

## **Sleight of Hand: Confession and Deception in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin***

**Sangeetha Puthiyedath**

Assistant Professor, The English & Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad

### **ABSTRACT**

Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin* proposes to write a confessional narrative. The text is a palimpsest of her narrative, the process of her writing and vignettes of narratives told to her by Alex. Atwood cleverly manipulates the body of the text and the multiple strands of stories to capture the complex nature of narratives. This paper attempts to explore the double bind of a confessional text that sets out to reveal secrets while simultaneously attempting to hide guilt. It also explores how the real intent of Chase's memoir, in spite of claims to the contrary is not to reveal but to conceal and what eventually gets revealed happens in spite of the fictional author, Chase. While it is obvious that Chase is a victim, it is also evident that she is a manipulator as well as perpetrator and Atwood challenges the very notion of victimhood. This paper is an attempt to explore the fissures that Iris tries to gloss over in order to unveil the unacknowledged intentions behind her narrative. Iris hopes to alleviate the guilt she experiences occasioned by her sister's suicide for which she holds herself responsible by openly acknowledging her part in precipitating it. But the question arises how far is expiation possible through confession and whether Iris' confession is compromised by the motives that goes beyond her stated objectives.

### **KEYWORDS**

Confessional Narrative; Duplicity; Suppression; Writing the Body.

Margaret Atwood's protagonists are often artists or writers, caught between the elusive real and the problem of representation. Iris Chase Griffen in *The Blind Assassin* is a writer who is involved in writing a confessional autobiography. She claims that her intention is to set the record straight about her life and her sister's and in the true confessional style with the promise of salacious details inveigles the unwary reader into the midst of drama with the blunt assertion: "Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge" (Atwood 3). Asserting her right to chronicle the events that led to her sister's death, Iris is unconcerned with her potential reader as she believes that by the time her confession is published she would have succumbed to her heart condition. Iris claims that she is writing the current memoir to set the record straight before she dies. Elsewhere she claims that she is writing it to commemorate her love: "I wanted a memorial. That was how it began. For Alex, but also for myself" (Atwood 529). However, Iris' acknowledged intention behind chronicling the story of the Chase Family and the Griffins should be viewed skeptically as her confession is compromised by multiple hidden impulses.

Confession being an intimate sharing between the confessor and the reader/listener

demands a complete breaking down of walls and an absolute avowal of honesty. The premise of honesty appropriated by the confessor gives her a unique vantage point. The historical significance of confession associated as it is with religious confession and the desire to attain purity of the soul inflects such a narrative with an added authority. In such a context motives acquire significant relevance. Foucault points out that "[T]he confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society...Western man has become a confessing animal" (1990 59). The religious mode of confession as a means of atonement under the influence of psychoanalysis has been replaced with an interrogation into hidden motives and an analysis of motives and actions. Often, instead of furthering a cause or healing a psychosis, confession has become an end in itself. Exploring a confessional narrative is a fraught exercise, but one, which can prove extremely revelatory, because impulses though well concealed, have a distinct tendency to reveal itself between the lines and subvert the stated object of the narrative.

Iris claims that she is writing the story of *The Blind Assassin*<sup>1</sup> (Note1) for herself as much as to correct inaccurate perceptions, which she

instigated by publishing an earlier work in her sister's name. In a belated attempt to force open her sealed interiority Iris Chase, the octogenarian narrator begins to write the story of her life, only to realize that stories endlessly branch into dialogic strands evading linear narrative thrusts. The structure of *The Blind Assassin* mimicking this dialogic proliferation is a story-within-a-story-within-a-story where each story encases the other like nesting Russian dolls, textually interspaced with newspaper clippings, society announcements, and description of photographs. So at one level the reader is confronted with the story of Iris, an eighty-two year old lonely woman waging a losing battle with time and the many ailments that afflict her, to finish a self-reflexive memoir chronicling the rise and the fall of an industrialist family in Port Ticonderoga, Canada – the Chase family. This narrative is interpolated with the story of *Sakiel-Norn* a science fiction narrated probably by Alex Thomas, Iris' former lover during their clandestine meetings in Toronto. As noted by Sharon Wilson, Iris is living simultaneously in three time periods, the past of the two narratives' events, the present of the writing, and the future of the science fiction.

