

# **Women's identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride***

**Effat Sarlak**

MA Student, Postgraduate Department of English Language and Literature

**Corresponding author:** Effat Sarlak

**ABSTRACT:** The main argument in this paper is focused on the picture and role of women, as The Second problems. Atwood, as a feminist writer and thinker, tries to depict in her novels the cultural, social, and psychological conditions of women being deprived of their rights in every aspect by men, during her time. The subject of identity and self-recognition by feminine individuals is one of the main issues of feminist arguments and debates, particularly in the modern literature. Atwood uses these events to show the power of some women and their own individual strength and desires which they have in their past life. They are victimized or victimize others in the society. Moreover, some educated women do not accept oppression among men and women. They recognize the patriarchal hegemony of men over women and their influence in the society.

**Keywords:** Feminist, victimization, oppression, patriarchal, subjugation, identity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The paper focuses on the identity of women in *The Robber Bride*. The female characters are analyzed psychoanalytically, in order to find their psychological neuroses. In psychoanalysis, the concept of splitting stems from the instability of one's mental concept of self. This modulation in the experience and assessments of the self leads to chaotic and unstable relationship patterns, identity diffusion, and other-directed mood swings. The female characters of *The novel* have undergone a special type of splitting of their identities because of the imposed hegemonic masculinity of the novel's male characters.

Atwood, in her novels, tries to depict every dimension of an individual's life in her time, particularly the femininity. The vast majority of her scholarship over the past thirty years has focused on her as a feminist, on the artist working through her writing to undermine a binaristic society that holds women as second class citizens, subjugated to the rule of their domineering husbands. Her characters are mostly those females who are subjugated to the domination of a patriarchal power, a father, a husband, a lover, or sometimes a friend. These subordinated women are often undergoing identity crises as the ultimate result of their suppressions. These identity confusions demonstrate themselves in the form of mental breakdowns which are depicted meticulously in the texture of Atwood's novel.

Atwood builds her characters from the inside out, and one of the concerns of the novel is the way individual personalities and sensibilities are shaped by relationships with others, for example how the masculine dominance of the male characters affects and endangers feminine identity of the novel's female character. She deals with how society and culture imprison both men and women into constructed stereotypes of masculinity and femininity attributing both men and women gender specific traits. It not only questions essentialist notion of gender identities as fixed and stable but also challenges the differences attributed to men and women owing to their biological sex. These biological differences in sex construct the gap between men and women's position in patriarchal society exalting men's status and marginalizing women in men's view.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Modern feminism begins with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), a work that criticizes stereotypes of women as emotional and instinctive and argues that women should aspire to the same rationality prized by men. She believes that women should enjoy social, legal, and intellectual equality with men. She says, "So women are to be considered either as moral beings or as so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men" (17). John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and his wife, Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) developed this argument. In 1869, Mill publishes *The Subjection of Women*. He argues that women ought to enjoy equality in social sphere, especially in marriage, and condemn forced repression.

Simone de Beauvoir is chosen as the theorist of this paper and her arguments have been cited in this study. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) was a French writer, intellectual, feminist and social theorist who is best known for her treatise *The Second Sex* (1949), a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism. It deals with the treatment of women throughout history and is often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy. It illustrates de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other." "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). It asserts that the experience of woman has been neglected by conventional society.

Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* about women's situation and their behaviors toward each other and some women's feelings "they had power and can make everything agreeable for themselves and so with many tricks entered other woman's mind and changed their way of life, and in this way are like devil and make many mistakes in the styles other women like" (282). As de Beauvoir writes in her *The Second Sex*, "[t]wo separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live an adventure full of risk and promise" (248). In the play, the women seem to have an alternate personality, and see themselves as two different women. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, declares that "[o]ur societies are patriarchal and a woman must break the bonds in order to be herself as a human being" (125). Christina Hughes, in *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (2002), argues "Feminists noted how men still maintain their positions at the top of employment hierarchies. It is true to say that some of the achievements of feminism have been in terms of accessing the public realms of social life" (33).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Feminism sought to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Feminist theory emerges from the feminist movements and it is general theories about the origins of inequality, and in some cases, about sex and gender that is the social construction in kinds of discipline. Virginia Woolf, in her work *A Room of One's Own*, asserts that "Men have treated women as inferiors for many years. It is the men who define everything in the society" (28). Atwood deals with women's experiences in male-dominated society and shows women catch in oppressive stereotypes from some women, struggle among themselves to make a female space. This does through power of thought, self-definition and self-reconstruction of one's own history and bonding among women of a refusal to take up the victim's position or the role of subjugation. Freud claims, "if man believes in what is described as 'multiple personality' that caused different identifications in the unconscious part of an individual, man may come to some disruptions about the concept of ego and when he believes that in all human being there are many persons, his view of identity can change." (1962).

