

Moral Disorder: Silent Woman Engaging with Life on an Amiable Note

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a versatile Canadian novelist, poet and short story writer, whose works deal with the contemporary issues. Female concerns are of prime concern to Atwood in all forms from traditional to present; how women at different platforms are waging wars within their personal and social ambit and emerges worriers in every situation. The present paper attempts to analyse the growth of a woman called Nell in the story collection called *Moral Disorder* who tries to do justice with every relation, be it her parents, siblings or children or any friendly relation. The story collection attempts to chronicle the life of woman who is in a complicated relation with a married man called Tig. Every story of this collection attempts to present the course of life and the resultant compromises.

Key words

Short story, Nell, Tig, Atwood, *Moral Disorder*, female, the other place, home, ideal and the real.

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Storytelling is a very old human skill that gives us an evolutionary advantage.

- Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (1939) is an internationally acclaimed poet, novelist and short story writer. Atwood is recognized as a major figure in Canadian letters who uses devices as Irony, Symbolism and self-conscious narrators. She explores the relation between humanity and nature, the dismal side of human behaviour and power as in relation to gender and politics. Being a popular novelist, Atwood has helped to define and identify the goals of contemporary Canadian literature and has earned a distinguished reputation among feminist writers for exploring various women issues.

Margaret Atwood is Canada's most important writer- an extremely versatile, imaginative, and in the most peculiar sense, a productive writer who published twelve volumes of poetry, twelve novels, seven short-fiction collections, six volumes of literary criticism, various reviews and numerous critical articles and even a history book, children's book and some comic strips. Her work has been translated into more than thirty languages. She is also the winner of the prestigious Booker prize 2000, for her novel *The Blind Assassin* and has repeatedly been shortlisted for the Nobel prize for literature. Besides being a renowned writer, she is a social critic who reflects on literary, political and social issues in a global framework and Canadian literature and culture in particular.

Although Atwood - by virtue of her virtuosity is definitely not a short story writer like Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, she joins these authors in making up the group of the three leading short story writers of Canadian literature. Atwood has published short fiction for four decades - *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1992), *Wilderness*

Tips (1991), *Good Bones* (1992), *Bottle* (2004), *The Tent* (2006), *Moral Disorder* (2006) and *Stone Mattress* (2014). She has definitely produced some of the modern classics of Canadian short fiction with stories as 'Polarities', 'The Man from Mars', 'Death by Landscape', 'The Age of Lead', 'My Last Duchess' and numerous others.

Her stories often give voice to marginal characters who try to revise their assigned roles. The quality that each story shares is the confessional focus, not necessarily of Atwood's herself but on part of her fictional characters. They are for the most part stories of the self, involving crisis of perception and identity (forced or acquired) either within the individual Psyche or arising between men and women. Such problems of Identity, perception and the clash between utopian representations and bitter realities are recurrent and central themes in Atwood's stories.

The subjects are familiar tropes of the current short story: miseries and confusions of childhood, city people learning life on a subsistence ... (characters) They are not quite predictable, but near to it, though there is a patience, a kindness in the tone which is not common. (Guardian)

Moral Disorder is Atwood's brilliant collection of short stories that captures the saga of a single character, seen as a girl growing up in the 1930's, a young woman named Nell in her 50's and 60's, and today at present, living the life of a single woman, no longer attractive, reflecting and commenting on the changing state of the world. Each story focuses on the ways relationships metamorphose a character's life: a woman's complex affection for a married man, the grief upon the death of parents and the joy of giving birth to children, the realization of being with someone you truly love. Although this collection of short stories comprises of eleven stories but this appears more or less like a novel as the central character Nell provides a unique kind of connectivity to these stories. It is told in fragments, the stories focusing on particular gritty situations of life. It captures every moment from 1930 to the present. Although episodic in nature with disjointed moments, Atwood provides a memorable mosaic of domestic pain and the surface tension of a troubled family. Atwood balances these apparently disjointed, non-linear events, thoughts and memories against life - with its own shape and a possible destiny.

Sharply focused, intensely personal ... *Moral Disorder* is domestic realism at its most convincing. These are poignant stories crammed with richly nostalgic detail, rueful, wise, elegiac. (Joyce Carol Oates)

Moral Disorder is about the moments of the whole life of a woman, full of sacrifices and sacrileges - the life of Nell married to Tig or Gilbert. The first story begins with an elderly married couple, Tig and Nell, having breakfast and discussing some horrendous political murder that took place far away. At the first instance the story strikes a familial chord and one understands that this is the framework for family stories. Her life is like Atwood's books - "a sock

drawer into which a number of disparate things are shoved , a jumble", "she'd been put in a false position, and she hated that. But she had no other word to suggest-no word for herself that would be both truthful and acceptable".(*M.D* . 135) The stories in this collection present Nell as a sole survivor and a fighter with harsh realities of life on one pretext or the other. In 'The Art of Cooking and Serving' Nell who is eleven years old knits a layette for her yet- to- be- born sister- the garment being lopsided while reading a book of household advices that makes her imagine a perfect life ahead, with all the efficacies of a lady of the time. In ' The Other Place' the young Nell is now a graduate , living magnanimously with a 'gold mirror and also the horrible green satin bedspread'.(*M.D.*101) She appears empty and removed from social exchange. Here, Nell's younger, rootless self haunts and challenges the stability of life in the present;

