

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN 2321 – 3108

## CHALLENGING ESSENTIALISM: WOMEN'S VOICE IN ALIAS GRACE OF MARGARET ATWOOD

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### ABSTRACT

The present work explores the novel *Alias Grace* of Margaret Atwood to challenge the existence of essential or natural feminine and masculine traits and proves them to be social constructs. Atwood denies the idea of biologically ordained sex-specific traits through her characters in the novel. Her characters transcend the boundaries and limitations of gender which are imposed on them by socio-cultural expectations and patriarchal ideologies. She undermines the essentialism by the performances of her characters which ascertain that both the masculinity and the femininity can be appropriated by the person of either sex.

Picking up and coalescing together the different strands of gender theories the work affirms the construction of gender as socio-cultural and then applying the same on the novel brings out the existence of essentialism as a construct. It is deftly explored that how Grace by negating her subordination discovers her voice to fight against the imposed femininity.

**KEY WORDS:** Gender, femininity, construction, essentialism, voice.

### Challenging Essentialism: Women's Voice in *Alias Grace*

With her statement "one is not born woman, rather becomes one" (295), Beauvoir stirred and stimulated the thoughts of feminists, gender critics and sociologists and laid the foundation of much of the work in the field of gender studies of 1970's. She was the first to directly talk of the 'becoming' of women by the conditioning and influence of society and culture. De Beauvoir constructed an epic account of gender division throughout, examining "biological, psychological, historical and cultural explanations for the reduction of women to a

second and lesser sex" (Waugh 320). Beauvoir considered the arguments of biologists, Freudian psychoanalysts and Marxists in her account of the construction of women as other, stating that woman is reduced "to a matter of physiology" by "biological science", "to matter of unconscious drives" by "psychoanalysis" and "to a matter of economics" by "Marxism" a subordination which is in fact socially and culturally produced (Gamble 29). She highlighted people's perception of woman's existence and identity to be located in her body that in turn enslaves and imprisons her in her sex role as 'womb' and 'an ovary'. Hence for man, woman is her

body, "for him she is sex -absolute sex, no less, she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" (16). The biological differences between the sexes doom woman to be the other of man, his vassal and his subordinate, "Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" (Beauvoir 15)

The work of De Beauvoir is based on the philosophy of existentialism which does not believe in essentialism or the existence of a pre-ordained 'human nature'. According to her there is no such thing as 'feminine nature' owing to which women can be essentially believed as historically and culturally inferior and subordinate to men. In *The Second Sex* she discloses an important truth of women's oppression in history. She emphasizes that the problem lies in the age old belief that, "He is the subject, he is the absolute-she is the other" (16). Negating essentialism Beauvoir argues that the reason for the oppression and inferior status of women cannot be attributed to biology, psychology or economy, rather it is "civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (296). She argues against the comparison between man and woman based on sexual differences stating that, "It is in her becoming that she should be compared with man" (66). Like Beauvoir, Betty Friedan also maintains that culture and society have constructed and conditioned the psyche of women to such an extent that they prefer dying in comparison to losing their femininity. Millet too mentions that society and culture under male supremacy force women to internalize their oppression and subordination as something natural. Millet disapproves that gender roles can be decided on account of biological differences since, "Male supremacy, like other political creeds does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of value system which is not biological" (27). Millet argues that "patriarchy always exaggerated biological differences between the sexes to make certain of men's domination, or masculine roles, and women's subordination or feminine roles through the process of socialization" (Tong 96).

The dawn of postmodernism influenced and reformed the approach of gender critics by emphasizing on the differences that existed amongst women and amongst men. Postmodern theorists denying the concept of traditional essentialist practices that identified the common condition of 'being a man or woman'; established the notion of identities to be regularly in the process of formation and hence they are fragmented. The dissolution of identity as something stable and fixed shifted the focus of gender critics from construction of femininity to construction of gender broadening the perspective from objective to subjective study. Under the influence of postmodernism gender identity emerged as a primary domain of cultural studies in the 1990's. It was established that the identity of a person is constructed through socialization using culturally shared materials and it is not fixed rather represents multiple masculinities and femininities which are performed not only by different men and women in the same circumstances but by same men and women under different circumstances. Theorists like Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, also discarded anything known as men's or women's nature, undermining essentialism that restricts men and women to the stereotypes of gender.

The novel *Alias Grace* is based on the real story of a woman named Grace Marks who was convicted of murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his house keeper Nancy Montgomery. She was found guilty of the murder, along with her co-servant James McDermott. When the crime was tried in court, Grace's punishment was mitigated to life imprisonment because of, "the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness" (AG 538), whereas McDermott was hanged to death. After completing almost thirty years of her life imprisonment in Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston, she was finally granted pardon in 1872. After that she went to New York State and was never heard of again. The truth of her involvement in the murder and her insanity was never revealed and it always remained a mystery.

