Writing with the Bodies: Women's Voice in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*

Dr. Shaista Irshad  
Visiting Faculty  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology,  
Allahabad, India

Abstract:

The present paper seeks to show that how Atwood’s female character Iris, when faced with extreme of harassment and subordination appropriates her voice to fight back against the oppressive forces that are instrumental in her construction and making. She personifies the bruises and injuries of her body to unfold all those factors which are responsible for women’s making, conditioning and becoming as marginalized, mute and passive object in the society. By conquering her body and writing from it she defeats her silence and deconstructs the order and law of language, disrupting the social structure, which prioritizes and propagates binary division of male/ female, where female is always the ‘other’. It is brought to the fore that how women by identifying their potential and using their subdued powerful identity may punish and overthrow patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords: Women’s Voice, Bodies, Gender, Construction, patriarchy

The novel *The Blind Assassin* is a multi-layered story including three parallel narrative strands i.e. stories within the main story- a memoir, a romance and a science fiction. Along with these parallel narratives there are reports from newspaper clippings which provide information about the major events of the city Port Ticonderoga in Toronto. According to Karen F Stein *The Blind Assassin* is “constructed like a Russian wooden doll”, i.e., “nested series of stories; and like the nested dolls, one story hides another until it is opened to reveal another one surprisingly similar to it” (135). The main story is the memoir written by Iris Chase at the age of eighty two years, within this main story there are two more stories- a ‘romance fiction’ and a ‘science fiction’. The romance fiction is originally written by Iris but published by her under the name of Laura and is about two unnamed lovers whose identities are revealed at the end to be that of Iris and her lover Alex Thomas. The ‘science fiction’ is narrated by the male protagonist of the ‘romance fiction’ (Sakiel- Norn fantasy) which is about sacrificial virgins. In the novel, “there is a continual blurring of borders not only in fiction and Iris’s real life memoir, but also between the Sakiel-Norn fantasy and the lives of two lovers in Toronto” (Howells 165). Iris in her memoir recollects and revises her past life, her childhood days, her family history, the description of her grandparents- Benjamin Chase and Adelia, and parents –Norval Chase and Liliana. Iris’s memories are linked to present as well as the past and more strongly with the suicide of her sister Laura at the age of twenty five. She writes her memoir in order to investigate the reason of Laura’s suicide which eventually turns out to be the unfolding of all those factors which are responsible for women’s making, conditioning and becoming as marginalized, mute and passive object. By rewriting the events of her life through her memoir Iris, “appropriates her voice and writes her untold story, thus becoming a subject that shapes instead of remaining an
object that has been shaped by patriarchal assumptions” (Koyuncu). Atwood destabilizes and deconstructs the binary of oppressor/oppressed and subject/object that relegates women to secondary status in society, and endows her women characters the power to fight against her oppressors. Fiona Tolan argues that the novel is “profoundly concerned with representations of female body, female victimization and female power” where women are presented as the, “product of the patriarchal culture dominant in the first half of the twentieth century in Canada” (78). Madeleine Davies too analyzes the “constructions of the body in Atwood’s work” identifying “recurring corporeal tropes of incarceration, disembodiment, alienation, disease and abuse” (58).

Iris, (along with her sister Laura) is sexuality mutilated by Richard who is presented as the personification of hegemonic masculinity, exhibiting sexist and misogynist attitude. Iris writes in her memoir, “when he married me he figured he’d got a bargain – two for the price of one” (BA 617). Thus girls are treated as no more than sexual commodities to be bought, sold and bargained for sexual pleasure and use. In marrying him Iris feels as, “beautiful trophy groomed wife” (Stein 142) whom Richard uses as a plaything, hurting her for his amusement and pleasure without being bothered that she was indifferent towards him, “to his nighttime activities, even repelled by them” (BA 454). According to Greer woman has been dictated and made to believe that her identity exists in her body, she is exploited and oppressed by man on account of her sexuality, she is the “sexual object sought by all men and by all women” (67). While Iris becomes the, “the showcase for wealth and caste,” Richard slips “into relative anonymity, as “handsome is as handsome does” (Greer 64). Iris recalls her marriage as, “a decorous and sanctioned violence” where Richard afflicted her body with, “bruises, purple, then blue, then yellow” (BA 44). He rejoiced the fact, “how easily I bruised …prefer[ing] conquest to cooperation, in every area of life.” “He favoured thighs, where it wouldn’t show” (BA 454-455). Iris’s position was that of domestic animal where she was expected to obey all his commands and orders without protest and her, “job was to open my legs and shut my mouth” (BA 407). Catherine McKinnon writes that “it is through social objectification of women that socialization of gender takes place where women are seen as sexual objects meant to satisfy men’s needs.”

