

## A Study of Postmodern Feminist Aesthetics in Margaret Atwood's Prose Poems in *Murder in the Dark*

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### Abstract

*Postmodernism refers to the subversion of unified assumptions of reality through decentering the notion of a unified reason with pluralistic version of reality having fragmentation and chaos in the postmodern era. Postmodern aesthetics, in this context, signify the loss of referent, which gives rise to the ambivalent depiction of reality. It takes into account the various narrative techniques like Parody and Pastiche in order to mock the concept of a unified reason. Postmodernism, in conflation with feminist studies, forms Postmodern feminist aesthetics which refers to dismantling the identity of women as a unified epistemology and hence, gives way to multiple and plural epistemological depictions of women identity. This multiple and pluralistic existence of women tends to create 'Angst' which leads towards the meaninglessness and hence, the identity crisis of women in the Postmodern era. Postmodern feminist aesthetics significantly de-essentializes the concept of women being 'typical' caught in the shackles of patriarchy through giving voice to individual stories of women. The present study deals with Atwood's engagement with postmodern feminist aesthetics to challenge the unified constructions of women identity through giving voice to fragmentation and chaos inherent in women identity in the postmodern world. The study also deals with an issue of identity crisis of women as it attempts to reveal that how women experience anxiety as a result of fragmentation and chaos due to the absence of unified epistemological construct of women liberation in the Postmodern world. Moreover, Atwood through her prose poems in *Murder in the Dark* (1983) significantly maintains the ambivalence of the position of women free from the constructs of freedom/oppression with emphasis on epistemological becoming of women identity through giving voice to the "third theoretical space".*

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**Keywords:** Postmodernism; Postmodern feminist aesthetics; Parody; Pastiche; Angst; Third Theoretical Space.

## 1. Introduction

*Murder in the Dark* (1994) is a collection of short fiction by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer. The collection, which consists of four sections with a sum total of twenty-seven pieces, offers a wide variety of literary styles including fictionalized autobiography, parables, travel stories, satires and prose poems.

Amongst these four sections, the fourth section comprises of prose poems, which are the promising representatives of postmodern feminist aesthetics. The study tends to explore the identity crisis of women resulting from fragmentation and chaos inherent in meaningless anxiety in the postmodern world. Moreover, the study tries to establish the need for third space in order to emphasize upon the epistemological becoming of women in postmodern context.

This research is premised upon two focal points: First, it takes contention with Atwood's prose poems as representative of Postmodern feminist aesthetics; to further sort out the fragmentation and dissolution in the identity of women ultimately resulting in identity crisis; our second major point is to link our reading of Atwood's prose poems – with its emphasis on Postmodernist epistemology as the denial of unified meanings in order to give voice to plural and hence, fragmented identities where De Toro's 'third theoretical space' (cited in Genz and Brabon 2009: 31) exists or needed to transcend the binaristic representations of women identity.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in Postmodern studies particularly though the representation of narrative fragmentation, chaos and identity crisis in a Postmodern context. Therefore, significant works have been done on Margaret Atwood's novels and poetry taking Postmodernism and its narrative techniques particularly from the perspective of ecriture feminism (Abbasi and Amani, 2012) historiographic metafiction (Labudova, 2018), identity crisis of women in Postmodern era (Gayret, 2019). This study is unique as it tends to link postmodern feminist aesthetics with identity crisis of women with a need for third

epistemological space in order to shatter the binaristic representations of women identity. Moreover, the issue of Postmodern feminist aesthetics has not been yet explored in Margret Atwood's prose poems in *Murder in the Dark* (1994).

A brief sketch of methodology used in this research is given followed by research questions and theoretical framework on which textual analysis with instances from the selected prose poems is premised. Finally, this study tends to maintain a stance that unified and fixed notion of women identity is a hyper-real in a postmodern feminist context.

## **2. Methodology**

The present research is non-empirical as the researchers intend to apply postmodern feminist theory on Margaret Atwood's prose poems. The research employs interpretative paradigm with its focus on socio-historic context of the given text. Moreover, the technique used for contextual analysis is close reading of the selected text as the paper intends to address what the text signifies with logical inferences, citing significant references from the text in order to support conclusion and findings drawn from the text (Lapp et al., 2015). Hence, the paper tries to juxtapose postmodern feminist aesthetics with the text to problematize the notion of fixed identities in a postmodern context. The four selected poems *Mute*, *She*, *Him*, and *Instructions for the Third Eye*, are part of the fourth section of Atwood's collection *Murder in the Dark* (1994) as they are chosen for their fragmented and Postmodern feminist stance towards women identity in a Postmodern world.

