

Intertextuality in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood is the first major author of Canada to envision a new woman as self-cognizant, self-governing and searching to acquire an identity of her own. As a versatile genius, Atwood through her novel explores the condition of women and their status in the Canadian patriarchal society. She portrayed women as both victims and avengers in her works. In her fiction and poetry, she often employed Canadian and Universal myths to portray the female/human predicament. Her works are often known for their intertextuality, *The Robber Bride* uses intertextuality like *Triple Goddess* and *The Three Little Pigs*. This article attempts to study Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993) in the light of intertextuality. Zenia, the protagonist of the novel is a whore who rebels against male sexual politics in a patriarchal society. She rejects society's view of fallen women, oppressed by male and uses her body as a weapon to humiliate men. Her strength is the power of female sexuality. She traps men, seduces them and then, abandons them. Zenia is a homeless, demonic woman who wants to revolt against male hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Patriarchal; myth; intertextuality; victim; avenger.

The term 'Myth' has been pushed in so many directions in recent years that its definition has become vague. Margaret Atwood's 1978 definition of myth does not go very far towards remedying this problem:

Myths mean stories, and traditional myths mean stories that have been repeated frequently. The term doesn't pertain to Greek myths alone. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* are just as much myth or story as anything else (Conversations 114).

Two of the forms of mythical inter-texts related to *The Robber Bride* are, precisely, Greek myths and fairy tales. These domains of discourse, which are closely related in the novel to the characters Charis and Roz, are two elements in a three-fold structure that also includes

history, whose field of discourse is related to Tony.

However, it is essential to address the ways in which mythical intertextuality functions. *The Robber Bride* discusses mythological intertexts in two different ways: first is the one that echoes pre-existing texts, mythical references make actions, characters, themes and structures pleasantly recognizable to the reader. This is an open-ended mode of intertextuality whereby familiar content is reworked into a later moment of textual production. The second function of myth in Atwood's novel is to frame meaning; to frame it in the sense of keeping it within certain boundaries, but also to frame it in the sense of setting it up as something which it is not, namely, limited in its possibilities. This is intertextuality which takes over

not so much the context as the structure of the work to which it refers. The principle intertexts which *The Robber Bride* uses in this way are the *Triple Goddess* and *The Three Little Pigs*. Because of the triple structure of each of these myths, underscored by the triple narrative of the characters' personal histories, this particular use of mythical intertext is the restriction which prevents the novel from opening up to the reader a range of potentially radical positions.

It is therefore no surprise to find traces of classical mythology in Atwood's writing, but it is more specifically the myth of the *Triple Goddess*, the goddess of the three ages—Maiden (Persephone), Matron (Venus) and Crone (Hecate)—which is the dominant mythical component of her work. Readers of Atwood's work have already discussed this aspect of *The Robber Bride*: both Sandra Djwa and Hilde Staels point to the figure of the Great Goddess to clarify aspects of Zenia's identity and come to associate her more closely with the figure of Hecate (Djwa 41, Staels 201). It is obvious that the myth of the Triple Goddess is an extensive invocation of intertextuality more than its connection with Zenia would suggest: it presents the triad structure to which Tony, Charis and Roz belong. It is not, however, the only intertext which focuses on the triadic structure; other dependencies are also hooked onto this framework and is sufficiently well-anchored to carry the weight. *The Triple Goddess* is not a myth of action or odyssey; it is a myth of presence, that which is constructed to appear at the same time, to precede those who receive it, and to live on beyond those who reactivate it through their story-telling. As myth, *Triple Goddess* is a chosen meaningful structure which Sandra Djwa sees as offering a universal site of identification for women.

It is usually stated that the most complex phenomenon is the human

psyche and unraveling its mysteries is a mammoth task. Many have miserably failed in their attempt. One may question the existence of any major difference between the male and female psyche as one probes the subject of the human psyche. A close reading of the novel reveals the difference. The psyche of a woman is indeed a zigzag puzzle, a labyrinth and a complicated knot to unfasten. Eventually, a seasoned, experienced hand with adept dexterity is required to unfasten it. That is what Atwood has successfully attempted here. It is the story of three protagonists, Tony, Charis and Roz; particularly it is the story of Zenia, the trio's friend. A friend or fiend? Zenia, who cunningly, stealthily and unobtrusively snatches away the men of this trio, dies in a bomb blast. To the surprise of the trio, on an unfortunate day, when the three are at the Toxique, their rendezvous restaurant, the dead Zenia comes alive, in flesh and blood. Each of the trio grows nostalgic and taking turns relate their nightmarish experiences with Zenia in the three different segments of the novel christened. Black Enamel, Weasel Nights, and The Robber Bride. Individually, Tony, Charis and Roz conceive a black murder of Zenia. Seemingly, they are incapable of executing it and Zenia proves to be too powerful and elusive to get rid of from this world, once for all. The real death of Zenia takes place rather late, when all the men have already been used by her. One can analyze it in any angle; all roads will lead to the same destination, the dreadful, destructive debauchery of Zenia.

