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Trauma, Memory and Identity Formation in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

Dr Mahmuda Nongjai
Assistant Professor, Department of English
G.P. Women's College
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur

Abstract

This paper studies Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) as a story of psychological growth and identity formation of the woman-as-artist or artist-as-woman within a society that compels women to navigate a tension between their creative freedom and traditional ideals of femininity. The novel delves into the conflict between the individual, the artist, and a social milieu that offers inadequate space and limited possibilities which curbs the formation of an authentic self. Through the protagonist's embodied experiences, *Cat's Eye* investigates the intricate interplay of identity, memory, and artistic expression. Central to the novel are childhood memories, which inform the narrative so as to shed light on the various sources of the narrator's psychological turmoil and her evolving understanding of selfhood. Ultimately, the paper argues that Elaine's art serves as a vital means for confronting her past, processing trauma, and reclaiming her subjectivity, showcasing the complex relationship between identity, memory, and creative expression.

Keywords: psychological growth, identity, trauma, memory, artistic expression, selfhood

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988), widely regarded as her most autobiographical novel, explores the theme of the psychological growth and identity formation of the woman-as-artist or artist-as-woman within a society that compels women to navigate a tension between their creative freedom and traditional ideals of

femininity. The novel delves into the conflict between the individual, the artist, and a social milieu that offers inadequate space and limited possibilities which curbs the formation of an authentic self. Through the protagonist's embodied experiences, *Cat's Eye* investigates the intricate interplay of identity, memory, and artistic expression. Central to the novel are childhood memories, which inform the narrative so as to shed light on the various sources of the narrator's psychological turmoil and her evolving understanding of selfhood.

Cat's Eye recounts the fictional autobiography Elaine Risley, a successful middle-aged artist who returns to Toronto, after many years for a Retrospective Exhibition of her paintings at a small feminist gallery called Sub-Versions. This Retrospective Show serves as central metaphor for the novel, parallelling Elaine's psychological journey as she reflects on her life from a childhood spent in the Canadian bush, through her school years, to her current status as an established painter. As Karen F. Stein observes, "Each section of the story, named after one of Elaine's paintings, moves between the present and the past. Her paintings are sophisticated, multifaceted, and often parodic responses to masterpieces of the Anglo-European aesthetic canon and to Elaine's experiences growing up in post – World War II Toronto" (Stein 87). Elaine's association with Sub-Versions and her contribution to the feminist art show position her as "a socio-cultural agitator who seeks to change oppressive or stagnant language and laws" (Sharpe 175) using her art as a means of critique and transformation.

From the very outset of her literary career, Margaret Atwood has consistently underscored the inseparability of the public and private spheres in the formation of identity. For Atwood, identity is not an isolated, internal construct but one that is continually formed and reformed through an individual's interaction with the surrounding social structures. The public sphere inevitably permeates personal experience, exerting a persistent influence on the individual's sense of self. This influence often manifests as an intrusion both spatial and psychological which engenders feelings of disorientation, vulnerability, and instability particularly during the particularly during the crucial phases of formative processes of selfhood. Atwood identifies this spatial and psychological

intrusion as especially pronounced in the lives of women, whose identities are forged within patriarchal systems that enforce restrictive gender roles. In such contexts, women are subjected to heightened surveillance and social regulation, rendering them more vulnerable and susceptible to external pressures to conform especially susceptible to the pressures of conforming to societal expectations. Accordingly, Atwood's works repeatedly explore and interrogates the ways in which patriarchal ideology shapes, constrains, and often distorts women's subjectivity. *Cat's Eye* powerfully illustrates these dynamics, portraying a society deeply embedded with traditional norms and cultural expectations conventional norms and cultural expectations that reinforce gendered conformity.

A central concern in *Cat's Eye* is the internalization of culturally constructed norms and representations of femininity, which play a formative role in shaping female identity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative, Elaine's experience demonstrates how femininity is not an innate essence but a set of repeated acts enforced by social expectation. To be accepted within the rigid boundaries of normative girlhood, Elaine is compelled to adopt sanctioned behaviours and appearances. Despite her intuitive independence, she is not exempt from the pervasive power of social regulation. The novel foregrounds how female subjectivity is produced through disciplinary mechanisms embedded in everyday life. As Michel Foucault suggests, power does not operate only through formal institutions, but also through diffuse systems of surveillance and self-monitoring. This process is vividly depicted in Elaine's school years, where her peers function as enforcers of gender conformity:

> "I worry about what I've said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time" (*Cat's Eye*, p. 123).

