

BLURRED IDENTITIES: A THEMATIC STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S "THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME"

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Abstract: Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian feminist novelist and poet. She writes about the subjugated position of women in the patriarchal society. Her female protagonists fight for their identity and survival in the society that suppresses their existence to the core. Her poetry brings out the power relations between the sexes that privilege men to exercise hegemony over women. Thus, self, identity, female body, the environment are the dominant themes of her poetry. In the poem, "This is a Photograph of Me", Atwood describes a blurred old picture, taken years ago, which the speaker (a woman) insists is her own. She cannot be seen as she is submerged in the lake and the light effects bring out her false image. However, her real self/ image are different from what can be seen in the picture. The poem therefore, brings out the identity crises that the speaker as a woman faces, as she becomes a commodity in the patriarchal society. The paper aims to study by a feminist approach the various themes explore by Atwood in the poet. The focus will be on the identity crises faced by a woman in her men dominating society. It will also bring out the gender inequality inherent in the society.

Keywords: Identity Crises, Oppression, Gender Inequality, Gender Roles and Male dominance.

Margaret Atwood's poem, "This is a Photograph of Me," was published in her second collection of poetry, *The circle Game* in 1964, winner of the 1966 Governor's General's Award. The collection contains poems that directly address the issues of identity, its quest in world which is difficult to trust and love in the age of technology. Margaret Atwood's voice is direct, direct, sharp-witted, intelligent and insightful.

The poem, "This is a Photograph of Me" is the first poem of the collection. It is revolutionary in its construction and its subject matter. It is divided into two parts, the first part is written in small lines, but the second part is written in brackets, symbolising as if it is an explanation of the first part. In the poem, Atwood describes an old picture that the speaker, who is a woman, admits is her own. However, the fact remains that there is no human being in the picture, let alone her. Instead, it describes a landscape with a house and a lake, a half branch of a tree and a small hill. Also, the photograph has been taken a long time ago, therefore has been destroyed by time and as a result appears blurry and smeared with grey flecks. In the second part, the poet explains that you can find the woman beneath the lake in the picture, as it was taken shortly after she was drowned. The poem is thus revolutionary not only in its structure, but also its content, theme and rich symbolism. The poem can be read on various levels and several interpretations can be made. The present paper attempts to study by a feminist approach the various themes of gender inequality and gender crises highlighted by Atwood in the poem. The poem will be interpreted both on its surface meaning and the deeper hidden meaning. The rich symbolism used by Margaret Atwood to decorate her poem will also be highlighted.

Women have undergone gender prejudice in all the spheres of their lives. Patriarchy, which means "the rule of the men" have subjugated women to the domestic sphere, where they outline that home and motherhood are the major areas that women are to be delegated. Any further identity has been negated by men. Adrienne Rich in her revolutionary book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* states, "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications" (40). As a result, "Women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies" (Rich 14). Feminist writers and critics raise their voice against the oppression of women by men. Adrienne Rich comments that "the feminist poet sought to validate and politicize woman's experience by defining the self, rejecting cultural differences, and revealing the substance of her life" (qtd. in Juhasz, 23). Atwood rejects the idea that writing to be a subversive to women identity; however, she rejects binary opposites of men/women dichotomy, and any identity inherent in such essentialist binaries. Margaret Atwood's works have often been linked as feminist, and several critics read her work as contributing to the upliftment of the marginalised position of women in the patriarchy society of her country. She often links the abuse of the female body with the abuse of the environment that has been made by colonialism.

Erinc Ozdemir moments that Atwood's works "valorises femininity against masculinity, while at the same time it paradoxically dramatizes a desire to destroy all dichotomies and dualistic thinking" (58). Margaret Atwood's

poetry involves a layered texture, as multiple meaning can be withdrawn. The language is symbolic and figurative, involving many symbols that form relationship between two different objects. The most apparent relationship that can be seen in the poetry of Atwood is the comparison of the exploitation of the female body with that of the environment, which qualifies that her work can be read by using ecofeminist approach.

