Dismantling the Patriarchal Myth of Femininity: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*

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Abstract

Atwood is an internationally known Canadian writer. Her works are noted for her feminist thought. Her novels, featuring women protagonists, examine their relationships in patriarchal society. She mostly writes about women, from a female perspective and with a noticeable feminist slant. Her writing transcends the boundaries of what is often described as 'female fiction'. The protagonists of Atwood's novels are not satisfied with their lives, and as they explore the reasons for their discontent, they come to realize that they are victims of social, economic and political discrimination. Once they have recognized their victimization, they attempt to reject it. In her fiction she attacks the gender discrimination and the narrow, dominant, social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender. Atwood *Life Before Man* is a bold attempt to redefine male notions and cultural definitions of femity. It is neither cultural nor social but an individualistic one. The term "femininity" describes the construction of 'femaleness' by society and which connotes sexual attractiveness to men. Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979) portrays the protagonist Elizabeth as a woman who chooses to live as an individual breaking down the patriarchal stereotypes of woman and holds a mirror to modern marital problems. She undergoes a struggle for survival and changes into a radical and takes diversion to extramarital affairs following her husband's model on the basis of equality. The novel poignantly articulates the marital disharmony and the existential despair of both men and women in the urbanaged modern further society. It further presents how in the struggle for autonomy and individuality between husband and wife the institution of marriage gets disintegrated and dehumanized. Elizabeth feels deserted and betrayed by Nate and decides to live alone in the 'family home' to look after her children. In her rebellion against the phallocentric world what she has achieved is adultery, a broken marriage and a couple of children to look after. She, in a way, breaks the myth of stereotyped notions of femininity. Atwood feels that marriage as an institution should help the personal growth and evolution of both husband and wife; they should live with dignity complimenting each other. Atwood opts for a social change in the institution of marriage to strengthen the man-woman relationship.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man*, Femininity, Patriarchy, phallocentric, Logocentrism, Stereotype, Disharmony.

Atwood is an internationally known, read, translated Canadian writer with the publication of more than twelve novels, ten books of poetry, three short story collections and two books of literary criticism. Her works are noted for her feminist thought and mythological themes. Her novels, featuring women protagonists, examine their relationships in patriarchal society. The epigraph to *Power Politics* (1971) is a bitter recognition of the politics of sex and of the destructiveness, from a woman's point of view of the sexual connection.

> You fit into me
> Like a hook into an eye
> A fish hook
> An Open eye (qtd. in Sturrock 73)

Atwood's critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) discusses in detail 'survival': survival of the individual in the face of mental suffering; survival of women in a male-dominated society; survival of humanity against increasing violence. Here she advises women to 'refuse to be a victim'.

Atwood along with Alice Munro questions stereotypes of nationality and gender, exposing cultural fictions and the artificial limits they impose on the understanding of the readers and other human beings". Atwood has been variously assessed as "a feminist writer, for her incisive commentaries on sex roles, a religious writer, for her visions of spiritual ecstasy, a gothic writer, for her images of grotesque misfits and surreal disorientations of the psyche, a writer of Canadian wilderness; a nationalist writer and a regionalist" (Roserberg 15). She mostly writes about women, from a female perspective and with a noticeable feminist slant. Her writing transcends the boundaries of what is often described as 'female fiction'. Through her female protagonists and narrators who often "journey from victimization to self-actualization, Atwood explores women's issues using elements of science fiction, historical fact, fairy tale, and dystopian vision.

Power politics is the common factor in Canada. Power structures have been built into the Canadian national consciousness and the female psyche and Atwood makes it her mission to explore and expose these. Most of Atwood's novels grapple with the politics and power politics in Canadian society. In *Second Words* Atwood explains what she means by gender politics: "By political I mean having to do with power: Who's got it, who wants it, how it operates: in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how" (73-74). It is imperative at this juncture to make a brief study about the feminist movement in Canada and Margaret Atwood's role in that movement.