This passage underscores how gender norms are enforced through peer surveillance and internalized self-discipline. Elaine's anxiety and desire to "improve" herself reflect the operation of what Foucault terms the “panopticon”, a model of power in which the subject internalizes external observation and becomes both observer and observed. In this way, Atwood reveals that the performance of femininity is not simply learned, but enforced through a network of subtle, persistent pressures embedded in everyday social interactions.

The lives of many of Atwood’s female protagonists are marked by a persistent ambivalence, generated by the conflict between personal autonomy and the societal demand for compliance with patriarchal expectations. In *Cat’s Eye*, the conflicting forces—social, cultural, and political—create a sense of psychological disorientation in Elaine whose identity formation is continually disrupted by external forces. According to Erik Erikson, identity development involves the incorporation of past experiences into a stable sense of self but Elaine’s journey is complicated by the lingering influence of formative relationships. She begins to forge a more integrated and coherent self only after distancing herself from Cordelia, Grace, and Carol, whose friendship had served as a form of social control. However, as Moya Lloyd argues, identity is always conceived within and against structures of power; it is not simply a matter of inward realization but of negotiating one's position within cultural discourses. Elaine's ongoing entanglement in gendered expectations reflects this dynamic. While she does exhibit moments of agency and self-awareness, she remains susceptible to external influences - most notably her lover, who seeks to mold her according to his own artistic and intellectual ideals. Her attempted suicide, prompted by the imagined voice of Cordelia, reveals the lingering fragmentation of her identity that persists into adulthood, despite her outward achievements. Notwithstanding moments of clarity and resistance, Elaine’s subjectivity remains vulnerable to the residues of past trauma and the enduring impact of gendered social norms. Ultimately, *Cat’s Eye* reveals that identity is continually shaped by the interplay of memory, trauma, and the enduring impact of gendered power structures.

Cat's Eye is deeply invested in the formative experiences of childhood, foregrounding the crucial role early life events play in shaping an individual's identity. The novel places particular emphasis on Elaine Risley's early relationships, especially with the girls from her childhood, who leave lasting psychological imprints on her evolving sense of self. These female figures, more than Elaine's own family, serve as central agents in the construction of her subjectivity, exerting a powerful influence over her emotional and social development. Their enduring impact is later reflected in Elaine's retrospective paintings, where their reappearance signals their embedded presence in her memory and identity. Unlike her parents, it is Elaine's childhood friends and their families who become the most significant forces in her narrative. Their collective effort to "correct" Elaine's behavior to conform to social norms becomes a deeply damaging form of psychological control. The pressure to adhere to conventional standards of girlhood leads Elaine into a state of despair and eroded self-worth, an inner decline that culminates in a traumatic event, marking a pivotal moment of psychological rupture and eventual transformation.

The encroachment upon Elaine's sense of self begins with her relocation to Toronto, where the rigid gender divisions within the school culture initiate her gradual separation from her brother, Stephen. No longer able to participate in the familiar world of boys' games, Elaine is compelled to befriend Carol Campbell, through whom she is introduced to Grace Smeath and Cordelia—figures who come to play a central and often tormenting role in her life. This shift marks Elaine's uneasy entry into the world of normative femininity, a space she initially finds alien and performative: "Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl" (52). In contrast to the imaginative, chaotic, and physically expressive games she shared with Stephen—such as practicing burping, sending coded messages, and competing in playful tests of skill—Elaine's new playtime with Carol and Grace is structured around performances of decorum and obedience. In the game of "school," for instance, Grace assumes the role of teacher, reinforcing ideals of control and order: "Grace is always the teacher, Carol and I the students… We can't pretend to be bad,

because Grace doesn't like disorder" (56). Under their guidance, Elaine engages in stereotypically feminine activities, such as cutting out domestic objects from the Eaton's Catalogue and assembling them in a scrapbook. Though these tasks feel meaningless and constrained, Elaine complies out of a desperate need for belonging: "They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any friends before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please" (126). In her attempt to assimilate into the world of girls, Elaine gradually suppresses her competitive instincts and adopts a more passive demeanor. This transformation is poignantly captured in a moment of self-awareness:

> I begin to want things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing-gown, a purse of my own. Something is unfolding, being revealed to me. I see that there's a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all. I don't have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well, make loud explosive noises, decode messages, die on cue. I don't have to think about whether I've done these things well, as well as a boy. All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the Eaton's Catalogue with embroidery scissors, and say I've done it badly. Partly this is a relief (54).

The divergence between the activities and games played by girls and those of boys, as Sarah Sceats insightfully notes, stems from the pervasive influence of prevailing social and cultural structures. As Sceats astutely observes,

> The interactions between these girls are personal and psychologised, but they also represent a wider social reality. The girls' behavior, specific but typical, is influenced by the expectations of western society. It is significant that neither Elaine nor her brother experiences any such intense manipulation in relationships with boys; boys deal with things differently, Elaine insists. Boys, of course, are subject to quite different cultural pressures. Grace sticking pictures of household commodities from the Eatons catalogues into scrapbooks and precocious Carol, whose mother has 'cold wave' and wears twin sets, are emblematic of idealized female roles

> (domestic and sexual) in the 1950s, roles bound up with commodification and the perception of women as consumed and consumers. Cordelia leads Grace and Carol in a parodical induction, designed to turn Elaine into the docile, feminine, anxious-to-please creature patriarchy arguably requires (Sceats 117).

In *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood critically engages with the themes of conventionalism and the social construction of femininity. As J. Brooks Bouson aptly observes, "With ideological intent, Cat's Eye describes the methods by which femininity is constructed in our culture" (Bouson 166). When Elaine first arrives in Toronto, she is unaware of the gendered expectations embedded within its social fabric and thus unprepared to navigate the normative pressures that soon confront her. Her unfamiliarity is quickly perceived by her peers, who assume the role of cultural intermediaries, initiating her into the codes of socially sanctioned femininity. Through her interactions with these girls—and, by extension, their families—Elaine begins to internalize a sense of deficiency. She comes to believe that her family, and by association she herself, deviates from what is considered "normal." This realization propels her into a process of self-correction that involves conforming to traditional gender roles and cultural norms. The demand for "improvement" thus becomes a euphemism for gendered socialization, highlighting how femininity is not innate but taught, policed, and performed in accordance with societal expectations.

Elaine's perception of herself as not normal is instilled by her friends who have internalized the established norms and values of society. The improvements that are forced upon Elaine by Cordelia, Grace and Carol are the re-enactment of the corrective behavior in accordance with the cultural representations of femininity imbued upon them by their parents as J. Brooks Bauson explains:

> Repeating what has been done to them, Elaine's friends determine to "improve" Elaine; that is, they attempt to coerce her to be a proper little girl and to mimic culturally prescribed feminine behavior. In an unconscious

imitation of their parents' disciplinary behavior and speech, they tell her she is "not measuring up" and "will have to do better"; they torment her for her "own good" because they are her "best friends"; and they insist that they want to help her "improve" (123, 122). Under the surveillance of her friends, Elaine becomes plagued by self-doubt. And as she internalizes the monitoring voices of her friends, she begins the process of self-monitoring. "I worry about what I've said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time" (124-25). In girlhood, as *Cat's Eye* reveals, we find early evidence of the inflexible social control of the female body (Bouson 166).

In concurrence with Bousan's views, Elaine's girlfriends' project of improving her is implicit of the imposition of norms and conventions which are set by society especially for females. This particular project of making Elaine into somebody who conforms to the social codes changes her so much that she starts feeling that nothing of her original self remains and therefore becomes hollow or deficient from within: "*What do you have to say for yourself?* Cordelia used to ask. *Nothing*, I would say. It was a word! I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (43). This suggests that Elaine's sense of an authentic self is gradually eroded through her interactions with friends who embody and enforce culturally constructed ideals of femininity. In conforming to their expectations, she is shaped into a version of herself that reflects their influence rather than her own autonomy. As a result, her individuality is not only compromised but also reshaped to fit the mold prescribed by societal norms ultimately altering the trajectory of her identity formation.

