



## Atwood's Female Writing: A Reading of "This is a Photograph of Me"

Pyeaam Abbasi<sup>1,\*</sup>; Omid Amani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor of English Literature, English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Hezar Jerib Street, Isfahan, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> M. A. Student of English Literature, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

During the twentieth century, women poets who were immensely influenced by the most revolutionary aspects of modernism, gave rise to what French feminists called 'écriture féminine' as a desired way of writing differently. In feminist writings emphasis seems to be more on how women are oppressed in the society as well as their anxieties about their bodies. Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) the Canadian nationalist poetess is a prominent figure concerned with the need for a new language to explore relations between subjects and society, the power relations that define one's identity as well as the inadequacy of phallogocentric discourse. What is also noteworthy in Atwood's writings is the rewriting of images and myths born by the patriarchal society and Western civilization. This study is an attempt to shed light on the ways Atwood pursues French feminists with emphasis on female body and language to show the poetess's exploration of female identity in her less-referred-to poem "This is a Photograph of Me." The writers have tried to show Atwood's tackling identity and restriction through the act of rewriting such established images as light and water.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood; This is a Photograph of Me; Feminism; Identity; Écriture féminine

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### ATWOOD'S FEMALE WRITING: A READING OF "THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME"

French feminism revolutionized many of the long-held beliefs. It highlighted the role of the female body in the construction of a new language that became the focal point in many feminist writings. This generated a new ambience of looking for the self, identity and female body—dominant themes in Atwood—that Warhol and Herndl refer to in *Feminisms* (1997): Emphasis in feminism seems to be more on how women are oppressed and "women's anxiety about disease and about their bodies in historical contexts" (p.5). As Cristanne Miller argues in "Gender, Sexuality and the Modernist Poem," during the nineteenth century "ideologies of gender were roughly based on identifying motherhood and domestic life whereas the twentieth century was the harbinger of sparking women's interest more on the issue of identity and self, hence feminism was the first major movement, either artistically or literally, that played a tremendous role that gave rise to shaping their own ideas and writing" (2007, p.70). Also, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "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, 1979, p.23). This implies the significance of the very act of writing as a "subversive tool for women in trying to create a space for a feminine, 'heterogeneous difference' outside the static closure of the binary oppositions that underlie patriarchal ideology" (Ozdemir, 2003, p.58). Atwood's exploration of identity is enriched with her use of voice and images that will be referred to.

Margaret Atwood, a canonical major contemporary writer of fiction and poetry as well as literary and cultural criticism, is widely regarded as one of the most prolific and highly versatile authors of Canadian and world literature. Caroline Rosenthal believes that Atwood's work

"raises and intersects many different issues: Canadian, feminist, anthropological, and cultural studies concerns as well as postcolonial criticism" (2000, p.53). *Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood's first groundbreaking novel, copes with the male-dominated and consumer society where men view women as commodities. *Surfacing* (1972) or Atwood's wilderness novel—Atwood was concerned about serenity of nature versus human tragedy—attempts to critique those who claim to be 'enlightened' and desecrate nature on the pretext of making progress because it yields the greatest profit to them. Erinc Ozdemir believes that Atwood's novel "valorizes femininity against masculinity, while at the same time it paradoxically dramatizes a desire to destroy all dichotomies and dualistic thinking" (2003, p.58). Lane refers to "a distinctive feminist voice" in *Surfacing* that "articulates issues of gender, subjectivity, madness, nationality, ecology and narrative power" (2006, p.71). *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), belonging to the science fiction and dystopian genre that sealed her international fame, dramatizes a patriarchal society where nothing matters except for the female body and reproduction at the core of the novel. Moreover, one cannot deny the Booker-prize winning novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000) among Atwood's fiction. Lothar Hönnighausen, regarding Atwood's poetry, states that "writing poetry for Atwood appears to be an irresistible, ongoing process of perception, reflection, and aesthetic organization" (qtd. in Nischik, 2001, p.97). Atwood in her poetry, as Gina Wisker comments, "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" (2010, p.1). As Reinhard M. Nischik asserts, Atwood's "extraordinary intellectual and imaginative power and gift of language, the uncanny topicality of her theme" (2000, p.1) has made her a favorite with readers, critics and scholars. Draper names Atwood among such poets as Elizabeth Bishop, Maya Angelou and Judith Wright for showing "the strength and diversity of what women's creative powers can actually achieve" (1999, p.160). Atwood is mostly concerned with the national literature and the question of female identity and Canadian identity which is the recurring theme in her fiction and poetry, as well as the landscape of Canada which is a predominant image in her works. Atwood has focused on core issues in her writings:

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. (Bouson, 2011, p.2)

Atwood offers trenchant critiques of the power politics of gender relations, the Enlightenment and rationalism, and social ideologies in Louis Althusser's and other mod-

ern theorists' terms, which are patriarchally constructed to put restraints on women. To this must be added exploitation and victimization, generally for Canadian people and particularly for women as the 'survivals,' as the major issue in her groundbreaking critical book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Atwood, in this work of literary criticism, looks for a grounding in a national identity, and fashions it as the central theme of Canadian literature that to a great extent influenced the ways Canadians understood their literary tradition. This has also paved the path for new advances in environmental interpretations of Canadian literature and portrays Canadian writers as victims imprisoned by colonial dependency.

J. Brooks Bouson (2011) also argues that Atwood can be categorized among those authors who write in the avant-garde female writing born out of works of French feminists, like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. The phrase 'écriture féminine' that appears in Hélène Cixous's article "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) depicts a mode of textual production and feminine mode of writing that resists dominant phallic models of communication. According to Cixous, Western civilization privileges masculine language, reasoning and meanings and depreciates the understanding of women. To undermine the conventional language fostered by patriarchal society, Cixous has developed this new way of writing as a critique of phallogocentrism. Accordingly she maintains that "nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of *reason* [emphasis added] of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It is one with the phallogocentric tradition" (Richter, 2007, p.1646). Cixous names three important characteristics for the so-called phallogocentric tradition: "self- admitting, self-stimulating, and self-congratulatory" (Ibid.). She names poetry as the genre that "involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women or...fairies" (Ibid.). As mentioned, Atwood's poetry along with her fiction has consolidated its significance in the case of female writing, and her primary objective due to her feminist mentality is to subvert male-dominated discourses and challenge the Western civilization or what is "confounded in the history of reason."

One of the salient features of Atwood's particular feminine writing is the way she retells or rewrites tales, especially history and myths, from a woman's point of view. These "patriarchal stories," according to Suzanne Juhasz, "have defined the culture and our meaning in it" (1979, p.27). Juhasz gives an interesting example of Atwood's retelling of a myth in *Circe / mad Poems* (1974). This is the story of Circe and Odyssey but this time Circe telling the story. Also regarding history, a good example may be her 1970 collection of poetry named *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* which is a rewriting that deals with Canadian his-

tory from the perspective of a famous immigrant English woman by using her documented journals and poetry.

The other aspect of Atwood's poetry related to Cixous's notion of femalness and female language is changing traditional concepts meaning those specifically inadequate male-constructed metaphors and images formerly used by women themselves. Suzanne Juhasz's words are noteworthy:

It means a texture that is consequently more complex, more subtle more layered. Especially, it means language that is figurative, forming connections, interrelationships. Specifically, images that intertwine woman and nature, a traditional and archetypal body of associations are used in a new way to identify the source and setting for female wisdom and power. (1979, p.23)

This is what Juhasz calls "transformation": a kind of breaking down the barrier between the concepts and writing a feminine poetry (Ibid.). A striking related example in Atwood's poetry is the decentering or deconstructing—in Derrida's term—the concept of "snake" that pervades much of her work. In the first line of "Psalm to Snake," she says "O snake, you are an argument / for the poetry" (Atwood, 1987, p.92). In Michael Ferber's words, the snake has been "connected with knowledge or wisdom" (2007, p.186) and in Harold Ellens' and Wayne Rollins' words, it represents "male sexuality with ... phallus shape" (2004, p.128). In fact, it exposes the very idea of phallogocentrism as well as male-dominated language and power. As Heidi Slettedhal Macpherson states, Atwood's speaker in "Eating Snake," "claims to have 'taken the god into my mouth' and deconstructs the phallic imagery, claiming that this snake refers to a real snake, which 'taste like chicken.' She claims that it was 'mere lunch' and 'only a snake after all'" (2010, p.108). Atwood's identifying the snake with female voice and energy is the invention of a different historical version outside the narratives of power and oppression.

