

Societal Decay and Violence against Women. A Study of Life Before Man by Margaret Atwood

Maninder Kaur^{1*} and Dr. Disha Khanna²

¹Research Scholar, GNA University, Phagwara

²Deputy Dean, Faculty of Liberal Arts, GNA University, Phagwara

*Email: - maninderkaur256@gmail.com

Abstract

We women are never and nowhere allowed any privilege, authority, happiness or chattels, or stature at all: this makes a delectable formula for self annihilation. The ample differences in the social norms, customs and traditions among and between different cultures have been so excruciatingly beneficial to feminist variances that it becomes very complex to uphold that all women are equally culturally deprived. In demanding for women the same rights as those available to men, the liberalists do not recognize women as equivalent to men, although this perky grievance has often been voiced against it. The topic of gender discrimination has been the favourite among the women writers and through their writings they have been raising their voices against these gender based inequalities. Margaret Atwood's stand on victimization is so meticulously discussed through its elucidation in her fiction that she is impregnable beyond limits in stating her stance on the respectable place for women in society. The present paper is based on Atwood's exploration of urban societal decay in Life Before Man. It is relevant because the anxiety and extremely apprehensive urban existence has very often resulted in the victimization of women. It deals with societal and urban decay in Toronto and its effects on women.

Keywords. *Gender discrimination, Resistance, Urban decay, Victimization,*

The 'Civilized Society', we boast of, provide ample rights and may be a few of the privileges to women, but, only those rights and privileges which male patriarchy deems fit to be accredited to the women. But still it cannot be denied that whatever little or less than little the women are and have been offered in the past, across the varied cultural paradigms, they have been the underprivileged. How powerful the cultural constructs work in the different societies, primitive or developed, the plight of the women has seldom changed. A deeper delving into the sea of cultures can make you see what a woman gets and what the society imparts to her.

We cannot deny the truth that we women

are never and nowhere allowed any privilege, authority, happiness or chattels, or stature at all: this makes a delectable formula for self annihilation. At the same time we also cannot ignore the fact that not all the women across various cultures are underprivileged and the sufferers. The ample differences in the social norms, customs and traditions among and between different cultures have been so excruciatingly beneficial to feminist variances that it becomes very complex to uphold that all women are equally culturally deprived. In demanding for women the same rights as those available to men, the liberalists do not recognize women as equivalent to men, although this perky grievance has often been voiced against it. This is

followed by another flippant accusation that women are the same as each other. Although liberal feminism does not deny these differences and presume that whatever and howsoever the differences may be, they do not justify the denial of their rights as human beings, or confining their rights as social and legal subjects.

The topic of gender discrimination has been the favourite with the women writers and through their writings they have been raising their voices against these gender based inequalities. Margaret Atwood (1996), an institution in herself, belongs to that lineage of the Canadian writers who write about women and are highly critical of the role models assigned to women in a patriarchal set up. For her, the society must accept the woman with all her follies and foibles and the society must let her live in her femaleness, her space. She needs to be recognized as a normal human being with all imperfections. The profundity of Atwood's presentation of the female predicament through her novels is astonishing. Her protagonists recognize the victimization present and they decide to move away and reject that victimization by realizing their femaleness and the desire to take control of their lives. Atwood's stand on victimization is so meticulously discussed through its elucidation in her fiction that she is impregnable beyond limits in stating her stance on the respectable place for women in society.

Margaret Atwood has been popularly known for what we can describe as Fiction of protest. Her works clearly exhibit feminist message although she has always denied to be labelled as one. Despite being categorized as the fiction of protest, it hardly minimises the mass appeal and rarely diminishes the imaginative value. There is no denying the fact that the women across the various cultures are oppressed

and marginalised with very little options of survival for them.

The present paper based on Atwood's exploration of urban societal decay in *Life Before Man*. It is relevant because the anxiety and extremely apprehensive urban existence has very often resulted in the victimization of women. It deals with societal and urban decay in Toronto and its effects on women. In every society, women are subjected to roles that they find deplorably objectionable. Elizabeth and Lesje in *Life Before Man*, survive by concentrating on raising her children and by taking refuge in her career as an escape from the world respectively. The society exposed in the novel is exemplary of how the societal decay compels women to be the victims.

Atwood's initial works preceding *Life Before Man* had some tangential references to the deterioration of the social order and breaking down of the norms that in a way lead to violence against women, but those works never had a direct focus upon these issues. But if we have a deeper look at her works and the overall writings of Atwood, we find these subject matters as something crucially indispensable. Violence against women and the societal deterioration in its broadest sense are the major issues in this thematic study since both the themes overlap in their scope. Atwood presents the study of that impact of the psychological stress from urban living which directly augments and stimulates violence against women. The psychological frustration of the male patriarchal order forces them to hurl violence and abuse on women and women are left defenceless against this oppression.