Prior to moving to Toronto and encountering the girls she would come to call her friends, Elaine lived a content and untroubled life. Her early childhood, characterized by freedom and a lack of imposed rules, stands in stark contrast to the rigid social expectations she faces upon relocating to the city. In Toronto, Elaine becomes acutely

aware of the gendered nature of societal regulation - a world in which girls, unlike boys, are subjected to constant scrutiny and limitation. It is here that she first realizes the extent to which female autonomy is constrained under the guise of "improvement." Reflecting on this shift, she recalls, "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (24). These so-called improvements, imposed by her friends Cordelia, Grace, and Carol, manifest as psychological torment, pushing Elaine into a state of emotional dissociation and physical self-harm. In an attempt to reclaim some form of agency amidst the escalating emotional abuse, she begins to injure herself most notably by peeling the skin from her feet. As she explains, "The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to" (120). This act functions as a form of what trauma theorists describe as "self-regulatory behavior," whereby the inflicted pain serves to ground the individual in the present and divert attention from overwhelming emotional distress. Feminist trauma scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman accentuate how traumatic experiences especially those engrained in interpersonal relationships can rupture one's sense of self and prompt coping mechanisms like dissociation and self-injury.

Elaine's fainting episodes further exemplify this dissociation. Intentionally losing consciousness becomes her escape route from the emotional cruelty inflicted by her peers. "There is a way out of places you want to leave, but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you" (182). This description echoes what trauma theorists identify as "temporal disjunction" - a phenomenon in which survivors experience time in fragmented or nonlinear ways as a result of unresolved trauma. Once Cordelia accuses her of fainting deliberately, Elaine evolves her strategy: she learns to dissociate internally without the outward performance of collapse, marking a deeper withdrawal into psychological self-protection.

> At these times I feel blurred, as if there are two of me, one superimposed on the other, but imperfectly. There's an edge of transparency, and beside it a rim of solid flesh that's without feeling, like a scar. I can see what's happening, I can

hear what's being said to me, but I don't have to pay any attention. My eyes are open but I'm not there. I'm off to the side (184).

Although Elaine feels extremely uncomfortable in her relationship with her girlfriends and wants to escape from them sometimes, she does not consider them as enemies who want to hurt her. Rather, she sees them as trying to help her: "With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends" (127). Her trust in her childhood friends shatters as victimization of Elaine at their hands culminates in the scene where she is abandoned in the ravine by her friends as a punishment. Just as Elaine succumbs to the cold and her body becoming weightless, she sees Virgin Mary walking towards her on the air carrying a glass ball in her hand that looks like the cat's eye marble and she is rescued. After this terrible incident, Elaine decides not to have any business with her supposed friends as she comes to know their intention to victimize her and control her life. The next day, when she sees Cordelia, Elaine just turns and walks away from her instead of talking to her. "It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does," as Elaine expresses, "I see that I don't have to do what she says, and, worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. I can do what I like" (207). Cordelia tries to stop her in desperation: "Don't you dare walk away on us," Cordelia says behind me. "You get back here right now!" However, Elaine keeps on going as realization dawns upon her: "It's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them" (207). Grace also tries to persuade her: ""Ten stacks of plates," says Grace. This would once have reduced me. Now I find it silly" (207). This time, Elaine defies their order and does not pay attention to their endeavor to stop her: "I keep walking. I feel daring, light-headed. They are not my best friends or even my friends. Nothing binds me to them. I am free" (207).

Although Elaine decides to sever ties with her childhood friends after the ravine incident, by this point she has already internalized the cultural constructs of femininity

that they had imposed upon her. Despite outwardly rejecting the need to conform to societal expectations of feminine virtue, she carries the influence of these values into adulthood. Although she resisted them in her youth, Elaine eventually allows herself to be shaped by external pressures, particularly those exerted by men. In her adult years, she becomes more passive and compliant, making her susceptible to manipulation.

