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## Gendered Stratification of Education and Economic World: A Study of Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to show in *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin* of Margaret Atwood that how men and women are stereotyped to pursue the discursively constructed fixed domains of subjects and studies based on the constructed traits of masculine and feminine identity. Women volunteering their independence in the institution of education and economics are deemed skeptical and ambiguous in the society. The different agencies of all society, religion, psychology, media etc. have time and again chided them against their initiative of creating their own space, labeling it as their “need”.

The novel brings out a very fine analysis of how women and men are targeted to pursue their ambitions according to their temperaments. This ultimately leads to the gender stratification that marginalizes women to the periphery.

**Keywords:** Gender, Stratification, Construction, Arts, Science.

Women volunteering their independence in the institution of education and economics are deemed skeptical and ambiguous in the society. The agencies of all kinds (religion, psychology, advertising, etc.) time and again have recurrently chided them against their initiative of creating their own space, labeling it as their “need”. (Millett, 2000, p. 41) They are the low-priced labor available in the market and have little or negligible impact in influencing the patriarchy that mitigates their efforts of asserting their independence. Millet (2000) further argues Even they are not allowed to receive education and if they get a chance to study, “the kind and quality of education is not same for each sex”. (p. 42) Millett (2000) argues that patriarchy endows men with the power equivalent to that of a king which is believed to be ordained by God and nature that automatically gives them “the total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sati”. (p. 33) While talking about the education of women, Greer (1971) argues that education is offered to both men and women with different objectives. Woman’s psyche and mind is conditioned in such a way that they regard education either as unimportant in comparison to the only ambition of their life i.e. marriage and child rearing or needed only to the extent of getting a good match and to manage their married life well, while, “many of them think of even their professional life either as a stop-gap or indirect qualification for marriage”. (Greer, 1971, p. 76) Apart from being exploited sexually through rape, incest, pornography and within marriage, women are also exploited and marginalized in field of profession, economics and education. They are altogether not allowed to receive education equivalent to that of men and pursue certain professional degrees. Not only the educational subjects, but also the professional streams too are coded and gendered masculine and

feminine. Thus, education is used as an instrument and tool to promote patriarchal ideologies, the expectations of society and culture that strengthen gender differences resulting in the creation of gendered spaces.

In terms of industry and production, the predicament and condition of woman can be doubtlessly compared to both “colonial and to pre-industrial peoples”. (Millett, 2000, p.41) Despite achieving their first economic sovereignty in the industrial revolution they still are not allowed to directly indulge in what is labeled as male domain i.e. technology and production. In the patriarchal society that all and all is gendered, manifests its hold by extending its unflinching power over all the institutions of society including education and economy too. In the gendered society not only human beings but the subjects and professions too are gendered. Millett (2000) reveals that, “patriarchy permitted minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them”, and even when allowed to study, “the kind and quality of education is not same for each sex”. (p. 42) Universities being the place of scholarship and training of professionals, producing personnel of a technocracy endorse the education of males invalidating women’s progress and development in the same. Millett (2000) argues,

Patriarchy enforces a temperamental balance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between “masculine” and “feminine” subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female- and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. (p. 42)

*The Robber Bride* of Margaret Atwood reflects that how men and women are stereotyped to pursue the already fixed domains of subject and study based on the constructed and presumed traits of masculine and feminine identity. The novel brings out a very fine analysis of stratification based on gender i.e. how women and men are targeted to pursue their ambitions according to their temperaments. The gender traits that are believed to be ordained by biology: i.e. women are believed soft, weak and delicate whereas men are strong, virile and hard hearted- are subverted and deconstructed by Atwood who allows and reflects the deft shifting of gender roles between men and women. Tony’s concern in those things as miserable and melancholic as war is prohibited not only by men but by her women friends Charis and Roz who discourage her from spending, “so much of her time on something as negative as war”. (Atwood, 1993, p. 25) Charis’s opinion about Tony’s opting for history as her area of interest is presented as, “Maybe that’s who Tony was, in previous life: Julius Caesar has been sent back in the body of women, to punish him. A very short woman, so he can see what it’s like to be powerless. Maybe that is the way things work”. (Atwood, 1993, p.66) The male professors display a rude demurral at Tony’s selection of war as her subject, “Male historians think she’s invading their territory and should leave their spears, arrows, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes and bombs alone. They think she should be writing social history, such as who ate what and when, or Life in feudal family.” It is perceived that gender role stereotyping is not only furthered by men, but women are the moderate careers of patriarchal needs and command. Though the number of women may be less, nevertheless they all, “think the same thing but for different reasons. They think she ought to be studying birth; not death, and certainly not battle plans. Not routes and debacles, not carnages, not slaughters”. (Atwood, 1993, p. 21- 22)

