TRANSFORMING ROLE OF WOMAN: A READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Much of the best work in Canadian literature in English belongs to the contemporary period, and it is integrally connected to the nationalist, feminist, and post-modernist movements. By the 1970s, poetry had become the predominant literary form in Canada. The most prominent figure in the contemporary Canadian poetry is Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b.1939) - Canada's extraordinary woman of letters -- who has made her reputation as much by being versatile as by being controversial.

KEYWORDS: Transforming Role, Woman, Margaret Atwood

Received: Jun 07, 2020; **Accepted:** Jun 27, 2020; **Published:** Nov 13, 2020; **Paper Id.:** IJMPERDJUN20201561

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's first important book of poetry, *The Circle Game*, appeared in 1966 and announced her arrival as an important Canadian woman poet who speaks from a feminist perspective. The volume, whose title poem first appeared in a folio edition in 1965 and designed, illustrated and printed by Charles Pachter, received a Governor General's Award the following year. In 1966, Contact Press published the entire collection, but this edition quickly went out of print and a new edition was published the following year by House of Anansi Press. A number of poems of the volume were included in her *Selected Poems* (1976); and since then the volume has been reprinted time and again by House of Anansi Press. The book received a wide critical attention in the literary circle and was recognized as the appearance of a distinctive voice in Canadian literary circle. The publication of *The Circle Game* also indicates the maturity of Atwood as a poet; and a comparison to her first volume *Double Persephone* (1961) can assure this maturity. "Thematically, Atwood here explores many of the concerns that have continued to intrigue her - the traps of reality, myth, language, and the pernicious roles we play, the cage of the self, and above all, the nature of human perception." (Grace 10)

The fact that *The Circle Game* received wide range of critical attention in the contemporary literary circle, brought international recognition to Margaret Atwood as a poet of new generation. The book also has been well served by her contemporaries. It successfully served the most useful functions of contemporary criticism - firstly, its public acceptance has helped to ensure that it would remain available to the reader; secondly, by perceptive commentary it has attracted and guided potential readers; and thirdly, and the most importantly, its contemporary critical reviews has helped to locate it in a particular literary tradition - and in this context it is in the feminist convention. In *The Circle Game*, Atwood projects the man-woman relationship from a feminist perspective and also projects the nature of this relationship as the game of circles which is the "game of power, the imperialism of eye, word and touch" (Blakely 33); the "round cage of glass", the game involving barriers. Rosemary Sullivan comments: "since the circle game is a game of ritual exclusion, it can be played with psychological barriers, with

language and with cultural myths..... In cultural terms, the circle game defines the garrison mentality that preoccupies Atwood, and the modern concept for the natural world.” (Sullivan 105)

The title poem of this collection, “The Circle Game” is often read as a miniature *Power Politics*: a power politics of female versus male: “I” - woman - and “you” - man - are the subjects of this game, “builders and inhabitants of the enclosure” (Blakely 33). Judith McCombs, the celebrated critic of Canadian literature, reads “The Circle Game” closely and a comment on Atwood’s changing position:

“The seven-part, concentric “Circle Game” is built of paired, encircling sections: the unclaimed, solitary circling children of the outer sections, section i and vii ; the mirror-window couple of sections ii and vi ; the garrison children of sections iii and vi ; and, at the climatic centre, section iv, the walled - in, childless, staring, eye-fixed couple.” (McCombs 147)

In *The Circle Game*, the existence of man and woman are not projected as separate entities, as independent human beings, rather “arm in arm, neither/joined nor separated” (43), the only thing is to go round and round. In its title poem, the paired mirror and window sections, sections ii and iv, they mutually construct each other and also define each other’s identities, where one commands the reflection of the other and, thus constrain and limit each other. “Both are trapped in the infinite regress of mirrors” (Blakely 33):

You refuse to be

(and I)

an exact reflection, yet

will not walk from the glass,

be separate.” (36)

This operation of eyes: the construction and constraint of each other’s identities - the mirror game - reaches to a point where she looks to him, and he to others - he for images alone, she for images in him:

You look past me, listening

to them, perhaps, or

watching your own reflection somewhere

.....

