as if he'd borrowed them". (p.225). Atwood has a style to differentiate between the rich and the poor. The differentiation is revealed through the self fashioning dresses.

Regimental Dress Code

The next day, troops from the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) arrived to restore order. After the RCR has got things under control, the Mounties arrived. Three of them appeared outside our front door. They knocked politely, then stood in the hall, their shiny boots creaking against the waxed parquet, their stiff brown hats in their hands. They wanted to talk to Laura. (P.255.) The brown hats belong to army and it is a self fashion protocol.

Iris and Laura gave shelter to Alex Thomas without the knowledge of Norval Chase. Their kind-heartedness is unveiled through their charity. By the first week in January, we decided it was safe enough for him to leave. We filched an old coat of Father's from the back corner of the cloak room for him, and packed him a lunch – bread and cheese, an apple – and sent him away on his travels. (P.267).

"Sabrina didn't notice me. Or she did notice me, but she didn't know who I was. I expect my hat was the object of it. It was a long way from being fashionable, that hat". (p.360). Literature reflects one's life and move towards the chronicles. The hat is no longer fashionable. This reflects the narrator Iris Chase is becoming older and older.

Seasons and Hats

"I caught a glimpse of myself back then, in a straw hat, a pale yellow dress, cotton because of the heat. It was late summer, the year after my marriage; the ground was like brick". (p.361).

Usually, the summer is hot and light rays spectrum are yellow. The dress is also pale yellow. Thus the triple parameter association is made among natural planet, dress and the season.

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Laura was standing on the front steps of Avilion. She was wearing a pale blue housedress printed with faded mauve butterflies – mine, three summers before – and no shoes whatsoever. (p. 381). She was young very fragile and alone. Just like her faded dress, her chastity also faded.

He drove us himself, in his blue coupe – one of his newest toys. In the trunk behind us were our two suitcases, the small ones, just for overnight – his maroon leather, mine lemon sherbet yellow. I was wearing an eggshell linen suit – frivolous to mention it – and I knew it would be wrinkled at the back once we arrived. Linen shoes, with stiff fabric bows and peek-a-boo toes. My matching eggshell hat rode on my knees like a delicate gift box.

My eggshell hat fell out onto the gravel and Laura stepped on it. There was a cracking sound, an intake of breath from Richard. I said nothing. In that instant I no longer cared about the hat. (p.382).

Age Factor

The circumstance clearly indicates the increasing tendency of age factor. Life is also fleeting and empty like an eggshell.

I was standing on the dock at Avilion, with the broken, greenish ice of the river tinkling all round like bells, but I wasn't wearing a winter coat – only a cotton print dress covered with butterflies. Also a hat made of plastic flowers in lurid colours – tomato red, a hideous lilac – that was lit up from inside by tiny light bulbs. (p. 466).

There was a single overhead light in the room; it had a yellow silk shade. In the glass doors I could see us reflected: our royal blue velvet dresses with lace collars, our white faces, our pale hair parted in the middle, our pale hands folded in our laps. Our white socks, our black Mary Janes. We'd been taught to sit with one foot crossed over the other – never the knees – and that is how we were sitting. (p.471). Reflection refers to the recollection of the past. Black, pale, white colours suggest gloomy situations in the lives of Iris and Laura Chase. It reflects the solitude of these characters.

Already my childhood seemed far away – a remote age, faded and bittersweet, like dried flowers. Did I regret its loss, did I want it back? I didn't think so. (p. 477).

My wedding gown, the gloves, the veil, and the flowers – these trappings Laura had not bothered with. (p. 551).

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Wedding Dress – a Trap

Laura did not consider the marriage of Iris and Richard as a valuable and holy one. The wedding gown is considered as a trapping. Thus the holy matrimony is not considered as sanctity.

One evening there will be a knock at the door and it will be you. You'll be dressed in black; you'll be toting one of those little rucksacks they all have now instead of handbags. It will be raining, as it is this evening, but you won't have an umbrella, you'd scorn umbrellas; the young like their heads to be whipped about by the elements, they find it bracing. You'll stand on the porch, in a haze of damp light; your glossy dark hair will be sodden, your black outfit will be soaked, the drops of rain will glitter on your face and clothes like sequins. (p. 636). The black dress is a symbolic representation of mourning. This associate with the future death of Iris and it also denotes the expectation of Iris about Sabrina to participate in her funeral.

Conclusion

In this paper Self fashion in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* is elaborately discussed. This novel is a type of Novella. It can be considered as Science Fiction. The technique is post-modern and the theme is Search for self identity self assertiveness, Destiny. The Location is Canadian Landscape, Port Ticonderoga. Narrative style is first person singular. The narrator is Iris. The metaphors include nature, animals and landscapes.