Bouson comments on some of the important components of Atwood's poetry:

On the social construction of female identity and cultural denigration of female body; on the power politics inherent not only in male-female relations but in mother-daughter relations and female friendships; on the desecration of the Canadian wilderness and global environment; and on Canadian nationalism, Canadian identity, and Canadian-American relations (2).

However, for Gina Wisker, Atwood's poetry is typically, "deals with respect for the possibilities of language underpinning her ability to express forms of perceptions and to demystify the stereotypes, the personal, national or gendered myths and representations by which we conceive and manage our lives" (1).

Margaret Atwood paints a morbid and painful picture of the condition of women in patriarchy. She highlights the societal treatment of women and the powerlessness of women in such a society. The passive voice in the first line "*It was taken some time ago.*" (Line 1). Since no time has been specified, it strikes the reader that the speaker has no control over when, how and by whom the picture is taken. Someone has taken a picture for her. It is suggestive of the fact that, women have no histories of their own; their histories are written by the patriarchy, as all history is written by men. Furthermore, when someone else writes a history, there are bound to problems of accuracy. In the poem, the speaker insists that the identity she holds had been confined upon her by someone else, most probably the person who had taken the photograph. However, the truth is that, the identity she holds is not true, it is something that has been imposed by force on her. As result, it is blurred and smeared. Similarly, Atwood writes, that,

*At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;* (Lines 2-5).

The photograph is distorted, almost unrecognisable and the speaker has to point out to the various things present in it. Similarly, women's place in the society is unrecognised by patriarchy. For men, women's true place lies in her home, any identity beyond that is not recognised. In fact, efforts are made to distort such identities. Atwood further, asks the readers to scan the photograph closely, only then will they be able to see the image of the speaker. As such, the identity of women is either distorted or hidden, and to acknowledge it, women will have to fight for their independence.

Atwood highlights the identity crises of the speaker, when she writes that;

*you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree* (Lines 7-8).

Women have often been regarded as a thing and the branch is a part of a tree, it always has a life and an identity in relation to the tree. In a similar way, women cannot exist alone in the society; they are simply seen as the "other" of the binary self/other. The patriarchy also perceives women to be an inferior part of them, just like Eve was as part of Adam. In the next line, she writes;

*to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.* (Lines 10-12).

The words "gentle slope" symbolise the hurdles and difficulties in the lives of the speaker and women in general in order to realise their true selves. What appears to be gentle is actually, a hard and difficult journey towards self-realisation. In the next line, Atwood mentions a "small frame house", which reckons the position of women in the society. Women are the weaker sex and are small, because of their size, they are often ignored by the stronger sex, the patriarchy. The word house symbolises women, as according to the gender norms formulated by men, a woman's true place is in the secure environment of her home. Thus, by doing so, the patriarchy delegate women's identity as a homemaker and a mother. Rich states, "we live in a patriarchal society in which patriarchal principles have been ceased to be valid...power, energy, ambition, intellect, the interests of the combative male, no more achieve the fulfilment of his being than they can of themselves build up a human society" (90).

Also, the word frame strikes the reader, as it is something that gives a shape, a kind of protection to other things. It is also symbolic fixed identity. Anything out of the frame is never recognised, just like that, women

are provided frames of identity, to which they have to oblige. The frame also means the rule of the society, that has been set by the men for the women and it is expected out of them to remain fixed in the frame. Therefore, remain fixed in their household chores and in the vicinities of their male sheltered homes.

*In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.* (Lines 13-14).

The lake stands for the society; however, the society itself is manmade, where the rule of the father is conceded to. Hills represent the gender norms and rules of the society. They often overshadow the true identity of women. They exploit her true essence, they destroy her voice. Ironically, Atwood calls these hills as small, side these rules are manmade, they are easy to destroy. Also, their essentialist qualities make them small in their stature. With this, the first half of the poem ends.

Atwood starts the second half in the same passive tone, again she does not specify any particular time. She writes:

*(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.* (Lines 15-16).

The speaker tells the reader some information regarding when the photography was taken, but fails to mention a specific time. However, the fact that speaker mentions that the photograph was taken after she drowned, does not mean she is actually dead. She is alive, but she has drowned in the lake, which means her identity had been overshadowed by the patriarchal rules and norms of the society. The speaker then points out the exact place where, the readers can find her in the photograph that rectifies that the photograph truly is of the speaker. Atwood writes:

*I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.* (Lines 17-18).