Iris Chase Griffen, the narrator is fully conscious of the devastation she will cause with the publication of her memoir. Fashioned as a parody of the "tell-all" memoir, Iris knows that the whole edifice built around the memory of her dead younger sister, Laura Chase, the ostensible author of *The Blind Assassin* with a cult following, will come crashing down with her confession. She wants to admit that she, not Laura is the author of the controversial work. However, decimating with language is not new to Iris. Forced into silence by both history and gender, Iris learns after repeated tragedies that silence can be suicidal, and that to survive she needs to learn how to speak out. Iris publishes *The Blind Assassin* a ruinous roman à clef in 1947, two years after her sister's suicide, in her name and successfully destroys her husband's political ambitions as well as his life. Robbed of the ability to speak out her anguish by a repressive androcentric society, Iris, like the slave girls of *Zyrcon* is rendered metaphorically tongueless. She subverts her powerlessness through her writing and in the process wrecks vengeance on the very people who exerted a stranglehold on her subjectivity – her husband, her sister-in-law, and the convention bound upper middle-class society of post-war Canada.

Iris narrates the story of the Chase family, its origin as a prominent industrial family and its ruin during the Depression. The nouveau rich Chase family whose wealth was based on buttons, bought respectability and an entry into

high society through a dynastic marriage with Adelia Montfort, "second-generation Montreal English crossed with Huguenot French" (Atwood 62) foreshadowing Iris's own marriage to Richard Griffen. Adelia Montfort not only brings 'culture' to Port Ticonderoga, but also the decadence of aristocracy and contempt for the process of making money. Her sons, Iris' father Norval and her uncles Edgar and Percival, imbibe their mother's disdain for capital formation and responds to the 'heroic' call of the Great War. The brutal shock of trench warfare quickly disabuses them of any vacuous notions of heroism. The end of the war finds both Edgar and Percival dead and Norval a scarred, bitter and broken man. His experiences on the battle field and outside it profoundly alter him and thrusts him into an existential crises. Once he returns home, Norval finds it impossible to slip back into his earlier life. He is repulsed by the hypocrisy of the society and fights a lonely battle with post war trauma. Added to it is his singular unsuitability to survive as an industrialist in a capitalist economy confronting with daunting economic challenges during the Depression. Iris is the collateral damage for her father's economic incompetence. Faced with immanent closure of their button factory and the loss of livelihood for the employees, Norval agrees to an infusion of capital from Richard Chase. In return he promises Richard the hand of his daughter, Iris, who is barely out of her teens. While, the compulsions behind Norval's decision is clear, the reader is unsure about Iris's reasons for agreeing to the marriage. The reasons she gives appear to be unconvincing. Iris' confession is riddled with unconvincing narratives, narrative gaps, and deceptive accounts that deceives not only the reader but appears to catch the narrator herself in its illusory web. While Iris' confession, provisionally appears as a deft sleight of hand as she pulls out the cards required to further her narrative of a disposed woman who is caught in a series of events beyond her control, the text lays bare her self-defeating deceptive practices.

Disempowered subjects shy away from direct confrontation and challenge, opting to subvert authority through devious and deceptive methods. Iris' narrative slippages and deception has to be read in this context. Her narrative brings into sharp focus the question of her agency. She confesses that she asserted herself only after Laura's suicide and compares herself to the tongueless slave girls of *Zyrcon* "swollen with words" (Atwood 31) that they could not utter. Iris' comparison of herself with the mutilated girls kept as sexual slaves is powerful reminder of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. The physical and mental torture, she is subjected to, by her husband has the silent sanction of

a society. Iris rebels against his brutality by engaging in a sexual escapade with a man, who would be considered all the more reprehensible by her husband for being a communist. When her silent surreptitious rebellion ends in disaster with the death of her lover and her sister, Iris rejects the silence imposed on her and wrecks vengeance of her husband and by extension on society through her writing. Her choice of weapon, words, should be read within the context of women's rebellion throughout history and their struggle for empowerment.

