



History Versus Herstory: A Study Of Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace

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Abstract: The aim of feminist narratives is to construct a particularly urgent and demanding address to the reader, who is asked to pay attention to the text, extending beyond the depiction of particular events and characters to make a claim for the reconstruction of historical knowledge. These narratives, in particular, educate women readers to achieve social transformation through consciousness-raising. These feminist narratives seek to illuminate women's hidden lives, scrutinizing the impact of political events and cultural changes on traumatised women. These narratives espouse a strong feminist consciousness, examining the cultural construction of gender and sexuality and critiquing the patriarchal suppression of women's rights in both the public and private spheres. Narrativization further acts as an important political tool by revealing past sufferings to the community in which it occurred. The aim of feminist narratives is to make women's herstory visible, give meaning to it, and ultimately create frameworks. Women being already voiceless within a given culture or society and with the additional burden of experiencing psychological trauma, which by its nature is the 'unspeakable', undergo a strong conflict in which the challenge to express herself becomes more important. Hence, finding a means to communicate the experience is of vital importance to the person who has sustained oppression. Therefore, narrative acts both as a source of communication and a means to subvert the already existing history that present a male dominated truth about women.

Key Words: unspeakable, herstory, narrativization, patriarchal, scrutinizing, reconstruction.

Discussion:

Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* (1996) is acclaimed as a postmodernist metafictional text that undertakes the task of unravelling discrepancies and discontinuities in historical accounts. Based on a real-life incident, it probes the manner in which Grace Mark's narrative with its history of a traumatic past, phobias etc counters any claim towards a definitive, emphatic representation of history. The novel, giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, represents a particularly relevant exposition of the position of women, one that continues to stimulate discussion on how this situation has, and has not, changed much. Atwood in this novel clearly exposes the role played by various social, political and cultural ideologies in Grace's trauma and undertakes an analytic inquiry into her mind

that reveals repressed memories, traumatic events, fragmented flashbacks and personality disorder.

The novel paints a complex and morally troubling picture of a historical figure- Grace Marks, whom the author portrays as articulate and self-protective. Atwood's depiction of Grace offers an explanation for Grace's conduct that is rooted in causality: Grace suffers traumatic losses, dissociation and then acts out her rage and pain in violence. The novel becomes a classic example of power imbalances inherent in the 19th century patriarchal Canadian context. Through the protagonist Grace, Atwood highlights the oppressive nature of various institutions that are hostile towards woman-as-witness. Grace's specific quest is to challenge the official versions of her story and claim the right to her own version by challenging the already accepted binaries of truth and falsehood, history and fiction. She becomes a creator, who is able to manipulate the patriarchal gaze and subvert the social norms she had previously internalized.

The novel provides several versions of the past, but everything is grounded on individual consciousness; all these versions are arranged in a paratactic mode, so that no particular version is privileged. Pertinently, several critics have argued that *Alias Grace* is about the impossibility of knowing the truth, as the novel emphasizes the effects of knowing or not knowing the truth on people's lives. In reply to such observations Atwood remarks in *In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction* (1998):

We all belong to our own time, and there is nothing whatever that we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set-in a past age [...] Like all beings alive on middle earth, we are trapped by time and circumstance (4).

The plot of the novel is based on a true crime and much of the narration is revealed as limited and suspect. Atwood represents Grace Marks from everyone's point of view and has slightly altered the real facts in the novel. Aware of many versions about Grace Marks, Atwood recreated her own and in this regard. She remarks: "For each story, there was a teller, as well as audience; both were influenced by politics, criminality, nature of women, insanity, and about everything that had a bearing on the case" (35).

In the summer of 1843, Thomas Kinnear, a gentleman farmer, and Nancy Montgomery, his housekeeper and mistress, were murdered in a small town near Toronto. Kinnear had two other servants, James McDermott and Grace Marks, who were charged with the murders and later found guilty. McDermott went to the gallows, while Grace Marks's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. However, it remained a moot question as to what extent Grace Marks was involved in the murders. Grace's motive, according to McDermott, was jealousy. She envied the housekeeper for the privileges which she enjoyed as Kinnear's mistress. Grace, sixteen years old at the time of the crime, receives a sentence of life imprisonment. Grace breaks down in prison and is remanded to a mental hospital. After eight years, she is released as a model inmate and allowed to

work as a skilled housemaid for a wealthy prominent woman, Mrs. Palmer. Grace is now twenty-three years old. No one exactly understands Grace's true self. She creates a number of aliases to conform to the needs and expectations of other people and situations. There is no particular narrative or one interpretation that can adequately portray the depths of Grace's soul. However, by the end of the novel, the truth is ultimately brought to light and it shatters those who believed in the innocence of Grace from the beginning. Atwood herself depicts Grace Marks as a woman with many aliases. She comments:

In my fiction, Grace too whatever else she is, is a story teller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives (36).

