

IS ELAINE A WILLING VICTIM OF/TO CORDELIA? A PSYCHOFEMINIST STUDY OF ATWOOD'S *CAT'S EYE*

L.R. Glington,

Part-time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, India

Dr. J. Samuel Kirubahar

Research Supervisor, Former Associate Professor, and Head in English, Research Centre in
English VHNSN College (A), Virudhunagar – 626 001. India

Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's (1939 -) *Cat's Eye* (1988), the narrator protagonist, and Painter Elaine Risley, narrates her own life story through a retrospective lens, jumping between her present-day middle-aged life and childhood memories of trauma. Her narrative is characterized by significant ups and downs stemming largely from the severe bullying she suffered from her childhood 'best friend', Cordelia, who acts as a powerful bully, making Elaine a victim of 'psychological torment'. Elaine's victimization allows her or rather drives her to turn to painting to achieve a therapeutic restorative effect, using art to process, control and gain distance from the lasting influence of Cordelia and her traumatic past. Her paintings act as a therapeutic release that helps her process the past. However, the novel depicts this process of healing as incomplete. Despite achieving success as an artist and confronting her past at a retrospective show, Elaine ultimately realizes that she is not really fully free of the psychological scars or the lasting influence of Cordelia's memory. The haunting process of Cordelia persists, indicating that the past remains fundamentally intertwined with her identity.

Keywords : *torture, victim, victimization, retrospective, art, memory, past, vision.*

Atwood is a much-debated, analysed, studied, and criticized woman novelist of Canada. She has been read on all levels – formalism, biography, psychoanalysis, Jungian concepts, Third Force Psychology, feminism, intertextuality, phenomenology, narratology, cultural studies, gender relations, sexual politics, postmodernism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, realism, romance, Gothic elements, thriller studies, ghost stories, memoirs, *bildungsroman*, *Kunstlerroman*, science fiction, apocalyptic genre, metafiction, anti-novel, fairy-tale elements, satire, irony, parody, dystopian and as nationalist, modernist, revisionist, feminist and postcolonial writings (Wilson 176).

Atwood creates female characters, who remain self-cognizant, self-governing and suffering from survival syndrome, neurosis, quest for identity, gender discrimination, sexual politics, and interpersonal and intra-personal relationships. Her literary career as a successful Canadian woman novelist began with her maiden novel, *The Edible Woman* (1968) in which Marian undergoes survival syndrome, identity crisis and psychological maladjustment called "Anorexia Nervosa". Her female characters remain distinct in that they aspire, attempt and strive to be true to their selves and have their true identity as human beings and as artists – Marian in culinary art by baking a woman-shaped cake in *Woman*, the unnamed narrator is a painter in

Surfacing (1972) Joan is a Gothic romance writer in *Lady Oracle* (1976), Rennie is a freelance writer in *Bodily Harm* (1981), Offred is a teller of tales in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Elaine Risley is a woman artist/painter in *Cat's Eye* (1988). They rebel against sexist/gender discrimination and dual standards in society, where women are looked upon as the other/an object for mere sexual pleasure. As they respect themselves, they register a vociferous protest against the intimidation and humiliation meted out to them. They never want to be identified as 'second sex' as Simone de Beauvoir calls them but as liberated and fully potential women to raise their voice against the hypocrisy, callousness and strangulation of a male-dominated chauvinistic society and its norms and yards. They undergo intrapsychic, interpersonal and intra-personal conflicts and are constantly obsessed with some fear in their psyche, which leads them to hide / mask their true identity and in some cases, assume a double identity to escape from the hard core reality of their existence. All of them are self-alienated and try to understand their behaviour and self and strive to grapple with the crisis in their lives, which elude any possible solution(s). Elaine of *Cat's Eye* also falls under this category as she is found fault with and tortured by her friends like Cordelia, Carol and Grace. Elaine suffers from Cordelia's influence on her and even she fears that she is her other half, which she tries to tear away from her consciousness and psyche and ease herself by becoming a female artist/painter.

