

## Flight, Anorexia and Madness Coexistence of Body and Spirit

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### Abstract

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has created various impressive women characters in her fictions. Facing the awkward situation, their bodies usually react first: flight, anorexia and madness, which present not only their abnormal state of body or physics, but also express their unvoiced desire, thoughts and spirit. Through the abnormality or even morbidity of the body, these females show great intensity of desires to rebel against phallogocentrism, remove the fetter of men, acquire the right of freedom and liberty and achieve true equality with men in social, political, cultural and economical respects. These appeals fit amazingly the situation of Canadian literature, in which Canadian woman writers and man writers are equally successful and influential, and reflect the belief of Atwood that contemporary women are capable of compete with men in all the fields in the near future through their persistent struggling as well.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood; Flight; Anorexia; Madness

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### INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is one of the influential Canadian writers, and is popular with both academic circle and common readers (Lilburn, 2000). She has produced a

wide variety of literary works, including poetry, short stories, novels, children's literature and literary criticism. Her poetry has gained her position in Canadian literary world, and her novels have been acknowledged all over the world. The representative novels consist of *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Oryx and Crake* etc.. These novels, taking western women as the main characters, reveal women's psychological world and life experience, in which the society is observed and reflected from the angle of females, and show the concern of Atwood about the survival and identity seeking of Canadian women in the contemporary society. Atwood is regarded as the best English novelist in recent fifty years (Patriek, 1986) and the spokesman of Canadian culture and the founder and master of Canadian Literature as well (Pan, 2007). The Times (1980) ever commented that in spite of the triple obstacles—labeled as a feminist writer, a Canadian and a poet, Margaret Atwood has still managed to become a true novelist, who shows us the way we think and behave, without caring about the gender and nationality.

The Canadian socialist Arthur Frank (1990) claimed that body lies in both the popular literature and academic field. The female body is always what Atwood concerns about and she herself ever admitted it in one interview. She has created various impressive women characters in her fictions. Facing the awkward situation, the bodies of these women characters usually react first before their consciousness: flight, anorexia and madness, which present not only their abnormal state of body or physics, but also express their unspeakable desire, thoughts and spirit.

### THE IMPRISONMENT AND FLIGHT

The binary opposition has permeated in many of Atwood's literary works: male and female, nature and civilization, body and spirit, and imprisonment and flight. It seems that

the bodies of these women characters are often suppressed and imprisoned, and the spirit of them tries to escape. However, in fact, Atwood wants to give an expression that body and spirit are inseparable: a variety of physical manifestations or reactions can reflect the spiritual state and vice versa.

Men in Atwood's novels strive to intrude and control female bodies all the time. The application of modern mechanical equipment, such as cameras and video cameras, has been keeping women under the intensive surveillance of men. Peter, the boyfriend of the main character Marian in *The Edible Women*, enjoyed photographing. Once, Peter talked about his experience of shooting a rabbit, a pray of him, and Marian associated herself with it and felt she herself was the victim. Since then, Marian turned frightened and upset when facing the camera lens of Peter. Camera here is employed as symbols of power and desire. Through manipulating the camera, Peter has realized his control over Marian's body and the gestures posed by it he liked and fulfilled his visual desire. Camera is extension of eyes. Men have achieved their gazing at women and women have been gazed and imprisoned by men's visual power through cameras. As a matter of fact, this kind of gaze is ubiquitous and symbolizes the strong power of men over women in the man-dominated society.