Her interest lies in any combination of money, romance, and excitement. The scent of these accommodations will have her rising like a cobra from a wicker basket. The provider of such diversions occupies center stage in her life, but his identity is unimportant to her, and it's a temporary position. Nobody can amuse her forever. All pied pipers

eventually fade into the past (3). Close to the end of the story, one could see how heartlessly Zenia blackmails Roz. Zenia shows her true colour. Larry, Roz's son gets hooked up in a drug deal. Zenia exploits both the situation and the person eventually and brings about a lethal blow to the closest of the relations. Growing ferocious to the resentful Roz, Zenia yells out: "Money is too important to you, Roz?" she says. "What I was really offering you was protection for yourself. Not for Larty. But you aren't worth protecting. Here's the real truth, then. Yes. I'm screwing Larry. Larry is my primary pusher... He thinks I need him (1). Zenia's behavior sounds diabolically against the established notion of women. The social psychologist David G. Winter observes: "Women display their power needs in a more restrained manner, congruent with traditional societal restraints on women's behavior" (4). But it is difficult to judge Zenia, based on this fact. She doesn't fit into any norms. Neither an inquisitive reader nor a critic could be a complete success in his analysis of the psyche of Zenia. For, the plot is woven with such an intricacy and characterization, with devices like flashback, conflicts external and internal details of history and war, battles, the folly of human relations, love, lust etc. that it is very difficult come out this *cul de sac*. Hence, the novel will, to some extent, stay a mystery. For, it is the story of the mysterious and enigmatic Zenia.

The novel is written in segments, from the victim's perspective and with flashbacks, which gives insight to the readers. Each victim has her traumatic story written in a separate section. Atwood writes in the third person for each victim in such a way that each one remains distinct. All three women cling on to each other for moral support. It is their friendship which helps them to confront and combat Zenia. Each one strengthens the other, so that they are able to conquer

Zenia individually. The solution offered by Atwood is that in order to combat malicious dominance, it is necessary to exorcise the oppressor, most of all from one's mind.

In the beginning of the novel Zenia who appears like a phoenix, returning from the dead, by the end of the story dies for real, and this time her three enemies actually get to see her body floating in a hotel fountain and then to scatter her ashes in a happy ritual over water. But that's not the end of her says the writer Atwood. The characters and events in the novel portray how women live in a good and happy society. It is Satirical how, despite putting in effort to change their position in society, the three major protagonists are incomplete, unfulfilled and unhappy. Although Tony, Roz and Charis enjoy ambition, success and satisfaction in certain spheres of life, they cannot function as complete human beings without each other's help, friendship and filling of the emotional void. At the end of the novel, the spiritual wins over the rationalist when Tony, the most rational character in the novel, the rigorous academic requiring a proof and a rational explanation for everything, finds this approach to the role of Zenia in her life inadequate. She is one of the three women to suggest a ritual burial and a wake for Zenia a year after her death, she even requests all three of them to wear black before they scatter Zenia's ashes into the lake halfway between the mainland and the Island, where Charis has her house:

She wants to do Zenia justice; . . . She craves some idea of ceremony of decorum; . . . What she herself would like is a little gunfire. A ritual canon shot, the flag lowering to half-mast, a single bugle note quivering in the silvery air. Other fighters get that, so

why not Zenia.' (TRB 466-68)

The issues which Atwood takes up to address in her novels are quite realistic and can benefit the women folk immensely to be their real and true selves. The death of Zenia remains a mystery to the end. Hence, in *The Robber Bride*, the woman heroes and villainess all lack true love and happy childhood; they portray fragmented identities waiting to be acknowledged by their real-self.

Zenia is the representative of the power of female sexuality. *The Robber*

Bride is the tale of greed, violence, viciousness and lust for power, and the war of the sexes. Atwood implies that men and women who adopt the male/female perversion lead them to degradation. Women cannot change the patriarchal society and the sexist world overnight. They need courage and patience to transform the society and attitudes of men towards women. The novel demands for equality and a world free from sexual exploitation and oppression.

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