The basic premise of Atwood's thought is based on the theme called 'survival'. In her book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she gives a model of basic victim positions. There are four victim positions formulated by her in her book *Survival*. They are :

1. To defy the fact that you are a victim.
2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious or any other large general power/idea.
3. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.
4. To be a creative non-victim. (36-38)

Eye is Elaine's narration and a retrospection. Her narration in the form of a novel is a vision. Her retrospection includes various visions like Elaine's back seat vision, her microscopic vision, her perception of the vision of others, cat's eye vision, Virgin Mary Vision, tourist vision (Wilson 31). Her "back seat vision" is an innocent vision which she presents when she is taken on a car by her parents. Her microscopic vision associates pictures of the dead in order to recover her missing parts. Others' vision includes that of God, her parents, friends, husbands and women artists. In the mirror vision, she understands that she is Cordelia's other half/reflection like that of Sula to Nel in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*.

In *Eye*, Elaine recasts her past after coming back to Toronto, her childhood place/city for a Retrospective Show of her paintings. During which, she also reveals her own psychological crises/conflicts perpetuated on her by her friends and especially by Cordelia. It results in her psychic' retrospection and introspection to understand her "epistemological problems despite the

phenomenological data made available by the ‘unreliable’ first person narrator” (Gupta, 119). Elaine, as the first person narrator, replays / recasts in her psyche/mind the fragmented broken pieces of her experiences in her childhood with her friends and reconstructs her earlier Toronto life with her brother’s, Stephen’s teasing, her mother’s engagement in a constant battle to transform her according to her likes like Joan’s mother in *Lady Oracle* and her friend’s, Cordelia’s, bullying, which corrodes her psyche. On her return to Toronto, she finds herself rampant with memory to reminisce her childhood tortures / experiences in order to relive those experiences – a kind of substitute gratification in her corrupted and wounded existence, which was as sterile as a wasteland emptied of its vegetation. In Elaine’s retrospection/memory, Cordelia reigns supreme and occupies her entire consciousness as Cordelia always threatens her with her presence. Cordelia’s presence makes her feel dwarfed, humiliated and sliced off from her self and makes her a victim, a willless creature, muted, voiceless, and faceless woman. Elaine becomes a victim of her friend Cordelia in her mental journey, odyssey as she is not able to get away from the feeling of being trapped and tortured by Cordelia, who has become an unavoidable monster creature in her identity formation, which is fractured, punctured and amputated and made to be emptied of its attributive in the formation of her identity.

Eye is set in Toronto, and the story is told by the first-person narrator in the form of an autobiography/a semi-autobiography/a portrait of the novelist, Atwood, and in turn it becomes Elaine’s history-her story/story of an artist/painter. It is a story of female victimization and brutality with the subterranean world of pro-adolescent girls and their clandestine war upon each other. It has Gothic themes of female victimization, brutality, anxiety, victimizer and victimized syndrome, buried past and its secrets, imprisonment of characters in a claustrophobic environment, doubling of characters, destruction and construction of vision, inspection and retrospection of an artist and so on. It is Elaine’s *bildungsroman*, which reveals Elaine’s childhood experiences on her psyche. In the end of the novel, she disengages herself from the Phantoms of the past. In it, Elaine becomes the subject of victimization by the bullying of her girlfriends. She is presented as a conflicted and insecure person and is subjected to psychic wounds. It is a cautionary tale of “women beware women” and “an exploration of mischievousness” (Wisker, 101). It is “an anxiety-ridden narrative preoccupied with the notion of psychic vampirism: the invasion by and loss of the self to a malignant order” (Bouson 160). Elaine travels from Vancouver back to Toronto for a retrospective of her works. “At the same time, the experience of crossing the border on the way back to Toronto coincided with a movement from happiness, security, freedom and peace to a sense of loss, pain, loneliness, humiliation, and the threat of more pain” (Rao, “Home” 101).

In *Eye*, Elaine reflects on her life during a retrospective exhibition of her paintings in Toronto. She suppresses her childhood trauma until she rediscovers a Cat’s eye marble from her red purse. Then, she unlocks her memories. She recalls her unconventional childhood in 1940s and 1950s Canada. Settling in Toronto around the age of eight, she faces brutal bullying from her chief tormentor and friend Cordelia and from two other girlfriends, Grace and Carol, who

criticise her appearance, behaviour and the way she walks, talks, stands and stares at others forcing on her self-harm, masochism, like peeling skin from her feet and contemplating suicide and isolate her socially. In the end, when Cordelia throws Elaine's hat into a frozen raven and abandons her there in the icy water, Elaine nearly drowns and fears death but hallucinates the Virgin Mary guiding her to safety. With this bitter experience, her toxic friendship with Cordelia and other girlfriends comes to a halt. Later, as a teen, Elaine excels in art-painting.

