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## RENAVIGATING THROUGH HISTORY AND HYSTERIA: *THE BLIND ASSASSIN* AS A CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVE

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### ABSTRACT:

Canada as a nation has had an apparent transition from a frontier nation to an industrialised and developed nation during the twentieth century. The role of Canadian literature in structuring nationalism and fostering multiculturalism in Canada cannot be forgotten at any cost. It was towards the end of nineteenth century that a group of new generation authors took remarkable efforts to establish a new Canadian identity replacing the erstwhile adherence to western models. By the end of twentieth century due to large scale immigration from all over the world, Canadian culture underwent immense changes. The twenty first century Canadian writers, therefore, can be classified broadly under two categories. The staunch advocates of Canadian

nationalism who took up settlement, survival and Canadian identity issues as the face of Canadian literature such as Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Armstrong, Thomas King consist of the former category and other Canadian authors of Non-European origin who took up issues of global impact and often set their stories outside Canada. The latter category includes writers like Rohington Mistry, M.G.Vassanji etc.

**KEYWORDS:** structuring nationalism and fostering multiculturalism.

### INTRODUCTION:

Much has been written about Margaret Atwood's policy as a writer, environmentalist and as an ardent advocate of Canadian nationalism. Therefore the focus is on the analysis of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective that would unfold the dubious rubric of socio-psychological dilemma in the life of the two central characters in the novel who are the representatives of twentieth century Canadians. Here the attempt would be to trace the elements of hysteria in the lives of

two central characters- Iris and Laura-in *The Blind Assassin* and account their hysteria as an outcome of their symbolic castration from a feigned history.

*The Blind Assassin*, published in the year 2000, is an epic tale of two sisters, a lady recollecting her entire life after half a century of her sister's death. The novel progresses mainly through first person narration and tells the story through her subjective experience. The story is set in the fictional Ontario town of Port Ticonderoga and in Toronto. Iris Chase, the protagonist-narrator, grew up in Port Ticonderoga along with her sister Laura Chase, facing difficult circumstances as they lose their mother too early. Having brought up under the care of Reenie

and busy father Norval Chase, both girls in their childhood and youth has poor understanding of the ways of the world. Their sufferings and ordeals accelerate with their father's demise and Iris's unhappy marriage to Richard Griffen, a businessman in Toronto which eventually culminates in Laura's suicide. There are two stories embedded in the main plot: one that is attributed to Laura Chase and Alex Thomas, a politically radical author with whom Laura and Iris harboured love and the

other story of a Blind Assassin in the imaginary city of Sakiel-Norn as told by the narrator of the second story.

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* covers a large span of time, beginning with Iris's Grandfather Benjamin's establishment of button factory in the early 1870's to Iris Chase's death in 1999. So the book offers a panoramic view of Canadian history almost from the British North America act of 1867, which marked the emergence of Canadian independence, to the end of the twentieth century. Atwood brings in her concerns about the reception and assimilation of the new Canadian identity towards the end of twentieth century. Iris who spends her salad days in Toronto often becomes the mouthpiece of Atwood who also has strong Toronto sentiments. Throughout her recollections of past and narration of present, Iris never conceals her pestering dilemma of the dynamic present day Canada. It is evident on numerous occasions. For example, when Iris observes the girl who received Laura Chase Memorial Prize her immediate thoughts are "could she be Indian, or Arabian or Chinese? Even in Port Ticonderoga such a thing was possible: everyone is everywhere nowadays"(50). Iris is unable to take pride even in the national anthem when it was being sung at the school during the prize ceremony.

