

## Atwood's Novels: A Documentary of Parental and Peer Group Violence against School Children

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### Abstract

Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, a prominent contemporary writer and booker prize winner uses her novels to sensitise serious global issues. Violence raged against weaker sections remains a predominant theme and she strongly registers her voice for the rights of children, women, and ethnic minority in her novels. The objective of the research paper is to bring together her discussions and discourses on issues related to children in two novels, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*. She microscopically portrays the childhood of Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* and Elaine Risely in *Cat's Eye*. The lives of the two little protagonists, like the lives of group ups, are filled with love, hatred, happiness and sufferings. Atwood has depicted numerous incidences of violence against and among children in the two novels and ironically in many such incidents, parents at home, teachers at school and elders at neighbourhood, completely fail to comprehend the gravity of the situation and consider the offences among children and abuses against children a trivial affair. Parents, teachers and elders in the two novels are not competent enough to handle children's psychic disturbances and disorders scientifically. Both Joan Foster and Elaine Risley do not receive support and care from their loving ones and eventually become vulnerable and fall a prey to their predators. The research paper will attempt to study the cases of violence in schools, reported in newspapers, with the two novels of Atwood.

**KEYWORDS:** Children, abuses, violence, home, school

### Introduction:

Margaret Atwood is a celebrated living author and has written sixteen novels, short story collections, poems and non-fictions. She has received national as well as international awards for her writings and is one of the influential writers of the contemporary literary world. Her readers are spread all over the world and she is known for writing serious contemporary global issues. Her predominant themes are women oppression, child abuse, cultural and ethnic conflicts and complexities. Her writings caution the world about growing intolerance and condemn any form of colonisation. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* a dystopian novel which was published in 1985 has recently drawn international attention, immediately after the completion of United States of America's presidential election in November 2016. *The Handmaid's Tale* has achieved sudden raise of sales in the United States of America and the sudden demand for the novel has prompted the publishers to release new edition with more number of copies in the 2017 calendar year. The novel is set in the near future and depicts the military regime in the Republic of Gilead. The dictator's regime completely curbs individual liberty which is the crux of the democratic system. In *The Handmaid's Tale* women are used as incubators and their primary job is to breed babies for the ruling class. The novel has received worldwide appreciation for its striking resemblance to the current political instability which prevails in the United States of America. Atwood is one of the early writers, who has recorded her

concern for the ecological deterioration of the blue planet. She has warned the international communities about the serious ecological issues in her novel *Surfacing*. Her novel *Surfacing* which was published in 1972, explores the future ecological threats which the planet may encounter.

Another important contemporary global issue which Atwood deals in her novels is; maltreatment of children. Her novels recurrently portrayed violence among children and violence against children. Her novel *Alice Grace*, centres around a real incidence which deals with the twin murder which took place in Ontario, Canada in July 28, 1843. Thomas Kinner, a rich land lord and his house keeper Nancy Montgomery was brutally murdered by Grace Marks, sixteen year old servant girl. Grace Marks experiences abuses at home and workplace. The adversities at home and workplace turns her into a murderer and she ends up a life convict at the age of sixteen. Though she has depicted the world of children in at least half a dozen of her novels, the research paper will study two of her novels: *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*. In these two novels, Atwood has elaborately discussed child abuses at home, school and neighbourhood. The research paper will examine the recurrent child abusive incidents reported, with the incidents of child abuses portrayed in Atwood's novels.

Her third novel *Lady Oracle* revolves around the agonising childhood experience of Joan Foster. Joan Foster is a victim of domestic violence at home and her mother crushes her happy childhood. Her mother completely plays havoc in Joan Foster's life and the wounds inflicted by her mother during her childhood remains fresh and haunt her throughout her life. Elaine Risley the protagonist of *Cat's Eye*, is a victim peer group violence. Three of her schoolmates bullies her and play spoil sport to her happy school days. According to Atwood, children who experience, either physical or verbal attack by parents, teachers or their own peer group suffer much more than cases of abuse inflicted by strangers. Hence Atwood attempts to redefine the roles and responsibilities of parents, elders and teachers. A clinical understanding is the need of the hour and substantive child protection laws and policies should be enforced to tackle children's psychic disturbances, disorders and child abuses. The indifference and lack of understanding in the part of parents, teachers and elders, to problems of children, create disastrous effect in the healthy psychological and emotional development of a child. The affected children, who experience maltreatment, subsequently avoid bringing their abusive experiences to the notice of the parents, teachers and elders, due to lack of trust, which sometimes leads to severe psychic disturbances and disorders.