Cordelia is the antagonist in the novel. She projects her insecurities on to Elaine and asserts her power and dominance on Elaine. She leads her psychological tortures on Elaine disguised as improvement games. She criticizes Elaine's appearance, posture, habits and decisions and excludes Elaine from her group of girlfriends, forces Elaine's hands under cold water until pain builds, escalates to self-harm and abandons her in a frozen ravine. Elaine becomes a victim of / to Cordelia but in the end of the novel, she becomes a creative non-victim and occupies Atwood's fourth basic victim position.

Elaine comes from an unconventional family. She has had a nomadic life as her father happens to be an entomologist. Her mother is hard working and patient but she does not believe in any sort of categorisation and does not care for social demands. She admits that her parents are younger and their faces are dirty. They "blurt out humiliating things that can neither be anticipated nor controlled" (CE 282). Elaine feels alien and apprehensive when her family settles down in Toronto. She was happy before moving to Toronto but now Toronto with its new alien and strange environment threatens her psyche. She admits : "Until we moved Toronto I was happy" (23). The city seems to her offensive, small, smouldering, suffocating, threatening, non-identical and ever waning and weaning out because of its old, intolerant, and traditional patriarchal attitudes which are corrosive and coercive to its residents. "Toronto represents an abhorrent world [...]" (Rao 101).

Eye focuses on the relationship between Elaine and her three girlfriends Cordelia, Grace and Carol. Among them, Cordelia represents the best and the worst in people as she is the chief tormentor and her family environment is unhealthy as her mother and her father never take care of her. Cordelia's father has a split personality and a brutish nature. She remains an alienated girl totally unaware of her inner self and feels that she is neither beautiful nor gifted as her elder sisters, Perdita and Miranda. She hungers for power, which she has never had. This hunger for power makes her torture Elaine and act as she knows everything and tell Elaine, Carol and Grace about plays, ballets, menstruation, fresh kisses poisoning with the deadly nightshades and the stream of dissolved dead people in the ravine under the wooden bridge (CE 88). She makes Elaine believe that she is not normal. She also plays havoc with Elaine's sense of self as she exerts a great power on her to make her believe that she is deficient in everything that is important in life.

In Toronto, the three young girls, Cordelia, Grace and Carol, act as the upholders of the traditional patriarchal values and oppress Elaine in the name of social conventions but all of them are victims of patriarchy themselves too. Cordelia is terrified of her father and often digs

holes to hide herself in and Carol is repressed and oppressed by her parents. “Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category ‘girl’ and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of a patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their own fathers” (Hite 137). Cordelia, Grace and Carol are indisputably narcissistic as they are self-admiring and compliant with stereotyped images of femininity, oppressive and highly pretentious and they expect these traits in everyone they come into contact with because narcissism, according to Lasch “is a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one’s own fears and desires” (65). In fact, overpowered and mesmerized by her friends, Elaine starts hating herself and develops certain outrageous habits like fainting and peeling off the skin from her toes in a masochistic way. She endures the humiliation and the agony inflicted upon her by her friends. Her friends are encouraged by her submissive nature and her helplessness. One day, her friends dress her up as Mary Queen of Scots and bury her alive. She recollects :

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. I'm wearing a black dress and a cloak, from the dress-up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole, it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows. (CE 125)

She is puzzled by her friends’ malice, who consider her an object to tease. She wonders : “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 girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please” (142). When she is abandoned in the dangerous ravine by her friends, she reintegrates with her real self and has a vision of Virgin Mary, who soothes her and helps her recover her strength.

The climax of an ordeal by Elaine’s tormentors is a near death – the horrors of freezing in the icy water. She is forced by her tormentors to slip into the creek, waist deep in freezing water. The hallucinatory vision of the Black Virgin with her glowing red heart gives her the strength to get out of the icy water with courage. “After physically surviving the ordeal of near drowning and near freezing (Canadian deaths), Elaine psychologically overcomes the abuse and walks away because she has finally learned to see through the eyes of the other girls into their now obvious motives. She has learned that survival depends upon perception” (White 169). Elaine’s drowning and freezing in the icy water shapes her life and art. She attains the imaginative power and draws upon memory, self-knowledge and the necessary isolation to transform her life into art. She finds the means to shape her painful memories of the past and the injuries by Cordelia into an art. She exercises both verbal art and the visual art to come out of her traumatic past. It results in animated resentment and grief in her paintings. On the whole, the “three stages of Elaine’s development as an artist-withdrawal, the acquisition of a particular way of seeing and a