This socialization of gender creates gendered spaces for women where, “women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men…and internalize a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women” (Mackinnon 531). Thus, “The method that is used to subjugate women is the objectification of women in sexual terms; the male perspective on society is dominant one… the relationship is founded on gender hierarchy in which men are dominant and woman are subordinate, socially, economically, politically and sexually” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon 121).

At one place Richard associates women with the imagery of fruits considering them as an object of consumption; he said “women could be divided into apples and pears, according to the shapes of their bottoms. If[Iris] was a pear, he said but an unripe one. That was what he liked about me- my greenness my hardness” (BA 390). Whereas at other places women are considered as, “Boats…busted car engines and broken lamps and radio’s – items of any kind that can be fiddled with by men adroit with gadgetry, and restored to a condition as good as new” (BA 83).

This fact is well commented by Germaine Greer who writes that, “if a woman is food, her sex organ is for consumption also, in the form of honey pot, hair- pie, and cake- or jelly-roll” (297).
After Laura’s accidental death Iris takes her daughter Aimee and leaves Richard forever and goes back to Avilion. She shows a tremendous change in her identity from that of dependent, passive, and domestic wife to a self-dependent and self-supporting woman. She redefines her identity away from the subscribed binary of subject/object which positions women as inferior and other to men. She is able to manage enough money not only, “from Richard and … from Laura’s estate”, but also by herself becoming a good businesswoman. She starts her trade in second hand artifacts, ‘in a modest way… with a few pieces of animal jewelry from Richard” (BA 620). By actively indulging in business of selling antiques and artifacts she undergoes a change and transformation from the passive, subservient, victimized object to an active, independent businesswoman thus redefining and recreating the gendered space in which she’d been long confined and imprisoned by the patriarchal society. This all becomes possible only by redefining herself through writing her memoir. She subverts that patriarchal order by writing herself through her body, which promotes, “male discourse of power in contrast to a female discourse of moral superiority, but physical weakness and fragility” (Stein 137). She undergoes a transformation from being passive object of patriarchal discourse i.e. from, “I was sand, I was snow- written on, rewritten, smoothed over” (BA 455) and at other place, “A tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on” (BA 57) to taking up the position of active subject, “my hand has taken a life of its own” (BA 457) and , “assumes power within the culture that has silenced her and manipulated her social identity”. By doing this, Iris “presents herself as more multidimensional than she was assumed to be by her culture” (Bouson Introduction 69).

Iris writes her memoir under the disguised and borrowed identity of Laura to shield herself from decorum and rules of upper class society that inhibits and restricts the writing and publications of such stories. As her memoir (romance fiction) is all about her extramarital affair with lower class culprit and fugitive she camouflages her identity with that of Laura who is shown to be meeting her lover stealthily and who involves into physical relationship with him and gets pregnant. The publication of the novel leads to the severe repercussions in Richard’s life and political career. The disgrace caused by the publication of Iris’s novel devastates Richard’s both public and professional life, whereby forcing him to retire from politics and confining him to death due to brain hemorrhage. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that, “women’s autobiography” presents “visible formerly invisible subjects” (5) and women “speaking from this position [of universal man] proffers authority, legitimacy and readability” (433).

In writing her memoir Iris achieves Helene Cixous’s concept of ‘écriture feminine’. Helene Cixous’ concept of ‘écriture feminine’ improperly translated as ‘Feminine writing’ has a huge impact in the construction of gender identity. It is explained as “a uniquely feminine style of writing, marked by disruptions in the text, ‘gaps, silences puns, rhythms and new images” (Waugh 335). Helene Cixous along with Irigaray, and Kristeva considered ‘écriture feminine’ as political. Utilizing Lacan’s concept they differentiated between the ‘semiotic’ (pre-symbolic phase) and the ‘symbolic’. Whereas masculine language representing the realm of symbolic is linear, logical, authoritative and realistic, ‘écriture feminine’ represents the realm of the semiotic and is eccentric, incomprehensible and inconsistent. These critics situate the construction of gender identity in language maintaining that the world is structured and interpreted through language which is predominantly masculine and hence represents patriarchal ‘law’ and order. By deconstructing the order and law of language, they aimed at disrupting the social structure, which prioritizes and propagates binary division of male/ female, where female is always the ‘other’. Helene Cixous, challenging the logocentric ideology proposes new feminine language, that
would subvert, “these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women.” Cixous related her concept of feminine writing with Derrida’s theory of ‘difference’, according to which, “meaning is not produced in the static closure of the binary opposition” rather is “constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other absent signifiers” (Moi Sexual/Textual Politics 103, 104). Cixous suggested the idea of “the other bisexuality” to reclaim women’s identity (Cixous and Clement 84). As opposed to the “classic concept of bisexuality”, she defines “the other bisexuality” as, “multiple, variable and ever-changing, consisting as it does of the non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex” (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 107). Thus she suggests that feminine writing can be appropriated by either sex. By subverting the binary scheme of sexual identity these critics emphasize women’s celebration of their difference and marginality as “the other bisexuality doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases them” (qtd. in Moi Sexual/Textual Politics 107). Cixous argues that women can resist and subvert patriarchal oppression by using feminine writing which is, “the passage towards more than self, towards another than the self, towards the other” (Cixous and Clement 112).

