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## UNVEILING CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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### **Abstract**

Cultural hegemony, a concept deeply rooted in the dynamics of power and control, plays a significant role in societies worldwide. Regardless of geographic and cultural diversity, the influence of dominant cultures on others persists. This study delves into the intricate manifestations of cultural hegemony, examining how it shapes the beliefs, values, and behaviours of individuals within different cultural settings, especially making women a victim. Through a critical analysis of Margaret Atwood's short story collection, *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*, this paper sheds light on the insidious nature of cultural hegemony and its impact. Drawing inspiration from Margaret Atwood's short story collection, *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*, with a specific focus on the narratives of "The Whirlpool Rapids," "Walking on Water," and "Bluebeard's Egg," this research explores the ways in which cultural hegemony operates within the context of Atwood's compelling storytelling. By investigating how dominant cultures impose their norms, values, and narratives on others which ultimately results in some kind of oppression/suppression, this study uncovers the often subtle, yet pervasive, mechanisms through which cultural hegemony exerts its influence on both individual and collective identities in a global context.

### **Keywords**

Cultural Hegemony, Suppression, Oppression, Norms, Narratives,  
Margaret Atwood, Short Stories.

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Cultural hegemony, coined by Antonio Gramsci, signifies the dominance of one culture over others in a social context, shaping norms and values. In today's interconnected world, this concept exerts a pervasive influence beyond cultural boundaries, affecting individuals' beliefs and behaviours, notably women. This study explores cultural hegemony through Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*. Focusing on 'The Whirlpool Rapids,' 'Walking on Water,' and 'Bluebeard's Egg,' we uncover how dominant cultures impose their norms, often leading to oppression.

Regardless of age, marital status, vulnerability, self-reliance, employment, intelligence, or cultural origin, women universally contend with societal and external oppression rooted in cultural hegemony. These entrenched norms, values, and patriarchal ideals persistently affect women, irrespective of their empowerment.

In Margaret Atwood's *Stories*, empowered women navigate both overt and covert challenges in their lives. This paper examines three stories from the collection focusing on protagonists Emma and Sally. While both are self-sufficient and financially independent, they exhibit vulnerabilities in their personal lives. Emma and Sally share commonalities and differences, experiencing oppression primarily within their relationships rather than from society at large. An empowered woman may escape societal mistreatment through education, employment, and social standing, yet she invariably confronts subtle suppression within her own home, an unwritten rule passed down through generations. Atwood subtly portrays this dynamic through the characters of Emma and Sally.

In the opening lines, the narrator describes Emma as a fearless woman, comparing her to those who "seem to be born without fear" (p-111, WP). She's portrayed as someone unafraid of adventure, even at the risk of her own life. Emma, a twenty-one-year-old college student working as a waitress near Niagara Falls to fund her education, embodies self-dependence and empowerment, earning money for her university fees. She's not interested in matters of love or romance at the university, driven instead by practical goals: "She wasn't thinking of love, but of making enough money to get her through her last year at university without going too far into hock" (P-113, WR). Unlike her peers, Emma is resolute in her objectives and works diligently to

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achieve them. Her adventurous spirit leads her to accept a favour for her friend Bill, who needs her to participate in testing a rubber raft on the treacherous Niagara Whirlpool Rapids: "Emma was flattered by this image of herself, and readily accepted it as a true one: a physically brave young woman, a bit of a daredevil, willing to put on a life jacket at a moment's notice and sit on a large inflated platform of rubber and swirl down the dangerous Niagara Whirlpool Rapids" (P-114, WR).

With haughty determination, Emma agrees to join Bill on the event day, underestimating the danger involved. She compares it to a roller coaster ride and desires to challenge the mighty Niagara Falls, akin to tightrope walkers and daredevils. She sees it as a gamble with nature or God, believing that surviving such challenges would indicate a greater purpose: "In the same way, she wants to check whether she is destined to live or not by participating in that event." (P-115, WR). As planned, she joins the team and faces a near-fatal accident during the raft test. Her resilience and effort saved her, leaving a profound impact. Afterward, Emma becomes resolute, prioritising her own views and expectations over others' needs. She turns inward, convinced of her invulnerability: "But the most obvious effect of the accident on Emma was her strong subsequent belief—it amounted to an article of religious faith—that she was invulnerable" (P-119, WR). This newfound belief in her invincibility shapes her subsequent actions during her World-Travel Phase, as she confronts mistreatment rooted in suppression and oppression.