Elaine's experience of socialization and subjugation becomes evident when she begins studying drawing and embarks on an affair with her teacher, Josef Hrbik. Initially, she perceives him as kind and gentle, believing that he "needs protecting, or even rescuing" (305). However, as their relationship progresses, Josef quickly assumes a position of dominance. He begins to view Elaine as his possession, advising her not to allow other men to touch her in order to keep her exclusively for him. As Stephen Ahern observes, "Josef is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity" (Ahern 12). Josef embodies and enforces patriarchal ideals that treat women as property, asserting that "a woman belongs to a man: if a man finds his woman with another man, he kills both of them and everyone excuses him" (316). He objectifies women, regarding them as "helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated" (318), reinforcing the view of women as passive and subjugated within patriarchal structures.

As Molly Hite notes, Josef's statements that Elaine is an "unfinished woman" who needs to "be finished," and his assertion that she is artistically "nothing... We will see what we can make of you" (291, 290), suggest that, as long as she remains sexually female, she is perceived as a project in need of improvement (Hite 196). In this regard, Elaine, as a woman, is subjected to the imperative of constant refinement, which is evident in Josef's attempts to shape her according to his own vision of feminine beauty. For example, he advises her, "You should wear purple dresses. It would be an improvement" (323). Through these actions, Josef assumes increasing control over Elaine, asserting his power by attempting to mold her into an idealized version of femininity. As Elaine says,

> Josef is rearranging me. "You should wear your hair loose," he says, unpinning it from its ramshackle bun, running his hands through it to make it fluff out. "You look like a marvelous gypsy." He presses his mouth to my collarbone, untucks the bedsheet he's draped me in. I stand still and let him do this. I let him do what he likes (323).

After the various makeovers imposed by her boyfriend, Elaine catches a glimpse of herself in the elevator mirror and becomes acutely aware of "what Josef sees: a slim woman with cloudy hair, pensive eyes in a thin white face. I recognize the style: late nineteenth century. Pre-Raphaelite. I should be holding a poppy" (323-324). As Elaine gazes at her reflection, dressed according to Josef's prescriptions, she realizes that the image staring back at her, one that significantly differs from her own self-image, represents Josef's idealized vision of femininity. This projection is not how she wishes to appear or how she desires to define herself. After this moment, Elaine remains silent, feeling "vacant" (324). As J. Brooks Bouson aptly observes, "For Elaine, as for other Atwoodian characters we have encountered, the enactment of the feminine masquerade in which the woman participates in the man's desire but at the cost of renouncing her own leads to a sense of self-alienation and inauthenticity" (Bouson 177).

Elaine comes to know Josef's true nature in the victimization and exploitation of Susie who is pregnant with his child and yet he refuses to marry her. Eventually Susie commits suicide. Considering the situation of Susie's abortion and subsequent suicide, Elaine thinks, "Everything that's happened to her could well have happened to me" (341). After Susie's death, Elaine begins to dislike him as she realizes that women were not real to Josef and that he is weak, narcissistic, and incapable of love and as a result she walks away from Josef's life. "It's enormously pleasing to me, this act of walking away," as Elaine puts it," It's like being able to make people appear and vanish, at will" (338, 339).

Although Elaine sets herself free from the dominating hands of Josef, she falls into the trap of matrimony. She marries Jon not because she is really in love with him but because she is pregnant with his child. After two years, their marriage starts

disintegrating as Jon's attitude towards Elaine changes. Before marriage Jon seemed to be a man of understanding. He is often heard saying, "sexual possessiveness is bourgeois, and just a hangover from notions about the sanctity of private property. Nobody owns anybody" (345), but after the marriage, being husband, he begins to think and treat Elaine as his property. He repeatedly reminds Elaine that it is he who owns her and not she who owns him. Before marriage he has offered Elaine equality in all spheres of life, but now he expects Elaine to assume the secondary position of being a wife. Not only does Elaine have to do household chores but she has to earn their living also as Jon does not take up any job to feed the mother and the child. With all the responsibility of a married woman, Elaine finds it very difficult to find time for pursuing her career as a painter. As she says,

> In the daytime I go to work, come back, talk, and eat. Jon comes over, eats, sleeps, and goes away. I watch him with detachment; he notices nothing. Every move I make is sodden with unreality. When no one is around, I bite my fingers. I need to feel physical pain, to attach myself to daily life. My body is a separate thing. It ticks like a clock; time is inside it. It has betrayed me, and I am disgusted with it. . . Whatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me (358).