Luce Irigaray’s vision of femininity and feminine language – ecriture feminine and parler femme is quite similar to Cixous’ idea of ‘ecriture feminine’. She undermines masculine binary scheme of positive/negative by maintaining that femininity is, “plural’, multiple, decentralised and unidentifiable” (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 143, 146). Therefore, according to her, woman is not one, but many. Like Kristeva, Irigaray too talks of pre-symbolic ‘space’ as ‘woman’s space’ or ‘experience’ to which men don’t have any access. This place is outside symbolic and constitutes “feminine jouissance or sexual pleasure” (Barker 233). Like Cixous and others Irigaray argues in favour of the destruction of the “discursive mechanism” (The Sex which is Not One 76) that is dominated by patriarchy. For this she suggests the undoing of “‘patriarchal logic’ through mimicking of male discourse” (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 139). According to her, “women speak mimes phallogocentricism only to expose what is covered over” (Barker 234).

Atwood’s female protagonists are believed to be “coded bodies” (Davies 60) that reflect the exploitation, torture and defacement endured on account of their mutilated existence as sexed bodies. Iris identifies the bruises imprinted on her body by her husband’s sexual animosity as, “a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it?”(BA 455). Iris’s body is presented by Atwood as a site, a space over which, it was others prerogative to carve, construct and mould, in compliance with the demands of patriarchy. She leads a passive, incarcerated existence, following others idea of who she is or ought to be. She exercises no autonomy or control over her body or existence and allows herself and her body to be coded and re-coded by others. It is only by “seizing the occasion to speak” that Iris makes the, “shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (Medusa 250). Cixous, along with Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray argued that women can resist and subvert patriarchal oppression by using feminine writing which is , “ the passage towards more than self, towards another than the self, towards the other” (Newly Born Women 112). According to these gender critics the gender identity is constructed in language which is predominantly masculine and represents the patriarchal order and law. Women can deconstruct the order and law of language by breaking their silence and expressing themselves through writing. Therefore according to Cixous using the concept of ‘ecriture feminine’ i.e. feminine writing, women can, “produce a female language and female texts capable of challenging historical and political constructions of subverting the dominant linguistic order, and
of representing themselves” (Davies 59). In *The Laugh of the Medusa* Cixous writes that in order to liberate themselves from the subordinated position of the *other*, “woman must write herself: must write about woman and bring woman to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies…woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history- by her own movement”(*Medusa* 245). Cixous urges woman to “break out of the snare of silence” (*Medusa* 251) and to speak of their exploitation and oppression. According to her it is only through “speech” that woman can refuse to be confined, “into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem” (*Medusa* 251). According to Cixous, “the speaking woman is entirely her voice; she physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body” (qtd. in Moi 112). Thus women can liberate themselves from the gendered spaces constructed by the patriarchal norms and patterns of society by expressing themselves in their voice. Woman has long been alienated from her own identity as human being; she has been muted to express her identity. Her social construction as “woman: and the ‘other’ relegates her to the existence of silence and passivity. It is only by returning and identifying her existence, occupying her body and writing from it can she mark and affirm her existence and identity.

By writing her memoir Iris leaves a message for her granddaughter Sabrina who has been forcefully snatched and taken away from her by Winifred Griffin. By narrating her story Iris not only liberates herself but also intends to set the ground for Sabrina to explore her identity. She writes, “the story of how” Sabrina “came to be” (*BA*521) so that , “she [Sabrina] can construct her own identity- since for both women the production of a more liberating and multifaceted identity requires the unearthing of aspects of their lives silenced by socially sanctioned representations of them”(Michael 102). She reveals that in her memoir for Sabrina, “Your real grandfather was Alex Thomas, and as to who his father was, well sky is the limit… your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation. You are free to reinvent yourself at will” (*BA* 513). Thus by leaving her memoir to Sabrina sets the way for her to reconstruct and redefine herself independently as per her desire.

The novel deftly weaves various strands of narrative coalescing them at the end where all the mysteries and hidden meaning surrounding Iris’s life and Laura’s death are solved. Iris, by revising and writing her memoir disentangles herself from all those factors and reasons which were responsible for the construction of her gender identity for her and Laura. Atwood through her characters destabilizes and deconstructs the artificially constructed gendered identity for women and enables the liberation of her protagonist Iris by letting her write her memoir which helps her in transcending from the passive, subordinate position of victim to that of assertive, independent victimizer. It is by identifying her voice and writing from her body that Iris breaks open the long suppressed silence and reveals, unearthing so many truths that otherwise go unnoticed.

Works Cited:


