

## **Title:**

Paradoxical Feminism: Interrogating Internal Misogyny and Female Self-Loathing in the Literature of Margaret Atwood

## **Introduction:**

Predominantly recognised as the author of the 1985 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* – a novel set in a U.S. totalitarian theocracy – Margaret Atwood stands as literary giant in contemporary society with her literature serving steadily as a cultural touchstone across the globe. Named 'The Reluctant Prophet', Atwood's voice of measured criticism and evaluation is pertinent at this moment in history where we face increased extremist behaviours and polarisation in volatile political climates. Atwood campaigns for a range of causes and has become a figurehead for groups facing various forms of oppression.

Atwood rejects the concept of cancel culture – the ostracization of an individual for the expression of typically conservative sentiments. Polarisation and cancel culture are often falsely associated with contemporary feminism. Consequentially, Atwood has been accused of being a bad feminist by many women. She has faced backlash for her nuanced writing and failure to prescribe to predefined behaviours. In response to this and the questioning of feminism in her works, Atwood is clear:

If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and are so victimised, they are incapable of moral choice, then no. If you mean . . . women are human beings with all the variety of character and behaviour . . . and are also interesting and what happens to them is crucial to the themes, structure, and plot of a book, then yes. Why interesting and important? Because women are interesting and important in real life.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion regarding the paradox of feminism turning inwards on itself has swept popular culture and is a topic that contributes largely to today's political climate.

## **Literature review:**

Despite the fascination with Atwood's work in this regard, little academic research – apart from that of Christine Briggs<sup>2</sup> – has been done to conduct a thorough evaluation of the presence of internal misogyny in the female characters of her literature. R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson<sup>3</sup> write about the issue of misogyny and the many attempts of women to escape it. As defined by Bearman,

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<sup>1</sup> "Margaret Atwood on Feminism", YouTube video, 0:09, posted by "UNSW", September 13 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP9D54n-YY0>.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Briggs, "Mean Girls: Socialized Gender Construction and (Pre)Adolescent Interfemale Aggression in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*". *Margaret Atwood Studies* 13, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Howard R. Bloch and Frances Ferguson, *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 1.

Korobov and Thorne: "internalized sexism occurs when women enact learned sexist behaviours upon themselves and other women."<sup>4</sup>

In this project, I will explore this concept of misogyny in relation to the female characters of Margaret Atwood in works such as *Cat's Eye*, *The Penelopiad*, and *Power Politics*. In doing so I will seek to identify the internalised misogyny that is so often inflicted upon and absorbed by women and explore its manifestations and visibility in female relationships. I will also examine the concept of self-acceptance in the self-loathing and internal misogyny of these female characters.

### **Aims and Objectives**

- To identify examples of internalised misogyny in Atwood's works.
  
- To investigate the ideology surrounding women's escape from misogyny and to compare this with the acceptance and normalisation of self-loathing in Margaret Atwood's female characters.
  
- To explore how internal misogyny presents itself in the relationships between females and to argue that this can potentially be more damaging to all parties involved than external misogyny.
  
- To demonstrate through these findings that Margaret Atwood's sharp observation and precise representation of internal misogyny presents us with a portrayal of womanhood that is reflective of the current climate.
  
- To draw attention to the importance of literature in representing these experiences of internal misogyny and self-loathing, and to therefore highlight their existence and impact on society.

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Bearman, Neill Korobov, Avril Thorne, "The Fabric of Internalized Sexism", in *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences* 1 (1), 2009, p. 10.

## **Methodology**

My primary mode of research will be done through the library and will be comprised of the following elements:

- Textual analysis and close reading of Atwood's texts, the primary sources.
- Engaging with scholarship such as published academic books and journals, available online through the library's databases and in physical form.

## **Requirements and Adaptability**

I will conduct this research independently in the college library. My proposed supervisor, Dr Murphy from The School of English, will meet with me primarily for the purposes of guidance and mentorship, and to monitor the progress of the project.

However, if circumstances with Covid-19 do not allow for this, my research can easily be translated to a fully online format. Meetings can be conducted via Zoom and the library's databases allow for remote access to the secondary resources. I have immediate access to the proposed primary resources.

Requirements that may be necessary are book or chapter costs in the case that certain sources are not available in Trinity's libraries or databases.

## **Overall Goals**

Through this research I am aiming to achieve several things - to develop my skills of critical self-assessment, to learn more about the experience of independent research, and to adapt to the process of working on a solo project. I believe that sustaining motivation will be a challenge at times. However, this project provides the opportunity to build and affirm the confidence and resilience needed to continue when morale is not always so high.

I aim to strengthen my networking and communication skills by being accountable for my own independent research and taking the initiative to liaise with my supervisor in the field to discuss ideas and my progress.

I aspire for this research to be productive in the field of literature in that it will further promote the engagement with Canadian literature, as well as draw attention to the important social issues handled in texts, like misogyny.