The novel unfolds the reversal of gender through the character of the History professor who against the demands of his gender “is more interested in economics” than he should be “in bloodshed” and professes to Tony about the uselessness of war for women that it is not “an appropriate subjects for girls”. (Atwood, 1993, p.169) Tony being a history professor too finds that “As a rule her (own) students are mostly men: not a lot of women find themselves deeply attracted to such courses as Late Medieval Tactical Blunders or Military

History as Artifact". (Atwood, 1993, p. 23) Thus, Tony perceives this as truth and re-affirms that though "Women are not usually called upon to commit such cold-blooded acts (like men) but this does not mean they are incapable of them". (Atwood, 1993, p. 405) Thus, Atwood deconstructs gender stereotypes and spaces constructed and assigned exclusively to women, on account of their biological and sexual difference from men. Tony as per the expectations of her specialization in history "unflinchingly investigates the atrocities and cruelties of history which proves that gender roles are artificially designed and constructed to confine and restrict women to the gendered spaces". (Vickroy, 2010, p. 56) Roz too has to face her own challenges, very much like Tony, in choosing her father's business and becoming a businesswoman rather than businessman. Roz grew up believing that "business was something mysterious, something way beyond her, something her father did behind closed doors. Something only fathers did, that girls were forever too dull-witted to understand." But when she manages her own business, she discovers that she could do it better than most of the men. She also has to endure the perception and behavior of the women employees, who are inflicted with the sting of patriarchy "the exclusive dominance of males... directly serves the interests of patriarchal power in industry, government and the military". (Millet, 2000, p. 42) The society easily bears with the dominion and supremacy of men; woman's authority is not easily accepted and tolerated by the people, particularly women. Roz cites the example that, "If she were a man she could get away with a brief nod; but she is not a man, and she knows a whole lot better than to try acting like one". (Atwood, 1993, p. 88) She adds further:

It's complicated being a woman boss. Women don't look at you and think Boss. They look at you and think *Woman* as, in *Just another one, like me, and where does she gets off?* None of their sexy little tricks work on you, and none of yours work on them; big blue eyes are no advantage... Whereas the same very women would fetch and carry for a man boots, no question... bring his slippers in her mouth, overtime no problem. (Atwood, 1993, p. 88-89)

The socio-cultural construction of gender identities results in the creation of gendered spaces, which confine both men and women in realizing their true identity and potential. In a "gendered culture, the religious, legal, political, educational and material institutions both create and reinforce expectations about how men and women should behave". (qtd. in Hussein, 2005, p.1) Millett (2000) strengthens this point by arguing that:

In a society where status is dependent upon the economic, social and educational circumstances of class, it is possible for certain females to appear to stand higher than some males" still it is known that "the caste of virility triumphs over the social status of wealthy or even educated women.... And the existence of sexual hierarchy has been reaffirmed and mobilized to "punish" the female quite effectively. (p. 36)

In the novel *The Blind Assassin*, as Iris and Laura grow up they are instructed and trained by maid Reenie and father simultaneously. The girls are restricted from going out unattended, to movies, or to any other places, as there was always the danger of being molested and sexually harassed by men, "men went there on the prowl dirty minded men- they would take seat next to you and stick their hands on to you like flypaper and before you knew it, they'd be climbing all over you". (Atwood, 2000, p. 245) Germaine Greer (1971) remarks that both boys and girls are brought up from childhood with different instructions:

While little boys are forming groups and gangs to explore or terrorize the district, she[girl] is isolated at home, listening to tales of evil-minded strangers. Her comparative incarceration is justified in the name of protection... She is taught to fear and distrust the world at large, for reasons which are never clearly stated. (p. 87)

The girls are expected to be "neat, obedient and silent and exhibit no overt signs of sexuality". (Atwood, 2000, p.193) They are trained to suppress their sexuality and appear sexless to preserve their integrity and femininity from being destroyed by men. On the same

account they are not allowed to go to public school and provided with tutors- both male and female, at home by their father. Education is imparted to girls with different motives and ambitions in comparison to boys. These private tutors too have their role in influencing and conditioning the psyche of girls and in the construction their gender identities and hence gendered spaces. According to Beauvoir (1997) while in order to make 'true woman' of her, woman is groomed accordingly from the childhood:

she is entrusted to female teachers ...books and games are chosen for her which initiate her into her destined sphere, the treasures of feminine wisdom are poured into her ears, feminine virtues are urged upon her, she is taught cooking, sewing and housekeeping along with her care of person, charm and modesty...in brief she is pressed to become like her elders, a servant and an idol. (p. 309)

The first tutor of Iris and Laura is a female spinster MsGoreham, nick named as Miss Violence by Iris. She imparts them the lessons which are replete with the examples of cultural and social expectations of patriarchal society from women in order to mould them into the expected stereotype of femininity. In words of Iris, "Although she herself was lumpy and inelegant, she has high standards of delicacy and a long list of things she wanted us pretend to be". (Atwood, 2000, p.189) She even works on the postures of girls, saying "pay attention to your posture". (Atwood, 2000, p.192) or else you will not get suitable life partners. She herself "had been doomed to a life of single blessedness" (Atwood, 2000, p. 188) i.e. "A woman with no husband". (Atwood, 2000, p. 187) Being a failure in marriage she, "sighed about everything" (Atwood, 2000, p. 191) and taught poems on the themes of unreciprocated love and concomitant death. She taught that "the only possible end of unrequited love for a woman is death, literally or metaphorically". She tells them that beyond marriage there is no life for women. "Besides, the possible outlets, or rewards, of love for women are within the confines of marriage." Those women who violate the norms of patriarchal society and try to enter to amorous relations with men outside the confines of marriage, "cancel[s] the possibility of a socially integrated life". (Koyuncu, 2001) Any deviation from the guidelines of patriarchal law is a punishable offence and is equivalent to death. While Iris recites and learns poems Laura remains unconcerned and mostly engages herself in colouring the images in history books Along with MsGoreham and Reenie, father Norval chase too, is influential in moulding the contours of their personality and mind. When Iris becomes thirteen her father starts, "tak[ing] interest" in her "[Iris] posture", "speech" and "deportment." He instructs that the clothing of Iris "should be simple and plain" feeling that, "he had let me[Iris] run wild for too long. It was time for me to be taken in hand". (Atwood, 2000, p. 193) Norval chase disapproves the teachings of female teacher (MsGoreham). He announces that "Ms Violence and her lax, musty, rose-tinted ways must be scrubbed away. He wanted the lacy, frilly, somewhat murky edges trimmed off us [Iris & Laura] as if we were lettuces, leaving a plain sound core". (Atwood, 2000, p.196) As opposed to the instructions of Reenie and MsGoreham- who were influencing the growth of girls according to stereotypes of femininity, Norval Chase imparts them with the instructions to construct them "into semblances of boys, one way or another" (Atwood, 2000, p. 196).

MsGoreham is replaced by male tutor Mr.Erskine who is presented as a sadist and a misogynist. As the propagator of patriarchal ideology, Erskine insists only that much education for girls that was necessary to mend their "excessive dreaminess", "slothful mental habits" and prepares them for "serious business of life" i.e. marriage (Atwood, 2000, p. 196-197). According to him girls were, "not expected to be geniuses" and with this view he tries to mould them "into shape" of women (BA196). According to him they needed to learn just simple mathematics which was enough, "to know how to balance household accounts, which meant adding and subtracting and double entry book-keeping" (BA 198). According to Bouson (2003), Mr Erskine represents, "an embodiment of the repressive forces of masculinist culture". (p. 256) He forces Iris and Laura to translate those texts which are