**Fiction and Fact:**  
Atwood is a story teller but her stories refer to the real life incidences which happen in the day to day life. The lives of the three protagonists considered for research, are not merely the imagination of the author. The lives of Joan Foster, Elaine Risley and Alice Grace are symbolic representation of abuses, crimes and violence unleashed against children. The readers can naturally connect these children with real life personas. Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* discusses the ontological status of fiction and reality. Waugh writes:

Metafiction, then, does not abandon 'the real world' . . . What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover- through its own self-reflection – fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary

worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'.(18) Waugh re-defines the relationship between fact and fiction and implicitly hints at the spontaneous overlapping of reality and imagination. Atwood is a self-conscious writer who explores and examines the contemporary global issues in her novels and in many of her interviews she has admitted her writings' relevance to the real world. Geoff Hancock a popular Canadian critic in his *Canadian Writers at Work*, a book which contains interviews of ten famous Canadian fiction writers has posted series of questions to Atwood about the social consciousness in her novel. Atwood in a reply to Geoff Hancock's question 'what is the novel to you' she ascertains that 'the "Novel" for me is the sum total of all men.'(268) She further says that she has 'never met one' novelist 'without' social conscience' (271)

### **Peer Group Intimidations in *Cat's Eye*:**

Atwood is a writer who digs deep into social issues. Her novels objectively records violence against and among children. The remarks of Elaine Risley, protagonist of *Cat's Eye* expresses Atwood's perception about peer group violence among children. Elaine Risley comments that **"Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized."**(140) Elaine Risley a controversial painter, who is in her mid forties, comes back to her native town Toronto, in Canada to host a retrospective art exhibition. Her native town brings back her childhood days down her memory lane. She recollects and narrates her agonising school days which are filled with shame and pain. The bruises of her childhood remain fresh and alive in her mind, and even after thirty years it creates painful ripples. Elaine who is in her mid forties with two teen age daughters, states her anxiety about mothering experience thus:

As my daughters approached this age, the age of nine, I watched them anxiously. I scrutinized their figures for bites, their feet, the ends of their hair. I asked them leading questions; 'Is everything all right, are your friends all right?' . . . When their friends arrived at our house to play, I scanned their faces for signs of hypocrisy. Standing in the kitchen, I listened to their voices in the other room. . . . Or maybe it was worse. Maybe my daughters were doing this sort of thing themselves, to someone else. (139) Elaine's

scepticism about her daughter and her daughter's friends springs from her affected childhood psyche. The three school friends Carol, Grace and Cordelia intimidate Joan, all through her childhood. The trio repeatedly hurt her physically, emotionally and psychologically. Elaine's parents failed to notice the physical and psychological bruises of their child. Her father is an entomologist who later elevated to the post of university professor and her mother supported him all through his career. The couple were preoccupied with their research work and forest visits and they completely fail to support and care their daughter. Elaine hence has to tackle her school mates' bullies and violence all alone. Her three school friends' bullies intensified day by day and at one point they pushed her into a dangerous ravine. She suffered severe snow bites and luckily a passerby rescued and saved her life. The leader of the group Cordelia, who derived sadistic pleasure from inflicting physical as well as psychological injuries to Elaine, in her later years turn out a drug addict. She was kept in a rehabilitation centre to treat her drug addiction.

The violence among children is increasing day by day in the contemporary world. The role of parents and teachers is very vital to curb the growing intolerant attitude among school children. Atwood presents a very crucial issue for deliberation

to the international communities for retrospection. Newspapers have reported so many cases of violence among school children. As mentioned earlier the research paper will examine the child abuse cases present in Atwood's novel with the child abuse cases reported in newspapers.

### **Ryan school student murder case:**

Ryan International School in Gurugram, Haryana, India has hit headlines in all news channels and newspapers for wrong reasons. Pradyuman Thakur, a II standard student was ruthlessly murdered inside the school premises on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2017. The news has sent shock waves in the nation. After the case is transferred to Central Bureau of Investigation, the premier investigation agency of India, the case took an unexpected twist. *The Hindu*, a leading Indian Newspaper reports thus in November 9, 2017:

The Central Bureau of Investigation(CBI) on Tuesday night apprehended a 16 year-old Class XI student of Gurugram Ryan International School in connection with the killing of seven-year-old Pradyuman Thakur, a class II student, of the same school. Pradyuman was found dead with his throat slit by a sharp-edged weapon on the morning of September 8 in the school toilet. The apprehended child in conflict with law allegedly wanted the scheduled exams and parent-teacher meeting in the school postponed.