Ana Sentov in an article, "Changing the Pattern: Reclaiming History, Constructing Herstory in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*" (2019) reclaims her history, which according to her is comprised of many different and often contradictory stories of her life and the crime for which she is imprisoned. These stories reflect the dominant discourse of a conservative patriarchal society, in which Grace is an Other due to her gender, class and social status. The law, the medical profession, the church, and the media all see Grace as a 'troublemaker': a woman who committed or assisted in a murder, a member of the working class who disturbed the social order. In the narrative, Grace is however revealed not as a passive victim but as an agent capable of reclaiming history and constructing herstory, challenging and defying the expectations of dominant patriarchal social structures. Further, it cannot be denied that whether guilty or not, Grace had lived through abuse and trauma, and her irresistible need for re-establishing her sense of identity and re-claiming the right to her own story is evident. Throughout the novel, both Grace and the reader question or completely reject these labels.

Grace's narrative consists of not only her own story, but also those of her family's, Mary Whitney's, Nancy Montgomery's, and fragments of many other histories. It also contains authentic insights into the life of poor Irish immigrants and servants, gender roles, institutionalized violence in prisons and mental asylums, and finally into widely accepted attitudes towards women. Thus, the narrative contains all the diverse aspects of her life that have shaped her identity.

Grace is both a witness as well as victim of domestic violence perpetrated by her father on her mother. Recounting her traumatic childhood with a drunken, abusive father and a mother exhausted by poverty and many pregnancies, Grace remembers that, "as the eldest child, she was the minder of her siblings, and that she had sometimes thought of drowning one or two of her younger siblings so there would not be so many mouths to feed" (104). This reference can be read as an insight into the mind of a future murderer, but also as evidence that ethics and morals have little meaning for those who struggle even for survival.

The worst memory is the death of Grace's mother. This occurs in the crowded hold of a ship in which emigrants are ferried across the Atlantic like cattle. Grace's father, who has frequently beaten his wife and has driven his family to poverty, is at least partially responsible for this death, and entirely accountable for its squalid circumstances. Grace's mind and in particular her memory, is profoundly affected by the traumatic events she has experienced right from her childhood in one form or another. Later in her life, Grace is heavily traumatised by witnessing an abortion. When Grace is working for a wealthy family in Toronto, she becomes very close to a fellow servant, Mary Whitney. Mary has an affair with one of her employer's sons, who makes the usual promises while enjoying her favours. On Mary's becoming pregnant, however, he ditches her and ends this relationship leaving her completely helpless. Faced with the prospect of losing her job and ending up as a prostitute, Mary has an abortion and bleeds to death in bed. This is another traumatic episode that haunts Grace, she sums up in the words, "and so the happiest time of my life was over and gone" (180). Grace Marks, unable to withstand the horrible death of Mary, leaves the place to avoid her memories. Ironically, Mary's memories haunt her wherever she goes, almost all through her life.

In the novel, Grace is depicted as a highly sensitive being scared of thunderstorms, crying easily and being childishly afraid of sheets hanging in the drying room, "they looked different, like pale ghosts of themselves hovering and shimmering there in the gloom; and the look of them, so silent and bodiless, made me afraid" (184). Her social status also contributes to her hysteria. As Mark Micale in *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (1995) comments:

Given the powerful fears and anxieties of the ruling class, it is not surprising that the servant class suffered from psychological distress, albeit of a different sort. Recent studies concerning the occupational identities of past hysterical patients reveal that among working people one category appears time and time again and that is the domestic servant (158-59).

However, it is the death of Mary Whitney that aggravates Grace's tendency to 'hysteria' and her aversion to doctors. Mary undergoes an abortion in which, "the doctor took a knife to her, and cut something inside; and he said there would be pain and bleeding and it would last some hours, but that after this she would be alright again" (203). It is this male disregard for the female that Grace has encountered previously aboard the ship when her mother fell ill and died. It is the disdain of the man who impregnates Mary and the disregard of the doctor, that directs Grace's attitude toward doctors and gentlemen when she says, "but it is my true belief that it was the doctor that killed her with his knife, him and the gentleman between them" (206). These men exert power and authority and their attitude is harmful when dealing with women from a class they regard as inferior. Grace realises that men dispose of and mistreat women and yet use them to satisfy their physical needs. At the same time their power and knowledge are reliant upon their interaction with the female or 'other'. However, it is against this other that they define

themselves. These men have used their knowledge in order to determine the conduct of women. However, they are themselves constrained within a power matrix, which predetermines all actions and resistance.

