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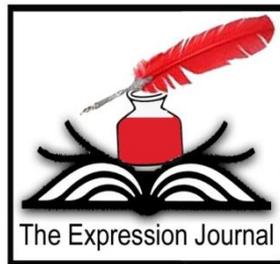
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## **MARGARET ATWOOD: AN ICONIC NOVELIST IN CANADIAN LITERATURE**

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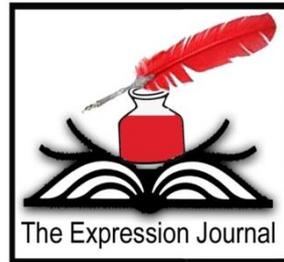
### **Abstract**

Margaret Atwood is an internationally renowned, highly versatile author whose work creatively explores what it means to be human through genres ranging from feminist fable to science fiction and Gothic romance. Margaret Atwood offers an immensely influential voice in contemporary literature. Her novels have been translated into over 22 languages and are widely studied, taught and enjoyed. Her style is defined by her comic wit and willingness to experiment. Her work has ranged across several genres, from poetry to literary and cultural criticism, novels, short stories and art. Recognized as a feminist author and the greatest living Canadian writer engaged with issues of gendered and national identity, Margaret Atwood also problematizes both of these labels and trends in her work. Margaret Atwood has written many books which deal with the feminist issues. Her female characters have to face many trial and tribulation. This research work explores the fictional oeuvre and will engage fully with each of the debates developed by the various key critics of her work, interweaving these with sustained critical commentary and guiding readers through the key critical issues and approaches to reading Atwood's fiction.

### **Keywords**

Margaret Atwood, Canadian fiction, gender discourse, genre,  
feminist stance, oeuvre, social ethos.

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“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

(Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 259)

Margaret Atwood is a singular scintillating literary star on the horizon of contemporary Canadian literature. She is, indubitably, a prolific and innovative literary icon. She courts controversy in literary circles. After Robert Davies and Timothy Findley, Atwood along with Alice Munro was the first and foremost to catapult Canadian literature to the global status and her insightful writings and critiques have contributed tremendously to the efflorescence of women's writing and she has firmly carved out an eternal niche in the Canadian literature.

Atwood has 'questioned stereotypes of nationality and gender, unfolding cultural fictions and the artificial limits they impose on our understanding of us and other human beings' Atwood has been evaluated as "a Feminist writer, for her incisive commentaries on sex-roles, a religious writer, for her' images of grotesque misfits and surreal disorientations of the psyche, a writer of Canadian wilderness; a nationalist writer and aregionalist."

Notwithstanding the Cardinal fact that she mostly writes about women from a female perspective, and with discernible feminist streaks, her writings transbound the frontiers of what is often limned as 'Female fiction'. In her oeuvre she shifts our' heed on Canadian identity- on Canadian relationship with united States and Europe, human rights issues, the Canadian wilderness and women's sear exploitation as well as her relation to the world and individuals around her. Her novels are informed with characters who are all seeking something; whether for answers, equipoise, freedom, vengeance, understanding or fulfillment. The plots are knotty and involved at times appalling dark but always imbued with passion and drive and the stories range from childhood cruelty to grown up in humanity and meanness of people towards each other; from the quest of a father to the search for answers in a post apocalyptic wasteland scenario. The locales move from nineteenth century Toronto to the Caribbean isles to dystopian future landscapes.

In Atwood's fictional universe 'there is no essentialist definition of 'woman' of feminism of even 'Canadian'; but instead representation of the endless complexity and quirkiness of

human behavior which exceeds ideological labels and the explanatory power of theory." Atwood embarks on the exploration of women's burning issues employing elements of science fiction, fairytale and dystopian' vision. Her novels feature female protagonists who are epitome of Atwood: they are as Judy Klemesrud 'reported in the New York Times, intelligent, self-absorbed modern women searching for identity' who 'hunt split logs make campfires and become successful in their careers, while men often cook and take care of their households. In her plots we have a tryst with the lives of these women who are shattered by overwhelming threats: Cancer, divorce, Violence and those that persist quietly, naggingly- solitude, loneliness and desperation.

Atwood's fiction critiques the Canadian social ethos in relation to the values incarnated by the Canadian dream. The novelist's sole concern is to free the Canadian psyche from the octopus grip of English and American imperialism and to unshackle women from their perception of themselves as the victims of masculine chauvinism. *Surfacing* (1972) is a tour-de-force of the novelist who showcases the involved question of identity for English speaking Canadian female. Identity, for the protagonist has become problematic, thanks to her role as a victim of Colonial forces. She has been colonized by men in the patriarchal society in which she flourished, by Americans and their cultural imperialism, or neo-colonialism as it has come to be known as and the Euro-centric legacy that remain in her country although the physical presence of English and French rulers have gone.

*Surfacing* is a novel which demonstrates the female protagonist's awakening from the stupor of personal sexual and natural alienation to an integrated sense of identity. It espouses the causes of woman, projecting and ecofeminist commitment and careful autopsy of its harking back to the natural world. It is the saga not of an individual but of a race, of man's predicament in the problem infested modern scenario where man is a separate island not from others but also from himself. *Surfacing* is woven round a mosaic of metaphors, a dead frog, an aborted foetus, lost 'father all of them associated in a young women's mind following a climatic descent into water which is also descent in her subconscious.