Being imprisoned and gazed, Marian tried to escape several times. The first flight took place when Peter and Len unscrupulously depicted the terrifying hunting scene during dinner one night, "So I let her off and wham. One shot, right through the heart....So I give her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place" (Atwood, 1998:69). Hearing the bloody experience of hunting for the rabbit of Peter, Marian couldn't help running away from the restaurant because she identified with the disemboweled rabbit subconsciously. However, she was chased and caught eventually by Peter in the street, just like the rabbit captured by the hunter. And then, they returned to Len's apartment. When Peter and Len were talking, Marian sneaked beneath the bed of Len, like a rabbit hidden in its hole, which was considered as a kind of flee. In fact, Marian believed the space under the bed was different from the realistic world and couldn't be intruded by Peter, so it was a safe place where she couldn't be harmed. She achieved self-awareness through the symbolical "escape into the underground". After Peter found her, she tried to run away again. Another flight took place in the engagement party for Marian and Peter, where Peter took photographs of her all the evening, making her feel like a target under the gun of a hunter. Therefore, she escaped from the party. At last, she succeeded in running away from Peter's apartment, because she was aware that marriage to her meant a tragic of losing herself or even being consumed. The flight of this time happened

consciously for rebelling against Peter and getting rid of the victim identity.

Iris, the protagonist in *The Blind Assassin*, married wealthy and ruthless Richard with the purpose of rescuing her family although she didn't love him. After marriage, Iris became Richard's private property, who deprived her rights and managed to control her body, "Filling my nails, soaking my feet. Yanking out hairs or shaving them off: it was necessary to be sleek, devoid of bristles" (Atwood, 2000, p.303). When Iris realized that her husband only considered her as the tool for unleashing sexual desires, she endeavored to escape from her husband by inventing various excuses. At last, Iris gained her inner dependence and autonomy through getting rid of her marriage. The main character Rennie in *Bodily Harm* always tried to escape from the personal miseries and uncontrollable political environment when facing a series of problems. Undergoing the mastectomy due to breast cancer, alienating from and breaking up with her boyfriend, and failing in a romance with the surgeon, Rennie fled to a Caribbean island. Although her body and psychology got harmed more severely during the process of escaping, she was able to rethink about the life. This escape is rewarding for it is the process of self-discovery and Rennie ultimately made it clear self-fulfillment was important in one's life. The terminal doesn't mean an end for her anymore, but instead a place to go somewhere else. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Moira, a brave woman, was too hard to be disciplined. She was open to resist the male authority and attempted to escape twice from the repressive totalitarian regime. In spite of being tortured after being caught, Moira never gave up her faith to struggle for freedom. In order to flee from the center, she disguised herself as the Aunt and imitated the Aunt's manner rather than the Handmaids, because she recognized "their power has a flaw to it" (Atwood, 1998:133). Offred, the protagonist of this novel, was critically influenced by some women like Moira, but she chose more careful and silent way to rebel against patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, Offred succeeded in escaping from the dystopian society to Canada with the help of Nick, gaining her freedom.

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## 1. THE ANOREXIA AND STRUGGLE

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The consumption era in western countries began since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women's body became both the consumers and objects being consumed. Man's standard for attractive women dominated, to which the majority of women yielded: beautiful, sexy, fashionable, and especially slim. As a result, woman's body was commercialized and consumed. In other words, female confronted the double oppression: men's invisible surveillance on their body and behaviors and their own internalization of the surveillance.

In order to create a perfect image in the other's eyes, females tried to alter their body through cosmetics, beautician, sexy dress and the like. The woman colleagues of Marian in *The Edible Women* are such females. They dyed their hair golden and stained their fingers beautiful color, applied lipsticks and eye shadow, and wore tight dress for underlining their sexy figure. They were prepared to show off their beautiful faces with make ups and charming dress and decorations, with the expectation of being appreciated by men. The female body became the controlling site of men, "Weighted down with fat, or on the contrary so thin as to forbid all effort, paralysed by inconvenient clothing and by the rules of propriety – then woman's body seems to man to be his property, his thing" (Tolan, 2007, p.14). Men have the right to judge or evaluate women and more terribly, women have even embraced the evaluation standard of their body proposed by men, which has caused the imprisonment of both female body and spirit by men and women themselves as well. Marian was different from her colleagues, who always dressed plainly and believed that the artificial decorations and cosmetics were completely unnecessary. Even after changing her hairstyle and wearing a sexy red dress at the party according to the requirement of her boyfriend and gaining Peter's wonder and praise, Marian still felt uncomfortable. Her body was uncomfortable meant that she subconsciously realized there was something wrong, but she could not consciously find out the reason behind it at that moment.