style, and the giving back of her visions to the world-may be paralleled with the three ordeals that she undergoes, the ordeal of childhood abuse, the ordeal in young adulthood of learning to cope with self-centred man as she tries to become an artist, and the ordeal of the retrospective exhibit, which causes her to examine her life” (White 67). But after the incident in the ravine, Elaine retreats into silence and self-assured separateness and Cordelia never harms her. Elaine turns into a harder woman by refusing to interact with Cordelia. On the other hand, Cordelia deteriorates into an emotional instability and mental illness. She dreams of Cordelia. In her life, dreams reiterate the immediate past. She dreams of Cordelia on three instances :

1. She dreams of Cordelia falling from the cliff or a bridge as a result of feeling guilty for having helped Cordelia escape from the loony bin.
2. In another dream, Cordelia is in the Queen Mary Schoolyard and is angry with Elaine.
3. In another dream, she dreams of a Mannaquin, hacked and glued together and has Cordelia’s head wrapped in a white cloth under its arm.

As Elaine is influenced by Cordelia, Elaine’s painting called “Half a Face” reveals the insolent and hostile gaze of Cordelia. It also shows that Cordelia has an interminable power over Elaine’s formation of identity. She admits :

I had trouble with this picture. It was hard for me to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age. I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers. So?

But the eyes sabotaged me. They aren't strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened.

Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture.

I am afraid of Cordelia.

I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when. (CE 267)

Cordelia never misses a chance to make Elaine feel inadequate as a girl and ever points out her mistakes and deficiencies. She says to Elaine: “Stand up straight! People are looking! [...] Don’t hunchover, [...] Don’t move your arms like that” (141). Cordelia makes Elaine believe that she is nothing (47). Elaine is also made to believe that Cordelia’s help is necessary for becoming a socially acceptable person. Elaine reveals : “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” (140).

In the end of her friendship with Cordelia, when Cordelia becomes a real threat / danger to her life and reduces her to nothingness, she wants to rebel against her only by engaging herself in the art of painting. She rebels and defies her chief tormentor, Cordelia only by artistic representation. Commenting on artistic representation by Elaine, Gina Wisker observes :

Artistic representation enables retrospective valuation, a distancing from events, and a development of different versions of reality, self and experience. Cordelia and the two other tormentors are genuine, but the novel explores the ways in which tormenters and tormented construct each other's versions of self. Elaine can escape this tormenting through avoidance, removing herself from their physical spaces, moving into other spaces, finding different friendships, and through refusing their versions of herself. She expresses herself through her art, digging through the layers of different periods in her life and revealing how people change and reconstruct versions of themselves and others. (104)

Atwood uses Elaine's character to illustrate the dynamism of the Canadian society in sustaining gender differences and in relegating girls to subservient roles. She achieves this by making Elaine spend the first eight years of her life in Canadian wilderness as a blissful girl, who remains free from social conditioning, but suddenly coming to Toronto to lead a settled life and to play with her friends, who have already embraced patriarchal values. Elaine feels lonely and humiliated in the company of her friend Cordelia, who is very conceited and makes Elaine realize that she needs to be refined in Canadian society and also to learn a lot of social and cultural skills to be a proper girl. She fails to connect herself with women as she finds it difficult to get relationship with them. She sadly admits: "Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not" (CE 404). Even she distances herself from her mother. She admits: "I'm aware of the barrier between us. It's been there for a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back" (467). Her fear of being powerless like her mother forces her to look upon women, who seem to be strong but instead of fortifying her womanhood such seeming strong women like Cordelia and her friends and even Mrs. Smeath kindle in her mind a feeling of hatred toward women. She cannot identify herself with other women. Thus, her identity as a woman remains unfixed due to her childhood experiences. She is aware of her uncertain personality. She is like "someone watching from the sidelines, having a cowardly handkerchief" (446). She is a misfit and a willing victim of Cordelia, a stranger onto herself and an outsider/alien. She is on the margin to be bullied by Cordelia. Her "traumatic childhood has resulted in serious memory gaps and in a propensity for metamorphosis, disguise, and identity shifts. It is significant that the reader is unable to formulate any fixed idea of what Elaine actually looks like, so frequently does she redesign her appearance" (Davies 66). She has willed inertia and learned to control the gazing vision in her. Coral Ann Howells in "*Cat's Eye* : Elaine Risley's Retrospective Art" deals with the issue of defacement in relation to Elaine's face on the theory formulated by Paul de Man in "Autobiography as De-facement" (*The Rhetoric* 67-81) and says :