embarrassing for, “the sisters for their supposed female traits – their ignorance and mental deficiency”. (Bousan, 2003, p. 256). Germaine Greer in argues regarding the education of women in *The Female Eunuch* (1971) that education is offered to both man and woman with different objectives. Her mind set up is conditioned in such a way that woman regards education as secondary to other ambitions of her life, that is marriage and child rearing. She is made to believe that education is necessary only to the extent of getting good match for her and to manage her married life well, “many of them think of even their professional life either as a stop-gap or indirect qualification for marriage”. (Greer, 1971, p. 76)

Having provided with only that much education which was required to fulfill the needs of their married life, Iris and Laura both internalize and believe in the common perception held by people in society that women business skills and are better suited to household life. Later on, after his wife’s death Norval Chase expects and trains his daughter Iris to act like a boy in order to compensate his desire of having a boy child, he said, “I must learn the ins and outs of the button business, as was my duty... I was to be the son in Chase and Sons”. (Atwood, 2000, p. 241) Iris undermines her skills because of the society’s perception of the same “I knew I had no business abilities” and had no knowledge as to, “how things worked in the real world”. (Atwood, 2000, p. 241) She further writes:

If I’d been a boy he[father] would have started me working at the assembly line, on the military analogy that an officer should not expect his men to perform any job he could not perform himself. As it was, he set me to taking inventory and balancing shipping accounts – raw materials in, finished products out. (p. 241)

Iris when joins the button factory encounters the critical attitude of both men and women, “scorned by the women and stared by the men” she knew, “they were making jokes” of her, “jokes that had to do with my deportment (the women) and my body (the men)...In their place I would have done the same”. (Atwood, 2000, p. 241) Beauvoir (1997) describes women’s secondary status in professional and educational world as:

It is outrageously paradoxical to deny woman all activity in public affairs, to shut her out of masculine careers, to assert her incapacity in all fields of effort, and then to entrust her the most delicate and most serious undertaking of all: the moulding of a human being. There are many women whom custom and tradition still deny the education, the culture, the responsibilities and activities that are the privilege of men. (p. 539)

After the death of Laura and the formalities of her funeral, Iris, with her daughter Aimee abandons Richard and goes back to her home Avilion. She musters enough courage in collecting herself, her individuality and transcends the boundaries of the stereotypes that have been defining her so far. From a passive, submissive and a non-existent being- a wife and a daughter- she proclaims herself identity as the one who is in charge of her own emotions, her individuality and freedom. She rewrites her identity and is able to make herself financially independent by extorting money, “from Richard and ... from Laura’s estate”, but also by establishing herself as businesswoman. She begins her new business in second hand artifacts, ‘in a modest way... with a few pieces of animal jewelry from Richard’. (Atwood, 2000, p. 620) By enthusiastically venturing into a new business of selling antiques and artifacts, she metamorphoses from being passive, acquiescent, victimized object to an active, self-determining businesswoman, reconstructing and recreating her new identity.

Thus, we can see that Margaret Atwood empowers her women characters by gifting them with strength and stamina of voicing their, exploitation and suffering. It’s through speaking in her own voice, writing in her own words that her women characters re-write themselves and redefine their identity. This can be seen being reflected in Cixous’s words that in order to unfetter themselves from predefined mould of patriarchy, women need to reject the language used by men, and introducing their own discourse, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”. (p. 334)

Thus, we see that education is used as an instrument and tool to promote patriarchal ideologies and doesn't permit women to fulfill any professional aspiration of their life. Women are imparted education with an aim of preparing them for the ultimate pursuit of their life i.e. marriage and child rearing. Atwood through her characters subverts the artificiality ingrained in gender formulation and portrays them as well equipped to surmount all the domains of world that are coded masculine and feminine. She nullifies the segregation and stratification based on gender and allows the interpenetration of the people of both genders into the opposite domains of education and professional world. It is finally seen that where on the one side men fail in their business pursuit at the end women on the other side excel and establish themselves as successful businesswomen.

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