Like Grace's mother, Mary too has died in the cold. Atwood subtly weaves ice and water together in times when excessive emotions like death are present. It is cold and shock that causes Grace to react:

I fell to the floor in a dead faint. They said I lay like that for ten hours, and no one could wake me, although they tried pinching and slapping, and cold water, and burning feathers under my nose; and that when I did wake up, I did not seem to know where I was, or what had happened; and I kept asking where Grace had gone. And when they told me that I myself was Grace, I would not believe them, but cried and tried to run out of the house, because I said that Grace was lost, and gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her (208).

Grace's apparent 'fit' fulfilled all the preconceived notions of what constituted hysteria. The cold water, slapping and pinching, used in an attempt to revive Grace, were standard measures used to restore hysterics back to senses. Hysteria is seen as related to excessive emotional stimulus, which in the case of Grace would be blamed on Mary's death. Grace is revived from this fit but for some time she remembers nothing and asserts total amnesia of the events, and the prison Governor's wife encourages her to let herself to be hypnotised by Simon Jordan, a young doctor and expert in amnesia treatment. Rather than revealing the desired truth, these sessions introduce various possible explanations including Grace's spiritual possession by her former fellow servant Mary, a deliberate and cunning deception perpetrated by Grace and, possibly, multiple personality disorder. During her conversations with Dr. Jordan, Grace keeps sewing and mending quilts establishing a link between herstory and quilting. Quilting, sewing and embroidery frequently appear in Atwood's fiction and are generally associated with ways of conceptualizing history from women's perspective. Grace has an understanding of the "secret codes" of women's lives passed on from one generation to the other in the form of quilts. She compares them to "flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war" (186), calling attention to the nature of the embroidered messages. The "war" women fight is basically connected with issues of gender and sexuality since placed on the top of beds, quilts "make the bed the most noticeable thing in a room" (186). Grace's argument highlights the gendered understanding of quilts and beds:

For men, they may mean rest and comfort and a good night's sleep, while for women they signify the place where some of the most dangerous or violent actions of their lives take place: [the bed] is where the women give birth. And it is where the act takes place between men and women that I will not mention to you, Sir, [. . .] some call it loves, and others despair, or else merely an indignity which they must suffer through. And finally, beds are [. . .] often where we die (186).

Thus the main pattern of her quilt speaks for her sense of community. However, there is no quilt without a border stitched to the main pattern and the one Grace chooses for her own story is “a border of snakes entwined” because, she knows all too well, “without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing” (551). To frame her story of female community, she also wants to include the characters whose betrayal came to destroy her and her friends’ lives. And in her story, these characters are primarily men in the form of father, employer etc.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood interrogates the impulse to assign guilt to women who are subject to controlling patriarchal narratives that discredit women’s voices. Confronted with Jordan’s objectivity, Grace comments, “what I say will not change anything” (41), an assertion that acknowledges how gender complicates the questioning control. Grace uses different strategies of resistance, sometimes silence and mostly evasion but she is the one to choose what to reveal and what to hide. She thus cleverly keeps Jordan’s interest, and prolongs the time he spends with her, because she is aware that this is what he wants. She is the first to realize that Jordan’s interest in her has sexual overtones, and tries to manipulate it in her favour.

Deborah M. Horvitz’s chapter on *Alias Grace* in her study “Sadism, Memory and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction” perceives a possible sexual dimension to Grace’s past suffering. Also, she cites the death of Grace’s mother during the family’s passage to Canada and her friend Mary Whitney’s death as traumas contributing to Grace’s dissociation and hysteria. Horvitz’s analysis argues that the novel articulates an intriguing, credible, psychologically consistent and sympathetic interpretation of Grace as a victim of trauma and multiple personalities. However, Horvitz grants Atwood’s recreation of a historical story through feminist point of view more credibility than the historical record indicates and what is most striking in Atwood’s explanation of her historical revisionism is her fascination with a story which cannot be known in its entirety because the truth was never fully revealed by the participants: the victims died, Grace’s co-accused was hanged, and Grace herself escaped execution only narrowly, but never provided an entirely satisfying account of the day of the murder. In Atwood’s novel, this provides the central elision around which the narrative unfolds. Atwood’s Grace is perceived by her critics as an unreliable narrator of the circumstances of the Kinnear murders, a vengeful woman who blamed the murders she masterminded on the male companion whom she had seduced. This depiction of Grace is at odds with the equally gendered view of her held by her supporters, who assume that her youth and beauty belie the possibility of such violent intent. From either perspective, Grace is so closely associated with femininity in either a monstrous or repressive form that she is a highly convenient symbol, a transparent representation of pure femininity as well as its pathological form, hysteria which Elaine Showalter terms “the female malady”.

