

Intertextuality patterns inherent in the novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract : Postmodernism involves the breaking down of barriers that involve taking little bits of everything and bringing it together. Intertextuality is the rhetorical device which is most common among postmodern writers. It reflects the influence of the authors and their skill to employ it in the piece of literature so that it conveys the meaning to the readers. In line with growing interest in the intertextual dimension of literary work this analysis seeks to uncover some of the intertextual patterns inherent in the novels of Margaret Atwood, one of the Canadian contemporary writers.

Index Terms – Intertextuality, Postmodernism, rhetorical device, contemporary

I. INTRODUCTION

Intertextuality or intertextual references is where texts, be they novels, poems, nursery rhymes, myths, paintings, music in short anything with cultural significance are included in the text and thereby add some sort of symbolic mantle or resonance.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* has been found to have some similarities with Lewis Carroll's *Alice books* and *The Little Mermaid*. Through an intertextual reading of *The Edible Woman*, one can better diagnose Marian's strange condition and understand Atwood's overarching criticism of modern patriarchy.

In her use of *The Little Mermaid* intertext Atwood has shifted the emphasis of the fairy tale from love story to transformation. Despite her literary mermaid follows the same basic plot as the original mermaid does, Atwood focuses on the consequences of transformation, provides the fairy tale with an extra layer of meaning. The intertext does not merely allude to a pre-existing fairy tale but annexes the fairy tale to change its focus and ending.

In *The Edible Woman*, Ainsley roommate of Marian longs to transform into a mother. Both Ainsley and the Mermaid longs for a spouse, Ainsley only desires to be impregnated by a male of her choice, for this she pretends to be a demure and silent young girl. Marian describes her transformation as:

Ainsley was not over dressed; she had dug out from somewhere a cotton summer creation I'd never seen before, a pink and light blue gingham check on white with a ruffle around the neck. Her hair was tied behind her head with pink bow [...] She had sacrificed her long oval fingernails, biting them nearly to the quick so that they had a jagged school girlish quality. (TEW, 79)

She is not as she usually used to be the next morning, Marian does not have any trouble in recognizing Ainsley again, she remarks that her roommate looks; "like a mermaid perched on a rock"(100). In the privacy of her home, Ainsley easily reverts back to her real self. The self assured woman who is out to fulfill her own ambitions. Ainsley temporary transformation to shy girl is instrumental in achieving her desired final transformation, to become a mother.

Ainsley has successfully deployed her tactic and has become pregnant according to plan. This transformation takes place easily and without a hitch. This is a sharp contrast with the little Mermaid's transformation. Even though the mermaid's appearance is wholly changed, she remains the same Mermaid inside, the mermaid pretends to be a human and Ainsley pretends to be a shy girl. Ainsley changes identity from single girl to mother is not just a change on the surface; it is comprehensive transformation which cannot fail. Ainsley's transformation is successful while there is a failure in the tale of *The Little Mermaid*.

The second intertext in the novel is of the fairy tale, *Alice in wonderland*. It is used for showing identity crisis. Marian when visits Duncan whom she has met during the survey of moose beer and at many other places there she meets Fischer, Duncan's friend. He tells Marian about *Alice in wonderland*:

Of course everybody knows Alice is a sexual-identity crisis book, that's old stuff, it's been around for a long time, I'd like to go into it a little deeper though. What we have here, if you only look at it closely, this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit-burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal, trying to find her role as a woman. Yes well that's clear enough. These patterns emerge one sexual role after another is presented to her but she is unable to accept any of, I mean she's really blocked. She rejects maternity when the baby she's been nursing turns into a pig, nor does, she responds positively to the dominating –female role neither of the queen nor with Duches or Mock turtle and Caterpillar. (249)

Marian is smug and righteous like Alice. Both experience an identity crisis when they start their inner journey. The other characters in the novel also resemble in Alice's tale. Peter resembles domineering caterpillar that makes Alice conscious of her identity crisis, Mrs. Bogue resembles the horrible Queen. The office virgins particularly Lucy looks like the cake with eat me written on it as she wants men to gobble her up. Clara and her family represent the Douches with her pig of a baby and her mad cook. Duncan seems to look like the Cheshire cat and combination of Rabbit guide and mock turtle.

