A POSTMODERN FEMINISTIC INSCRIPTION OF NEW SELFHOOD IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD AND TONI MORRISON.

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ABSTRACT

The parallelism drawn between postmodernism and feminism is manifested in both their agenda to undermine all totalizing experience, the metanarratives and to create a new space for pluralism, marginality and difference. Both these ideologies were committed to deconstruct the false universal hierarchies of values. Both postmodernism and feminism challenge the monolithic definition of truth. Modeled on postmodernism’s refutation of unitary self, feminist too constantly engaged in reshaping the consciousness of the self. The fluid relationship between a women writer and the language prevents the prioritisation and actualization of the self. The primary concern of feminist critics is to problematize the ubiquitous metanarrative, ‘patriarchy’ which they identify as the most functional and dominating system in our civilization. Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison as feminist writers do challenge the rules and conventions of writing and of society in general. Their novels are feminist social satire, and mock the institutionalized methods of marginalizing and disempowering women. So they both effectively deploy postmodern fictional strategies that subvert the hierarchization of binary logic that is deep rooted in all pervasive patriarchal system.

(Keywords: Feminism, Postmodernism, Metanarrative, Subjectivity, Patriarchy, Marginality, Subversion)

Postmodernism is characterized by its deconstructing impulse and distrusting stance on all certainties, fixed truths, social structures and hegemones. It tends to problematize the notion of unitary self, theory of essentialism, ideology of Enlightenment and the establishment of all metanarratives. It is this point, where the agenda of feminism intersects by challenging the notion of established discourses of grand narratives, such as patriarchy.

Feminism’s affinity with postmodernism can be identified with its denial of unitary subject without eliminating subjectivity, historiography without disowning history. Influenced by Leotards explication of postmodernism as the rejection of metanarrative, the feminist intellectuals responded combining it with their own committed feminist project of questioning the basic masculine value of western culture which had been operating to disempower women and devalue femininity.
Both enterprises (Feminism and Postmodernism), view art as a social sign inevitably entangled in other signs in the social structure and the meaning and the value of each sign is determined by the place it holds in the structure. Feminists engage themselves to advance further to alter those oppressive systems.

As a Canadian and a woman writer Margaret Atwood’s writings seek to subvert the dominant discourses which inevitably makes her a postmodernist. It is a political and existential act which involves a challenge and resistance which eventually leads to the creation of a substitute centre of power. While probing the relationship between feminism and postmodernism Magali finds Atwood’s novels work perfectly on this new alliance (Postmodernism and Feminism).

Atwood’s novels enact the double agenda at work in the postmodern recognition and analysis of the gaps that inherently exists in western systems, challenging those systems and opening up possibilities for change strategies that have feminist potential (Magali p. 146).

Atwood exploits the spaces provided by postmodern fictional strategies to persuade postfeminist theorists to think further into the subtext of theories about gender relations.

Postfeminism is the product of postmodern process of undermining patriarchal discourse and can be interpreted as an umbrella term to encompass latest concepts of Girl power such as bold, assertive, self assured and competitive young women and cyberspace floated by cyberfems, androgyny, pluralism and multiculturalism. And B.R. Agarwal defines the scope of postfeminism as,

Postfeminism therefore is a radically new way of talking about femininity, masculinity and sexuality, such concept breaks down the opposition between masculine and feminine and substitutes them as elements that represent multiple differences. It is in fact an attempt to display the polarity of differences by recreating the multiplicity of the differences (Agarwal p. 92).

Atwood wrings directed towards a newer perspective of womanhood and its space in patriarchy and vindicates plurality, appreciation of mutual differences and congenial coexistence of gender free individual. Marian in Atwood’s Edible Women senses the unreality and hypocrisy and consumer - consumed syndrome in society and she nurtures resentment against Peter to whom she agrees for marriage of convenience.

This novel is an indictment against women’s consumerisation in male dominated society. In an interview with Jo Brans she defines her feminist ideology as ‘human equality and freedom of choice’.

Quebec women writers in 1970 and 1980 have produced texts, in which the narrative voice is split, multiplied and fragmented a distinctively postmodernist discursive strategy to effect a new inscription in the feminine.

The first part of the novel in the Edible Woman is in confessional mode, and the third person narrative is employed in the second part of the novel representing realization of self negation and self effacement and the final part of the novel manifests self redemption, evolution of self assurance, and self certitude through the first person narrative.

The first part of the novel ends with Marian’s realization of her disorganization of self and she expresses “I must get organized, I have a lot to do.” (p.126) and the second part of the novel in the point of view of an omniscient third person narrator highlights her impending subjugation to the connubial authority and erasure of her selfhood however she earlier senses this duality in selfhood as,
It was my subconscious getting ahead of my conscious self, and the subconscious has its own logic. The way I went about doing things may have been a little inconsistent? (p.123)

Atwood has used this multi voiced narrative to refute a single vision and a single authority and they subvert all notions of control, domination and of truth. Like Edible Woman, another novel Lady Oracle also very explicitly explores an emerging multiplicity in the protagonist selfhood. It is in the form of pastiche, a literary patch work and a newer interpretation of gothic motifs, a parody of fairy tales and fantasies. As Katarina observes,

The coexistence and parody of the reality alongside fantastic intertextual allusions to classic, escapist Harlequin romances and traditional fairytale produce a non escapist postmodern patchwork (Katarina p. 209).

This polymorphous novel as a cosmic masterpiece works to parody literary genres and subverts traditional literary expectations to make feminist critique of male female relationships that’s why Susan J Rose calls the novel as a ‘feminist parody of gothic’ and Lucy M Freihert calls a ‘feminist parody of picaresque’.

