

IDENTITY CRISIS AND QUEST FOR SELF UNDER IRRESISTIBLE CULTURAL CHANGES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S CAT'S EYE.

Poovitha M¹&Dr. V. Manimozhi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Chennai-73, India

² Professor & Head, Department of English Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Chennai-73, India

ABSTRACT

Women's development over the period of time has been tremendous. Despite many developmental opportunities, women are sometimes suppressed not only by the patriarchal ideologies but by some of the unfathomable minute issues. Some of the issues that can trouble an adult during the period of growth are the experience of the past. Bullying and abuse are some of the worst experiences of the childhood stage, that can mar growth later. The reason for choosing *Cat's Eye* for the research is to analyze the ways in which a child can become the object of someone's harassing nature [1]. Even when nothing is pre-planned things fall out of place and amidst such circumstances Elaine prepares for the journey in search of an identity. This paper revolves around the elements associated with the quest for an identity that seems lost from the outset of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. The protagonist lives in the present haunted by the overwhelming past. The cultural nuance in her life as a result of migration paves way for the metamorphosis in her physical and mental state. The emergence of an artist from the nomadic way of life amidst the cultural variations and migration becomes the predominant theme. The author through the life of Elaine Risley's past focuses on the cultural changes and personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood born on 18th November, in the year 1939 is one of the renowned Canadian writers. She is a poet, a novelist, literary critic, an essayist, teacher and an activist. She has been garnered some of prestigious awards like the Booker Prize, Arthur C. Clarke Award, Princes of Austrians Awards and Governor General's Award and so on. Her contribution to theorizing the Canadian identity has brought to her enormous acclaim both nationally and internationally [2]. Atwood's works are with feminist touch, though she does not associate herself with feminist ideologies, her works are more or less inclined toward feminism. The collection of her works includes *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace*, *Oryx and Crake* and the Testaments.

Cat's Eye was published in the year 1988. The novel revolves around the life of the female protagonist Elaine Risley. The past and present life of Elaine throws light on the way in which her life was designed. The childhood stage of Elaine has a deeper impact on her present life. She has to destroy her self-esteem to find a new life. She is unable to get over the depressing experiences of the past, yet she rescues herself [3]. The early adulthood of Elaine as an art student is what forms the main plot of the novel. Over the course of her life, she is able to connect with the people from her past to straighten her present life, finally, she is able to find herself and an identity.

The protagonist Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye* portrays a retrospective exhibition; thereby

getting the opportunity to revisit her past. An artist by profession Risley paints the past and present in an artistic way [4]. The protagonist undergoes a change in personality and as the novel proceeds, it could be understood that her persona over time has undergone a transition which at times becomes complementary and at times a contradiction to her real self.

"Regardless of my reality, I have a career that might actually be legitimate."(15). The juxtaposition of Elaine Risley in the past and present forms the crux of this paper [5].

THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Elaine's initial years were spent on roads with her family as her father was an entomologist. As a child she was happy with the way her life was and was habituated to the nomadic kind of life- an enchanted existence it was to Risley and her brother. She was unaware of all odds of life in a city. To her the world was limited to a smaller circle consisting of her father, mother and an elder brother [6]. Her brother was her best friend as they had to discuss everything and even followed certain code language to share their thoughts and secrets which they kept uninformed to their parents. But things began to change once they shifted to Toronto.

"I was happy till we moved to Toronto."(21)

Elaine's parents too failed to impart in the necessities that could have prepared her for the changes which she was to encounter, on the other hand she felt entrapped after moving in to the partially finished house in the suburbs of postwar [7].

"I'm in serious trouble. I wish to return to the inn, to the street, to my previous rootless existence of transitory happiness."(33)

Elaine who was optimistic, curious, adventurous and extremely open- minded underwent a drastic and dramatic change when she met Cordelia, thereafter everything became traumatic. She became shy, secretive and insecure. Everything was new to Elaine after shifting to Toronto, even girls.

"As a result, I'm left with the young ladies, true young ladies, at the end of the day. Whatever the case may be, I'm not used to young ladies and have no notion what they're like. I'm uncomfortable around them; I'm not sure what to say. I understand young men's implicit standards, but I always feel like I'm ready to make a blunder with young ladies"(47).