The novel challenges the existence of essential or natural feminine and masculine traits and proves them to be social constructs acquired through performances. Atwood negates the idea of biologically ordained gender through both male and

female characters in the novel. Her characters transcend the boundaries and limitations of gender which are imposed on them by social and cultural expectations and patriarchal ideologies. She undermines essentialism by the performances of her characters where both the masculinity and the femininity can be appropriated by the person of either sex. The traits which are said to exclusively belong to men are exhibited by women and women specific traits are performed by men. This reflects Atwood's notion of gender identities, like those of gender theorists, as fluid and unstable. She reflects that the identity of both man and woman is constructed through socialization using culturally shared material.

Women characters in the novel submit passively to the essential stereotypes endowed by patriarchal society and those who deviate are treated as abnormal and unfeminine or unwomanly. "The woman who pursued active goals was by definition ill- adapted to her real role and probably infantile" (Greer 107). In order to justify their passivity and lack of intellect, Victorian society imposed certain diseases and disorders of mind and psyche on women. "Diseases such as hysteria, nerves and nymphomania began to have names and identifications brought on by the further need to typecast women who couldn't be typically forced into 'normal' gender mould"(Clark). According to Germaine Greer, earlier it was believed by, "most skeptical anatomists, while deploring the arts which quacks and witches used to allay 'hysterics' that the "womb was charged with blood and stale seed from whence arise foul and ill conditioned damp". It was believed by people, that mostly "unmarried women and widows suffered" from hysterics, and that "a good husband could fix it". Greer further argues that similar symptoms can be allocated to other "hypochondriacal syndromes that are put down to hysteria these days; epilepsy, asthma, breathlessness, etc". Thus women "were assumed to be by nature subject to the tyranny of the insatiate womb", which was seen as a, "part of every illness of the female sex", and to suffer, "symptoms from which men only suffered if they indulged in excessive self-abuse"(55).

Simone de Beauvoir too states that according to, gynecologists, "nine-tenth of their patients

(suffering from hysteria) is imaginary invalids; i.e. either their illness had no psychological reality at all or the organic disorder is itself brought on by a psychic state: it is psychosomatic". She finally claims about hysteria as the outcome of the "anxiety of being a woman that devastates the feminine body."(356). Grace Marks is shown to be suffering from hysteria, amnesia, somnambulism and double personality disorder, easily slipping , "with supreme ease from one role into another and people are left wondering if she was "sham" as a lunatic, "an accomplished actress", "a most practiced liar", "siren" devoid of moral scruples( Vevaina92). Her psychic and mental imbalance is marked as hysteria, amnesia and somnambulism by doctors. Thus it becomes inevitable that if "Grace can't be pushed into a construct by male enforced supplication through marriage, she will be pushed into the polar opposite categorization of where her mental capacity will be brought to question and body will be male free for all"(Clark). Atwood shows that along with Grace, other women patients in lunatic asylum said to be mad, were feigning madness for one reason or the other, which proves that hysteria is no more a biological malfunctioning of uterus rather a social construct. She shows:

A good portion of women in the asylum were no madder than the Queen of England. Many were sane enough when sober as their madness came out of a bottle... one of them was in there to get away from her husband, who beat her black and blue, he was the mad one but nobody would like him up.; and another said she went mad in the autumns as she had no house and it was warm in the asylum.... In the spring she would become sane again because it was good weather. (AG 34)

Thus we see that hysteria which was seen to be the outcome of women's anatomical build up affecting unmarried women and widows is proved to be a social construct, a psychological disorder which resulted due to oppression and exploitation of women under patriarchy due to their inability to meet the socially constructed ideals of femininity. Atwood's presentation of Grace's hysteria, "suggests that the disease has more to do with women's' social role and the unequal relations of power

associated with these roles than with innate gendered or racial etiology”(Goldman 6). By questioning Grace’s mental state the narrative “consequently plays with the gendered construction of a concept that tends to reinforce the exclusion of the discourses of the oppressed, especially women, from the social spheres of life” which leads to the “portrayals of the stereotypical madwoman which helped to reinforce several myths of femininity, through the disruptive voice of a historical outcaste, Grace Marks” (Silveira 303).

While Grace’s mother, her friend Mary, housekeeper Nancy and Mrs. Humphrey are not able to resist the domination of patriarchal society and are doomed to death, Grace tries to resist and protest the sexist oppression of men and her discursively constructed gender identity by feigning amnesia, and madness. She exploits the guise of her madness to avenge the patriarchal society and to reconstruct a space for herself which is free from the confines and refrains of patriarchal ideology. Being fully aware of the repercussions of her open revolt owing to her gender and class, she knows that it is only through the veneer of madness that she can give voice to her suppressed and passive existence.