But my dreaming self refuses to be consoled. It continues to wander, aimless, alone. It cannot be convinced of its safety by any evidence drawn from my walking life. I know this because i continue to have the same dream, over and over.(*M.D.*101)

In 'Monopoly' and in 'Moral Disorder' Nell is married, living on a farm and attached to the Earth and various vegetation around. Only Atwood could imagine and write about the plump 'White Horse' called Gladys and the lamb with a such comic tone. At that stage, Nell " still thought life on a farm represented some superior form of authenticity".(*M.D.*172) as simultaneously life makes its way smoothly as Nell is expecting a baby. Thus, another stage in Nell's life, as "Nell told him about the baby, and it was all fine" (*M.D.*184)

Moreover , the collection represents those things that clearly weave around the thought process and memories as Nell thinks on the same lines in 'The Entities'. A woman spends her entire life sacrificing for others be it her husband, parents , siblings or a stranger (turns The house that gives a woman like Nell a sense of completeness, she never hesitates to share it with some one she adores). In case of Nell, she provides shelter to Tig and his family when they need it badly. Nell thinks about the entities in terms of memories and things;

But what else could i do with all that? thinks Nell, wending her way back to her own house. All that anxiety and anger, those dubious good intentions, those tangles lives, that blood' as Atwood writes. "I can tell about it or i can bury it. In the end, we all become stories. Or else we will become entities. Maybe it's the same".(*M.D.*213)

One can easily perceive that the integrity of these stories lies in the struggling yet facile character of Nell , who is consistently struggling with the contrast that life presents- pain, sickness and death and the visions of a perfect life conditioned by family advice, television images and children's stories. Nell as a child is full of ideas about an ideal home with everything in

perfection until such ideal imagination is found impractical and impossible. Nell in every possible way tries to attach herself to a human community of men, women, children and work but finds it worthless and morally disordered. But, she still has a dream for her life, of that 'other place' a place still furnished with gold mirror and " also the green satin bedspread, which has taken on a life of its own and is able to morph into cushions, or sofas, or armchairs, or even once a hammock" (*M.D.*101). With such representations of the female imaginations and the resultant clash between the ideal and the real Atwood provides, "disastrous hubrid and phenomenal spirit with empathy and bemusement".

Moreover, such picturesque narrative of a woman's life bounces along seamlessly ever changing perspective from first to third persons view and makes these stories irresistible. "Bad News" presents a woman and her husband in their autumn years. Nell muses that tenses define their lives. "Past tense, back then; future tense, not yet... smaller than anyone else's window".(*M.D.*4) These stories leap from one decade to the next and back , the relationship of the sisters become more complicated and intriguing. Each story is a change of tense and tone into which that presents a deep understanding of Nell, her strength and weaknesses. The character of Nell gathers sympathy that is truly rare, as her life progresses. Although there is no chronological continuity to the arrangement of the stories, one is left with an impression of putting together a puzzle resulting in a sense of accomplishment. The story that ends the collection," The Boys at the Lab" returns us to Atwoods unnamed narrator, now a middle aged woman caring for her elderly parents-essentially mother that evokes a familiarity with Atwood's other fiction, where similar portraits of strong yet elusive maternal figures, including ghostly mother of *Surfacing*. Here, the mother is bedridden, near blind and near deaf;

Talking into her ear is like talking into the end of a long narrow tunnel that leads through darkness to a place i can't really imagine. What does she do in there all day? All day, and all night. What does she think about? Is she bored, is she sad, what's really going on? (*M.D.*238)

When mother's memory at last fades, the narrator evokes out of her own imagination, an ending to the final story she has told her mother. Thus, the daughter emerges as a strong motherly figure who assumes the role of mother for her own mother.

Thus, *Moral Disorder* by way of these intermittent stories brings something new to the dramatization of growing up of a female into such relations as were not expected of a woman. In terms of Nell's spatialization of experience- be it a farm life or her dealings with her relatives, this collection offers a kaleidoscopic reflection of female coming of her age. With a seemingly casual but carefully managed haphazardness, the narrative moves backwards and forward over the life of Nell who refuses any straight forward chronology. With such sensitivity to the literary

aspect of Atwood, *Moral Disorder* presents her 'talking back' both within and outside her own literary oeuvre. At least she understands, "I'll have to be all by myself, forever. I've missed the life that was supposed to be mine ."as she is fully aware .

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