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‘Feminism’ is a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women’s rights and women’s position in culture and society. The term tends to be used for the women’s rights movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social and economic equality between men and women. It is a body of social theory and political movement primarily based on and motivated by the experiences of women. While generally providing a critique of social relations, many proponents of feminism also focus on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women’s rights, interests, and issues. It is difficult to define feminism in terms of a set of core concepts but it is common core is the thesis that the relationship between the sexes is one of inequality or oppression. “All forms of feminism seek to identify the causes of that inequality and to remedy it, but the issue of precisely which agency produces and reproduces inequality is the source of many of the differences between feminists” (Macey 122).

Feminists are united by the idea that a woman’s position is unequal to that of a man and that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men to the political, social and economic detriment of women. However, feminists have used different theories to explain these inequalities and have advocated different ways of redressing inequalities, and there are marked geographic and historical variations in the nature of feminism. In general, feminism is “concerned with how women’s lives have changed throughout history and it asks what about women’s experience is different from men’s, either as a result of an essential ontological or psychological difference or as a result of historical imprinting and social construction (Ryan 101).

According to feminist theory, the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as objects of exchange between father-dominated families that formed alliances through marriage. But archaeological evidence from Europe and the Middle East has suggested that Stone Age Civilizations practiced goddess worship and were organized as *matriarchies* – social orders with women in charge. However, from the time of the earliest written records, these civilizations had been overtaken by patriarchal cultures that worshipped male gods and in which men were political, religious and military leaders, and women were kept in subordination. In the time of the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans and in the early Christian era, women were excluded from public life and were made subordinate to men. For example, Greek philosopher Aristotle argued in his *Poetics* that women were inferior to men and must be ruled by men. Saint Paul told Christian wives to obey their husbands and not to speak in church. Even the modern industrial society is by and large patriarchal in character. Michael Ryan makes a succinct observation in this regard:

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Men hold almost all positions of political and economic power and economies work in such a way that women are more likely to be poor and men more likely to be rich. The assumed norm in many societies is for women to be in charge of domestic labour and child rearing while men engage in more public concerns…social structure translates a historically continuous threat of physical force. (101)

The women's liberation movement, which started in the United States, combined liberal, rights-based concerns for equality between men and women with demands for a woman's right to determine her own identity and sexuality. This ideology of second-wave feminism was greatly influenced by the writings of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and American feminist Kate Millett, who drew attention to ways in which women were oppressed by the very structure of Western society. In *The Second Sex* (1949) de Beauvoir argued that Western culture regarded men as normal and women as an aberration ("the Other"), and she called for the recognition of the special nature of women. Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), draw attention to the persuasiveness of patriarchy and to the ways in which it was reinforced through the family and culture, notably in literature. The recognition of the rampant nature of patriarchy fuelled the feminist idea of universal sisterhood – that women of all cultures and background can be united within their common oppression. These second wave feminists considered that "The western cultural tradition has, through its use of binary oppositions, helped assure male rule. Men are associated with reason, objectivity, logic and the like, while women are linked to the body, matter, emotions, and absence of logic and reason, and the like. In its misogynist form, androcentric culture equates women with castration and death" (Ryan 102). These feminists argue that women need to constitute a separate realm outside male-dominated culture.

Many Canadian women writers such as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood have registered a great measure of success as feminist writers and are acclaimed as major contemporary women novelists. "The women's movement has provided many of these novelists with the courage and motivation to break out of traditional patriarchal forms to depict how women have been abused, exploited, and oppressed (Prabhakar 22).Canadian women novelists from Ethel Wilson to Garbrielle Roy show their concern about a woman's struggle to discover herself and find self-fulfillment. Their works project Canadian woman's encounter with the patriarchal world order. They made women critically conscious of their own roles in conventional patriarchal social structures. Canadian women-writers question and challenge the women's status quo. "Through their narrative strategy of irony and fantasy these writers not only demand revision of social values and conventions but also envision alternate worlds in which women would be autonomous and self-defnining citizens" (Prabhakar 21).