The speaker says that she is in the lake, under the surface, which brings out the fact that, she is a part of the society, but an invisible one. It means her place, voice; spirit and identity are also invisible in the male dominating society. It is here, at this point in the poem, that the theme of identity crises is most apparent. Her mental position means, that although she is important for the continuation of the society, still her place of importance lies under the surface, which represents the men. She is not only under the surface, but she is drowned, meaning that she is not only dominated by men but they suppress her every act, voice and success to the level that she is unable to recognise her own self.

The speaker continues to demonstrate her identity crises. Atwood writes;

*It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion* (Lines 19-23).

The speaker herself finds it difficult to locate where she actually stands in the photograph, thereby stressing her identity crises. She also is unaware of her size. The water symbolises the patriarchy and the light symbolises her own self, women in general. Just like in the real life patriarchy and its rules have demolished the very identity and existence of women, in the same way, because of the effect of the water, the light is wears a distorted look.

The last lines of the poem state;

*but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)* (Lines 24-26).

The speaker asks the reader to be patience and look deep, and finally, they will be able to see her. The word long plays a double meaning. It insists on the fact that, the subjugation of women is not a recent phenomenon; instead, women have been suppressed and marginalised for a very long time now. This view of Atwood can be explained in the words of Adrienne Rich, when she states:

As women our relationship to the past has been problematical. We have been every cultural's core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one-half, and are now are a majority, of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves. Confronted with this "Great Silence", we have apparently have two paths to follow: The path of anatomising our oppression, detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us; and the path of searching out those women who broke through the silence, who, though often penalised, misconstrued, their work

neglected or banned, or though tokenised in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self-determination; who were, in short, exemplary (84).

The last lines of the poem are most significant, as they offer a contrast to the tone of the poem. The speaker starts by using the word “but” which comes out like a warning to the patriarchy. Just like conveying the message that, do whatever you can, you can kill me physically, you can hide my identity, but you never will be able to kill my spirit.

The last lines of the poem bring with them an element of surprise. Atwood in a very clever suggest to the readers that, the “you” in the last line of the poem, does not simply addresses them. It also addresses the patriarchy, the men, and the male dominating society, showing them her existence in the world, making them aware of the injustice women have endured because of their oppressive and dominating societal norms. As such, the “me” of the poem represents all women in the society. Thus, the title of the poem, which at the start of the poem appeared a little weird, is justified by the end of the poem. The photograph is of all women, whose freedom had been oppressed by the rule of men, by blurring their identities and marginalising them to the sphere of the home.

The poem is divided into two halves, separated by visible parentheses. The first half describes the landscape and the condition of the women in such a world. The second half gets the reader closer to the true essence of being a woman in the patriarchy society. It also describes the true identity that has been given to women by men. Several themes have been highlighted as such. The first theme in the poem is the theme of female oppression. A variety of symbols like the house, the lake, the tree branch and the house suggest female suppression. Another theme is of identity crises, symbolised by blurred lines, grey flecks, blended with paper. The branch being the part of the tree, under the surface symbolises women’s lives being the part of the patriarchal rule. The poem is set in the wilderness, which like the female body and female identity has been exploited by men. The photograph then becomes a beginning of a revolution, which has underlined it aim in the last lines of the poem. As Rich comments, “The desire for a clearly confirmed past, the search for a tradition of female power, also springs from an intense need for validation” (85). Also, the patriarchy has been able to blur and destroy the photograph of women, but they will never be able to diminish and destroy her spirit of freedom.

The poem in the true sense, reveal the blurred identities to which women have been subjected by the patriarchy, being symbolised by the dim and smeared condition of the photography. However, by the time we reach the end of the poem, Atwood seems to suggest that, the patriarchy have triumphed in hiding the true identity of women, but they never will be able to hide her spirit, which will eventually rise up from the ashes, like the phoenix and show the society, her existence and her identity which will not be blurred.

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