Elaine's confrontation with her own face defaced, like her return to Toronto, constitutes [...] which De Man identifies as the autobiographical impulse with its sudden alignment between present and past selves that opens up multiple possibilities for mutual reflexive substitution, displacement and doublings. These

are for him ‘defacements’, endemic to the autobiographical project which ‘deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration’. (209)

This sort of defacements, giving and taking away of faces, can be seen in Elaine’s portrait of Cordelia, which is called “Half a Face”. Actually, Elaine is defaced, tormented, unfixed, and made to be incomplete. Coral Ann Howells further observes : “Cordelia as the absent other would also confirm De Man’s theory of autobiography as a double project of self-representation, moving towards self-restoration at the same moment as it marks otherness and deprivation [...]” (207). It is because “Elaine’s discursive narrative remains incomplete [...], her paintings offer a different figuration, acting as a kind of corrective to the distortions and suppressions of memory [...]” (208). Her autobiography becomes a visual image presented by her third eye-account of the history of her story. As seeing eye with the third eye, cat’s eye marble, or discursive recorder, she tells her own private history with fragments of Cordelia’s story.

Elaine suffers from the domineering but negative influence of Cordelia. It affects her psyche and shatters and batters her self-confidence in her. She feels lost and alienated and has had an old rootless life of impermanence. She feels helpless, unhappy, and alien. She miserably fails to measure up to the expectations of her friends. She experiences herself as subdued, victimized, vulnerable, and a helpless woman, who is shrinking within herself. She suffers from bouts of anxiety and a nervous disorder. It results in non-conformity and social and cultural alienation. She is ever haunted by the fear of being put to shame. Her network of defenses like being humble, agreeable and pleasant and her strategies like withdrawal and mastery are not strong in her to make her a complete human being. When withdrawal, mastery and compliance fail in her, she fails to stand up to the image of a good, unselfish and devoted friend to Cordelia and to others. When she thinks that she fails, she walks away from Cordelia. She wallows herself in contempt. She suffers from self-torture. She torments herself physically and psychologically resulting in masochism. She inflicts pain on her physically. She loses herself/her self. She wallows in guilt-feelings. She yearns for fading out in sleep. She desires to extinct/kill herself.

In the end of the novel, Elaine and Cordelia are forced to swap their places but both of them are in need of each other. Elaine goes to an art school to be clothed/disguised in feminine roles/ways and Cordelia becomes a woman with hysteria to be sent to a private rest home following a suicide attempt and she becomes a haunting presence in Elaine’s psyche and in her art too. However, Elaine’s conscious awareness gives her the power to fight with Cordelia’s ghost. She soon realizes that Cordelia’s ghost does not have an independent existence but it is an inseparable part of her personality. “*Cordelia has a tendency to exist*” (CE 488). So she says:

You’re dead Cordelia
No I’m not
Yes You are. You’re dead
Lie down. (489)

Besides, Elaine also understands that Cordelia herself is a victim of the repressive society. This makes her desire for revenge on Cordelia to recede. She forgives Cordelia and lays her spirit to rest by enunciating the same words that she has heard in the vision of Virgin Mary some years ago : “So, Cordelia, Got You back” (CE 488).