"This is a Photograph of Me" is the first poem of Atwood's first important and mature collection and a highly acclaimed work among the poems of her best-loved book, *The Circle Game* (1966). What in this collection is of paramount importance is Atwood's romantic attitude and creation of a romantic atmosphere. From a romantic point of view, Atwood by looking at the external nature is inspired and begins a journey as a quest for self-knowledge. As a matter of fact nature acts as a stimulus to her thinking and slipping into imagination, thus what is more significant is the very imagination not nature as genesis for inspiration. This is reminiscent of the well-known romantic themes of quest, exile and exploration of the unknown.

"This is a Photograph of me" portrays a photograph with the setting of wilderness, reminiscent of her second novel *Surfacing* (1972), with "a small frame house," "lake" and the very word "surface" that is open to different layers of meaning. The serene natural setting presents a startling contrast to the human tragedy it masks. Atwood uses

the subject "I" to show the presence of the speaker in the photograph and offers the picture of the speaker "drowned" in the "lake" persuading the reader to "look long enough" to see her and her drowned body in the lake. This is, as Branko Gorjup states, "the portrait of the artist as landscape, of the artist who enters landscape" (2007, p.134). By and large, the defensive relationship one finds between "I" and "you" in Atwood's poems refers to not only the cruelty of men but also is a reaction of the "I" through "verbal enactment of her sense of a splintered consciousness" (Draper, 1999, p.202). Atwood's poetry is open to, like Sylvia Plath's, aggressive feminist interpretations as well as political readings where male establishment and female slavery and freedom are explored.

The "drowned body" is a female body which, as French feminists suggest, is tied to language. Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa," states that when a woman articulates, she uses her body to "support the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true... she signifies it with her body" (1976, p.1647). Also in this regard, Luce Irigaray in "This Sex Which Is Not One" illustrates female's sexuality as generally multiple or with plural and fragmented identity, signifying that it is "more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle" (1985, p.25) than the symbolically integrated phallus and thus can escape from the history of male domination. For her, as for Cixous, the very "difference" is crucial and it has become a means of evading the models of patriarchy. Hence, Irigaray describes feminine language as "the multiple nature of female desire and language" (qtd. in Tolan, 2007, p.177) and "where male writing is traditionally linear, logical and progressive, affirming the authority and unity of the writer, écriture feminine is typically highly symbolic, inconclusive and with multiple and even contradictory meanings" (2007, p.177). Then, to articulate symbolically and contradictorily is the highly prior means of feminine writing that can be seen in Atwood as well.

The vivid feature that strikes one at first glance is the presence of the tension between the opposites or "violent duality" as Sherrill Grace calls in her 1980 book where she studies the role of oppositional forces in Atwood's works. The crucial binary is you/I that plays a prominent role in the poem. In this case the issue of identity and self as "I" is enormously subjected to "you" in the poem where the female/male binary can also be seen. Here "you" may be the male, the victor or civilization versus "I" who may be the female, the victim or nature. This is not an easy task of division since the photograph hides identity and history. Ipso facto, the caricature of reality shows the poetess's concern with the identity of women exposed to restrictions by male dominance. The poem plays with the conventional equation of appearance and reality. The photograph obscures, rather than reveals, the speaker's mysterious identity and history.