### **2.1 Research Questions**

The prose poems of Margaret Atwood taken from her collection *Murder in the Dark* are considered to be significant postmodern narratives regarding the representation of fragmentation and chaos surrounding the identity of women in Postmodernist context. Thus, the present research aims to answer the following broad question:

RQ1: How Margaret Atwood's prose poems in *Murder in the Dark* exhibit Postmodern feminist aesthetics?

The study intends to answer this broad question by answering the following secondary questions:

RQ2: How do Atwood's prose poems voice the concept of identity crisis of women in Postmodernist context?

RQ3: How does Atwood call on the need for 'third theoretical space' regarding women identity through her prose poems?

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Sim (2001) takes Postmodernism as skepticism or doubt towards totalitarian or authoritative epistemologies, which claim universalistic truths regarding "received wisdom, cultural and political norms" (ibid, p.3). He calls it 'anti-foundationalist in terms of its nihilistic approach towards ideological stances which claim cultural and moral certainties. Moreover, it dismantles the unified notions of enlightenment in order to defy reason as a singular entity, to give way to pluralistic notion of reality through fragmentation and chaos in the postmodern world.

Baudrillard (1994) talks about the instability of reality in terms of the concept of Simulation—a hyper-real. It entails the absence of proper referent in the postmodern era. This hyper-real, according to Baudrillard, blurs the difference between the truth and false and hence, the real and the imaginary. He also talks about language in terms of its failure as a system to relate stabilized meanings through representations in terms of the instability between the 'signifier' and 'signified'. Baudrillard talks about postmodern multiplicity in terms of Simulacrum which exhibits the presence of ideologies not unified but plural and hence, instable in nature.

Lytard (1984) describes Postmodern aesthetics in terms of the notion of Kantian sublime which, according to him, has both pleasure and pain in itself or rather it is the pleasure derived from pain. He also describes postmodern aesthetics with reference to something that remains "unpresentable" as a result of the lack of well-defined narrative forms with no defined and set rules. In this context, Postmodernism takes various narrative techniques in practice to describe postmodern unpresentableness. One of the significant techniques is Historiographic metafiction, which shatters the binaristic representations of history and fiction in order to

challenge the political fabrications of historical representations. Foucault (1977), in this regard, subverts the ontological representations of history through genealogical studies which, according to him, is parodic in terms of farcical nature of history; dissociative in terms of presenting fragmentary identities; sacrificial in terms of contesting the traditional notions of epistemology. Pastiche is also one of the significant Postmodern narrative techniques which Jameson calls “blank parody” – a mockery of unified reason through narrative fragmentation and chaos (Bertens, 1995) and “Eclecticism” by Lyotard (1984) which entails the mixing of various styles to define reality as dual and multiple in the Postmodern era.

Postmodernism conflates with feminist studies to give rise to Postmodern feminist aesthetics which negates the possibility of a unified women identity and hence, multiple and plural in a Postmodern world. Lyotard (1984), in this regard, talks about plural epistemological context as identity according to him, “exists in a fabric of relation” (ibid, p.15). In this context, Heideggerian concept of Angst is significant as, according to Polt (1999) it consists of a “deep crisis of meaning” as it lacks exact or singular site of human anxiety. Thus, this postmodern multiplicity in relation to feminist studies creates meaningless anxiety in women which leads towards identity crisis.

Brooks (1997) talks about feminist epistemological becoming and emphasizes on the epistemological plurality of women identity in the postmodern era. She further contextualizes the political as well as social experiences of women and challenges the foundationalist notions of feminist epistemology where women is seen as universally oppressed in the hands of patriarchy. Cixous (1976), in this regard, shatters the universalistic notion of women as “typical” and emphasizes on metonymical representations of women identity and hence, claims the absence of universal epistemological grounds for women liberation. She significantly establishes the grounds for Postfeminist Historiographic metafiction, which suggests that women can voice their stories through their speech with a denial of anarchical stories given by history.

Butler (1999) contests the “category of women” as having pre-conceived notions of oppression and liberation and hence, a unified notion of identity.