There is always

(your face

remote, listening)

someone in the next room. (37)

This signifies the position of woman in the circle game - woman does not venture into the world outside, rather confines herself in the limited orbits of her world, whereas man ventures outside that limited reflection. Thus man rather

than woman tries to break this circle game of mutual constrain. These mirror and window games are a gender ritual: as for women, the problem is using the wrong mirrors/windows: "trying to see oneself as male, for women." (McCombs 148)

In the paired sections iii and v, the "circle" is real, the unclaimed children are "circumscribing reality, laying foundations for those garrisons the mind that structure adult perceptions." (Sullivan 105) In section iv, which forms the centre of the poem, the couple's circle game underlie the gender domination: the dominating man's eyes entrap the female vision and identity:

So now you trace me

like a country's boundary

.....

and I am fixed, stuck

down on the outspread map

of this room, of your mind's continent (39)

"This mapped impalement implies also a Gothic scenario, of the hapless maiden readied for rape and/or torture in the chamber of the ruthless villain." (McCombs 150)

Thus though Atwood's circle game is a game of mutual construction and constrain, dominance of the field belongs finally to man, as man determines woman's universe and identity. This "memorizer/ of names (to hold/ these places/ in their proper places)" (39) possesses woman further by "word/ plays", by "calculated ploys/ of the body, the witticisms/ of touch" (39). All these refuse her individuality, her existence entirely. Man fixes woman in the field of his own "mind's continent", and she is:

transfixed

by your eyes'

cold blue thumbtacks (40)

But this circle game also sets up a counter-impulse : the impulse to break out of the circle. Thus the transformation of the circle game begins in the last section of the poem which culminates in the "Circe/Mud Poems" of *You Are Happy*.

I want to break

these bones, your prisoning rhythms

.....

all the glass cases,

erase all maps

crack the protecting

eggshell of your turning

singing children.

I want the circle

broken. (44)

The endeavour of “I”- woman - is to break “the closed rules of your games” (43) of the dominance by “you”- man - and helplessness. She tries to break the mirror which is used to fix her in the images created by him.

The same endeavour of man to control the image of woman, her autonomy and existence, is also there in the poem “Camera”. The camera, an overtly time-fixing instrument, is a recurrent symbol in Atwood’s fictions and poetry for controlling the female identity by male. For Atwood photographer is usually male and the person photographed is female: and in the process of photography female space is controlled by male space. The poem “Camera” presents a ‘camera man’ who in his search for an “organized instant” wants to control reality and fix it in a stasis - and in the process wants the female voice of the poem to “stop”, and “hold still”:

You want this instant:

nearly spring, both of us walking,

wind blowing.....

you want to have it and so

you arrange us :

in front of a church, for perspective,

you make me stop walking

and compose me on the lawn;

you insist

that the clouds stop moving

the wind stop swaying the church

on its boggy foundations

the sun hold still in the sky

for your organized instant.

Camera man

how can I love your glass eye ? (45-46)

“Throughout the poem Atwood organizes its objects into opposing polar clusters: on the one side the man, his camera, and his “square of paper”, on the other the woman speaker, the clouds, the sun, the church on its “boggy foundations”, the dissolving force of time”. (Davey 20) Thus the relationship between man and woman is not based on the ground of equality and compassion rather on the ground of male dominance over female space.

In another poem of this collection, photograph is used as a symbol of controlling reality, although it is not clearly associated this view with the male. However, in the poem “This is a Photograph of Me”, the subject who evades and disproves photography’s “organized instant” is a woman. The photograph of the female narrator - “It was taken some time ago”- is presumably taken by “you”- and this man-constructed image of women at first appears to be “a smeared/print: blurred lines and grey flecks/ blended with the paper;” and then comes further construction -

then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch : part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

The tone of the narrator is flat, matter-of-fact, the description is diagrammatic, and the reader is led with deliberate casualness to the shocking disclosure in parentheses:

(The photograph was taken

the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

The “drowned” narrator is presumably under the surface of both the lake and the photo and also under the dominance of the male space. The female narrator is deceived from her identity and existence and loses herself in the man-constructed deceptive world:

It is difficult to say where

precisely, or to say
how large or small I am :
the effect of water
on light is a distortion (11)

But, like many of the poems of *The Circle Game*, the female narrator tries to overcome this fixation and come out from the control of the male-constructed world and assert her identity and existence; and also tries to find her space by demanding the due attention from her male counterpart - the perfect position to have maneuvered herself into:

but if you look long enough,

eventually

you will be able to see me.) (11)

The man-woman relationship, in *The Circle Game*, is primarily based on mutual construction and constraint; yet the lack of communication between them is also evident. This break of communication is partly due to the lack of passionate involvement between the lovers. In "After the Flood, We", the two lovers are introduced "syntactically as parallel subjects" (Davey 41)

I walk across the bridge

towards the safety high ground

.....

gathering the sunken

bones of the drowned mothers

.....