The Governor’s wife, her daughter Lydia Mrs. Quennell and Reverend Verringer, a Methodist minister, believe Grace to be innocent in line with the common essentialist notion of the society where all sorts of aggressive and criminal behaviour are exclusively attributed to the domain of men and any woman exhibiting such violent traits is presumably looked upon as an aberration. "They [female criminals] are seen as twice, or doubly deviant – as rare, abnormal female offenders for breaking social rules and as ‘unfeminine and unnatural’ women who have broken out of their conventional roles" (Carlen and Worrall 22). Women are believed to be fragile and incapable of committing such brutal crimes, unless assisted by some male culprit or under the influence of some mental anomaly. As put in Grace’s words, “They don’t care if I killed anyone, if I could have cut dozens of throats; it’s only what they admire in a soldier.”(AG 30). Therefore Verringer appoints an American Dr. Simon Jordon, to study Grace’s case, by probing it scientifically and establishing that the murder was committed by her

under the influence of some mental disorder. Verringer describes Grace’s sickness as, “It may be that much of what we are accustomed to describe as evil, and evil freely chosen is instead an illness due to some lesion of nervous system, and that Devil himself is the malformation of the cerebrum.”(AG 91-92). Grace too being aware of social perception of women as helpless and fragile victims fabricates her madness with the hope of being liberated from prison some day. Having learnt from her lawyer Kenneth McKenzie- all the tactics of manipulating the truth cunningly of presenting herself, deplorable, fragile, illiterate and victim of McDermott’s plot, she “transgresses the borders of confinement imposed by the ideologies of power and directs the processes of production of meanings” by taking “the narrative of her story into her own hands”(Silveira 304). Dr. Simon’s treatment process involves the retelling of Grace’s past life events, which would help unraveling the hidden knot of truth or fabrication “to reestablish the chain of thought...which was broken perhaps by the shock of the violent events in which she was involved”(AG 97). Grace in narrating her past life events reconstructs her own identity that had kept her long captivated and confined to her femininity. She undermines Dr. Simons efforts and fights back against patriarchal ideologies by manipulating the truth and information needed by him using it, “as a weapon against Dr. Jordon”(Clark). Grace maneuvers her appearance and manners, in order to appear in accord with her fabricated identity of lower class servant and amnesia patient where she claims to have lost the memory of those events which are linked with murder. Not only she fools everyone including Dr. Simon by performing the role of an innocent wrongly accused victim, but also traps him into the snare of constructed and cooked truth. She offers the story which is expected by men from the woman of a lower class: “Here is the story required by a patriarchal world in which women are sweet and passionless, fainting at the least sign of something offensive to their innocence and in which servants “know their place”, are diligent, silent and capable but not overtly intelligent”(Brettschneider). Grace, being aware of Dr. Simon’s strategy of tracing the truth of her identity by investigating the narrative of her past, and her dream sequences,

manipulates her narrative by providing fabricated truth and distorted versions of her dream. This she does not only to divert him from reaching any coherent conclusion of her feigned madness, but also to avenge and punish him for his lustful and amorous perception of her body. She musters all her potential to use and exercise the power of language over the scientific discourses of Dr. Simon, by retelling the story of her past life, revisiting all those incidents which were responsible and influential in the construction of her femininity. By constructing the story in her words, she learns, "how to perform the Male Narrative Paradigm, bringing reader to a peak of desire for the "revelation scene" the "epiphany", or showing forth, in which Mary Whitney apparently justifies Atwood's title as the supposed "other" who has learned to speak in to alias of "Grace"(Ingersoll).

In giving voice to her silent self, and attempting to reconstruct and redefine her identity, she holds and exercises power over language, which has long been the monopoly of men only. By becoming assertive speaker she not only challenges patriarchal ideologies which has long imprisoned women to the gendered essentialism, but also deconstructs and destabilizes the notion of identity as fixed, coherent and stable. Through her narrative she reveals, "the "truth" which underpins the truth of identity as constructed through performativity in discourse(Ingersoll). By doing so she fulfills Helene Cixous's concept of 'écriture feminine' in reconstructing a space for herself in language and society by assertively appropriating her voice and narrating her story. Cixous suggests that women can challenge, "Historical and political constructions" and subvert the "dominant linguistic order" of patriarchal society by fully inhabiting their bodies" and speaking from them(Davies 59). As bodies are the sites which are inscribed with men's discourses of oppression and exploitation and speaking in her own voice will liberate women from the clutches of patriarchal ideologies. Cixous urges woman to "break out of the snare of silence"(Medusa 251) and to speak of their exploitation and oppression. According to her it is only through "speech" that woman can refuse to be confined, "into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem" (Medusa 251). According to Cixous, "the speaking woman is