Until she decides to revolt, Iris is a pliant woman who unquestioningly acquiesces to the demands made upon her. She is depicted as a woman "not waiting to write," but "written on." Iris' body becomes the blank space on which Richard, her sexually abusive husband, literally writes on, leaving dark bruises, which Iris recognizes as "a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle" (Atwood 383). Her sense of obliteration is evident when she observes: "I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over" (Atwood 383). Written on by her husband and overwritten by her lover Alex, Iris asserts her agency only when she finds her metaphorically cut-off tongue. Commenting on how Iris simultaneously "writes and rewrite" her story using her body as "primary text and constant referent" (60) Davis observes that Iris appears to actualize Cixous' advice to women to write the body. As Cixous exhorts Iris can write only when she repudiates her husband's authority and reclaims her agency over her body.

The symbiotic link between the act of story-telling/writing and the female body is one that Atwood explores in the *The Blind Assassin* just as she does in her earlier writings especially *Lady Oracle*. While Joan, in *Lady Oracle* appears to fill the pages with the exorcised flesh from her body, Iris seems to write with the "blood-red ink of the body" flowing from the painful cuts that she had to endure. Drawing the readers' attention to the feminine act of writing as a breaking of social taboos, Atwood's terminology for writing closely resembles words used for female bodily functions. Iris refers to her writing as "my black scrawl; it unwinds in a long dark thread of ink across the page, tangled but legible" (Atwood 98). The resemblance to her description of her mother's miscarriage is evident: "There was something on the floor that looked like blood, a trail of it, dark-red spots on the white tiles" (Atwood 94). It also echoes her ruminations when she hears Winifred's casual remark that pregnant women used the roller coaster ride at Sunny side to induce abortions:

What I pictured when she said this was those red streamers they used to toss from

ocean liners at the moment of sailing, cascading down over the spectators below; or a series of lines, long thick lines of red, scrolling out from the roller coaster and from the girls in it like paint thrown from a bucket. Like long scrawls of vermilion cloud. Like skywriting. (Atwood 334)

The skywriting with the blood of miscarriage appears to a harsh metaphor for women's writing. However, if one considers the fact that women's writing, especially confessional writing, because of its association with the secretive and the sexual was considered taboo, the associations is justified. When Iris takes up the pen to avenge her sister, she is too frightened to acknowledge her authorship. Instead, she publishes *The Blind Assassin* as the posthumously published work of her sister. The effect was as devastating as she hoped for and destroyed her husband's political ambitions. By taking up the pen in her old age, she is setting out to correct a historical wrong and admit to her role in authoring the book while publicly laying bare her intentions for doing so. Writing with her body, vainly rebelling against its physical deterioration, with imminent death looming over her, Iris is confronted with teleological questions. She wonders about the purpose of her confession and her potential reader. She insists that one should write without a potential reader in mind else the writing would be compromised. "The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise, you begin excusing yourself" (Atwood 291). Conscious of the lure to excuse and explain one's actions with the hope of gaining empathy and understanding Iris remarks: "You must see the writing emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it. Impossible, of course" (Atwood 291). The resemblance to the scroll of blood emerging from the womb is once again underscored through this imagery.

The effect of such writing, women recording their innermost fears, suppressed desires, dreams and experiences fundamentally challenges society and its power structures. When a woman is writing the body, she will be subjected to external discursive pressures. To comprehend this one will have to discard the idea of the body as constituent of a physical reality. As Gary Wickham puts it: "the notion of bodies as the target of power is part of Foucault's attempt to avoid the liberal conception of individuals as unconstrained creative essences" (cited by Mills 82). Foucault radically redefines the concept of the individual that has been prevalent from the time of the Enlightenment. While the Marxian thinkers



challenged the notion of individual freedom and forced a rethink on how power is configured, Foucault pries open and lays bare the discursive processes through which bodies are constituted.

Expressing the body is a fraught exercise since you are challenging the right exerted over the body by the society who seeks to define and control female sexuality. In the *History of Sexuality* Foucault argues how the narrative on sexuality underwent a critical redefining during the nineteenth century. In terms of sexual discourse Foucault finds the twentieth century an extension of the nineteenth century marked with duplicitous prudishness and suppression. The attempt to confine discussions of sexuality behind closed doors inflected it with the glamour of something taboo. The secrecy associated with sex, to the point of even refusing to name it, denying its existence linguistically, paradoxically contributed in what Foucault refers to as a “discursive explosion,” within controlled situations. Thus, while all talk about sexuality was proscribed through convention, it survived as “illicit discourse” (Foucault’s term). Iris records how the publication of *The Blind Assassin* in 1947 caused a scandal that exposed society’s hypocrisy. While the work was openly castigated as obscene, it was avidly enjoyed in private.

