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Margaret Atwood: Amplifying the Voices of Abused Women

Margaret Atwood has written both prose and poetry that address oppression of the female population. Often the stories of abuse victims are pushed into the background unless they are women with fame or fortune. The story of the woman being abused by her romantic partner in the house down the street, the apartment above, or who suffers harassment at work are not told. In his article “Minor Characters have Their Day,” Jeremy Rosen, an assistant professor of English at the University of Utah, discusses how by leaving these stories out of the narrative we are further oppressing these victims (155). Rosen further explores how Atwood has brought the stories of these “minor characters” to the forefront letting the victims’ voices be heard and their stories told (155). Through her poems she has given a voice to those women whose stories have been ignored. One of her most poignant works, “Songs for Murdered Sisters,” was written to address the many deaths of women at the hands of men “Over the years, thousands of years / So many sisters lost / So many tears . . .” (Atwood 37). Atwood writes about some of the many ways women have been oppressed throughout history including through fashion, their inability leave an abusive partner, and even how women who posed a threat to a man’s way of life would be hanged as a witch. Through her poems “Princess Clothing,” “Songs for Murdered Sisters,” and “Half-Hanged Mary,” Atwood shows how sexism has led to violence against women.

In an article on transmedia feminism, Amy Boyle states that Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* explores the ongoing suppression of women, “particularly in relation to

reproductive rights and sexual and economic independence” (852). *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been praised as a symbol of feminist politics worldwide. In fact, women staged a silent protest in the Texas State Capitol by wearing costumes like those worn by the handmaids in Atwood’s novel. In addition to her prose, Atwood uses her powerful voice through poetry to address these issues. Her poetry demonstrates the victimization and vilification of women. Charlotte Beyer’s article addressing feminist mythology discusses how Atwood’s poems and stories paint a vivid picture of the treatment of women in societies and ages dominated by men and theological ideologies (277). During the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson, she was told by Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse that she is “incredibly likable and winsome,” neither adjective having any bearing on her ability to do her job as a United States Supreme Court justice (Joseph). Women are treated with condescension regardless of their impressive educations and careers. Comments like these serve to neutralize the threat presented by intelligent, dedicated, and successful women. Through her works, Atwood sheds a light on abuse and violence and the rules of society that continue to place a man’s value or pleasure above a woman’s. She tells the tales women are afraid to share.

In “Princess Clothing,” Atwood touches on the constraints placed on women’s appearance by religion and culture. This poem illustrates how fashion is used as a tool of oppression. Current school dress codes demonstrate how the female body is still objectified and girls are devalued, their educations coming second to their male counterparts (Aghasaleh 97). This is yet another way to regulate a woman’s body and mind. A woman must worry about “what she should wear / so she will be fashionable, or at least / so she will not be killed” (lines 1-3). In this poem Atwood, specifically addresses the hijabs worn by Muslim women in some areas of the world. The lines “They’re setting a bad example. / Get out the stones” allude to how this

form of dress is seen as unacceptable in areas such as the United States where this is not common practice (lines 7-8). These women are not only oppressed by the men in their society who expect them to dress this way, but also by those around them who disagree with their religious practices. Atwood uses imagery to illustrate things women have done in the name of fashion. The lines “Fur is an issue too: / her own and some animal’s” represent women’s removal of almost all their body hair to be seen as attractive (lines 9-10). When Atwood speaks of clothing in this poem, she shows how women are expected to dress more for fashion than practicality. For example, “Wool worn next to the skin / was once an army decree. / In mid-battle it’s hard to shower” shows that wool was used in men’s clothing (lines 36-38). A woman cannot wear wool as it would make her sweat which is “even if pink: / not feminine” (lines 43-44). Women should wear silk because “Cotton on the other hand / was crackly. Still is” meaning women must sit quietly in the background (lines 45-46). In an interview, Atwood makes mention of this dichotomy when she says “because it’s biblical, so wool over here, linen over there” in reference to gender (as quoted in Freeman). She uses powerful imagery and metaphor to make the point that doing all these things still would not save one from being killed and having her murdered body thrown into a ditch “like a lost glove, like a tossed book / mostly unsaid. Unread” (lines 20-21). Fashion plays an important part in how a woman is seen through the judging lens of the public eye, affecting both her career and safety.