Elaine learns the rules with the help of her three new friends, Grace, Carol, and Cordelia: the young ladies' line is distinct from the young men's line; she is not yet ready to follow her brother, Stephen, as she did previously [8]. She invents female repulsions:

"Meshes, a robe, and my own satchel are all things I've never craved before. As it unfolds, something reveals itself to me. I see that there is an entire universe of young females and their tricks that I was previously unaware of, and that I may be a part of it without having to put in any effort." (54)

Elaine was not acquainted to religion or any religious practices, she did not know what was meant by going to church, *"Song inquires as to which church I will go, and I respond that I am unsure. We do not attend chapel."* With new people in her life Elaine started learning the unlearned lessons of life related practices. Elaine's happiness within the limited circle of family and friends was short lived and sooner she started developing instinctual thoughts which resulted in complete transition in her personality [9]. Cultural changes, new people and friends and the

ambience provided Elaine with opportunities to mould her, but until the end of the novel it could be perceived that though she was lone she remained with double persona; or it could be stated a person with multiple personality.

ESCAPISM – A SOLACE

With the introduction of Cordelia everything changed in the life of Elaine. The taunting and contemptuous nature of Cordelia cornered Elaine in everything she did, Elaine started becoming conscious of what she did, what she was dressed up in or what she ate, thus in every area of Elaine's life Cordelia overpowered her, She fears being *"Irreversibly expelled."* *"I'm afraid I'm going to lose them."* However, she also interjects their scorn and feels worthless and inferior. The attitude of her friends was merely pushing Elaine into the sort of darkness which shadowed her forever [10]. Elaine as a child looked forward growing older, but when she actually became old she only sifted through her past memories in search of something which she had either overlooked or lost. She could have escaped from her past soon after shifting from Toronto but the psychological changes in her never allowed her to move on in life. She was only harassed and haunted by her past. Though she tried to get accustomed to the newer society, people around and the chosen profession, but she always admitted from her memories and hallucinations that she never wanted to be away from the memories of the past and people who left her almost ruthless.

Once Elaine went through the different phase of realization she started moving on to the realm of dreams – a sort of escapism to seek solace

"My fantasies aren't usually about Cordelia," "I reply, as if I've been given permission to do so."(145)

She learned everything that she wouldn't have if she was in the former nomadic lifestyle, the unwelcoming surrounding [11] with emotionless people only altered her personality and developed an identity to adapt to the environment

"You should learn how to speak out for yourself" "Allowing them to push you around is definitely not a good idea."(156).

CULTURED PAST IN THE UNCULTURED PRESENT

Toronto is the city that Elaine hated in the past and in the present too. The city turned her into an introvert, the retrospection of the self brought in the major revelations and the resurrection of the lost self and an understanding of the truth that could have saved her from the traumatic life had she been given a chance to herself to understand the same, the delineation of life, friendship and relationships in the new city would have been on an optimistic actuality [12]. The hatred towards the city is revealed at various instances,

"In fact, I despise this town. I've hated it for so long that I can't recall ever feeling anything other."(13)

The migration to Toronto since her childhood must have contributed to the progress of Elaine rather it only contributed to the attrition of almost everything.

"It helps me remember a point amidst a stream or an extension that is mostly finished and most of the way across." (13)

Even towards the end of the novel, it is revealed the hatred for the city never vanished or diminished from her mind [13].

"Regardless of how much Jon wants to stay in the city, I think I really want to leave. The city is the one who is suffocating

me.”(375)

After having shifted to Vancouver she wanted to leave everything that she gained from Toronto [14]

“Toronto is behind it, a long distance away, like Gomorrah, ablaze with ideas. I’m hesitant to look into it.”. (382)

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood in this work *Cat’s Eye* talks of the process of metamorphosis of a simple girl. Life is very much unpredictable and as Elaine one can find diminishing and deteriorating experiences [15]. It is essential to overcome the problems with the grit as Elaine possesses. Atwood’s work is for all ages, and for every individual. As a feminist writer she has the best to offer to her readers through this work.

Emergence of a famous artist amidst the controversial thoughts and personalities in Elaine remained exploratory to Elaine herself. What she gained or lost remained uncertain to Elaine until the end. Whether it was hatred or unconditional love towards Cordelia or the city couldn’t be surmised. In the culmination, it could be understood that Elaine’s life did take a roller-coaster ride and the metamorphosis of her physical and mental self was very much affected by the migration and introduction of newer society and people. Her identity was never part of her individuality; rather she kept probing into reality to find who she “was”.

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