Marian became anorexic with her growing bewilderment, worry and uneasiness. After the engagement, everything seemed out of control and the symptoms of anorexia of Marian occurred. That she refused to eat beefsteak with Peter in the restaurant was the first time of her refusal to food. When she saw Peter's cutting the steak cleanly with a sharpened knife, she was aware this brutal act was a kind of artistic murdering. At that moment, she vaguely realized that she would be devoured by Peter, just like the cooked meat, without individuality. Therefore, her body reacted firstly to protest against being consumed. With the approaching of the marriage, the symptoms of anorexia of Marian became more and more serious. Marian was dismayed at her own anorexic symptoms, which she hoped not to be permanent, and otherwise, she would starve to death. Marian's body refused "anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre." (Atwood, 1998, p.165) Besides beef, Marian couldn't eat lamb, pork, and even eggs either. For her, eggs were also alive, symbolizing female reproduction. The eating problems couldn't be solved and the foods which could be accepted by her stomach became more and more limited. She even couldn't consume carrots and vegetables in that these foods are the root of life in her eyes. The change of her appetite was closely linked to her feelings towards Peter. Her body's refusal of food signified her resistance against the marriage dominated by

the male power, and anorexia is a voluntary diminishment of a repulsive, other-identified self.

Food has close relationship with women, who are the producers, collectors and processors. In the era of consumerism, western women took the responsibility to provide food to men, but at the same time, they themselves became food consumed by men. Anorexia was inextricably bound to the value of being slim, in accordance with the evaluation standards of men in those days, adopted to restrain even maim their own body. Behind the anorexia lie the awareness of the awkward situation of the female, their struggle against being controlled, and their efforts of regaining their uniqueness and rebuilding their identities.

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## 2. THE MADNESS AND REBELLIONS

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The remedial actions should be taken to solve the problems of the lack of basic physical or psychological needs to maintain the balance of life and keep healthy. Nonetheless, in reality, the basic needs of people sometimes can't be satisfied due to the constraints of social conditions, resulting in the negative psychological emotions, such as loneliness, anxiety, depression and upset etc.. If these negative emotions can't be released or discharged, abnormality in physics or psychology, even mental illness will be caused. According to the Psychiatric Medicine in nineteenth century, female nature and behavior were inextricably bound up to illness, passivity and lack of volition, making women prone to mental disorder and thus, mental insanity was often connected with the female body which was considered naturally weak and in need of the protection of men. The behaviors, such as faints, fits of tears, crying and screaming, immoderate laughter, nerves, hysteria of women were taken as madness. Female authors could release their desires demonstrating their internal struggle and resistance through creating and writing the madwomen because both female authors and the characters in their works are confined in patriarchy. Feminists illustrate that "madness is an attempt to articulate needs unrecognised by a dominant patriarchy that rejects the legitimacy of female anger, and also represents a refusal to be silenced" (Tolan, 2007:236). One of the classical mad characters in western literary works is Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, who tries to escape the imprisonment of her husband and uses hysteria as a powerful weapon to refuse her husband's value and fight against the colonial patriarchy.