The school ensemble hit up with squeaks and pads and we sang "O Canada!" the words to which I can easily forget in light of the fact that they continue evolving them. Presently a days they do some of it in French, which once would have been unfathomable. We sat down, having avowed our aggregate pride in something we can't articulate (46-47)

Not only is Iris destabilised with her present but she undermines and dismantles her past with retrospective effect. What Louis. A. Montrose calls "the textuality of history" is revealed. Iris' journey through memory rewrites and reinterprets most of the events against the version of archived history manifested in the form of various articles from newspapers in various chapters. Laura's disappearance in between her journey from Avilion to Toronto and its newspaper report serve as a good specimen as to how easily a concocted story suddenly becomes a part of authentic history. A powerful, influential, rich businessman like Richard could instantly manipulate events with a phone call and disseminate a forged story as reality. Elwood Murray, the press photographer, represents the agents who intrude into privacies, facilitates gossips and eventually contributes to the feigned history. The question why Iris and Laura, who were born and brought up in an upper middle class family, failed in playing 'fair' in their part in this feigned history is what demands a psychoanalytic reading for their hysteria and its cause.

As in most of Atwood's novels women's problems, issues of gender equality and nationalism surface in *The Blind Assassin* often. But this particular fiction doesn't confine only to what generally is attributed to most works of Canadian origin known as 'Garrison mentality'. The term Garrison mentality was coined by famous literary critic Northrop Frye. In literary works containing Garrison mentality, the characters tend to look outward and build imaginary walls against the society or outer world. In *The Blind Assassin* it is more than what could be called as Garrison mentality because both Iris Chase and Laura Chase wanted to be as social and genuine as anyone.

I'd generally thought those windows were very fine. In any case, I could see that Winifred's judgment was the judgment of the outside world-the world that knew such things and passed sentence appropriately, that world I'd been so urgently yearning to join. I could see currently how unfit I was for it. How rural, how crude.( Atwood 227)

This inability to establish one's congruency with one's surroundings is what French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls 'symbolic castration'. In his book, *How to Read Lacan*, Slovenian philosopher and thinker Slavoj Zizek explains Lacanian thought:

The emotions I perform through the mask (false persona) that I adopt can in a strange way be more authentic and truthful than what I really feel in myself. When I construct a false image of myself which stands for me in a virtual community in which I participate, the emotions I feel and feign as part of my screen persona are not simply false: although my true self does not feel them, they are nonetheless in a sense true.(Zizek 18)

Laura and Iris neither realise this masking technique of one's persona and nor do they understand the importance of maintaining a symbolic identity. They behave as they feel and always

project their psychological identity. Among Iris and Laura, it is Iris who at least gets a look at her emblematic job and considers:

In any case, I had no words to express this, my conflict with my mom's variant of things. I didn't realize I was going to be left with her concept of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned on to me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her. (Atwood 117)

Perhaps it was Iris's delay to engage in the symbolic fiction, the reality represented in the symbolic order, which culminated in the tragic death of her sister Laura. Iris never understood why she should protect Laura, why she should get educated, she should participate in balls. This is also the reason why Iris couldn't raise her voice against Winifred, Richard's sister, even when she knew Winifred was faking and unnecessarily being fashionable and pompous in the public. Iris silently acts as per the instructions of Winifred and Richard, but she always bore questions popping up in her mind and she never could relate this to her life.

Richard had various engagements during the day.... He employed a vehicle and driver for me, I was taken out to perceive what in his view should be seen. The vast majority of the things I investigated were structures others were parks....But I couldn't generally bode well out of what I was seeing. Structures are just structures. (369)

Iris and Laura never had a chance to witness a harmonic, romantic relationship which is expected of a husband and wife in the symbolic order. In their Childhood, their father Norval Chase was a war veteran who returned injured and led his life in solitude within the house. Reenie, the housekeeper/ maiden who took care of Iris and Laura was also leading a single life as far as they lived Avilion, in Port Ticonderoga. Iris' record of Winifred Prior's conjugal life is :

(Was she hitched, bereft, or separated ? It wasn't totally clear. She utilized her given name after the Mrs., which would show a type of harm to the recent Mr. Earlier, if without a doubt he was recent. He was only here and there referenced and never observed, and was said to have a great deal of cash, and to be "voyaging". ... (225)

