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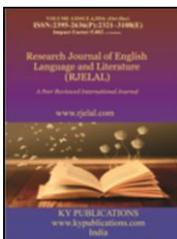
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PANGS OF GROWTH : ADOLESCENT FEMALE WORLD IN
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *CAT'S EYE*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, adept in describing thought processes, has portrayed vividly the world of young girls- their desires, their fears and compromises in her *Cat's Eye*. She throws light on the the negative side of childhood friendship and peer pressure which hitherto has not been given importance. The novel narrates the excruciating experiences of Elaine Risley, who because of a mistaken sense of loyalty allows herself to be bullied by her friends. The paper aims to focus on Atwood's portrayal of the depression and deviation in Elaine as a result of her painful experiences and the trauma she undergoes. Atwood throws light on the fact that childhood friendship is not always positive, not for everyone and that for every child that dominates there is one that is suppressed.

Key words: childhood friendship, peer pressure, negative influence, deviation.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has most often catered to the tradition of idealizing friendship, portraying the brighter side leaving out the more realistic, murkier and the complex aspects. In any friendship there are compromises, resulting in dissatisfaction and distress. It would be imprudent to ignore the negative experiences as they have a lasting influence on one's life. Psychologists put forth that, "as a developmental hindrance, experience in friendship relation would be expected to push a child forward a maladaptive developmental pathway by promoting deviance' (Bagwell). Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* focuses on this complex aspect of friendship relations. The novel delves deep into the world of school children portraying the nature, behaviour and desires of the girls of that age examining the various reasons causing conflicts. Adept in the portrayal of women's sphere, Atwood presents the female world unveiled in her novels. She keenly follows the

thought process of women and describes it with sensitivity. Her capacity to capture and concretize the invisible, indescribable and the subtle renders it possible for her to portray the exterior and interior of the women's world with graphic precision.

Cat's Eye narrates the harrowing childhood experiences of Elaine Risley, a painter with her school friends Carol, Grace and Cordelia. Growing up in a nuclear family of four, her father, mother, brother and herself and often having had to live away from society because of her father's job as a researcher, Elaine had no opportunity to mingle with girls of her age as friends and she is uncomfortable when she gets a chance to be in such a group:

I am left with real girls at last in the flesh. I am not used to girls or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them. I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I

sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen calamitous blunder (55)

Elaine's ignorance of the behaviour of girls of her age leaves her unprepared to understand, answer back and protest when she is slighted by her friends. She believes that the objective of her friends is to improve her manners and behaviour and tries to please them. As Cooper observes, the tendency to equal /satisfy the rest in a group and the desire to be accepted dominate adolescent children.

Early sociological accounts portrayed the adolescent as a member of this distinct and cohesive peer culture cut off from the rest of society forced inward toward his own age group made to carry out his whole social life with others of his own age (137)

Eline finds it disappointing when her friends in the process of projecting themselves, expose others' ignorance without worrying about hurting them. Elaine recalls how Carol exaggerates the fact that there was no bed in Elaine's house when she visited her:

Carol tells everyone at school that our family sleeps on the floor. She gives

the impression that we do this on purpose because we are from outside the city, that it is a belief of ours. She's disappointed when our real beds arrive from storage, legged with mattresses like everybody else's (57)

and remembers how "Carol was happy to be one above her. "She was more and more gratified the more bewildered I was" ..(60) "you did not know what a cold wave is?" She says delighted. She is eager to explain things to me, name them, display them (60)

Elaine is not fortunate enough to have reassuring and encouraging friends. She finds no comfort but only pain in the midst of friends who team up in commenting on her every single movement, making her feel small:

They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way from school I have to walk in front of them or behind. In front is worse, because they talk about how I'm walking, how I look from

behind. Don't hunch, says cordelia. Don't move your arms like that" (141)

Through this small group Atwood brings out the cold comfort that Elaine experiences with her friends.

Atwood's insightful portrayal brings to light the often left out factors in adolescent friendship that might be cause of a later deviation, yet left unnoticed at the time of happening. She also brings out the hesitation in children to discuss the matter with any one which blocks their way of getting help. Irked by the constant instructions and comments of her friends when Elaine tries to avoid them, Cordelia would bully her back into the group. Elaine gives up the idea of discussing the matter with her brother / mother that it might appear to be childish to them. She also has a sense of insecurity in sharing it with them for the fear of appearing childish and losing their friendship by their interference.