Deviating from the role of "family angel", women would be considered as abnormal. If women rebelled against men's control, they would be labeled as madwomen. In *Alias Grace*, the women in the asylum are there for many reasons. One of the women was there to escape from her husband, who beat her black and blue. Another woman went mad because she had no house to live in and keep warm and she would freeze to death if she

didn't do a good job of going mad. Grace thought about these women's circumstances, realizing madness was the final weapon of the impotent and she was determined to make use of such powerful weapon. Thus, Grace became a madwoman in others' eyes. When Dr. Jordan first met Grace, he said that "He had seen many hysterics...who had looked very much like this" (Atwood, 1997, p.66). Grace fainted, after imagining waking up beside Mary who was already dead, "no one could wake me, although they tried pinching and slapping...because I said Grace was lost, and had gone into the lake, and I needed to search for her" (ibid, p.208). When Grace woke up on the morning of the murders, she felt that she was detached from herself, her face in the mirror not like hers at all, and her hands only a husk with inside it another hand growing. She couldn't remember anything about the murdering. When Grace recovered in the penitentiary, she performed the behavior of screaming and hysteria. Grace's mental deficiency led to a plea for leniency. Eventually, she was regarded as a madwoman by the public, managing to escape the penalty and resisting the authority of Dr. Jordan. "Grace uses her narrative to manipulate the Gaze by deceiving or blinding those who try to use her" (Wilson, 2006, p.185).

Marian in *The Edible Woman* also has the symptom of hysteria. "Marian's hysterical refusal of food was eventually acknowledged as an alternative, repressed, but nonetheless valid logic" (Tolan, 2007:235). When Marian was subconsciously afraid her fate would resemble that of the rabbit, a prey being gutted, she described: "After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand.... I must be crying then!" (Atwood, 1998, p.71) With the approaching of the marriage, Marian became more nervous and upset and some illusions were often produced, she herself even thought she needed to seek help from a psychiatrist. At the end of the novel, Marian recalled her own unreasonable actions, and called them stupid hysterical behaviors. In patriarchal society, hysteria is considered as the typical disease of women. When the so-called rationalism and truth are safeguarded by western rational world, madness with mysterious power reveals the inhuman nature of rationalism, showing its great vitality.

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## CONCLUSION

Body is the concern of contemporary western philosophy which broke up with the traditional thought of rationalism that privileges the rational mind over the instinctual body. Contemporary philosophers hold that body is not "the other" subject to the spirit and it is not only independent, but also counteracts the spirit. Atwood agrees with most contemporary French philosophers in negating the binary oppositional relationship between spirit and body as that of active and passive components. Instead, Atwood claims that the body represents a spiritual one containing a multitude of rebellious elements. Women's body and spirit

are one and they are indispensable. The female bodies contain mysterious energy, like cocoons and the "Pandora Box".

Margaret Sanger (1988:255) elucidates "no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body... It is for women the key to liberty." Atwood is extraordinarily concerned with female body, and therefore, the female body becomes one of the themes of her novels. The protagonists created by Atwood are always considering whether their bodies should be disciplined by contemporary rationalism or safeguard the freedom and human dignity and whether their bodies should be obsessed in consumerism or realize the spiritual fulfillment. "Atwood illustrates how women can use their bodies as objects of resistance against the system of oppression designed to control those bodies" (Parker, 1995:365). Through the abnormality or even morbidity of the body, these women show great intensity of desires to rebel against phallogentrism, remove the fetter of men, acquire the right of freedom and liberty and achieve true equality with men in social, political, cultural and economical respects. These appeals fit amazingly the situation of Canadian literature, in which Canadian woman writers and man writers are equally successful and influential. Since 1960s, Canadian women writers have gained worldwide recognition, including Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Carol Shields. Two decades later, "a constellation of new women writers, including many from a wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, has enormously diversified Canada's literary image, and these women's novels and short stories feature in increasing numbers on international publishers' lists"(Howells, 2005:194). In face of the great achievements made by Canadian women writers, Atwood is always keeping a clear mind and evinces that "the goals of feminism movement have not been achieved, and those who claimed we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject"(Atwood, 1987, p.12). The belief that Atwood wants to convey through these women characters created in her novels is that contemporary women are capable of compete with men in all the fields in the near future, which can only be fulfilled through both the bodily and spiritual struggling of females persistently.

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