Therefore Iris never had a chance to learn the masking and faking of a symbolic persona. It is evident from Iris's words that both she and her sister were suffering from symbolic castration. They had their psychological identity but was terribly lacking a symbolic identity which constituted the reality of social life for everyone else. Zizek says:

Castration is the gap between what I immediately am and the symbolic title which confers on me as certain status and authority....Because of this gap, the subject cannot ever fully and immediately identify with his symbolic mask or title; the subject's questioning of his symbolic title is what hysteria is about; why am I what you are saying that I am? (Zizek 19-20).

There are more evidences for Iris's confessions about the symbolic castration from which she and her sister were suffering. "I excused her (Laura), obviously. I generally did; I needed to, on the grounds that there were just both of us. Both of us on our thistle surrounded island, sitting tight for salvage; and, on the terrain, every other person." (Atwood 53)

Hysteria emerges when Iris and Laura start to question or to feel discomfort in their thrust symbolic identity. There was no one to rescue them from the island existence of psychological identity. Usually a child enters into a symbolic order with the help of its parents and immediate relationships. There should be recognition of child's identity by parents and society. And it is only when the child conceives this recognition from society, it gradually fits itself into the symbolic order. Having left alone after mother's death, Reenie, the caretaker, was Iris's only chance of recovery to her symbolic order. "I generally hear such things in Reenie's voice. She was our town mediator, mine and Laura's. Who else did we need to fall back on". ( 57)

The story of the Blind Assassin runs parallel to Iris's life. Iris and Laura are the adopted foundling girls in Sakiel-Norn, the imaginary city in the story. Iris' father's first concern has always been the button factory and ex-service men and their families who worked there and moreover their father always desired for sons and not daughters. So, Iris and Laura were like adopted girls, who were muted and sacrificed to God in Sakiel-Norn. Just like Snifards who handed over adopted girls for sacrifice before God to retain prosperity, Norval Chase handed over Iris and indirectly Laura-both helpless and

mutated symbolically-as a sacrifice to regain his prosperity. In the story it is the Blind Assassin, who was hired to kill the King of Sakiel-Norn, who rescues the girl from being sacrificed. Similarly Alex Thomas, a politically blind radical, who offers a little solace and love for Iris. Alex Thomas, who was an orphan like the carpet-weaver turned blind assassin, seems and proves genuine for Iris and Laura than Richard who is civilised and fashionable. A blind but direct reality is more easily understood by Iris and Laura than an obvious, masked, constructed reality. "Contact precedes locate, before discourse. It is the primary language and the last, and it generally comes clean." (Atwood 341).

Laura commits suicide not because she was raped by Richard which would have been a symbolic death for any woman in those times. Laura, rather, could not conceive Alex's death which actually could create an impact on her psychological identity. The symbolic identity of an individual is always determined historically. Iris and Laura, being symbolically castrated, was never part of a historic life. Iris' attempt to write and publish a book by Laura's name could be seen as a realisation, which Iris had after leaving Richard. Iris gives Laura a symbolic identity as a writer which Laura never was. With this, Iris enters into the world of masking and faking in order to express herself and Laura to the public in general and to Sabrina, Iris' granddaughter specifically. Iris has now a 'superior' thought of history and how to think of one: "History as I review, was never this winsome, and particularly not this clean, however the genuine article could never sell: a great many people incline toward a past in which nothing smells." (Atwood 35)

*The Blind Assassin* therefore escapes the generalisation of being called a yet another text expressing 'Garrison mentality' and at times overflows over the boundaries of Canada with a wider, larger socio-psychological issue. Nor does the text limit itself as a platform to exhibit what Atwood herself would categorise and define as Victim-Survival narrative in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. It acquires more or less the shape of a confessional narrative of a victim about her history and hysteria. *The Blind Assassin* thus becomes a renavigation through the history and hysteria of a twentieth century Canadian subject.

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