Elaine and Cordelia can be identified as twins like Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*. “If Elaine and Cordelia are ‘like the twins in the old fables, each of whom has been given a half key’ (CE, P.411), it follows that Cordelia is in Horneyan terminology the ‘arrogant-vindictive’ side of self-effacing Elaine” (Gupta 120). In Elaine’s memory, Cordelia reigns supreme as a fearful presence as Cordelia is always ready to frighten her by her overbearing presence, which makes Elaine feel that she is a victim, a will-less creature, mute and faceless. Cordelia’s influence can be seen in Elaine’s psyche. Cordelia’s voice rings inside Elaine’s psyche and head and Elaine becomes Cordelia as she cannot shrug off Cordelia. Elaine is only her half-self without Cordelia. Cordelia is Elaine’s expansive self. In fact, Elaine projects herself as she sees, feels, and considers herself as a sufferer, a victim and a fragment without Cordelia. Cordelia is a friend-adversary to Elaine. Elaine cannot erase Cordelia from her memory/consciousness. Cordelia becomes an integral part of her identity-whenver Elaine sees herself in the mirror, she happens to see Cordelia standing beside her in the mirror. In fact, Elaine suffers from the bouts of dependency syndrome and develops self-hate for being a vulnerable victim. She has a love-hate relationship with Cordelia. In moments of crisis, she becomes Cordelia’s enemy and when the crisis is over, she longs to be with her as a friend. It necessitates a split in her personality. There is a continuous conflict between her compliant and expansive selves. She loves Cordelia as she wants to be powerful, masterly and triumphant. She hates Cordelia as she is reduced to nothing by Cordelia’s domineering influence and nature. She becomes a spineless woman/a funky and a willing victim. She believes that she is not a demented woman. She tries to save herself from becoming a disembodied being. “The difference between Elaine and Cordelia is that Elaine knows when she is being mean and regards it as a pleasurable diversion; while Cordelia, who is a lot more insecure than Elaine, feels an inner compulsion to act nasty. With maturity, Elaine tries to opt out of the victor-victim games and adopt a ‘live and let live’ attitude but does not always succeed in it” (Vevaina 244-45). Her success is only partial.

Elaine rebels against Cordelia out of desperation when she is reduced to a naught. She can no longer tolerate being abused and humiliated by Cordelia. She feels free when she is able to disregard Cordelia’s orders. She gains confidence after Cordelia becomes conciliatory to her and she feels that she no longer needs Cordelia. She learns to resort to aggression when her compliance self fails in her. “Along with compliance and aggression, Elaine learns that hostility” (Gupta 126). She becomes careless about her appearance. She wants to run away from tension. She wants to remain invisible. In later stages, Elaine’s wish to be invisible turns into a wish for committing suicide and she even slashes her wrist to commit suicide like Dimple of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, who ponders over ways of committing suicide and later kills her husband instead like Maya of Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock*, who kills her husband Guautama. Her

morbid obsession with death becomes her demonstrative suffering as she enacts her drama of committing suicide. She allows in guilt feelings and yearns for ultimate extinction of her self. It makes her resort to self-mutilation and masochistic traits in her. She pulls the strips of flesh from her feet; nibbles her fingers and clips her nail till she feels the pain in her body. She loses herself in her sufferings. Hers is a demonstrative suffering and it is obsessive and compulsive. Suffering makes her a whole person in her. Her wallowing in self-pity and guilt feelings is due to her feeling that she has become a victim of Cordelia and for having deserted her too. She suffers due to split personality. Her hidden expansive self is lodged under her subdued image of a victim of Cordelia. She is not afraid of Cordelia but afraid of being Cordelia. She even thinks of committing suicide.

Suicidal instinct works at two levels for Elaine : it gives her power over others, elevating her as a suffering martyr and it helps her ward off her self-hate. In the first case, it satisfies her self-effacing need. The fantasy of being looked after with Jon by her side, Sarah nearby and doctors hovering around her, ‘she felt white, drained of blood, cared for, purified, peaceful’ (CE 374). Secondly in addition to restoring her dwindling neurotic pride, it satisfies her masochistic longing to self-extinction. (127)

In the end of the novel, Elaine gains confidence. “Later, faced by an irrepressible unconscious, Elaine learns that biology cannot articulate her sense of the body, her instinctual fear and loathing of the mature female form, and turns instead to art” (Tolan 190). Even when all critics call Elaine a victim, Barbara Hill Rigney in “Alias Atwood : Narrative Games and Gender Politics” calls Elaine “a witch” and further relates that “It is Elaine’s curse and her fantasy that Cordelia, responsible in childhood for so many brutal acts, dies, finally, in obscurity and misery, while Elaine herself enjoys the success imaged in the ‘retrospective’ of her work” (64).

Atwood makes Elaine have the will power to achieve selfhood. She makes Elaine create her own identity as a free woman. In the end, she becomes a creative non-victim. In spite of her outward submission to the oppression at the hands of Cordelia and her friends, she has always lived with an innate sense of self as her subtle subversive strategies, such as painting and peeling off the skin, chewing her fingers till blood comes out, have helped her survive in her formative childhood years and silently fight against authoritarianism. Later in her life, painting becomes her most powerful and significant subversive strategy, which she uses to wield power over the people, who harassed her and her panting becomes a way of remembering the people, who have helped her to evolve as a free woman artist/painter. With her painting skills, she demolishes the myth that art belongs only to men and seems to affirm that art and creativity belong to all human beings.

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