



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

Julie Dory, Joint Honours English Literature & German, TCD | Supervised by Dr Bernice M. Murphy, School of English, TCD
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Bad Feminist: Margaret Atwood

Whilst the title of this project suggests a purely literary approach, I sought to look at the topic more broadly in terms of both a historical and cultural context. Atwood's voice of measured criticism and evaluation is pertinent at this moment in history where we face increasingly extremist behaviours (from both the far right and left) and polarisation in volatile political climates. Atwood has become a figurehead for various groups facing oppression across the globe, but has recently faced backlash for her nuanced writings, opinions, and failure to prescribe to a social discourse script, beliefs, or set forms of expression. Her stance on censorship and freedom of expression has shattered the expectations of many left wing radicals who previously worshipped Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* for its typically feminist themes, leaving them disillusioned. Most recently, her signature on a letter calling for the rejection of public shaming and cancel culture – the ostracization of an individual for the expression of typically conservative sentiments – alongside alongside J.K. Rowling's signature, lit a match that sent her Twitter following up in flames. Atwood's nuanced writing has led many to question the nature of feminism within her texts. Whilst her female characters are representative of some of the many complexities and extremities of womanhood and female oppression, the violent and grey nature of these female protagonists' thoughts and actions have proven to confuse and often enrage those who have become accustomed to unilateral debate and binary thought patterns/modes of expression within social media echo chambers like Twitter or Instagram. Criticism has debated that in exposing female spite and texts that sent out a message of 'woman beware woman', Atwood is actively anti-feminist, and she has in turn been labelled a 'bad feminist' by many. This research identifies these traits of Atwood's writings as the opposite. Atwood in fact maintains her own self-imposed policy of truth. When speaking about the process of writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood notes that every act of violence against women in the novel is something that has been lived at one moment or another in the course of our recorded human history: "nothing went into the book that had not happened at some point in time". This research, therefore, followed the main argument that in highlighting acts of violence – whether quiet or loud, between and against women – Atwood's writing is ultimately feminist in its accurate and true representation of the female experience beyond just domesticity and placidity, and in the face of misogyny

Age & the Body

"Atwood's power games are played, exquisitely, by little girls."

– LISTENER on *Cat's Eye*

The representation of ageing women and the female body in *Cat's Eye* demonstrates the influence of internalised misogyny on not only adults, but also on children. It highlights the nature of misogyny as a learned behaviour in young girls, rather than an instinct that is natural. These behaviours are not contained within age groups either – girls are trained to perpetuate misogynistic ideals onto older women, meaning eventually onto themselves. Not only is it a bloodbath of woman vs. woman, girl vs. girl, but also of girl vs. woman. The younger girls in the novel repeatedly make observations about the older women in their lives, referring to them as "old biddies" or "witch". A telling comment is made, revealing the nature of the ways in which they interpret the role of the woman as servant to man: "There's something strange and laughable about older, unmarried women."

On the other hand, older women in the novel often feel resentful towards, judgemental of and alienated from younger women. When faced with a group of younger women running the gallery in which her retrospective exhibition will take place, Elaine Risley says: "I should be grateful, these women are on my side, they planned this whole thing for me, they're doing me an honour, they like what I do. But still I feel outnumbered, as if they are a species of which I am not a member."

The spaces that Elaine Risley occupies and the societal and behavioural attachments with which they come play a significant role in how she perceives herself. As a child in the woods and Canadian wilderness, she is often free to play, explore and express herself in the same way as her brother. When she moves to a residential community near the city where her father begins work at a university, she is initially relieved to find a set of predefined rules for girls through school and the perceived friends she begins to make: "I don't have to think about whether I've done these things well, as well as a boy." Whilst this seems like a relief, the behaviours that Risley internalises later prove to be far more detrimental in her relationships with others and to her own psychological wellbeing from childhood into adulthood and fit with the commodified vision of what it is to be a girl (and later to become a woman). In later life, she looks back to her youth and the horror of the reality of the manifestation of misogyny as bullying and struggles to reconcile her ageing body and her value as a woman artist who is now perceived to be old enough to have a retrospective exhibition, despite being far from finished.

"We are survivors of each other. We have been shark to one another, but also lifeboat."

– *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood, 1988

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Outside-In:

Internal Misogyny & Self-Loathing

Philosophy professor Kate Manne defines misogyny as "a social system or environment where women face hostility and hatred because they're women in a man's world – a historical patriarchy . . . Sexism is the ideology that supports patriarchal social relations, but misogyny enforces it when there's a threat of that system going away . . . It's primarily about controlling, policing, punishing, and exiling the 'bad' women who challenge male dominance."

As a result of the ways in which they are raised and socialised in patriarchal environments and societies, the ideals and standards to which women are held are almost always internalised and then projected as the ideals to which they hold themselves and each other. This internalisation of misogynistic behaviour - internal misogyny - can be understood to occur when women enact these learned behaviours upon themselves and other women. Its normalisation – and to a certain extent, celebration – within patriarchal societies translates into an acceptance that breeds its manifestation within female relationships. This system is a self-sustaining one, beneficial to the patriarchy, by Manne's definition. If women challenge male dominance by straying from the preordained path or belief, misogyny enforces a self-checking system.