Both the heroine Alice and Marian are busy in searching the essence of the problem, their existential dilemma that prevents them from living free and autonomous lives. The problem derives partly from the fact that neither Alice nor Marian know who they truly are. Alice, the first time she grows, she asks herself:

I wonder if I have changed in the night. Let me think; was I same when I got up this morning? Who in the world am I? And that's the great puzzle, when the caterpillar asks Alice who are you? Alice replies,

I – I hardly know Sir, just at present – at least I know, who I was when I got up this morning but I think, I must have been changed several times since then.(Caroll,53)

The above incident shows changes taking place in Alice, when she feels, she is growing up. The changes found in Marian are remarked by Gleny Stow, “Marian McAlpin has a similar problem of defining her own reality in a puzzling and non-sensible environment” (90). The first line of the novel implies that she is about to change, “I know, I was all right on Friday when I got up, If anything I was feeling stolid than usual”(TEW,3). During her exploration of an urban world she finds that as a woman she has very little control over her life.

When the eating disorder takes over her life, Marian begins to ask the same questions as Alice, wanting to know what she is becoming, what direction she is taking, so that she can be prepared. Harkness also asserts his view on the mental condition of Marian, “her inability is linked to her inability to take control of her life. When she surrenders control, her mind and body split” (TEW,103). Except these examples there are several examples in *The Edible Woman* which show resemblance with *Alice in wonderland*. They both start their fictional journey with identity crisis and in the ending both are left in confusion as they are unable to decide who really controlled the journey. Alice wonders who it is that dreams it all while Marian asks whether it is Duncan or Peter who tries to consume her. Regardless both the protagonist Alice and Marian achieve their objectives to be inconsumable, to become inedible women. Jack Zipes theories also tune with Atwood’s use of fairy Tale. He said:

Oral and literary fairy tales enunciated, articulated and communicated feeling in efficient metamorphical terms that enabled listeners and readers to envision possible solutions to their problems so that they could survive and adapts to their environments. (27)

That is why Atwood’s fairy tale intertexts are indeed adapted to fit the problems of her characters in which transformation often has a positive result but which does not always result in happily ever after.

Surfacing has a number of intertextual references in various guises. It helps the reader's total understanding of the novel. These intertextual references help to make up the fabric of the novel and to give it a place in culture. The unnamed protagonist has started her journey with her three friends. Anna, a friend of the protagonist is interested in singing and reading books. She sings a song, “House of the Rising Sun and lily Marlene”(S,6).

The next example is a list of books on the narrator’s father book shelf which gives us more of an idea as to what kind of a man he was:

There are detective novels mostly, recreational reading beside them are the technical books on trees and the other reference books, Edible Plants and Shoots, Tying the Dry Fly, The Common Mushrooms, Log Cabin construction, A field guide to the Birds, Exploring your Camera, The King James Bible which he enjoyed for its literary qualities, a complete Robert Burns, Boswells life, Thompsons Seasons, selection from Goldsmith and Cowper. (S, 34)

This passage shows that he was interested in the book which had a streak of nature. He admired the eighteenth century rationalist, he thought of them as men who had avoided the corruption of the Industrial Revolution and learnt about the balanced life.

The next example of intertextuality is directly quoted text rather than just named books and this has a slightly different function. In this instance, its inclusion bears the hallmarks of the stream of consciousness and style of narrative. This was the incident in the past when the protagonist used to go to lunch to her friend where her father would say, “Pork and beans and musical fruit the more you eat the more you toot” (S,34). She also remembered the lines she used to sing in the recess, it was to insult, but perhaps they were edible, “Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I am going to the garden to eat worms”(S,58).

In the past whenever she heard the story of her mother saving her brother drawing, she used to ask her mother what would have happened if she would have not saved him but her mother never answered. She herself would interpret it, she thought he might be in the graveyard as the word appeared she remembers the verse about the graveyard at school, “Stick him in the bread pan, Sock him in the jaw; Now he’s in the graveyard, How, how, how”(S,72).

The protagonist, Anna and David remembered the poetic lines they used to sing at school, “In days of yours, from Britain’ shore Wolf, the gallant, the hero came; It spread all over the poor house floor on Canada’s fair domain” (S,120). It includes a number of poetics verse pop up in between the story this shows the impact of childhood in the life of the characters in the novel.