She emphasizes on epistemological becoming of women in the form of her emphasis on third epistemological space for women like De Toro's "third theoretical space" which according to him involves "deconstruction of current hegemonic systems as well as the new knowledge generated from the margins, or rather, from different centers" (cited in Genz and Brabon 2009: 31). According to Butler, this third epistemological space provides a site for articulation in order to voice the plural and multiple identities of women in a postmodern context. In this regard, she treats gender as a multiple construct and hence, a "performative" in the form of intelligible and unintelligible genders. Intelligible genders entail or follow the normative constructions of society, while on the other hand unintelligible genders are regarded as deviance from the society. Thus, in this way, Butler (1999) not only voices the plurality and multiplicity but also the fragmentation and chaos inherent in women identity in the postmodern world.

The present research is mainly premised upon the feminist notion given by Brooks (1997) as epistemological becoming of women along with Butler's (1999) concept of third epistemological space. The rationale behind taking these feminists as the major theorists is to problematize the unified notion of women identity in the postmodern era. Moreover, the purpose is to highlight that how the identity of women in postmodern times is ambivalent, thus, hard to explain in terms of anxiety women experience in the backdrop of absence of unified space regarding liberation/freedom.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

The title of the book *Murder in the Dark* (1994), which is also one of the narrative in the book, is symbolic as it recounts a childhood/adult game with darkness at its center as everyone in the game tries to make his/her own way in the dark where eyes become useless. It is significant as it signifies a complete Postmodernist loss of faith, hence the loss of unidirectionality in the form of some belief or system. The game involves a murderer, a detective, a victim and other players. The players choose their roles through selecting a piece of paper from several bits of paper put in the hat. The bits of paper with roles written are symbolic of postmodern fragmented identities. After a detective and a murderer are chosen, the detective leaves the room putting off the lights allowing the murderer to

choose victim on his/her own. When a murder is done, the detective returns and tries to find out that, who is the murderer among all the players. Margaret Atwood equates the murderer with a writer who kills reality via fiction or language. It also relates the Postmodernist nullification of the authority of unified knowledge or epistemology as the murderer's attempt to murder in the dark conveys the presence of an author or a writer in the dark, which gives a very bleak picture of postmodern world where the author/knowledge-maker tries to grope in the dark with an utter sense of chaos.

*Murder in the Dark* (1994) signifies a Postmodernist loss of faith in unified reality through decentering language as a stable system to convey meanings; through dismantling representational politics of reality conveyed by patriarchal systems of language; the voicing of Postmodern feminist ambivalence in the form of fragmentation of women identity. This fragmentation is signified in *Murder in the Dark* (1994) through dividing the book in four parts. Moreover, it is best explained when Atwood's experiments with various styles like intermingling autobiography with fiction in the first part of the book. The autobiographies are the shortest ones making them oddest due to their concise structures, mostly in ten to eleven sentences often the trite ones. The writer takes everyday mundane experiences in the second Atwood (1994) significantly maintains Postmodernist notion of instable reality particularly in fourth section of the book in terms of its multiplicity with an absence of a proper and singular referent and hence, establishes a hyper-real instead of a traditional notion of reality, which cannot ground individuals in a proper well-defined context. The writer divides the section in twelve prose poems; each poem significantly exhibits the loss of a well-marked referent giving pluralistic ideologies keeping the unified meanings at length. In this context, the writer develops a world of Simulacrum where there is a reality, which is fragmented in the form of multiple realities which is termed Eclecticism according to Lyotard (1984) and blank parody according to Jameson (Bertens, 1995) exhibited through concise prose poems, each piece maintaining a world of its own. In this regard, the writer starts the fourth section with a prose poem termed *Mute*. The poem is significant as it mainly signifies the failure of language as a system to determine unified meanings. Atwood through the metonym of mute relates the helplessness of