Without over-simplifying or failing to recognise the variety of feminist attitudes, groups, and movements, the feminist paradox can be introduced when the extreme and denouncing behaviours that feminism has traditionally and overarchingly fought to reject are the same behaviours that self-identifying feminists begin to project towards women. An example of such can be found within the concept of cancel culture. The engagement with and enactment of cancel culture in the media has falsely come to be understood as a widely representative characteristic of all contemporary feminists. The extremities of control and exile that Manne discusses as being key identifiers of misogyny are now also features of many people identifying as feminists on the Internet and social media platforms like Twitter. Soundbite activism has taken precedence in the post-Trump era, and the very behaviours which many feminists claim to be against, are the behaviours that are now being amplified and projected onto other women.

"Misogyny . . . is something we practice almost unconsciously. We're embedded in a culture and we internalise the customs and social mores that define that culture – and thus perpetuate it. We're all implicated, even if we're not aware of it."
– Sean Illing in conversation with Kate Manne, Vox



Margaret Atwood by Tim Walker for The Sunday Times Style magazine, September 2019

Research Going Forward

There is much scope – as well as room in the field of Canadian literature – for the progression of this project to develop into a further comprehensive study. I would like to cast a wider net and expand to the interrogation of other Atwood texts – particularly her earlier works – and research further into the fields of sociology, history and politics, specifically in terms of both the Canadian Gothic and Postcolonial in terms of the land and space occupied by Atwood's female characters and the ways in which this influences their behaviours, attitudes and tendencies.

"I am tempted to think that to be despised by her sex is a very great compliment to a woman."

– *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood, 2005

Fiction vs. Reality:

The Reluctant Prophet

Featuring on one of the covers of the September 2019 *Time* magazine issues, Margaret Atwood was branded 'The Reluctant Prophet' – a title and status which had been acknowledged by many in all but name since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. At the same time as the election, the television adaptation of Atwood's renowned dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was preparing for its 2017 airing debut. Many of the producers, actors, and indeed Atwood herself, questioned the success of the series, fearing that viewers would find its content too far removed from the everyday life. However, they noted that the world changed quite literally overnight when it was announced that Donald J. Trump had won the election. Suddenly, the story of *The Handmaid's Tale* shifted to becoming a very close and possible reality rather than just one individual's creative absurdity or a dystopian warning sign. In Atwood's pre-Gilead era, Serena Joy – the wife of protagonist Offred's Commander – gives televised radical speeches advocating for traditionalist values and calling for women to abandon their jobs outside the home. Offred reminisces about her and her partner's own reactions to these speeches at the time: "We thought she was funny. Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. She was a little bit frightening." Whilst Atwood's scene was written in 1985, it eerily resembles of the campaign in the run-up to the 2016 election. Trump's extremist statements and beliefs paired with his exaggerated behaviours and gestures were largely seen as comically impossible. Enthralled in the war of political entertainment between Clinton and Trump, a dangerous complacency set in amongst those who undermined Trump's genuine influence. Political inactivity in terms of casting votes contributed to the result of his eventual election. A similar attitude in *The Handmaid's Tale* United States sees the government overthrown in a coup d'état and the rise of the patriarchal theocracy: Gilead.

Visual likenesses between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the U.S. under Trump's presidency. Note that the fictitious court (left) aired before the portrayed event (right).



Government meeting in Hulu television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, aired July 2018



Senate Judiciary Committee in the U.S. Capitol during Brett Kavanaugh hearings, September 2018



Serena Joy presenting to the court in Hulu television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, aired July 2018



Christine Blasey Ford testifying against Brett Kavanaugh, September 2018

Hierarchy, Division & Class

In several of Atwood's texts, men make us of hierarchical structures to pit women against both themselves and one another. This is heavily enforced through the practice of labelling and the assignment of roles to different women. In *Cat's Eye*, Cordelia refers to her middle/upper class family's maid as "the woman," attributing a learned domesticity to women at large, and is one example of assigning value and worth to women in relation to the societal and familial roles they play. This could prompt one to think about the argument so often heard in relation to male violence towards women when appealing to the men: "how would you feel if this were to happen to your mother/sister/daughter?" To be a woman alone is not sufficient, and the roles women play are seen in relation to the benefit of or relationship to the man. The ways in which the women of *Cat's Eye* perceive each other's roles is identical to the ways in which these roles are placed within the patriarchy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, strict labels are applied to both men and women in Gilead. Explicit rules and duties are attached to each role. The women are divided into the categories of Aunts, Marthas, Handmaids, Wives, Econowives, and Unwomen. Unwomen, being of the categorical lowest class, are typically women who are infertile, widowed, queer (labelled as gender traitors), divorced, adulterers, and who previously may have been activists. The acceptance of Unwomen within Gilead on the part of other women comes partly with the justification of their categorisation through the appeasement of the women in higher classes with small privileges. If people – in this case women in a totalitarian state – are given small liberties and freedoms whilst taking (many larger) others away, it becomes easier for the leading party – in this case the patriarchal theocratic government – to manipulate and control the population into submission for fear of falling further down the class ladder into further disadvantage.

"Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations."

– *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, 1985