Greet Hofstede (1928-), in *Culture and Organizations* (1997) argues, "Identifying with a particular culture helps people feel they belong and gives them a sense of security. An established cultural identity has such as health and education" (32). Atwood tells about marginal and culturally marginalized character and compared the central character with one of characters with different culture and race and she focuses on the expense of their identities and integrity in the past and present. The play deals with the issue of the position of woman in the society. Atwood brilliantly recasts the monster as Zenia, a villainess of demonic proportions, and sets her loose in the lives of three friends. Everybody in this novel has a motive for killing Zenia and that is the point, or at least, one of the points. Zenia is a dark, malevolent force in the women's life. Zenia is symbol of people's desire in the dark, middle of the forest nightmare spaces in the black pits of people's souls. She compares the main character (Zenia) as a vampire and other supernatural creature. The relationship between powerful and powerless and the endless circular conflict women are engaged in past. "Zenia indicates, it cost to defy the social order: Freedom is not free, it comes with a price" (Robber Bride 267).

The important point is that the things that happen to the play's characters are things that are common to all the people. These events are realities which surround all people who are familiar with them in their everyday life. Atwood's plays have great influence on other feminist writers and one of the most significant differences between Atwood and her other contemporary playwrights is that the situation she used in her plays, is common and makes others awaken

and experience a change in their inner world. In such a system of society, the frivolity, romanticizing, and occasional lying that characterize Zenia are not so strange because social conventions do not allow her to have a truly, deep and serious share in her personal life.

Margaret Atwood focuses on the exploration the dark side of women's lives in disturbing portraits that call into question the treatment of women by the society as a whole. With the Robber Bride, she takes cruelty and victimization among adult women as her subject. she compares female characters as monstrous creatures in the Robber Bride.

### **Conclusion**

Atwood depicts the internal urge of women to break all conventional identities in order to live with freedom. In The Robber Bride, Atwood represents that every woman is an independent of her husband, but picture of Zenia is like patriarchal society. The point is that this kind of society cannot satisfy the natural needs of the woman for freedom and this idea forms the background to her criticism of the contemporary life or society. She believes that there is a contradiction between the official and the private life of the individual. she suggests this idea as a commentator on the contemporary life. In her point of view the individual is sustaining element in society;. The power structure within the domestic home reflects the hierarchical power structures which prevail in the outside world.

Atwood's desire is truth and freedom. she stresses a new beginning and reform and self-realization. Like other people, she wants a change and reform, including woman's position and desires to fight for the improvement of women's position and their education. An untrue system of marriage, heredity and women's position in the family and society are the repeating themes in Atwood's plays. One can argue that the female and the male characters in The Robber Bride are left starving from their childhood. They are in constant search for recognition and hope change their life. These desires can be seen as the context of the women's complicated feelings and thought about Zenia. The fear of loneliness, or fear of images of past and events occurred in the past and childhood. These images, like a cycle are repeated in their mind. A woman, like Ros with many worth and good position cannot forget her past and sound of past bothers her. Atwood also shows victim in the novel adopts the path of survival and later enables her identity or self-free. As discussed before, Atwood's novel deals with the hidden subjugated world of women where injustice in society pushes them towards darkness. It is a shadow that stimulates the women in the society.

### **REFERENCES**

- Atwood M. 1993. The Robber Bride .Toronto: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.  
Freud EL. 1961. Letters of Sigmund Freud: 1873-1939. Transl. Tania and James Stern. London: Hogarth P.  
Hofstede G. 1928. in Culture and Organizations (1997).  
Hughes C. 2002. Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research. London: Thousand, New Delhi, 2002  
Woolf V.1929. A Room of One's Own. London: Hogarth Press.