The emergence of peer groups in elementary school, according to Killen, aids children's development by providing positive friendships; relationships and social support and she observes that the downside includes influence of a group when it imposes unfair standards, especially on outsiders, or members of outgroups which is often created when peers form an ingroup(web). Elaine is at the receiving end where her friends join while they criticise her. She wonders how often she had to stand out alone for some mistake of hers not knowing exactly what her mistake was:

On the window edge beside mine, Cordelia and Grace and Carol are sitting jammed in together whispering and giggling. I have to sit on a window ledge by myself because they aren't speaking to me. It's something I said wrong. But I don't know what it is because they won't tell me. Cordelia says it will be better for me to-think back over everything I've said to day and try to pick out the wrong thing (138)

Her friends make her feel unworthy. Elaine feels that she is not equal to them. She often receives contemptuous smiles from Cordelia's sisters when she is standing alone outside. Elaine feels miserable that she is not doing better though her friends give her many chances.

I'm standing outside the closed door of Cordelia's room. Cordelia, Grace and Carol are inside. They're having a meeting. The meeting is about me. I am just not measuring up, although they are giving every chance, I will have to do better. But better at what? (138)

Atwood pictures the poignant movement of Elaine's childhood, when she describes how Elaine is left alone when she is desiring of being one among them giggling and whispering with them.

Elaine recalls many of Cordelia's pranks with her stubborn looks forcing Elaine to obey her orders. She vividly remembers the painful feeling of having been betrayed when once amidst a game where Elaine had to take the role of dead queen Mary of scots, she was lowered into a hole and left there for a longer time:

Up alone outside, I can hear their voices and I can't hear them. I lie wondering when it will be time to come out nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel darkness passing down on me. Then terror. (125)

Elaine, the sensitive child takes everything in the face value and starts thinking about the comments without knowing to tackle them skilfully. Little ones are not often conscious of the harm done to others. As Elaine thinks later in life, "little are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life sized"(22).

Children allow themselves to be subjected to harassments for many reasons: their ignorance of the way to put a full stop, for fear of losing recognition and friendship and for fear of being laughed at. Elaine endures the insults with the hope of pleasing her friends and keeping her friendship intact. She learns to protest only after the traumatic incident of having had to walk alone in the ravine to pick up her hat thrown by Cordelia. Overcome by remorse and fear she makes her way to her hat lying on the sleet. She falls on her back over the ice and lies there in fear and desperation without making an effort to get up. She sees a figure which she believes to be that of Virgin Mary uttering the

comforting words "you can go home now. It'll be all right, go home" (224)

She does not betray her friends to her mother who questions her about their presence when she fell on the sleet. However, she decides to give up their friendship for they were no true friends. Then she learns to keep away from them and gradually stops being worried about them.

There is a vivid description of the world of adolescent children, the matters that interest them like talking about boys, commenting and criticising girls, to be curious about sex, to do things without the knowledge of the parents and all the characteristics of teen-age. Atwood's description of the minute details of dress, behaviour, teenage talk and attitude illuminates the way the adolescent mind functions.

Elaine learns not only to protect herself but also to protest and then to bully others when she is in higher grade. She learns to bully Cordelia, though they are together. Cordelia invades her thought even after she is out of school, even in later life. Elaine's experience with Cordelia who spoiled the happiness of her childhood prevents her from offering help to Cordelia. Elaine feels guilty about not helping Cordelia but couldn't bring herself to do it. It is true that Cordelia was herself a child immature and not guided. Atwood throws light on how Cordelia herself was treated at home. She imitates the elders at home and it was all perhaps not serious. It is only when she distances herself from Cordelia she realises that she mistook Cordelia's imitation of the elders' role as real.

"You get back here right now" I can hear this for what it is. It's an imitation. It's acting. It's an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them (229)

Elaine realises all on a sudden that she been very foolish all along to have taken Cordelia's orders seriously. It was after all a game. And Cordelia was behaving like the elders, re-enacting what her father and sisters were doing to her.

The variation in background brings about a difference in belief. Children with different traditional and cultural backgrounds, show a difference in their interests and nature. A child that

is ordered about learns to be authoritative. A child that is treated well is fair to others. When children from varied background are forced to live together, there is a clash of individuals there is the painful experience of giving up and accommodation. Atwood with a keen eye for details, pictures through her words the pangs of growth that an adolescent female experiences and the negative influence of unequal friendship not supervised by elders.

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