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Atwood's novels show how society sustains victimization by holding power over women. The protagonists of Atwood's novels are not satisfied with their lives, and as they explore the reasons for their discontent, they come to realize that they are victims of social, economic and political discrimination. Once they have recognized their victimization, they attempt to reject it. No protagonist is always able to avoid being victimized, and two of them may actually die, but all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, fight against victimization. Atwood is a member of the Amnesty International and Canada's civil Liberties Union. She is also a human rights activist. In her fiction she attacks the gender discrimination and the narrow, dominant, social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender. She is critical of the post-modernist of impersonality, autonomy and dehumanization. Being a feminist, she is conscious of how gender restricts the educational opportunities open to women. Her female protagonists are researchers, writers, journalists, artists and painters who become victims of gender politics and power politics. Christine Gomez observes in this regard:

> At the thematic level, Atwood's novels examine themes related to the politics of gender such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual carving out of female space by woman through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy…Not only at the thematic and structural levels, but also in the organization of women characters, Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender. (74)

Atwood's novels are governed by feminist consciousness which runs as an under-current and serves as the unifying principle. Atwood demands through her novels, the demolition of gender system and dreams for a new world without gender discrimination.

In *Life Before Man* (1979) Atwood presents the oppressive modes of patriarchal system of marriage. To Atwood, marriage determines the destiny of women within a patriarchal culture. Marriage contract, which is "a mutual bet for gaining ascendancy in power, personal autonomy and self-realization" (Gillespie 70), gives women very little chances of winning the bet. Atwood's protagonists are very much conscious of the victimization of women in marriage. Like Marian in *The Edible Woman* and Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, "Elizabeth, the protagonist in *Life Before Man* is considered to be a frustrated, rebellious and an indifferent woman in regard to the institution of marriage" (Prabhakar 126). Here Atwood covers two years in the lives of three ordinary middleclass couple "chatting the development and deterioration of their relationship within the context of daily routine, miscommunication, tawdry affairs and gray emotional

struggle" (Grace 135). Elizabeth is a down to earth character. She is a realistic portrayal with all her strength and limitations. She prefers to live like an individual by breaking down the stereotypes of women.

Atwood *Life Before Man* is a bold attempt to redefine male notions and cultural definitions of feminity. It is neither cultural nor social but an individualistic one. The term "femininity" describes the construction of 'femaleness' by society and which connotes sexual attractiveness to men. Feminists are concerned about cultural definitions of femininity in the media which represent sex role stereotyping. The assumption here that appearance creates identity was an early target of feminist writers. Drawing on the language of social psychology, Kate Millett attacked femininity for implying that anatomy is 'destiny'. Phyllis Chesler agreed that 'femininity' is in effect a sex-role stereotype and in *Women and Madness (*1972) proved that women's attempts to achieve it were a prescription for failure, victimization and severe mental illness.

Both French and American writers suggest that 'femininity' is part of an ideology which positions 'women as Other' against 'masculinity' which is regarded by society as the norm of human behavior. For example, Susan Brownmiller suggests that femininity is a way of making masculinity appear more masterly and competent. Julia Kristeva argues that characteristics of 'femininity' can therefore be found in the writing of 'marginal' men like the modernist author Mallarme. Third World feminists interpret 'femininity' more positively. For example, Buchi Emecheta describes how the self-creation of femininity enables her women characters to become strong and independent (Humm 93-94).

Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979) portrays the protagonist Elizabeth as a woman who chooses to live as an individual breaking down the patriarchal stereotypes of woman and holds a mirror to modern marital problems. It is Atwood's first attempt at social and domestic realism. Elizabeth is frustrated, rebellious and indifferent in regard to the institution of marriage. The message here is that marriage should help the personal growth and evolution of both husband and wife, and they should live with dignity complementing each other. The novel covers two years in the lives of three ordinary middle-class people – Elizabeth and her husband, Nate, and Nate's new lover, Lesje, for whom he leaves his wife – "Charting the development and deterioration of their relationships within the context of daily routine, miscommunication, tawdry affairs and gray emotional struggles"(Grace 135). In this way Atwood examines the politics of power in interpersonal relationships between wife and husband in *Life Before Man*. As the author of realistic fiction, Atwood does not claim for Elizabeth, the protagonist of the novel, greater autonomy than actual women can reasonably claim in their life. Through Elizabeth Atwood has given a portrait of a real woman with all her strengths and limitations, muddling through

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existence. Atwood is aware that women, both as literary characters and as human beings, must be allowed their limitations: Again, she observes:

> If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have – hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy-without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary, for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch goddess or a gearing instance of the deviousness of women. For a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital of W off woman. (*Second Words* 228)

Elizabeth in *Life Before Man* encounters her life before men in general and Nate in particular in an antagonistic and male-dominated society. She undergoes a struggle for survival and changes into a radical and takes diversion to extramarital affairs following her husband's model on the basis of equality. As Prabhakar remarks: "Both Elizabeth and Nate indulge in a tug-of-war and what matters for them is who wins and who loses. Marriage, for both of them, has lost its sanctity and credibility like all other modern marriages" (128). The novel poignantly articulates the marital disharmony and the existential despair of both men and women in the urbanized modern further society. It further presents how in the struggle for autonomy and individuality between husband and wife the institution of marriage gets disintegrated and dehumanized.

Atwood feels the freedom of right to equality in marital relationships does not mean that the wife/husband has a right to do anything that brings her/him satisfaction in an immoral way. To Atwood, sexual immorality of either partners is a violation of the moral code established and respected by society. Simon de Beauvoir also says that "adultery is for both a breach of contract" (*The Second Sex* 445). Atwood thinks the act of adultery in the institution of marriage would lead to a complete chaos and anarchy in social relations. The novel drives home the message that both wife and husband be faithful to each other, and they must show respect for the regulated social conduct which is essential for the maintenance of social stability and the sanctity of conjugal relationships.

Elizabeth has a tragic past. She is the product of several contradictions in the past of her family. She grows up in an unhealthy and joyless family atmosphere. Her father leaves the entire family in a state of dissolution and destitution. He abandons his wife and children for a mistress. So, her mother suffers from neurosis and becomes an alcoholic. Unable to run the family, the mother, in a cold-blooded act, sells her children to Auntie Muriel, a tyrant, for a regular

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allowance to spend on alcohol. Finally, she commits suicide by setting fire to her body. Elizabeth is aware that her mother has been "Entirely destitute, a wronged party, a saint under the streetlights … like clouds or angels, lived on air…" (*Life Before Man* 259). Thus Elizabeth and her sister Caroline are left under the care of 'dinosaur Auntie Muriel' who is both "the spider and the fly, the sucker-out of life juice and the empty husk" (105) Atwood has portrayed Auntie Muriel as a victim of patriarchal society leading her to exercise a damaging influence on the early life of Elizabeth. At an early age Auntie Muriel was thwarted in her ambition of becoming an educated woman. She was not allowed to go to college by her domineering father. She too suffered under patriarchal domination. Her roles were restricted. She was compelled to sit at home doing embroidery. Even after her marriage, Auntie Muriel plays what Virginia Woolf calls the "Angel of the House" and leads a life of unending sacrifice. In this way, she becomes a victim of the patriarchal codes in the society.