entirely her voice; she physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body" (qtd. in Moi 112). Thus women can liberate themselves from the gendered essentialism constructed by the patriarchal norms and patterns of society by expressing themselves in their voice. Mary Daly believes that like other institutions of society, in language too, women are mute and have no space to express them. Like other patriarchal institutions, language too became the tool of male hegemony. According to her, "there can be no sex- neutral subject or language, and if women are to have language, it will be women's language"(Hoagland & Frye, Interpretation 10).

Thus Grace challenges the essentialism embedded in gender stereotypes through her narrative of her story. She surpasses and transcends the passive, submissive, silent feminine identity and plays dexterously with the perception of Dr. Simon's idea of women. It is through her discussion and dialogic exchange of thoughts that she reconstructs her identity. Grace despite knowing the right answers of Dr. Simon's queries never gave right answers, "but I'll not oblige" and "goes back to her stupid look "(AG 45) which she has "practiced"(AG 43). Being well aware of his amorous glances towards her she feels, "as if he is drawing me; or not drawing me , drawing on me- on my skin- not with the pencil he is using, but with an old fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end. As if hundreds of butterflies have settled all over my face and are softly opening and closing their wings"(AG 79). Grace perceives Dr. Jordon's desire to cast her in the expected mould of femininity, visualizing her as an object of sexual use. Being aware of his hidden sexual desire, she assertively narrates her life history in a way that provides the fodder to his patriarchal ideologies and expectations. She takes the position of active speaker who having become fully saturated with the oppression and exploitation of patriarchal society feels like, "a peach" which has become "too ripe and splitting open of its own accord" (AG 79). She leaves Jordon helpless and fragile, "drawing his energy out of him- using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story"(AG 338). He is left bewildered, wondering, "Is it a real case of amnesia, of the somnambulistic type, or is he the victim of a cunning imposture"(AG

374). He expects, "certainty" in Grace's narrative, which is what, "she is withholding from him"(AG 375). Grace is viewed by him as "calm as Madonna" who exerts her, "passive stubborn strength against him...her strongest prison is of her own construction"(AG 421) which he finds difficult to break. She attempts, "to make" her story, "as interesting as" she can, and "rich in incident" (AG 286).

At last when all his efforts fail in knowing the truth of her madness, her case is handed over to Jeremiah, the peddler, performing as Dr. DuPont, who owing to his excellent performance passes off easily as a specialist in Neuro- hypnosis. It is through DuPont's hypnotism that Grace exploits her condition in trance, gives voice to her long oppressed, muffled and suppressed voice openly. She seemingly pretends to be suffering from double consciousness or de-doubling and appropriates her voice giving the impression of being uttered from the mouth of Mary Whitney. Speaking in Mary's voice she verbally attacks all those men who treated her and other women no better than sexual objects. She attacks Dr.Jordon publically and avenges his perception of her as sexual commodity. "I know when what you are thinking when you sit in that stuffy little sewing room with me". She speaks of her awareness of his intentions, that like other men, he too wanted to kiss her and touch her. She tells them, "I had him (McDermott) on a string and Mr. Kinnear as well. I had the two of them dancing to my tune"(AG 465)! Grace proves through her guise of double personality disorder that, "women are not docile innocent fools. They all play the same game to kowtow to the men; it's just a matter of not getting caught that separates Grace" from other women in novel (Clark). She not only exposes Dr.Simon's lust for her body but also his sexual intentions for Lydia. Thus using the disguise of Mary's voice she challenges the essentialism and constructs an identity which is purged of all the accusations of being a murderess, which otherwise was not possible.

Thus it is explored in the novel that gender identities and hence essentialism imposed on women is socio-cultural construction. The essentialism associated with women owing to their biological differences with men is proved to be the outcome of society

imparted through family, religion and other institutions. Grace Marks is able to fight against patriarchal ideologies by appropriating her own voice and narrating her story. She undermines the essentialism and avenges the wrong done to her by giving voice to her swollen silence and by criticizing and attacking those who were responsible for her and other women's exploitation. She reconstructs her new identity by disrupting the gender order affirming that gender is not confined to sexed bodies. In order to liberate herself she exploits people's perception and traditional beliefs in her own favour and defeats them by weaving and concocting her narrative as per patriarchal society's expectations. By manipulating her de-doubling she safely avenges the wrong done to her.

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