...ministers in church denounced it as obscene, not only here; the public library was forced to remove it from the shelves, the one bookstore in town refused to stock it. There was word of censoring it. People snuck off to Stratford or London or Toronto even, and obtained their copies on the sly, as was the custom then with condoms. (Atwood 41)

Atwood does not present the infraction by women readers as an expression of sisterhood or solidarity with the silenced woman, rather as a proof of people’s need to feel superior and to condemn others who dares to break barriers. Remarking on the notoriety of Laura’s work, Iris notes how people of Fort Ticonderoga “drew the curtains and read, with disapproval, with relish, with avidity and glee—even the ones who’d never thought of opening a novel before,” and adds caustically: “There’s nothing like a shovelful of dirt to encourage literacy” (Atwood 41).

Recognising the impossibility of writing with no one in mind, Iris identifies Myra, Reenie’s daughter, and then, more importantly, her granddaughter Sabrina as her prospective reader. She also breaks her own injunction not to read what she has written: “I look back over what I’ve written and I know it’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve

omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light” (Atwood 407). Acknowledging the presence of the unsaid, the gaps, Iris is admitting to self-censoring. “You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn’t necessarily get you the truth,” (Atwood 407) argues Iris. While Iris is aware of the elusive nature of truth she is blind to the possibility that she herself may not be able to access it. A confessional narrative is predicated on memory and recall. The ontological questions that Iris attempts to confront are almost impossible given the indeterminate nature of memory. It is this realization that gives the text its iterative tendency to reflect on narrativity. Coomi Vevaina states that “[t]he compulsion to narrativize is due to the unfailing potential of narrative to make sense out of the chaos of lived experience and present it in a form that seems natural” (95). Drawing attention to Hans Kellner’s claim that the narrative not only “gives things a plot (*muthos*)” in the Aristotelian sense, but also “turns the chaos of history into an illusion of the immediacy and order of nature” in the Barthian sense, she locates the compulsion to record one’s story in the nature of truth itself.

The reader gets a heavily edited version of Iris’ interiority through Iris’ over determined narrative. She not only attempts to explain the series of untimely deaths – her father’s, her sister’s, her husband’s, her daughter’s – through her narrative, but also tries to simultaneously convince and cast doubt about her role in precipitating Laura’s suicide. She appropriates for herself the title of the ‘blind assassin,’ and claims that she precipitated Laura’s suicide with her blindness. However, even as she confesses her guilt, she is simultaneously affirming her innocence. Her narrative is a prolonged attempt to enlist the unwary, gullible reader to affirm and reassure her of her innocence. Confession, can be a narrative spoken with a forked tongue uttered by subjects who are caught in a double bind like women. Iris’ deception appear to have its roots in the systematic disempowerment she, as a woman is subjected to by a patriarchal society. The sub-text of *The Blind Assassin* is the ingrained misogyny that manifests itself as sexual violence enacted on the body of women. The men in the text, Richard and Alex, Iris’ husband and lover treat women as mere sexual objects or as decorative pieces to flaunt as their assets as in the pulpy science fiction of “The Peach Women of Aa’a.” (Note2) Richard appears to view physical relationship with his wife in terms of a violent conquest, “He preferred conquest to cooperation” (Atwood 383) and remarks to Iris gloatingly, “It was remarkable how easily [she] bruised” (Atwood 383). Alex, her lover, the ‘He’ in the story, within the story is equally misogynic, taking perverse pleasure

in humiliating her. He conveniently chooses to believe that her relationship with him is purely sexual in nature and tells her: “You shouldn’t worship me...I don’t have the only cock in the world” (Atwood 8). Later during one of their meetings, he snaps to her remark that she worry about him: “Don’t worry, darling...You’ll get thin, and then your lovely tits and ass will waste away to nothing. You’ll be no good to anybody then,” (Atwood 112) thereby reducing her to a non-person, a body that is meant for mere sexual gratification of the opposite sex. The extreme objectification of women where they reduced to mere erogenous zones is violently realized in the science fiction tales that Alex churns out to earn a living. Though he is viciously lampooning the capitalist society through his portrayal of *Sakiel-Norn* with its *Snilfards* and *Ygniroids* and their master-slave relationship, he is blind that Iris is as much a slave by virtue of her gender as the *Ygniroid* serfs. Apart from being a critique of exploitation, Atwood uses the story of *Sakiel-Norn* to underscore the silencing of women’s voices. The comparison Alex makes of the tongueless sacrificial virgins in his fictional tale to a “pampered society bride” (Atwood 32) buttresses this similarity.