"Several years after the Whirlpool Rapids, at her most fearless, Emma was in a boat, going up the Nile. This was during her world-travel phase" (P-120, WW). During her world-travel phase, Emma encountered various cultures and faced different treatments. She stood up against ill-treatment, even when travelling alone in an economical boat. An Arab man made advances towards her, driven by cultural differences and expectations regarding clothing. This incident illustrates how oppressive norms affect women's choices in clothing. "if you don't leave me alone," she said to him loudly, "I'll jump off this boat." ... Emma took hold of his hand and bent the little finger back... Then she clambered over the railing... she jumped overboard" (P-121, WW).

Despite facing oppression, Emma confronted the situation boldly. She warned them, used self-defense tactics, and threatened to jump off the boat to make them reconsider their actions. This highlights her empowerment in standing against ill-treatment. "The men in the boat re respectful after that... They hadn't believed a young Western woman travelling alone could ever have been serious enough about what they considered her honour to risk death for it" (P-121, WW). Emma's assertiveness changed the dynamics, earning her respect. The incident challenged cultural stereotypes about Western women, revealing the impact of cultural biases on perceptions.

"The Wreck Bay bartender—he was the one chewing her out—said everyone knew she was that sort of a woman... and Emma realised that she was not hidden away and invisible here as she always supposed herself to be in foreign countries, but much discussed" (P-128, WW). Emma's choice of partner, Robbie, who was significantly older, raised eyebrows. Society's judgement and discussions highlighted the impact of cultural norms on relationships and gender roles. In Emma's journey, we see how cultural hegemony can influence perceptions, behaviour, and expectations, but her resilience and determination allow her to challenge these norms and assert her independence.

Sally, financially empowered, married Ed, a heart surgeon, enamoured by his perceived stupidity, which she found endearing. However, Ed's true intentions gradually emerged,

revealing a silent suppression of Sally's desires. "It was her idea to have a kind of terrace... but Edward says he likes it the way it is" (P-131, BE). Sally's desire to make changes to their home was stifled by Ed, who imposed his preferences, demonstrating a form of silent suppression of her wishes. "She'd hoped for a baby of her own when she married Ed... but he was neutral about it" (P-148, BE). Sally's desire for motherhood was silently suppressed by Ed's neutrality, influenced by his prior marriages and children. She suppressed her own longing due to her fear of losing the relationship. "Sally was left out of both these equations... she couldn't be expected to have any opinion" (P-148, BE). Sally felt disconnected from the house she lived in with Ed, as her opinions and desires were seemingly disregarded. Her vulnerability in the relationship led to silent suppression.

"Ed doesn't know what happened with these marriages... What if he wakes up one day and decides that she isn't the true bride after all, but the false one?" (P-134, BE) Sally's fear of Ed's potential rejection and her constant vigilance to prevent it made her obedient and accommodating, resulting in her own silent suppression. Sally's situation parallels the story of Bluebeard, where a sinister character marries women and kills them for disobedience. While Sally initially dismisses the idea that Ed resembles Bluebeard, similarities emerge as Ed's controlling nature and suppression of Sally's desires become evident.

In both stories, these men seek obedience from their wives, resorting to extreme measures when challenged. However, Sally's resilience allows her to survive in Ed's shadow, contrasting with Bluebeard's ill-fated wives. The story sheds light on the silent suppression women may face within relationships influenced by cultural norms and gender dynamics.

1. Traditional Gender Roles: Cultural hegemony often reinforces traditional gender roles, where men are expected to hold power and women are encouraged to be submissive. In Sally and Ed's relationship, Ed's dominance aligns with these traditional expectations, which results in Sally silently suppressing her desires and opinions to maintain the relationship.

2. Marriage and Motherhood: Culturally, marriage and motherhood are often seen as essential roles for women. Sally's desire for a baby represents her adherence to these societal expectations, even at the cost of her own desires. Ed's neutrality about having children demonstrates his implicit influence over Sally's choices, reflecting the hegemonic notion that women should prioritise the stability of their relationships over personal fulfilment.