The association between self fashioning and the circumstances in the novel are clearly established. Benjamin Chase attire depicts the richness, power and authority exercised by him. Adelia wants to maintain the dignity and decorum of her husband and hence chooses the seal coat. Norval Chase wants to exhibit his valour and contributions to the country are clearly revealed through his Royal Canadian Regiment Uniform. Lilitiana wears the best dress to welcome the hero of the war Norval Chase. However their relationship between them can be compared to a belted affair and a crispy one.

Laura Chase used to choose sober colours because to captivate the attention of others. She always prefers Blue colour which is similar to the liking of Alex Thomas. Blue refers to the serenity and tranquility of life. In the journey of achieving the serenity of life, Laura Chase loses her self identity.

Laura steps on the eggshell hat of Iris and there is a cracking sound. This symbolizes the cracking of relationship between Iris and Richard. Atwood assigns different self-

fashioning styles to suit the characters and incidents in the novel. The Association between self-fashioning and characterization is highlighted in this article.

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Figure 1: Major Characters in Atwood's "The Blind Assassin"

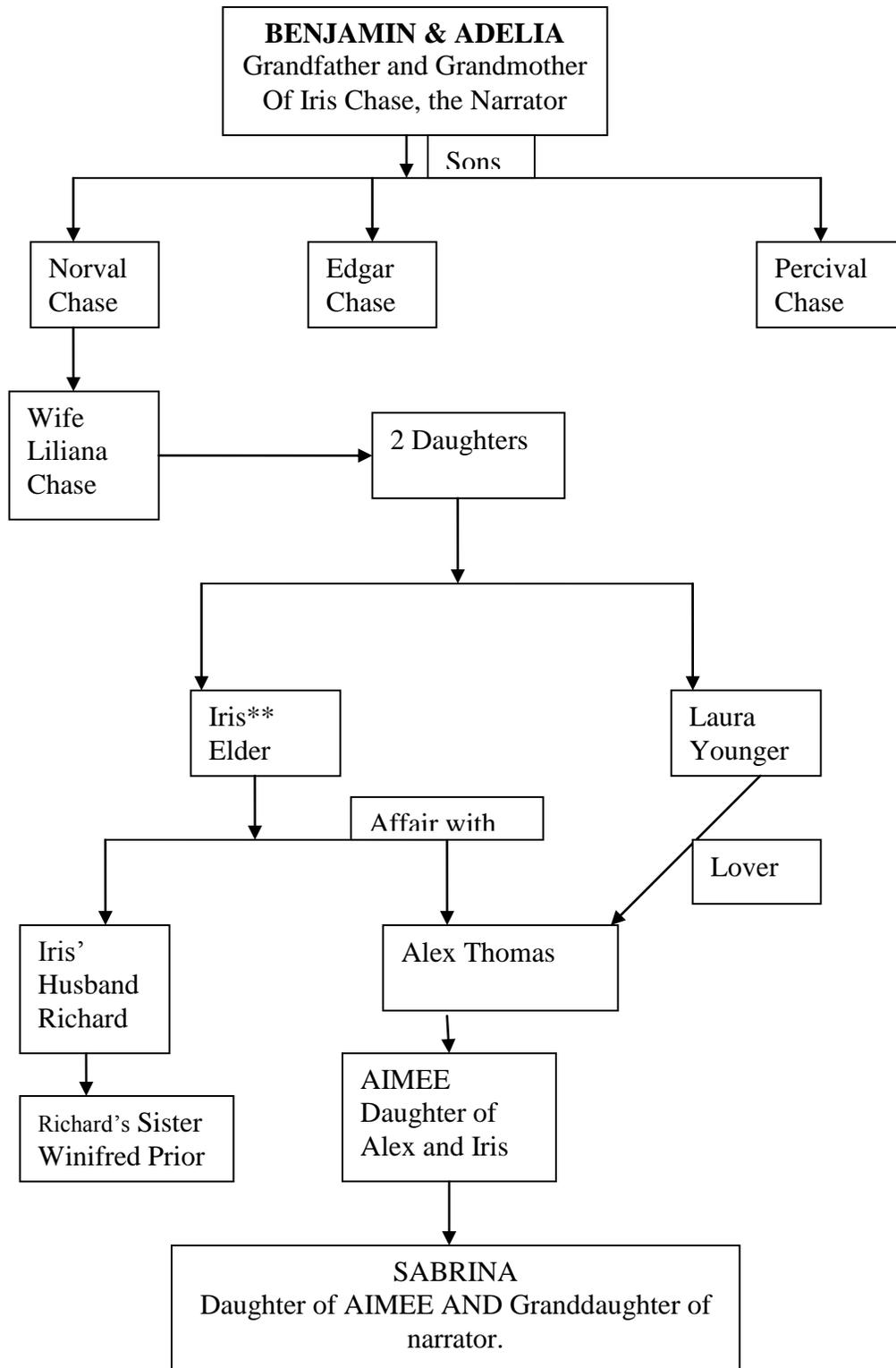
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