Iris’ intention is clearly stated – she wants to confess her ethical transgressions and in the process ask forgiveness in the true confessional spirit. However, the text betrays her and reveals the rift between her stated intention and the actual narration. James Phelan in *Experiencing Fiction* remarks that there are two distinct kinds of unreliability: “bonding unreliability” in which the narrator’s confusion and misinterpretations endear him to us, and “estranging unreliability” in which the author intentionally draws the reader’s attention to the unreliability of the character-narrator (224). Confessing is a difficult act, and the motive behind the need to confess is often complex. Devoid of the religious framework the ethics of the confession is in itself suspect, and in cases can border on self-gratifying exhibitionism. This is all the more relevant in this age of pervasive social media. Arguing that Confession is a Western invention Foucault says that “the Christian West invented this astonishing constraint, which it imposed on everyone, to say everything in order to efface everything, to formulate even the least faults in an uninterrupted, desperate, exhaustive murmuring, from which nothing must escape” (1979 84).

Peter Brooks in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* distinguishes a confession from a memoir. He says that a confessional narrative “implies that the speaker or writer wishes or even needs to reveal something that is hidden, possibly shameful, and difficult to articulate” “the rhetoric of the genre may involve a kind of hind-and-see, where the reader finds that what is confessed by the narrator is not the whole or the pertinent truth” (Brooks 82). Iris indulges in a “hide-and-see” with her reader in her confession – disclosing, while simultaneously withholding information. The silence Iris employs with regards to her actual nature and motives is one she has perfected over the years in her relationships with others. The real blindness of Iris is her inability to see or understand herself. She drifts passively into situations never questioning herself or revealing her true feelings. When she claims that her eyes are open, her sister who is not ‘blind’ retorts “[l]ike a sleepwalker” (Atwood 242).

The octogenarian Iris has no more access to her interiority than the unexposed, protected Iris of her youth. Her interiority is an unexplored area of darkness and she resists examining her emotions, motives and compulsions even at the end of her life. So while the reader is forced to listen to her obsessive focus on the effects of age on her body, one finds little proof of self-reflexivity. Her critical self-examination is restricted to her bodily degeneration on account of her age and never on her actions. The structure of the novel with its intervening sections of the past and the present, conversations of the unnamed lovers and the science fiction that has been described by Atwood as a “collage”, poses its own challenges. Her approach reflects what James Phelan states in *Experiencing Fiction*, “a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response” (4). Ultimately, the intent of Iris’ narrative, in spite of claims to the contrary is not to reveal but to conceal and the polyphonic structure reflects her closed, compartmentalized interiority. Iris creates multiple scaffolding to protect herself from her truth and in the process deceive the reader. Ultimately, *The Blind Assassin* turns out to be a text that challenges the very possibility of a confessional narrative and the ability to access truth.

<sup>1</sup>*The Blind Assassin* is the title of multiple narrative texts: a) The title of Margaret Atwood’s fictional story of Iris, b) the story of *Zyrcon* narrated by Iris’ unnamed lover who is probably Alex, and c) The misleading autobiography of Laura published in 1947, which is actually written by Iris.

“In this science fiction “The Peach Women of Aa’a” narrated by Alex, there are two women., one is described as a “sexpot,” while the other is described as being “serious-minded, who could “discuss art, literature, and philosophy, not to mention theology,” (Atwood 365).

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<p><b>Dr. Sangeetha Puthiyedath</b> is an Assistant Professor with the Department of Materials Development, Testing and Evaluation, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her PhD Dissertation was on Interiority and the Dialogic elements in the novels of Margaret Atwood. She has published papers on Atwood, Ecocriticism, Religion, and Language.</p>
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