You saunter beside me, talking

of the beauty of the morning,

not even knowing

there's been a flood. (12)

Here the lovers are concerned with their self-contained experiences, and particularly "you"- the male counterpart - is mechanically related to the female persona: he "saunter" besides her talking casually without any endeavour to establish the bond of communication with his female counterpart. The "syntactic parallelism" is also ironic as the relationship between the lovers is "etiologically nonexistent" and on the other hand the space is the only operative link between them: the relationship is to be one of spatial juxtaposition rather than of mutual interaction.

In Atwood's writings - in poetry as well as in fiction - there is the frequent comparison of the status of Canada to that of women: both are the product of male construction. The pioneer of "The Progressive Insanities of the Pioneer" (*The Animals in That Country*), attempts to impose order on the Canadian landscape, and man in *The Circle Game* tries to construct the identity and image of woman. Thus in the poem, "The City Planners", they are projected similar to the insane pioneer "with the insane faces of political conspirators" who tries to impose an order in the wilderness. Nature - the woman incarnate in Atwood's views - is shaped and constructed into cities by the city planners who are presumably man:

That is where the city planners

with the insane faces of political conspirators

are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other
each in his own private blizzard ;

guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a bland madness of snows.

Most of the poems in the collection focus on the tension between opposites - male and female - chaos and order - and depicts the apparent impasse in the relationship between lovers: for both the partners are bound by mutual construction and constraint - both are trapped in the circle game. But dominance of the field belongs finally to man. In the poem "An Attempted Solution for Chess Problems", there is "no final ending but/ a stalemate" in the relationship:

The white king moves

by memories and procedures
and corners
no final ending but
a stalemate,
forcing her universe
to his geographies (18)

Male space is not merely inherited - "memories and procedures"- but imposes "rule squares on the green landscape" (18). "Female space is its Other - the "girl" who must be fitted into the pastoral conventions, the "green landscape" that must yield to "chessboard pattern".

"Journey to the Interior" explores the possibility of escape on the part of the female persona from the circle game of male dominance to the self: but the effort to escape ends in futility as she discovers it "a poor country" like the on ground nature:

There are similarities

I notice :that the hills
which the eyes make flat as a wall, welded
together, open as I move

to let me through ; become

endless as prairies ;....

.....

..... that this is a poor country ;

.....

therefore inaccessible.

Like the speaker of the earlier poems, the female persona of this poem, found it impossible to escape from circle games and has withdrawn into the self with the apparent doubt : “(have I been/ walking in circles again?)” and in the end only to find that she is trapped in the most dangerous circle:

..... I know

it is easier for me to lose my way

forever here, than in other landscapes.

Thus in “Journey to the Interior”, Atwood gives a possible way out of the circle to her female persona though the aspiration “I want the circle/ broken” cannot be fulfilled and the male dominance in this circle game of power is still continuing.

Another way out of the circle, in the poem “Pre-Amphibian”, is sleep, where she is “released/ from the lucidities of day/ when you are something I can/ trace a line around....” But this “release” also ends with futility and the persona again finds herself entrapped in the circle:

..... and we

see each other through the

hardening scales of waking

stranded, astounded

in a drying world

.....

with sunlight steaming merciless on the shores of morning.

In the poem “Some Objects of Wood and Stone”, the image of “transfixed” woman returns. In Atwood’s poetry, technology and mythology are the two major male sources of power by means of which men assert the priority of space over nature as well as on woman. Man seeks to fix woman as well as the reality itself in his own “mind’s continent” (“The Circle Game”) and wants to reconstruct it:

We went to the park

where they kept the wooden people

static, multiple

uprooted and trans-

planted.

.....

In front of them

the other wooden people

posed for each others' cameras

and nearby a new booth

sold replicas and souvenirs.

The persona, presumably female, wants release from this breathtaking world of circle game and seeks solace and concrete comfort in physical objects: pebbles and carvings. Through these objects, "single and/ solid and rounded and really/ there", she wants to break the circle of words and sights with which she is trapped.