The Handmaid’s Tale shows its connection with the Grimm’s Tale *Little Red Riding Hood*. There are references such as red cloak and the basket she carries for shopping which resemble the red dress of the protagonist of the fairy tale. Offred thinks that her journey might lead her either to freedom or to death the ending is ambiguous but she has risked the death for the sake of art just like the protagonist of fairy tales does, “Myself into it a distorted shadow, a parody of something, same fairy tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness” (THT,3), that is same as the danger like *Little Red Riding Hood*, Offred wears a red cloak and carries a basket. She knows if she fails to do her duties toward the Gilead. She would be disposed off by the Commander (Wolf), Beside this the title *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a close connection with *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer written in Middle English during 1300.

The Canterbury Tales related the journey of individuals travelling together on a pilgrimage to a religious site for prayer at a popular spring time. During this journey each individual narrated a tale to pass the time and each chapter of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is a tale told by each pilgrim. There is a Miller’s Tale, The knight’s Tale, The Wife of Bath’s Tale, The Nun’s Tale and so on. Atwood in naming her novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is relating back to Chaucer’s Text.

The intertexts that are lingering in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are the quotes from the *Bible*. The Gileadean society has justified their action by referring them to incidents in the *Bible*. “Forgive them, for they know not what they do”(76). In the *Bible, New Testament* these are the words said by Christ about for those, who are crucifying. There are several such references in the novel where the outlaws in the Gilead society are justified by referring the *Bible*.

Margaret Atwood use of intertext derived from the Gothic novel and fairy tales places her novel on a continuum while critiquing the tradition. She has also derived the title, *The Robber Bride* from Grimm’s fairy tale entitled *The Robber Bridegroom*. Margaret Atwood was a voracious reader of Grimm’s fairy tale. In an interview, Margaret Atwood says about her interest in Grimm’s fairy tale:

Unlike the heroines of the more conventional and redone stories such as *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, the heroines of the stories in Grimm's fairy tales show considerable resourcefulness and usually win, not just by being pretty virtuous but by using their brains. There are wicked wizards as well as wicked witches. (Ingersoll,71)

Margaret Atwood has constructed a traditional Gothic figure surviving as a powerful force in the story which is about contemporary social reality in the 1990's Toronto. Atwood has reassembled the parts of the old legends and fairy tales in order to recreate her female monster that damages the lives of three women. Roz's twin daughters are very young but are impetuous and sure of themselves. They are passing through a period in which they often want to change stories so that they are more to their taste. This gradually turns into a feminist phase where they decide that every character should be female:

Winnie the Pooh was female, the piglet was female, Peter rabbit was female, If Roz slipped up and said he and they would correct her. She! She! They would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female too Roz still doesn't know why it's odd what a difference it makes changing the pronoun. (TRB,142)

Significantly, Aunt Tony's choice of literature for the twins is also the unabridged version containing the authentic fairy tale. Tony narrates the twins about *The Robber Bridegroom*:

The beautiful maiden, the search for a husband, the arrival of the rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them. One day a suitor appeared he was, She! She! Clamor the twins. All right Tony let's see you get out of this one says Roz, standing in the doorway. We would change it to *The Robber Bride* says Tony. (TRB,143)

This passage seems to be a sort of clue from the author about the symbolic side of the entire book. It is as if the author gives readers a hint about what basis the novel is written on. Except these intertexts of the fairy tale, Atwood has also used the quote from the *Bible* which is used by the protagonist Charis who has the habit of opening the *Bible* randomly and pinning it daily. When she thinks of Zenia she takes her like the figure of Jezebel in the Old Testament. She comes to know that something unusual is going to happen, when she got up. "She realized it as soon as she got up and stuck her daily pin into the *Bible*. It picked out revelations seventeen the chapter about the Great whore" (TRB,223).

The other intertext are about the prose and poetry quoted by the secretary of Roz. When Roz asks Boyce about the stocks, he replies in a poetic way by quoting the lines of Tennyson and directing her about the bad condition of stocks Boyce says, "Half a league, half a league onward all in the death of the valley of Death rode the fortune fine dumdria"(TRB,43). Boyce by quoting the lines of the poet Yeats says "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold" (TRB,43). This is the way he converses with Roz. The above discussion shows that Margaret Atwood likes to use the intertext technique in her novel whether it is from the Fairy tale or the Bible or quotes of the famous poet.

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