Elizabeth undergoes a trauma under the control of Auntie Muriel who imposes on her own embroidery which is a fortune to Elizabeth. Elizabeth fears and detests Auntie Muriel as she is destructive by imposing the patriarchal norms. Thus, the harassment of Auntie Muriel disturbs Elizabeth psychologically which in turn makes her become hostile towards men. In one of her interviews Atwood describes Elizabeth's relationship with her aunt thus: "She absolutely hates, loves and detests her aunt – which gives her a lot of energy. Her hatred drives her on" (qtd. Prabhakar 129). Elizabeth's sad experience and bad upbringing of Auntie Muriel, drive her to wage a war against patriarchal structures of power and domination, In the words of Prabhakar: "She becomes a strong and dominating woman who refuses to be victimized by any man or woman" (130). She becomes a threatening force, the daring and dashing "lady with the axe" (*Life Before Man* 41) who courageously faces her life before men in a patriarchal set-up. She is prepared to do anything against patriarchy. She observes:

> I don't want to discuss my mother, my father, my Auntie Muriel or my sister. I know quite a lot about them as well… I am an adult and I do not think I am merely the sum of my past. I can make choices and suffer the consequences. (86)

Auntie Muriel's character is due to the victimization of patriarchal society. She, unable to realize the harm done to her, chooses to shape other women in her mould by becoming an active agent of patriarchal power. Unlike other novels, Atwood has portrayed a woman through Auntie Muriel who becomes a victim and a victimizer.

Elizabeth, a special projects administrator at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, marries Nate, an unemployed law graduate, with the hope of getting security and shelter for her life. But she soon understands that it is Nate, who is emotionally weak and dependent, requires security.

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Consequently, she becomes "a cage: Nate a mouse, her heart pure cheese. Earthmother, Nate her mole, snouting in darkness while she locked him" (145). Therefore, Elizabeth has to lead a rules-bound and logocentric life. Nate hides his occupation of making "handmade wooden toys" (34) as a secret from his wife. He even longs to have a lottery prize to meet the needs of his drinking and smoking. He is like a "prodigal son" (281) to his mother. His mother wanted him to be "a radical lawyer" who defends "the unjustly accused" (33). He is such an 'idle drone' who depends completely on his wife for money. The life of Elizabeth and Nate is a mechanical one for they do not know what 'love' means between them. They are an example of a disharmonious couple though two children are born out of their wedlock. Their marriage, in due course, begins to shatter around the edges when Nate goes after women like Martha and Lesje. He spends a lot of money for women and sex.

Nate, the indecisive and immoral husband, plans to leave Elizabeth for Lesje, a perennial, innocent, "a dinosaur lady" (132) who offers dinosaurs to men. Lesje is forced by her witch-like grandmother to seek refuge in the unreal world of fantasies. She is a 'paleontologist' who becomes a victim of prehistory. She has fantasies in which she is "wandering in prehistory" (10). Lesje's dinosaur fantasies exemplify the monstrous nature of man-woman relationships based on the ethic, 'The strongest sustain themselves by eating the weakest'. Lesje had loved William, an environmental engineer. The problem in their marriage is that of the issue of his children. Their love affair breaks up as William does not want to have a child by her. Therefore, she has "seedy" or "even tacky" affair with Nate. Moreover, Lesje lends Nate money as he is perennially short of money for his needs. She is addicted to Nate's version of her. For him, she exists on "a scale of relatively important things" (*Life Before Man* 204) but for her, he is absolutely needed to get pregnant. Both Nate and Lesje have wronged Elizabeth. Lesje has trespassed into the marital life of Elizabeth. Nate thus breaks the sacred bonds of marriage. Elizabeth considers Nate as the father of her children but not her husband. Nate, on the other hand, neglects both his wife and children. His children feel as if "he's an uncle, a new school principal" (224). His failure both as a husband and father leads Elizabeth to commit a moral crime. What is particular about the marriage of Elizabeth and Nate is they still live together under the same roof because of the children.