"Against Still Life", is another poem of this collection where the female persona is determined to break the circle and find a way out of the male space of silence:

I want to pick it up

in my hand

i want to peel the

skin off ; I want

more to be said to me

than just orange :

want to be told

everything it has to say

But this aspiration of the female persona to break the circle proves to be a futile effort as she gets cool response from her male counterpart. The lack of communication between them is due to both mental and spatial distance:

And you, sitting across

the table, at a distance, with

your smile contained, and like the orange

in the sun : silent :

This 'distance' and 'silence' are obstacles for the female persona to establish a communication with her male counterpart. She desperately tries to communicate with him by hearing the stories of his life:

..... I want

anything you can say

in the sunlight :
stories of your various
childhoods, aimless journeyings,
your loves; your articulate
skeleton; your posturings; your lies.

These orange silences
(sunlight and hidden smile)
make me want to
wrench you into saying;

But the constant silent posture of him irritates her to the extent that she seeks to employ violence in order to break this silence. It seems that the female persona is no longer willing to be entrapped in the “silent” world of male dominance where every female action is constructed and controlled by male effort. The despair of the female persona to break the silence of her male counterpart implies the despair to break the monotonous circle game:

now I'd crack your skull

like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin
to make you talk, or get
a look inside.

The female persona presumes that if the silence is broken - circle is broken - she may find the force of life:

I may find

an egg
a sun
an orange moon
perhaps a skull ; center
of all energy
resting in my hand
can change it to
whatever I desire
it to be

She, in the end, with deliberate casualness, wants to “force life to unfold its meaning”: (Grace 13)

all I need to know

 tell me

 everything

 just as it was

 from the beginning

This craving for release from circle games, however short lasting and tentative it may be, occurs in the poems "A Place: Fragments", "The Explorer", and "The Settlers". In the poem, "A Place: Fragments" the persona, in search of a place outside the suffocating circle game, finds:

Old woman I visited once

 out of my way

 in a little-visited province :

 she had a neat

 house, a clean parlour

 though obsolete and poor :

The transformation of the circle game is also apparent in this poem - the images of woman as - victim, transfixed and constructed by man - are transformed with the transformation of the image of man. The mirror - by means of which man construct the image of woman - and which is an instrument of asserting domination of man in the relationship with woman - is transformed: in the house of the old woman there is:

a cushion with a fringe

 glass animals arranged

 across the mantelpiece (a swan, a horse,

 a bull); a mirror;

 ... and in the center

 of the table, a paperweight :

 hollow glass globe

 filled with water, and

 a house, a man, a snowstorm.

The room was as

dustless as possible
and free of spiders.

The symbols - “paper weight”, “hollow glass globe filled with water” suggests the radical transformation of the circle game of male dominance. Here it seems, man, rather than woman, is constructed and trapped in the impasse with no way out. Again “free of spiders” signifies the release from the enclosed circle on the part of woman where she is entrapped by her male counterpart- “spiders”.

“The Explorers” and “The Settlers” also depict the possible release from the enclosed circle. In “The Explorers”, the male voice also transforms and serious effort is made to look at the world outside the enclosed circle game:

They will be jubilant

and shout, at finding
that there was something
they had not found before,

In the poem “The Settlers”, a further development in the process of breaking the circle game and establishing a proper relationship between man and woman is noticeable : where “our inarticulate/ skeleton” is no longer “two skeletons”, but “intermixed” and “one”. The speaking voice in this poem is neither trapped within circles:

Now horses graze

inside this fence of ribs, and

children run, with green
smiles, (not knowing
where) across
the fields of our open hands.

These images - “horses graze”, “children run”, “open hands” - offer an alternative vision to the earlier circles and traps with which woman is enclosed.

In *The Circle Game*, Margaret Atwood explores the nature of man-woman relationship as a mutual construction and constraint. The relationship is based on the joyless circle games involving barriers. Atwood projects this relationship from a feminist perspective and shows that though it is based on mutual construction and constraint, the domination in the field finally rests with man: women are subjects of construction in the male vision. Atwood also projects the aspiration of female voice to solve this impasse - to break this circle - to find that “place of absolute/ unformed beginning” for which the female persona longs in the poem “Migration: C.P.R.”. This effort of release ends in futility as in “Eventual Proteus” where the lovers are little more than “voices/ abraded with fatigue”. But this aspiration: “I want the circle/ broken”- remains present in the heart of the female voice till the end of this collection and culminates in the “Circe/Mud Poems” of *You Are Happy* where Circe finds herself equal in the power game of relationship.

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