As described in the above passage, Elaine has no time to give to painting during day time and moreover, Jon never tries to help and support her. Such circumstances, compels Elaine to do her painting during the night time. But Jon doesn't like her working at night because it disturbs his sleep. When she asks him: "When else can I do it?" (365) He does not give an answer but as Elaine says, "There is only one answer, one that would not involve the loss of his own time: *Don't do it at all.* But he doesn't say this" (365). In simple words, he wants her to stop painting – meaning that he wants her to stop pursuing her career and take the passive feminine roles as prescribed by society. By now Elaine realizes her own husband's intention to crush her creative endeavor and thereby her individuality.

Along with depreciating and victimizing Elaine, Jon also cheated on her. While Elaine is working so hard to earn for their living without having any time for her painting, Jon spends his time in enjoyment with his girlfriends. With this kind of situation, Elaine feels a sense of emptiness and suffers feelings of rejection:

> I don't want to see anyone. I lie in the bedroom with the curtains drawn and nothingness washing over me like a sluggish wave. Whatever is happening to me is my own fault. I have done something wrong, something so huge I can't even see it, something that's drowning me. I am inadequate and stupid, without worth. I might as well be dead" (394).

These lines clearly demonstrate that Elaine has internalized societal expectations of passivity and self-blame. Even when she is unaware of any wrongdoing, she instinctively assumes that she must be at fault. While she sometimes conforms to traditional gender norms that portray women as irrational or neurotic, she does not accept them without question. When Jon dismisses her frustration and disappointment as merely "inevitable and predictable because she's a woman" (366), Elaine swiftly challenges this reductive gender stereotype, resisting the simplification of her emotions based on her gender. As Elaine remembers,

> Once it was a shaming thing to say, and crushing to have it said about you, by a man. It implied oddness, deformity, sexual malfunctions.
> I go to the living room doorway. "I'm not mad because I'm a woman," I say. "I'm mad because you're an asshole." (363)

Commenting on Elaine's pointed reaction to her husband's absurd gender stereotyping, J. Brooks Bouson aptly observes that "using a feminist-dialogic tactic, she turns his hostile words against him" (Bouson 178).

Although Elaine claims that Jon has not "overmatched" her in their fighting, her life becomes very depressing and her integrity of selfhood is deteriorating as her anxiety about severance or abandonment re-emerges in her consciousness. On one of the nights

when Jon does not come back home, Elaine presumes that she has been left behind in the same manner as she was once left behind in the cold by her trusted friends during her childhood. In her frustration and fear, she hears the voice of Cordelia urging her to kill herself: "*Do it. Come on. Do it.*" As Elaine says, "This voice doesn't offer a choice; it has the force of an order . . . . The Exacto knife is what I use, to make a slash. It doesn't even hurt, because right after that there's a whispering sound and space closes in and I'm on the floor" (395). Following her suicide attempt, Elaine feels that her relationship with Jon is too difficult to maintain on her part and therefore she decides to leave Jon as she has done repeatedly in the past as well: "The trick is to close yourself off. Don't hear, don't see. Don't look back" (396). Leaving her husband, she goes to Vancouver with her daughter Sarah and starts painting again.

Thus, *Cat's Eye* reveals the inherent gender bias embedded within the institution of marriage in patriarchal society, portraying it as restrictive, problematic, and exploitative particularly for women. Romantic love and marriage are depicted not as avenues for fulfillment, but as "a potential form of bondage and persecution which endangers, rather than enhances, female selfhood" (Bouson 177). Consequently, these institutions work to diminish women's autonomy and erode their sense of identity.

In *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood not only explores the themes of victimization and the assimilation of women's identities but also highlights women's own complicity in their subjugation whether through the influence of men or through adherence to patriarchal social norms. The novel's protagonists, particularly Elaine, often fail to actively resist the impositions of cultural expectations or to challenge the appropriation of their identities. However, Atwood presents this complicity as a result of their internalization of culturally constructed ideals of femininity, which assign rigid gender roles and dictate acceptable behavior. Still, the internalization of patriarchal values and the attempt to conform to prescriptive role models as seen in both Joan and Elaine is portrayed as a widespread and deeply ingrained social phenomenon, rather than a personal failure.