Margaret Laurence has rightly observed that the novel has myriad thematic motifs but most important amongst them was the ecological which she found articulated Atwood's quest for the meaning of a in human lie shadowed always by morality. The themes are many and the nature of reality is one of the most engrossing. Some of the issues our most burning contemporary issues- the role of women the facts of urban life and mist of all the wovening and perhaps killing of our only home earth. The novelist envisages the entire globe threatened by the urge to exploit its resources rather than to cultivate its potentialities with ecological awareness. The Edible woman' presents a vision of the society in which man had metamorphosed the whole of his milieu into a "Commodity market' so much so that even man himself had become a commodity fit to be consumed. In *Surfacing*, Atwood goes further to identify the forces which have brought about his abject degradation in environment.

*Surfacing* is a short incisive exploration of how past and present intersect- endlessly damagingly- when a young woman returns home to the remote north of Quebec to search for her missing father.

Alongside compelling glimpses of life on the verge of the wilderness and a master class in characterization, Atwood employs the tale to anatomise the pitfall of memory the effects of modernity, the wedge between rural and urban life and the legacy of the 1960's sexual revolution.

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Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* zeroes in on women and their relationships to men to society and to food and eating. It is through food and eating that the novelist-discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern male- chauvinistic world. The female protagonist Marian Olcalpin, wrestles between the role that society has imposed upon her and her personal definition of self, and food turns emblem of that struggle and her eventual rebellion. At the far end of "The Edible woman, 'Marian reconstructs that novel persona, or concept of self, through a renewed relationship to food. This novel foreshadows Atwood's slant towards nagging problems like Colonialism, Feminism and the so-called Canadian dream which is in Consonance with the American dream in the United States culture. The novelist repeatedly harped in her non-fictional writing that the relation of America towards Canada is analogous to that of man towards woman in the male chauvinistic society.

*The Handmaids Tale* by Atwood was a dystopia, swayed Orwell's unputdownable classic 1984. The story is set in the near future U.S.A in the Republic of Gilead, a state ruled by religious fundamentalism. Birth rates are down in the post-nuclear age of Gilead so handmaids women who are fecund- are designated as sexual slaves to spawn offspring for childless couples deemed morally fit to raise children. Women in Gilead are not allowed to read, hold jobs or have money.

Recounted by a young handmaid named Offred or of Fred, the man to whom she belongs- the novel is conceived a powerful dystopian vision of anti-feminist totalitarianism. The new world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a woman's universe even though governed seemingly and policed by men. Its ethos smacks of domesticity its female population' is divided verging on household functions each class clothed in a separate hue that instantly (identifies the wearer- dull green for the Marthas (house workers); blue for the wives; red blue and green stripes for the Econowives (working class); red the Handmaids (whose function is to bear children to the head of the household, like Bilhah.

In the novel, all the freedom women have acquired are evoked and the language is forbidden to all but the male elite. The heroine Offred is prized for her ovaries, because she is one of the few women whose reproductive systems have survived the chemical pollution and radiation from power plants.

In Atwood, the events are envisaged through the eyes of the main character whose potent tool is irony and penetrating and scalpel sharp observation. The tale is interspersed with flashbacks to her earlier life, when she had a husband Luke, a five-year-old daughter and was allowed to read. The novelist anatomises some of the traditional stances that are ingrained in the thinking of the religious rights and which she encounters particularly menacingly threatening. The novelist's forte is satire which is trenchant, often hilarious, and often very mordant.' Humour is merged in her fictional landscape and poetry concerns women's gnawing issues on some level but her novel. *The Handmaid's Tale* has occasioned the feminist commentary. The novel *Cats' Eye* is an engrossing read by Atwood. It showcases momentous spells of beauty but also has real encounters with cancerous evil, apathy and terror. In *The Cat's Eye* the novelist gets inside the skin of a teenage girl not only detested, but tortured by her 'peers'. The novelist recounts the story of Elaine Risley, an avant garde painter who finds herself poring over her tumultuous childhood when she repairs to her home-town of Toronto for a retrospective art exhibit. The story is narrated in flash back as the story of her current life as painter on her second marriage is recounted in between the story of her childhood. In *Cats' eye* the novelist shuns specific political or moral ideologies, focusing instead on the emotional and psychological labyrinths that plague individuals at war with social ethos.

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Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a cautionary tale set in a future in which genetic science, climate change and social inequality will spell doom and disaster to civilization. The novel is a riddle in which the reader whiles away the time, thinking of what is happening. *Oryx and Crakes* is a dystopian fiction which expatiates on the nagging issues within the environs and bio-technology focuses on the never-ending metamorphosis of our sense perceptions. The novelist has pleasure to Christen it as a speculative fiction.

Atwood ranks with Graham Greene for her meticulously crafted books which are amazing read. She is a feminist writer of repute. She paces with adroit ease and creates female characters that are compelled to remake themselves to notch formidable grit and resolve in their attitudes. Atwood as a novelist is extraordinaire ringing in global Hall of Fame as leading luminary surprising avid readers with her innovations and radical challenges to contemporary social myths and fashionable ideologies. This icon of Canada is the rara avis of Canadian letters who has ensconced herself in the arduous onus of deciphering life in the twenty first century.

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