This novel is the delightful mixture of typical human parody, humour and satire it demonstrates Atwood’s perception of self and reality and thus postmodern local narration is deployed to reconfigure women’s experience.

The relationship between this novel and Irigary’s objective to uncover the absence of a female subjective position and her ‘Otherness’ is evident in the unconventional use of mirrors and the recurring use of loose ends, distorted forms, difference between self and the other, reality and unreality, by deconstructing classical unities time, space and character, the novel provides a locus where plurality of styles and traditions visit and assures that man and woman can establish a better relationship even in this patriarchal order. Cooke comments on the distorted narration of the novel,

The novel’s plot within a plot interrupts the chronology of the main narrative that is creating different temporal levels with an intertextual references offering alternative temporal dimensions (Cooke p. 90).

Molly Hites the American critic uses Lady Oracle to illustrate how this novel a satisfyingly good read and simultaneously invites the readers to question their assumptions about reading, Atwood archives this by deploying meta fictional narrative as the novel is about novel writing and reading.

The limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism is exposed in The Handmaids Tale and the postmodern impulse of distrust utopianism is evident in the novel. The narrative disruption propose to proceed its social criticism foregrounding the sexism that underlies in western discourse, and demonstrating impossibility of radical change in feminist terms without any metaphysical shift. Besides challenging the metaphysics it opens the way for a multiplicity of histories and realities that are neither male-centered nor fixed. According to Magahi’s proposition,

I will argue Atwood’s novel manages to offer traces of Offred’s story – history And her material existence even though all the texts that make up the physical novel are ultimately male centered (Magali p. 136).
The novel applies both deconstructive and reconstructive strategies (postmodern strategies) to problematize the reading of history as linear objective marginalized discourse and the novel concurrently inserts women’s oral story history.

In This Novel Offered is caught between Nature and Culture binaries, unable to lean on either for sustenance or for meaning. She is the resulting entities of the amalgamation of language and subjectivity, her fluid female subjectivity exists only through the medium of language. Her existence disrupts the conventional binary opposition of subject and object and resists the naming process that circumscribes female identity. By embarrassing the conventional notion of history, reality creating multiple histories, multiple truths, the novel proceeds to acknowledge and represent women’s material existence and recommends changes in it.

Offred’s awareness of the subjectivity, the constructedness of ‘truth’ handed over to her by Gilead regime is what makes the Handmaids tale a postmodern novel. Early in the novel Atwood establishes the metafictional aspect of the text and it becomes more evident as the book progresses.

Like Atwood, Toni Morrison also exploits the intersecting realms of postmodernism and feminism by challenging dominant western metanarratives, employing generic hybridity and irony and redefining the function of writing and reading. Her significant postmodern strategy involves the theme of split subjectivity which assumes form and structure in the triple conscious of Race, Class and Gender.

In order to understand the theme of split subjectivity, a postmodern feature of Toni Morrison’s works it is important to examine the contingencies under which the black female self shapes itself (Kottiswari p.11).

Morrison’s female character Sula in the novel Sula like Atwood’s Marian and Joan and Offred redefines the female subjecthood by employing Postfeminist subversion of the binary opposition of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. As Page claims,

...in Sula Morrison more explicitly constructs a system of binary oppositions and simultaneously unravels it(Page p.60).

Sula’s life is a philosophical parable of self-creation. She intends to transgress all the conventional boundaries of attitudes and behaviors. She experiences a thorough liberty to reinvent herself, which gives her immunity to the public disapproval. Morrison characterizes Sula as,

...she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life...She has no centre, no speck around which to grow(pp.118-119).

Rigney recognizes this Morrison’s deconstructive writing which unsparingly destablishes all western binary systems that inherently operate a closed hierarchisation not only in the realms of subjecthood but in all possible domains. Morrison’s feministic concerns enacts Deconstructive impulse to subvert the closed system of this binary logic.

The crucial opposition of binaries enacted by Morrison in Sula is the relation between the self and the other. The characterization of Sula disrupts the traditional conception of unitary Self that is privileged over the Other. In Sula Morrison deliberately highlights the polarizing and the aggressive subordinating of the Other. But the character Sula enacts the postmodern impulse of opting a voluntary status of pariah
and sense of a new freedom by being the Other. She creates a new scope and space for the Other which has been disempowered hitherto. In this novel the representation of the subject position is decentered and fluid, and it is based on the distinction of the black social experience and black selfhood. This condition explains how the politics of racism is fused with the politics of subordination in traditional binary system.

The fictional female characters such as Marian, Joan, Offred and Sula dismiss the concept of unitary self and enact a postmodernist notion of acentric self. Decentered self is the ancient and longstanding condition of females. Hence Feminism allied with postmodernism harboured a mission to explore and inscribe a new conscious and strategic progress of female subjectivity.

Conclusion

Thus postmodernism’s new inscription on female subjectivity doing away with the transcendental and essentialist notions associated with it, is evidently enacted by both Atwood and Toni Morrison. Their postmodernism allied feminism posits the subjectivity as a constructed and assumed state and operates within closed social and cultural conditions. The contestation posited by Atwood and Morrison’s works are incited by feminist impulses but the urge to challenge itself is a postmodern trait. In their novels the feminists motivation have successfully urged postmodernism to reconsider the selfhood in terms of gender. Their anti metanarrative impulse challenges the male centered epistemology. Both these novelists efficiently exploit the postmodernist parodic and ironic representational strategies for the feminist way of working within and yet challenging dominant patriarchal Meta narrative.

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