individuals in Postmodernist world where there is a complete nullification of language as a code to depict reality. The writer starts with the dilemma, a question "Whether to speak or not" which according to the writer, immediately appears when "you've said too much, again" (Atwood, 1994, p.86). This is further elaborated when the writer takes nouns, verbs and vowels as a bunch of futile objects unable to communicate well. Moreover, the writer employs Postmodernist technique of intertextuality as the poem refers to Bacon's theory of idols in the form of idol of marketplace where words mislead and fail to communicate properly (Bacon, 1902). The Postmodernist disillusionment has been highlighted when the market is described as "flyspecked" so it is almost impossible to cleanse language of its absurdity and thus the writer imposes a futile question "how do you wash a language?" (Atwood, 1994, p.86). Moreover, the language has been associated with a food item, which has been eaten "once, too often" and creates weird sounds when chewed and hence, gives a feeling of nausea and rottenness. The prose poem *Mute* comes to an end with resignation from the belief system of language, as the narrator wants a complete isolation from the world with "hands over your mouth, your ears, your eyes" (ibid., p.87). The narrator warns that people might think you are a beggar as they "will or will not drop pennies" (ibid) or they might believe "you can't talk, they're sorry for you, but." (ibid). The writer in the very end gives an image of futile waiting, which echoes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2011) where the Godot in the form of unified language system never comes.

But you're waiting for the word, the one that will finally be right (Atwood, 1994, p.87)

Atwood (1994) in *She* gives a genealogical analysis of women position in Postmodernist world. The identity of woman is no longer a stereotypical and a unified one with traditional roles but rather, the woman's identity is plural and multiple and hence, fragmentary which Lyotard (1984) calls "unpresentable" in nature. That's why *SHE* is represented as a woman who exists in bits and pieces but "knows exactly what she's doing" and sometimes *SHE* wears "shorts, with tanned thighs" or "sleeves like cabbages" or "Lace at the throat, the ankle, skimming the breasts" (Atwood, 1994, p. 88), in order to give an image of a woman who exercises her freedom and existence in multiple realities. The narrator then turns to the blank parody of her identity crisis through a question "What

will it get her?" which further leads the Postmodernist woman towards the Heideggerian *Angst*, a meaningless anxiety, as *SHE* cannot ground herself in one place because this is *SHE* who has to move "from one point to the next and then see another, and another beyond that." (ibid). The poem exhibits Kantian sublime (1984) because *SHE* experiences pleasure from pain. *SHE* "deals in longing, the sickness of the heart, stuttering of the arteries" (Atwood, 1994, p.89). Even then *SHE* is not sure whether to call it a "suffering" or not because no matter it is a pain or a pleasure, the question remains "Where does it lead?" (ibid). Moreover, *SHE* also acts like Butler's "performative" with an inclination towards being "unintelligible" as *SHE* does not follow the traditional norms. *SHE* is a woman with an ambivalent existence with no pre-defined rules either for oppression.

Moreover, *SHE* is a woman who experiences freedom in one moment and anxiety in the very next moment as mentioned above and thus, extends existentialist and identity crisis. *SHE* like *MUTE* ends with an image of waiting, a patriarchal expectation by men who think, "she will be there, finally waiting, for them, all cool white light." (ibid) which is an absurd notion due to futility in epistemological foundationalism in the Postmodern world.

Atwood (1994) significantly emphasizes upon the epistemological becoming of women in her prose poem *HIM* through shifting the narrative positioning of men and women regarding the constructions of knowledge as the narrator is a woman who slices *HIM* into a category of analysis which is a Postmodern epistemological shift where woman does not act as a sole site of study and hence, not a unified subject of oppression. The narrator describes *HIM* as "semi-blinded" either because of the woman's "sudden light" or because of "his own dark hurtling gravity-free interior" (ibid., p.101) which gives a stark contrast between the existential realities of men and women. The woman is associated with light and hence, bears positive connotations signifying knowledge. On the other hand, man is associated with darkness and thus, signifies ignorance. But again there is no finality that which one of the above reasons is responsible for the "semi-blindness" of *HIM*, the light or darkness as the signifiers and the signified slip into one another due to the narrator's confusion to decide on the reason because no matter it is light or darkness, *HIM* remains unable to see things clearly. This

is *HIM* who cannot communicate himself properly because language no more serves him as he has “difficulties with language” (ibid). The epistemological becoming of woman is made possible through a Historiographic Metafiction technique in the poem as *HIM* is portrayed as “anxious enough” with “unprotected” and “candid” eyes and also this is *HIM* who uses “sadness” as a “tool for bludgeoning water” (ibid., p.102) which is an implication towards the practice of men who want to benefit themselves from women, which was previously thought as the practice of women to manipulate men. Moreover, there is an icing on the cake because *HIM* is unaware of his ways of manipulating women, as “he’s no purveyor of his own grief, he’s unconscious of it” (ibid). In the end of the poem, it will be the woman who will bestow her forgiveness on men despite of his eyes “hard as if cast by granite” (ibid) and with a thought “I’m in a bed with a killer?” (ibid) because of the futility of search, a search for perfection “because, now you’re beginning to remember the way the others were partly like him” (ibid., p.103).