In the same way that “Princess clothing” brings attention to the role of fashion in the treatment of women, Atwood’s lyrical poem “Songs for Murdered Sisters” addresses the unending issue of violence against women. This work was inspired by the murder of Nathalie Warmerdam, the sister of Canadian opera singer Joshua Hopkins (Flood). The poem is written mostly in stanzas of two lines each, like the rhythm of a heartbeat or shallow breaths. The picture

painted in the lines “Who was my sister / Is now an empty chair” is a vivid reminder of the emptiness left behind after the death of a loved one. Atwood compares the telling of this story to that of a fairy tale, but this one has no happy ending. She makes this point bluntly by saying, “But this is not a story. / Not that kind of story . . .” (33). The story of women in abusive relationships is one that is ongoing. Not all women have the means to leave their situation and even those who do often still are not safe. Death comes knocking on their door as it did for Warmerdam and as Atwood writes, “You opened the door / And death was standing there” (34). Men are threatened by women who have the strength to get away from them. These women are then “Killed by fearful men / Who wanted to be taller” (37). Women are expected not to be out late at night as that is when predators are on the hunt. Atwood stresses the danger of a woman out by herself late at night, “Singing Alone, Alone, / Singing Dead Too Soon?” (36). The capitalization of every word in this stanza emphasizes how women who are out at night are so often preyed upon by men. Men have been preying on women from the beginning of time.

While “Princess Clothing” and “Songs for Murdered Sisters” focus on more current issues, Atwood’s poem “Half-hanged Mary” illustrates how long this abuse has endured. This work, set in the 17th century, demonstrates the historical use of violence against women who pose a threat to the ideas or power of men. The lines “Most will have only one death. / I will have two” reference one death by character assassination and then later a physical death (Atwood 66). Mary is hanged because she had property, knowledge of medicine, and specific physical attributes namely “. . . breasts, / and a sweet pear hidden in [her] body” (Atwood 59). The knowledge of such things, especially by one with a womb, threatens the men in town who then hang her from a tree. Mary is used as an example to the other women in town “a flag raised to salute the moon,” to keep them under control (Atwood 59). The women who gather to watch the

hanging know they will suffer the same fate if they speak up or help her in any way as “Birds / of a feather burn together” (Atwood 60). The idea that women who have been attacked by men have brought it on themselves or were “asking for it” is illustrated by the lines “or like a judge / muttering about sluts and punishment” (Atwood 63). Atwood compares a judge in his robe to a “dark angel / insidious in his glossy feathers” (63). Atwood’s tone changes closer to the end showing Mary’s defiance in the face of death. The image of the evil serpent is used to illustrate the danger or evil that Mary represents to the town. This idea goes back to Eve causing her and Adam’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The fact that Mary has come so close to death gives her even more power (Stein 123). Since she does not die, Mary can now use her voice to influence the minds of the other women in town leading to a collapse of the patriarchal society. Consequently, this makes Mary an even greater threat now than she had been before the hanging.

Atwood’s body of work embraces feminist ideas. She explores how subjugation of women neutralizes the threat they pose to the patriarchy. These poems tell the stories of women who cannot speak for themselves, either because of fear or because they have already fallen victim to violence at the hands of men. In Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own,” it is pointed out that women with brilliant, creative minds who might have been poets or playwrights were most often hanged for witchcraft because they were well read or had some knowledge of healing herbs (28). These traits are praised in men but feared in women. Character assassination of women is common in the political arena, but also occurs frequently in trials where women have been victims of violence or sexual assault. Atwood’s novels demonstrate how easy it would be to succumb to the patriarchal ideas of government women fought so hard to overcome if their fight does not continue. Her poetry shows the pain, fear, and longing suffered by the oppressed and those the victims leave behind. Simply telling these stories is an act of defiance. In one

interview, Atwood states, “those in power had a responsibility to the community” (as quoted in Snell). Without writers like Atwood, these stories would never be told, and these women would disappear. Only by continuing to write about the women who suffer abuse and oppression can it be ended. Their stories serve as a reminder of those lost and as an education to those who may encounter similar situations in the future.

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