3. Silenced Voices: Cultural hegemony can silence the voices of those who challenge the dominant narrative. In Sally's case, her fear of Ed's potential rejection, rooted in his previous failed marriages, prevents her from expressing her desires openly. She silences herself to conform to Ed's preferences, echoing the cultural expectation that women should prioritise male authority.

4. Norms of Submission: The cultural hegemony that promotes male authority often discourages women from asserting their independence or making decisions that challenge the status quo. Sally's accommodation of Ed's wishes, such as not making changes to their home, reflects her internalisation of these cultural norms.

5. Resilience amidst Hegemony: Sally's survival in her relationship with Ed, despite the silent suppression she experiences, can be seen as an act of resilience. She navigates within the confines of cultural hegemony, finding ways to assert her agency even when it requires subtlety and adaptation.

6. Betrayal in a Male-Dominated Society: Sally's vulnerability in her relationship with Ed and her betrayal by Marylynn highlight the influence of a male-dominated society. The cultural hegemony often reinforces traditional gender roles, where women are expected to be

submissive and dependent on men. In this context, Sally's empowerment in financial matters is overshadowed by her emotional vulnerability. As she reflects, "Guess what Ed said today?" Sally says. Marylynn leans further forward. 'what?' she says, with the eagerness of one joining in a familiar game.

7. Silencing Women's Concerns: Sally's suspicion of Ed's character and her fear of being replaced by another woman indicate how cultural hegemony can silence women's concerns and force them to internalise their insecurities. Sally hesitates to express her doubts openly, fearing that she will be seen as paranoid or overly possessive, which is in line with societal expectations that women should not challenge their partners. She worries, "...a familiarity between them, an understanding. If this is it, Sally has been wrong about Ed, for years, forever. Her version of Ed is not something she's perceived but something that's been perpetrated on her, by Ed himself, for reasons of his own. Possibly Ed is not stupid. Possibly he's enormously clever." (P-162, BE).

8. Female Friendship as a Double-Edged Sword: Sally's betrayal by her friend, Marylynn, underscores the complex dynamics of female friendship in a patriarchal society. Cultural hegemony often encourages women to support and empower each other. However, Marylynn's opportunistic behaviour reveals that even in female friendships, there can be hidden power struggles and betrayals driven by societal norms that prioritise the desires of men. Sally witnesses this firsthand as she observes, "Marylynn is bending forward, one hand on the veneer. Ed is standing too close to her, and as Sally comes up behind them she sees his left arm, held close to his side, the back of it pressed against Marylynn, her shimmering upper thigh, her ass to be exact. Marylynn does not move away." (P-161, BE).

9. Re-evaluating Perceptions: Sally's realisation that she has been deceived by Ed challenges her perception of him. This moment reflects the influence of cultural hegemony, which often portrays women as naive or easily manipulated, while men are seen as clever and calculating. Sally's questioning of Ed's intelligence and motives reflects a broader societal narrative where men are perceived as the dominant and strategic gender.

In conclusion, this research paper has delved into the intricate web of cultural hegemony as depicted in Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*. The stories of Emma and Sally, both financially empowered but vulnerable in different ways, serve as poignant illustrations of how cultural hegemony infiltrates every aspect of their lives. Emma's daring adventures around the world reveal the influence of cultural norms on gender roles, clothing, and relationships. Her resilience in the face of oppression showcases the potential for individuals to challenge these norms, even when travelling alone in foreign lands. Sally's silent suppression within her marriage to Ed reflects a different facet of cultural hegemony, one that manifests within intimate relationships. Traditional gender roles, societal expectations of marriage and motherhood, and the silencing of women's voices all come into play as she navigates her partnership with Ed. Her story parallels that of Bluebeard's wives, emphasising the power dynamics and silent oppression that women may endure.

Ultimately, the lens of cultural hegemony allows us to unravel the complexities of how dominant cultures shape norms, values, and power dynamics. It underscores the pervasive influence of these cultural forces, not only on societal structures but also on individual lives. Through the stories of Emma, and Sally, we witness the enduring struggle against these hegemonic forces in our interconnected society, highlighting the importance of continued exploration and analysis in understanding and challenging cultural hegemony.

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