A chapter titled "Lesje" in *Life Before Man* begins with: "Organisms adapt to their environments. Of necessity, most of the time. They also adapt to their own needs, often with a

certain whimsy, you could almost say perversity" (LBM 148). The protagonist in the novel, Elizabeth, is also shown as one of the organisms. The novel opens with an "Elizabeth" chapter, in which Elizabeth thinks: "I don't know how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail." (LBM 13). In the second "Elizabeth" chapter, the narrator says: "She doesn't want anything else she will have to take care of" (LBM 27). In the third "Elizabeth" chapter, the narrator describes Elizabeth as being unnaturally distant from her children: "Her remoteness from them, the distance she has to travel even to hear what they're saying. She wants to be able to touch them, hold them, but she can't" (LBM 42). Her quest for survival has left her with no option but to adapt according to the circumstances. In doing so what she has added to in her life is simple misery. The choice of words, the diction, the expressions and the way the narrative flows through the small chapters best describe the conditioning and mind of Elizabeth. Throughout the work, this is how the narrative flows. Every chapter which is titled Elizabeth depicts a sad, melancholic and miserable Elizabeth. In part two, Elizabeth asks: "What is it they peddle for the mentally disabled?" (LBM 62). In part three, Elizabeth notes how her Auntie Muriel takes in "every disreputable detail of her own appearance" (LBM 125). In part four, Elizabeth's body's position is described tersely as: "Straitjacket" (LBM 216). In part five: "She wishes to appear tranquil, serene, like her favourite stone Buddha in the Oriental collection." (LBM 273).

The deliberate and invariable building of this kind of narrative pattern is common in almost all the works of Atwood. Resultantly, Elizabeth as presented in the fiction is the best

example of round characters. Elizabeth can very easily be acknowledged as a genuine character with more than authentic problems. Elizabeth is established as someone who is trying to survive by adapting to her environment. Her behavioural patterns may attempt to label her as obstinate and perverse but the question that comes to mind is if she has any choice? Choice to act, to think... all she is left with is to adapt and adjust. When Elizabeth thinks that she does not know how to live, that she does not want to take care of anything, and that she is distant from her children, she is exploring her environment and finding that there is no place in it for her.

Elizabeth, like any other woman who is caught up in the web of patriarchal orders and in a typically stereotype role, is anticipated to be a bringer of love, affection and care to those around her. Surviving a loveless, crashing and crumbling marriage Elizabeth fails to cope up with her own expectations. Chris, her lover kills himself and Nate, her lawyer husband has taken up the profession of a toymaker. Her inner conflicts and inability to cope up with the stress of shouldering the responsibilities any further are too burdensome for her. Because of her desire to discard any kind of responsibility, she thinks she is disallowing herself from the basic responsibilities for her children. Nancy, her daughter prepares a costume, a Halloween costume and when she wears it: "You didn't scream.' Nancy says reproachfully, and Elizabeth realizes she's forgotten this. An error, a failure" (LBM 44). Not screaming or not giving a startling expression to the kids for Elizabeth is something of a failure, an error. Her remorse and feeling of guilt signifies her uncertainties regarding her duties as a mother. This feeling of remorse and regret gets a further place in the novel when Elizabeth dreams of having lost her

children. "Elizabeth is having a bad dream. The children are lost. They are only babies, both of them, and through carelessness, a moment of inattention, she's misplaced them. Or they've been stolen. Their cribs are empty, she's hurrying through unfamiliar streets looking for them." (LBM 200). Elizabeth's uncertainties regarding her capacity as that of a mother clearly indicate her intrinsic stress she has on her mind regarding the recent shock of Chris. Elizabeth somewhere knows that her dream has past associations: "The dream is an old one, an old familiar. She began having it after Nancy was born." (LBM 200). Her belief is deep rooted in regards to her being incapable of shouldering responsibilities. A deep study down the childhood of Elizabeth reveals and somewhat justifies her present frame of mind. A victim of disturbed childhood, and a bullying father, Elizabeth called him "a turd" to his face in front of his friends (LBM 157). Her father deserved this derogation in being addressed in an extreme obnoxious manner. Elizabeth thinks to herself: "He tickled her under the armpits. The next morning he was gone. It was after this that space became discontinuous." (LBM 157).

Sheila Rowbotham (1974), celebrated historian in her book, *Women, Resistance, and Revolution: a history of women and revolution in the modern world*, throws a widened theoretical perspective regarding the societal deterioration and urban decay. From a completely Marxist point of view, she remarks: "Increasingly, from the mid-nineteenth century the family becomes the last refuge of all those human qualities unable to survive in the outside world of capitalism" (70). Sheila Rowbotham considers the capitalism as a root of deterioration and societal decay, which, in turn, resulted in loosening the strength of the institution of the family.

Elizabeth's family, marital and personal; all her troubles can be attributed to the societal deterioration and decay, which Rowbotham is referring to. Elizabeth's parents, exceedingly alcoholic who indulge in physical violence and verbal abuse, are an archetype of socially deteriorated value system where indulging in sexual games with one's own daughter is acceptable. This is the lowest possible point of the decay. Economic impecunious existence of her parents and their struggle to find a way through their problems results in the bad childhood of Elizabeth.