Atwood acknowledges that her historical novel takes up recent concerns around traumatic memory and applies them to past events. Grace’s story, Atwood remarks, “is dependent on what she remembers; or is it what she says she remembers which can be

quite a different thing? And how can her audience know the difference? (35). This unreliability of Grace as a narrator draws attention to the significance of women as narrators of herstory. As Atwood comments:

Here we are, right back at the end of the twentieth century: with our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time. [...] we cannot help but be contemporary, *Alias Grace*, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, is, of course, a very contemporary book (36).

An examination of Grace Marks as a fictionalized but historical protagonist to whom Atwood attributes elements of recovered memories provides an insight into the centrality of childhood sexual abuse to the contemporary feminist construction of herstory. She experiences flashbacks and nightmares which contain significant traumatic material; when she is diagnosed with dual personality disorder, it is apparent that Atwood is drawing a link between trauma and Grace's disorder which depends on a violent past history.

An exploration of Atwood's novel that views Grace as a trauma survivor whose claims may be false also offers a means of explaining the impact of gender on testimony, which is more vulnerable if it is voiced by a woman and particularly one who claims that she cannot remember everything. Sue Campbell in "Narrative Position and Memory Authority" (2003) writes that women's testimony is examined particularly closely and gaps or omissions are taken to imply not simply forgetfulness but deceit:

We often see in legal settings the attempt to undermine memory authority by shifting significance to what has been forgotten, even though no one remembers all the details of an incident in the past. In certain contexts, I can maintain a memory claim only if there is a certain account I have not forgotten in the surroundings of the past event, and what I am responsible for is often determined by challenge. The framing of women's abuse narratives as quasi legal testimony encourages the public, as interpreters to take the stance of cross-examiners who categorize forgetting as memory failure and insist on completeness and consistency of memory detail through all repeated telling (246)

Atwood in this novel clearly exposes the role played by various social, political and cultural ideologies in Grace's construction of herstory. Grace Marks may not have been a storyteller, but in granting her a voice-albeit one heavily over laden with late-twentieth century concerns about trauma, she offers a provocative revision.

In *Alias Grace*, Dr Jordan is unwittingly conditioning Grace's narrative, despite his sincere desire to give Grace a clean screen on which she can write her unmediated truth. Grace suggests that her narrative is chiefly a way to structure herstory:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else" (355).

Hence, narrating experiences becomes a way of comprehending what actually occurred and of evaluating what can safely be revealed to others. Atwood does not justify murder or state that Grace lacks volition entirely. Instead, she places Grace in the appropriate social context in order to reveal that demonizing and punishing Grace will not solve the greater, underlying issue of gender oppression that served as a catalyst for any such action. On the one hand, Grace is expected to tell the truth, but on the other hand, the dominant social and patriarchal structures have already decided what the truth is. Using strategic silence and evasion, and in maintaining the enigma of her personality, Grace Marks (re)constructs and reclaims her story and accepts different aspects of her identity. Whatever she may be guilty of, she ultimately positions herself as an agent rather than a victim. Grace's comments:

It is not the culprits who need to be forgiven; rather it is the victims, because they are the ones who cause all the trouble. If they were only less weak and careless, and more foresightful, and if they would keep from blundering into difficulties, think of all the sorrow in the world that would be spared (439)

Conclusion:

The novel is an invitation to women to become agents of change and to speak out against all forms of injustice, not to be victims but to break the silence. These recent incidents have shown how *Alias Grace*, as a novel giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, continues to be relevant and modern, giving us an opportunity to reflect on the ways the position of women has (not) changed. *Alias Grace* with her refusal to conform to social expectations, her powerful autobiographical voice remains one of the most authentic and fascinating female characters of Atwood's oeuvre.

Atwood, in this novel, shows her protagonist as caught in the shaping discourses of sexuality, class, gender and institutions like the asylum. These discourses attempt to discipline her. They build fields of knowledge with given 'truths' and attempt to construct herstory in accordance with these 'truths' .. On the one hand, Grace is expected to tell the truth, but on the other hand, the dominant social and patriarchal structures have already decided what the truth is. Using strategic silence and evasion, and in maintaining the enigma of her personality, Grace Marks (re)constructs and reclaims herstory and accepts different aspects of her identity.

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