The blurred identity is visible from the beginning of the poem where the speaker describes the photograph as

"smeared" with "blurred lines" and "grey flecks." As mentioned earlier, the setting in the photograph is the wilderness and the descriptive adjectives actually refer to nature, set in parallel with the female distorted by the patriarchal civilization. This is what Karen J. Warren (1996) defines as ecofeminism. In her simple definition ecofeminism addresses "the relationship between the inferiority of nature to culture and the inferiority of women to men" (p.164). Hence, the speaker likens the situation of the photograph to her own situation, to her own self. Furthermore, the female/male binary may expose or reveal another related binary that is reason, rationality and mind versus emotion, unreason and insanity. What happens to nature, as one sees in this poem, is the consequence of civilization and progress, actually the same as the Enlightenment. This is a grand narrative, from a Lyotardian point of view, that is rejected by Atwood in a way that she attempts to represent nature as damaged by reason and rationalism. Hence, the so-called binary you/I, as Cixous discusses in her 1975 essay "Sorties," leads to the origin of opposition in the original couple, male and female, and that they are never equal but in a hierarchal order favouring the aggressive male over the passive female, or the "philosophical discourse" of activity/passivity (p.579). Atwood was always concerned with the status of women as material commodities for commercialization and being intellectually disregarded. That is why the photograph hides the poetess's identity: the real self may be in the photograph and the unreal in reality.

The words that may signify different meanings in the poem are "water," "light" and "distortion." One can at the outset mull over the meaning of these words facing their transformation. Reflecting upon "water," J. E. Cirlot states that "when we plunge our head beneath water, as in a sepulcher, the old man becomes completely immersed and buried. When we leave the water, the new man suddenly appears" (2001, p.366). Hence, it is life-giving and makes one—even the dead—reborn. Also, one can ponder over water as a symbol of purification with its chief deployment in the absolutely vital religious rite of baptism. It can also be attributed to "lake," for one may think of a lake as purifying water as well. The other image is "light" that in Cirlot's view is "the manifestation of morality, of the intellect, and the seven virtues" (2001, p.187). It also connotes the Enlightenment, reason and rationality. However, what is noteworthy is the effect of water (patriarchal society) on light (woman) as a distortion which signifies that the whole photo is a distortion of the harsh reality of the situation. Light interacts with water molecules to cause loss of light, colour changes, diffusion, and loss of contrast. A photo taken under water looks bluish. A man is supposed to make a woman complete but far from completing her, the woman's perfection is marred by his attitude, treatment and outlook.

What Atwood carries out in this poem is a rewriting of the meanings of "light" and "water." For "water" it is

implied that she indicates "men" who are the victors and rulers in the society, and own the dominant discourses. Besides, for "light" it is implied that she means "women," those who are the victims of the patriarchal society and try to find their own voice, discourse and writing. In addition, "distortion" is a new image for women in the poem in which there is no "effect" any longer. It is not that the female exists "just under the surface," but is "drowned" in the lake "in the center." It means that she is not dominated by the patriarchal society, and she has a new identity with a different look at the world. Atwood's ecriture feminine adds that one should look below the surface for the woman.

Finally, by scrutinizing the last stanza, "If you look long enough/ eventually/ you will be able to see me" one can notice the volatile situation in the poem. The parentheses used signify interruption and fragmentation, and a different look towards the masculine officiousness is made when there is some distance in the picture or in reality between man and woman. The phrase "long enough" signifies the issue of marginality of women, who, being out of sight of men, need the careful look to be perceived. Moreover, the speaker wants and tries to persuade men to see her. This stanza confirms Simon de Beauvoir's assertion in her famous *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p. 281).

Atwood can be referred to as one of the central disciples of the French feminists' theory of ecriture feminine by rewriting myths and history as well as transforming the familiar concepts and employing dualisms in her writings. This means that it is not inevitably avoidable to call her style of poetry female writing. By the wonderful narrative voice, Atwood has described a mysterious picture that is not a recent one and is smeared with blurred lines. It is interesting to note that her part in the description can be omitted without marring the perfection of the whole. In the picture, background takes precedence over the speaker who is relegated to the background. Atwood, the same as a French feminist like Cixous, believed that females had been defined by men, and woman's body had been repressed. Using a female voice with new meanings for established images is Atwood's mode of writing and challenging insufficiencies of language to express women's consciousness.

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