It was Auntie Muriel and Uncle Teddy who adopted Elizabeth. Aunt Muriel discloses this to Elizabeth how her mother was "glad of the chance to get rid of the responsibility. Of course we paid her something." (LBM 231). The whole narrative in this part of the novel takes an aggressive tone: "Elizabeth can't remember how she responded to the news that her real mother had sold her to Auntie Muriel. She thinks she tried to shut the piano on Auntie Muriel's hand; she's forgotten whether or not she succeeded. It was the last time she ever let herself be goaded that far." (LBM 231). Elizabeth's childhood draws clear parallels with the status of women in the previous century and at the same time refers to the present and unchanged predicament of the women in poor urban black communities. Elizabeth is inhibited by the societal decay that has delimited her right from hers childhood. Undoubtedly she was adopted by Auntie Muriel and had all the chances in the world to resurrect her and change her life. Auntie Muriel was not a nice person, and although Elizabeth hated her, "She hated me. She wouldn't see me, she used to call me on the phone when she was drunk and say..... But I did my duty. It was what Father would have wanted. Your mother was always the favorite." (LBM 295). Elizabeth hated

her for doing "harmful, even devastating things". (LBM 314)

Despite all this the fear of shouldering up the responsibilities always haunted Elizabeth. The images of disturbed childhood, deteriorating parentage forces She has seen how her parents failed to give her a better deserved childhood and this petrifies her all the more if she might not be following the same trail. Survival is something very important to all the protagonists of Atwood. Elizabeth also survives the pangs of her painful and excruciating childhood, she partially overcomes the obstacles that she had faced as a child living in a decayed urban area. She has successfully come out of the matriarchal autonomy of Auntie Muriel. The death of her sister was one of the major reasons in her quest and pursuit to come out of the clutches of painful despair and survive. Her desire to give a better childhood to her kids is the main force behind her focussed energy. Elizabeth emerges victorious by surviving in contrast to her parents and sister who succumb before the deteriorating social values and norms.

Unlike Elizabeth, Lesje presents a different attitude towards survival. She adapts herself accordingly and finds a safe haven in Royal Ontario Museum. Taking into consideration her pregnancy, Lesje reflects: "A pregnant palaeontologist is surely a contradiction in terms" (LBM 322). Even as a university student, Lesje is unable to keep up the level of personal interface, her peers expected of her. She reluctantly joins a women's group after the long persuasion of her friends but only to find her horrified since it was forcing her to add another aspect to her personality. First, "The anger and desperation of others have always been her weak points. She's an appeaser and she knows it." (LBM 53), and second, She knew she couldn't,

she didn't know the language" (LBM 68), the communication barrier was always her weak point. Despite being in the company of a feminist and politically active roommate, she found it convenient to move out of the hostels of the University of Toronto rather than engage in "meaningful dialogue while eating her cornflakes or drying her hair" (LBM 68). Atwood narrates this account in the opening "Lesje" chapter. Lesje is portrayed as a character who loves escaping into safe havens. It establishes Lesje as a character who acclimatizes her existence in escaping, by disappearing. Her life as a palaeontologist easily consents to her escaping and hiding from society by disappearing into a world of her job. The museum becomes her favourite place, far from the world of miseries, offering her the shelter where she could work in without having the risk of running into something offensive. How marvellously Atwood paints her disagreement and her desire to escape in the world of palaeontology because Lesje knows she can't have any disagreement with a fossil. Seldom does she have to enter in any of the situations involving personal variances. She finds a comfort, a solace in her office similar to that of the unnamed narrator in surfacing.

A general revolt with the societal norms and seeking solace in her own professional life, Lesje does mull over the thought of her pregnancy. As compared to her sister Elizabeth, who reflects the future life her kids would be leading, Lesje has no such intentions. She on the contrary reflects:

"She's not used to being a cause, of anything at all. On her office wall the tree of evolution branches like coral towards the ceiling: Fishes, Amphibians, Therapsids, Thecodonts, Archosaurs, Pterosaurs, Birds, Mammals and Man, a mere dot. And herself, another, and within her another. Which will exfoliate in its turn. Or

not.” (LBM 322).

Lesje's family had learnt a way of surviving during the times of World War II. Similar to that was Lesje. She regulated her life in the urban society of Toronto. Lesje takes a large step away from safety when she conceives. She shift her stance from stability toward inconsistency, which is very contrasting to her mother, who "has cultivated serenity" (LBM 207), or Elizabeth, who "wishes to be serene" (LBM 273). Atwood has painted Lesje as an artefact of her background in which she adjusts in a fairly anti-social manner, yet she survives. By surviving, she is able to continue to adapt and to lead a life that to her is rewarding, even if she does perceive having a child as "exfoliating.”

Thus, in *Life Before Man* there seems to be deterioration related to social and economic circumstances. Women are most easily ill-treated and subjected to abuse when they have no choice. Urban and societal decay, economic and political havoc, and intense tribalism add to the fabrication of such circumstances in which women suffer and don't find any respite from mistreatment. A close watch into the andocentric societies in the novel are distressing, but they are not nearly as disconcerting as the vision Atwood presents in her succeeding novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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