Atwood (1994) significantly calls on the need to establish third epistemological space for women devoid of any foundationalist hegemony in *INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE THIRD EYE* in the form of Third Eye, which stands as a metonym for third space, through which multiple existential realities of women can be voiced. The narrator starts with the description of Third Eye, which acts as an organ of vision like the other two eyes, which open and sees things but there is one exception to it you “close it, and it doesn’t.” (ibid., p.113) which gives an image of inevitability to it, something which cannot be avoided in any case. As this Third Eye provides a space, which voices multiple realities thus it is not trustworthy in a sense as it gives a pluralistic vision of reality. The narrator, in this context, relates a class of people who don’t trust Third Eye because it makes reality a mere illusion, a simulation and a world, a simulated place to live in.

That -wasn’t really F., standing on the corner, hands in his overcoat pockets, waiting for the light to change: F. died two months ago. It’s a trick my eyes played on me, they say.  
(ibid)

It is a space where a difference between “vision” and “a vision” is questioned. The “vision”, according to the narrator, is something which is “assumed you’ve seen”, which signifies a tendency of individuals or society to establish pre-defined norms and beliefs, a capability to assume or rather presume things. On the other hand, “a vision” is something which develops on the assumption that “you haven’t” seen which signifies a dilemma to decide on the absolutistic notions of reality. Thus, a pure vision to describe existential reality for women becomes almost impossible as it lies somewhere between seen and unseen in the Postmodernist world. Moreover, in this epistemological space there is no idiom possible to depict reality as “Language is not always dependable either” (Atwood, 1994, p. 114). The narrator poses a compulsion that “If you want to use the third eye, you must close the other two” (ibid., p.114) which in a way implies the two eyes as a binaristic representation of reality and hence, a unified identity. According to the narrator, in order to experience reality with all its multiplicities given by Third Eye or a Third ‘I’, you need to transcend the visions given by the other two eyes and hence, the unified notions of “I”. The narrator mocks the act of experiencing Third Eye through creating ambivalence that if you close the other two eyes “This sometimes works; on the other hand, sometimes you merely go to sleep.” (ibid) But the inevitability of Third Eye is maintained as according to the narrator even if you go to sleep “That sometimes works also” (ibid).

The space created by Third Eye gives a pluralistic version of reality in a sense as it depicts the brutal picture of reality in the form of “gassed and scorched corpses at the cave-mouth, the gutted babies” (ibid., p.115). It also exposes “hearts gone bubonic with jealousy and greed, glinting through the vests and sweaters of anyone at all.” (ibid., p.116, ). The Third Eye “when wounded” and “merciless” can see only “torment” which signifies the utter brutality of Third Eye. On the other hand, the Third Eye can see the minute details, which the other two are unable to see like “the brick houses, each brick, each leaf of each tree”. It is only the Third Eye which can enlighten you from within as “your own body, will be glowing from within, lit up, so bright you can hardly look. You will reach out in any direction and you will touch the light itself.” (ibid). In the above lines, the word “light” has been used as a metonym for knowledge, the knowledge though ironically blinds you with its extreme brightness but it is only this light, which can show you

that truth is no more a unified entity to pursue as the narrator states, "... it will show you that this truth is not the only truth." (ibid)

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, Margaret Atwood significantly shatters the binaristic and unified representations of reality and talks about hyper-reality, which creates a simulated world with language as an instable phenomenon to depict reality in the Postmodernist world. In order to further lay emphasis on reality as a plural entity, the writer has used various Postmodernist techniques like Pastiche, Intertextuality, Historiographic metafiction and blank parody to nullify the presence of unified meanings. Moreover, Postmodern feminist aesthetics has been maintained through giving voice to identity crisis of women through instances of Heideggerian *Angst*, a meaningless anxiety in women and also through Kantian sublime where women experience pleasure through pain and hence, a woman becomes an unintelligible gender who does not follow the traditional patriarchal norms but still under the hegemony of nameless anxiety. Atwood also talks about epistemological shift in the form of reversing the narrative positioning of men and women and hence, subverts the notion of men as the interpreters and epistemology makers. Moreover, the writer emphasizes upon the third epistemological space where the notion of reality and hence, identity cannot remain singular and unified in the postmodernist world.

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