The murder of Pradyuman Thakur is not a singular case and cannot be considered as a rarest of the rare case. Brutal violent incidents are reported in many schools throughout the world. UNESCO's global status report on *School Violence and Bullying* was released in International Symposium on School Violence and Bullying in Seoul, Republic of South Korea in 17-18 January 2017. UNESCO's *School Violence and Bullying* reports thus:

A 2012 report by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children notes that more than one billion children around the world attend school. . . . Many are also exposed to schoolyard fighting, gang violence, assault with weapons, and sexual and gender-based violence by their own peers. (8)

The UNESCO's report calls school violence and bullying as a global problem and further states that '246 million children and young people experience school violence every year'. UNESCO's report defines bullying as a 'intentional and aggressive behaviour occurring repeatedly against a victim where there is a real or perceived power imbalance'.(15) UNESCO's report demands immediate action plan to tackle the global menace which makes the life of millions of children all over the world miserable.

### **Parental aggression in Lady Oracle:**

Atwood's *Lady Oracle* demonstrates the horrible impact of parental aggression in a child's life. UNESCO report states that weak or ugly physical appearance of a child, as one of the main causes of violence perpetuated on children. It states that 25% of children are abused because of their unpleasant or timid physical appearance. Joan foster was an obese child and her mother tried many methods to reduce Joan's body weight, but all her attempts failed to provide result. Joan's physical appearance disgraced her mother and she considered her daughter a symbol of shame. Joan's mother often host's parties at her home, but she never allows her daughter to sneak into it. Joan terribly suffers in the hands of her mother. Here, Atwood portrays the complicated social consciousness of an upper middle class woman. Many parents consider their children as a thing of pride. The life of the child and parents are

intertwined and success or failure of the child either improves or damages the parent's social image. If a child is a low performer, it terribly hurts the honour of the parents.

Joan is an obese girl child and her obesity is the main cause of her mother's hatred for her. Joan Foster's mother put her in a dance school to reduce her body weight. In the annual dance festival Joan is included in Butterfly Frolic Dance. She practises for months and she dreams of dancing with colourful butterfly wings. But ironically, in the eyes of her mother, Joan did not look like a butterfly. But on the day of the performance her mother instructs the dance teacher to convert Joan into a mothball. Joan's mother and her teacher Miss Fleggy, crush the little girl's dreams. Joan pathetically pleads and asks 'Can I wear my wings'(50) Atwood poignantly presents the violence against children at home and school at one stroke. The role of parents and teacher play a crucial role in child development. Ironically her mother and teacher, together pressurises her to perform an act she foremost dislikes. The dance school fiasco leaves a permanent scar in the mind of the little Joan and she never trusted her parents and teachers all through her live. She considers it a treacherous act and never forgives he mother and permanently moves away for her mother both physically and psychologically. Joan's mother's indifference grew day by day and later it took a violent turn. Joan's mother at the heat of rage attacks her with a knife. Joan narrates the incident thus:

She looked

at me with an expression of rage, which changed quickly to fear, and said, "God will not forgive you! God will never forgive you!" Then she took a paring knife from the kitchen counter . . . and struck it into my arm, above the elbow. It went through my sweater, pricked the flesh, then bounced out and fell to the floor. (136)

Here Atwood expresses her concern for children who live in adverse situations. She urges the parents and teachers to play a proactive role in providing violence free environment for children at home and school. Joan Foster is not just a fictional character; she is an emblem of parental violence which happens all around the world

### Conclusion:

Atwood with the devastating irony appeals the world to unchain the feathers which entangle the dreams and desires of children. Lebanon born poet, Khalil Gibran has echoed similar note in his poetry collection *The Prophet*. The Prophet Almustafa the poetic persona, in the poetry collection *The Prophet* replies thus to the question asked on Children:

AND a woman who held a babe against her  
bosom said, Speak to us of Children.

And he said:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of to-morrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.(20)

The remarkable lines quoted above of Khalil Gibran can be considered as the guiding light to eradicate child abuse and it has to be discussed at national and international

levels to tackle the menace of child abuse. The mystical poet in very few poetic lines has laid a road map for child right policies. In the year, 2016 UNICEF conducted an opinion poll to prevent school violence. 80% of the respondents who participated in the opinion poll urged the government to raise awareness on child abuse and 30% respondents recommended to promote classroom discussions on the issue.(p.40-School Violence and Bullying Global Status Report) UNESCO's global report recommends to establish systems for reporting child abuse cases and it also proposes to strengthen legal protection for school children. Margaret Atwood is one of the leading writers who voiced for child rights and protection. She has first registered are voice against child abuse at home, nearly half a century ago. Margaret Atwood has great ability to perceive grave global issues at its initial stage and law makers and educationalists should take solid measures to prevent violence against children and should implement necessary actions to make home and schools a safe haven for children.

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