Like many female protagonists in feminist literature, Elaine's resistance to the structures that confine her and erase her individuality often unfolds on a subconscious level. This latent defiance finds its most compelling expression through her art. Painting becomes a mode of self-exploration and self-articulation, a space in which Elaine can give form to the unspeakable and recover aspects of herself lost or repressed. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of the subject-in-process, Elaine's artistic practice can be read as a way of navigating the fractured terrain of identity, where memory, trauma, and subjectivity are fluid rather than fixed.

In her *Retrospective* exhibition, Elaine curates paintings that are deeply autobiographical, each one tethered to specific moments and figures from her past. The titles of these paintings mirror the novel's chapter names, creating a narrative arc that traces her psychological development. As Kristeva suggests, art can serve as a means of confronting the abject, the disturbing, repressed elements of the self that society demands be cast out. In revisiting figures such as Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia, Elaine is not simply recalling the past but working through it, confronting emotional residues that once fragmented her sense of self.

Her painting of her mother in the kitchen subtly resists the confinement of traditional gender roles, offering a quiet critique of domesticity. Similarly, the titles of her artworks reveal deeper layers of meaning: *Falling Women* reflects the precarious social positioning of women; *Half a Face* speaks to her fractured bond with Cordelia and the splitting of identity; and *Cat's Eye*, the novel's central symbol, encapsulates vision, memory, and transformation. The cat's eye marble functions as a psychic anchor - a Kristevan "chora," or pre-linguistic space where the boundaries of the self are simultaneously dissolved and reconstituted. In this way, Elaine's art becomes a process of healing and re-formation, a visual language through which she reclaims both her voice and her subjectivity.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's paintings featured in the Retrospective Show serve as a crucial medium through which she bridges the gap between her past and present, drawing

repressed experiences into conscious awareness. According to Julia Kristeva, the return of repressed memories often through symbolic forms like art enables the subject to confront what she terms the *abject*, those traumatic elements of the self that are cast off but persist within the psyche. Elaine's art functions as a confrontation with this psychic abjection, especially the emotional residue of her formative relationships with figures like Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath. Through painting, Elaine is able to re-enter the emotional terrain of her childhood, explore its pain, and begin a process of reintegration.

This process aligns with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which suggests that traumatic experiences are not fully grasped in the moment but return belatedly in the form of haunting memories or symptoms. Elaine's paintings mainly those that recall her childhood tormentors are not simple recollections but expressions of trauma re-emerging, allowing her to finally "know" and process what had long remained unspeakable. Each canvas becomes a site of narrative and psychological reworking, offering Elaine a space to explore the lingering effects of past injuries.

Ultimately, the Retrospective becomes not just an art exhibition but a therapeutic journey toward self-understanding. In a moment of emotional clarity and forgiveness, Elaine envisions herself offering peace to Cordelia: "I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. It's all right, I say to her. You can go home now" (443). This gesture marks a symbolic reconciliation with her past and a movement toward psychic closure. Through the act of painting, Elaine reconstructs a fractured identity and reclaims agency, illustrating how art, as Kristeva and Caruth would agree, can serve as a vehicle for working through trauma and achieving personal transformation.

In *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood tells a profound narrative of Elaine Risley's retrospection through gender, memory, and identity within a patriarchal society. Drawing on feminist theories study of the unconscious, Atwood demonstrates how femininity is both imposed and internalized, yet also resisted. Elaine's traumatic childhood, designed by peer cruelty and social expectations, leaves a lasting impact, haunting her into adulthood and influencing her relationships and art.

Nonetheless, *Cat's Eye* is also a story of retrieval of self and identity. Through her retrospective exhibition, Elaine confronts her past, transforming her trauma into art and self-expression. Her paintings become an act of healing, illustrating the complex, ongoing process of reclaiming one's identity. Atwood's novel contests simple narratives of victimhood, offering instead a rich portrayal of women's resilience, their ability to confront history, and their power to redefine the self and reconstruct individual identity.

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