Elizabeth becomes involved with Chris who works in her office and finds solace in him. She keeps up her extramarital relationship with him within its limits, without touching either her house or her children. She rejects his demand to give up her job and leave her family. Thus, she refuses to become a dependent woman once more. But Chris feels humiliated at Elizabeth's behaviour. Elizabeth opposes the power of Chris over her life. As Prabhakar observes, "she becomes the spokes–person of men and women who have 'militaristic' attitude towards their female/male – counterparts" (132). As a result, Chris kills himself violently due to the anger and

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fear of being nothing. His death is just 'an event' and not a sacrifice for love. Elizabeth feels herself as a 'widow' of Chris. She mourns on the death of Chris:

> 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 angry. I'm so angry. I could kill you. If you hadn't already done that for yourself. (*Life Before Man* 3)

After Chris's death Elizabeth decides to lead a harmonious life with her husband. She tries to open his eyes by questioning about his extramarital affairs. She wants to save their life from the wreck that they both have jointly created. But Nate decides to leave his family and wife for Lesje. On the other hand, Elizabeth prefers to share her life with him on the basis of a friendly rapport which is needed for old age. But her dreams become shattered when Nate plans to divorce her and marry Lesje who wishes to have a child by him. Lesje needs to be pregnant to stay alive and to secure her primary significance in Nate's life. In fact, she prefers to become "an unwed mother." Elizabeth, due to this traumatic experience in marriage, is uncertain about her future. She is so distracted, but she sometimes fears of falling asleep in the tub. She has violent nightmares that her children are lost.

Ultimately, Elizabeth and Nate agree to go in for divorce. Elizabeth, 'supermom', knows well in advance the afflictions of children after divorce. So, she takes precautionary measures to prevent children from undergoing the trauma. Elizabeth is aware of the trauma the children will suffer on account of their separation. Nancy, Elizabeth's daughter, asks her: "You and Dad don't love each other anymore?" (228). She answers with a heavy heart that: "I know it makes you unhappy that your father doesn't live here with us any more… your father loves you both very much. Your father and I will always love each other too, because both of us are your parents and we both love you" (228). Nancy questions pathetically: "Mummy, are you going to die?" (228). This query stirs up pain and frustration in Elizabeth. However, she does not use 'emotional blackmail' to turn the children hostile towards their father.

At the end of the novel, Elizabeth feels deserted and betrayed by Nate and decides to live alone in the 'family home' to look after her children. She feels liberated from Nate's image of her as a dragon woman. In her rebellion against the phallocentric world what she has achieved is adultery, a broken marriage and a couple of children to look after. She has transformed herself into a respectable individual now. She becomes the creator of her own reality. Elizabeth accepts her life contentedly and refuses to be a victim because "she's still alive, she wears clothes, she walks around, she holds down a job even. She has two children" (*Life Before Man* 278). She has learned the lesson in her life the harsh way and she now possesses the knowledge that will help her children. She resolves to look forward to the future of her daughters whom she would like to bring up as champions of human values. She transcends the narrow confines of her individual

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self and grows beyond mere personal; she now connects herself to the outside world. Thus, Elizabeth decides to survive with dignity in society. She, in a way, breaks the myth of stereotyped notions of femininity.

Atwood, through *Life Before Man,* satirises the institution of marriage which is based on merely bodily wants: fraud, deception, greed and lust which can never make a successful and result only in misery and suffering for the partners concerned. As such she has given guidelines that concern relationship between the sexes. Atwood feels that marriage as an institution should help the personal growth and evolution of both husband and wife; they should live with dignity complimenting each other. The novel, in truth, sets out possibility for the moral and social evolution of human beings. The message that Atwood conveys through this novel is:

> The married people should not be viewed as each other's property but as living, growing organisms … personal growth [is] commendable. You … have the right attitude and be honest with yourself. (113)

The novel thus offers hope for a 'mutual salvation' and peace between the wife and husband. Atwood opts for a social change in the institution of marriage to strengthen the man – woman relationship.

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