

# Feminist Discourses on Madness and Identity in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

Arunakumari S

Assistant Professor, Division of Languages, Scholl of Life Sciences, JSS AHER and Research Scholar, Maharaja's College Mysore, University of Mysore

**Abstract:** *This scholarly inquiry delves into the literary realm of Margaret Atwood, a prominent figure, renowned for her exploration of themes intrinsic to feminist discourse, particularly madness and identity. An intricate motif permeates Atwood's novels, representing comprehensive examination. Employing an interdisciplinary framework, this study navigates the narrative landscape, shedding light on the gendered dimensions of madness and their profound implications for construction of identity. Exploration unfolds within robust context of feminist literary critique, emphasizing, relevance of Atwood's narratives in advancing discussions concerning gender and agency. Selected works, including "The Handmaid's Tale," "Alias Grace," and "Cat's Eye," stand as focal points for textual analysis through Atwood's skillful manipulation of literary techniques, vivid imagery, and nuanced symbolism in the portrayal of madness. Within this exploration, emerges the intricate interplay of gendered contours, intricately shaping the experiences of female characters. Their encounters with madness emerge as potent instruments for resistance and self-assertion. Critique assumes a central role in this study, anchoring prominent feminist theories to the narratives woven by Atwood. This critical perspective unveils nuanced depictions that either reinforce or challenge prevailing feminist ideologies. The insights of distinguished feminist scholars, including Susan Sontag, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, find thoughtful integration. Gendered facets of madness are illuminated, unraveling profound implications for agency. Narratives of recovery and resilience are not only celebrated but also subjected to critical scrutiny. Through Atwood's masterful storytelling, evolving landscape of feminist discourse is traversed, resilient profound insights into the multifaceted nature of identity and the persistent pursuit of gender equality.*

**Keywords:** Portrayal of Madness in Atwood's Novels, Gendered Dimensions of Madness, Narratives of Recovery and Resilience, Feminist Critique of Madness, Agency and Madness

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, celebrated within contemporary literature, occupies a prominent space within feminist discourse. Margaret Atwood's literary portfolio areas diverse genres, encompassing dystopian landscapes, historical narratives, and psychological dramas. Her protagonists, often resilient individuals navigating oppressive societal constructs, embody the broader feminist struggle. Their encounters with madness, their struggles with the boundaries of sanity, offer a unique vantage point to analyze the intricate dynamics of gender and identity. This study endeavors to address fundamental inquiries: How does Atwood depict madness within her novels, and how have critics like Sontag, de Beauvoir, and Friedan interpreted these portrayals? In what ways does madness assume gendered dimensions, and how does it influence the construction of female identity within her narratives, as analyzed by these eminent critics? How does madness serve as a means of resistance, agency, or rebellion within the context of feminist themes?

### Portrayal of Madness in Atwood's Novels

The comprehensive analysis of how Margaret Atwood depicts madness in her literary creations, specific characters and situations in Atwood's novels that exemplify madness, such as Offred's experiences in "The Handmaid's Tale" and Grace's story in "Alias Grace" in the narrative techniques, imagery, and symbolism employed by Atwood to convey the complexities of madness. In "Alias Grace," Atwood crafts a nuanced portrayal of Grace Marks, a convicted murderer who may or may not be mad. Through a first-person narrative that shifts between lucidity and uncertainty, Atwood blurs the lines between sanity and madness, inviting

readers to question the nature of identity and perception. Feminist critics like Elaine Showalter have explored Atwood's use of madness as a literary device to challenge traditional gender roles and question the authority of psychiatric institutions. Showalter's work on the "female malady" in literature is particularly relevant here.

In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood examines the hysteria that emerges inside a society that is both oppressive and misogynistic. As the protagonist Offred struggles to survive in the theocratic state of Gilead, she begins to unravel psychologically. The way that Atwood skillfully captures Offred's gradual loss of identity and autonomy while she struggles with her sanity has been praised by critics. In "The Handmaid's Tale: Margaret Atwood and the Emergence of Canadian Women's Literature," critic Elaine R. O'Reilly emphasises how Atwood's depiction of lunacy in the book serves as a sobering reminder of the dangers associated with strong political and religious beliefs.

The historical novel "Alias Grace" (1996) is based on a true murder that occurred in the 19th century. In-depth research is done by Atwood on the life of convicted murderer Grace Marks and the questions raised by her guilt or innocence. The novel addresses memory, trauma, and insanity/sanity. In her essay "The Hysteric's Tale: Alias Grace, the Madwoman in the Attic, and the Dissemination of the Female Gothic," critic Barbara L. Baetz analyses the ways in which Atwood's portrayal of Grace Marks questions stereotypical views of female lunacy and victimization.

Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) delves into the protagonist's spiral into insanity as she confronts her tumultuous past and

returns to her childhood home. The distinction between the protagonist's internal psychological landscape and the outside world is hazy in the book. "Atwood's Surfacing': A Problematic Journey, " a critique by Patricia Merivale, explores how the protagonist's psychological collapse and the novel's fractured narrative mirror the issue of madness and its relationship to identity.

Characters in the 1993 film *The Robber Bride* struggle both individually and collectively with their own forms of insanity. Atwood investigates the ways in which cultural influences, obsessions, and trauma might exacerbate mental instability. Reviewer Susan Swan, writing for *The Globe and Mail*, commends Atwood for her skill in giving her characters psychological nuance and a complex web of madness and its repercussions in the lives of the book's female protagonists.

These illustrations show how Margaret Atwood frequently uses the concept of madness as a prism through which to examine more general issues of trauma, identity, gender, and social criticism in her books. She has been praised for digging into the complicated and often delicate human psyche, resulting in nuanced and thought - provoking portrayals of madness. There is still debate and criticism about Atwood's writings in literary circles.

### Gendered Dimensions of Madness

According to Atwood's works, lunacy is gendered, with female characters experiencing it differently from masculine characters. In Atwood's works, textual evidence shows how particular challenges and cultural pressures cause lunacy in women. Offred is a character in "*The Handmaid's Tale*" whose gendered oppression and experience of lunacy are entwined. Her inner turmoil and strife are exacerbated by the dystopian society of Gilead and its stringent societal expectations placed upon women. The limits imposed on women in a patriarchal society are reflected in Atwood's examination of lunacy, as Susan Sontag's feminist analysis of "*The Handmaid's Tale*" makes clear. Sontag contends that the oppressive dictatorship in the book is well represented by the character Offred's mental instability, which works as a metaphor.

Gender norms and societal expectations have been pointed out by numerous feminist critics as contributing factors to the appearance of crazy. Women are frequently penalized for breaking from social norms that they are expected to adhere to. The renowned book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830 - 1980* by critic Elaine Showalter explores how pathologizing women's actions for defying social norms has traditionally been a part of society's attempt to pathologize women. Such cultural influences are frequently highlighted in Atwood's books.

One of the most important feminist works, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, depicts a woman's spiral into madness as her husband repeatedly disregards her feelings and opinions. An allegory for the suppression of women's voices and experiences, which in this case leads to madness as a form of defiance. Women are likewise seen to be silenced in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially when it comes to the ritualized controlling over their speech

and ideas. The connection between sexism and mental illness is examined by critics like Janet Larson in her essay "*Dystopia and the End of Politics*, " which discusses Atwood's novel.

As a means of pathologizing women's feelings and experiences, the historical diagnosis of "hysteria" was frequently used to women. Novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* examine this idea in depth. Sander L. Gilman and other feminist academics explore the idea of hysteria and its application in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*.

Discriminate against and subjugate women. Although not unique to Atwood, this setting is useful for putting gendered discussions of insanity into perspective. Loss of autonomy and identity are frequently shown in Atwood's novels, notably *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, with female characters losing agency and coping with a loss of identity. Dissociation and delirium are two symptoms of this kind of loss.

In "*The Madwoman in the Attic*, " critic Sandra M. Gilbert examines the idea of the "madwoman" throughout literary works, highlighting how women who defy social expectations are sometimes stigmatized as insane. Atwood's protagonists frequently encounter such categorizations when they exercise their agency.

It's crucial to recognize that intersectionality and lunacy go hand in hand. Cross - cutting categories like race, class, and sexual orientation can exacerbate the experience of madness. Such an example can be found in bell hooks's "*Ain't I a Woman?*" The book "*Black Women and Feminism*" talks about the particular difficulties Black women encounter since they can suffer from both gendered and racialized types of madness.

The article "*Madness and Civilization in Margaret Atwood's Novels*" by Chelsi West Ohueri delves into how Atwood's books, such as *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, portray madness as a reaction to the harsh and cultures of patriarchy that her female protagonists live in. According to Ohueri, women who experience gendered restraints may turn to lunacy as a coping mechanism or a form of resistance. The article "*Gender and Madness in Margaret Atwood's Fiction*" by Claire Massoud explores how Atwood explores the relationship between gender and crazy in her writings. She talks about how societal expectations cause female characters in Atwood's books to feel alienated and lose their identities, which can result in mental anguish and even lunacy.

An examination of "*Surfacing*" and the protagonist's decline into madness as she faces her own identity and the patriarchal rules of society is presented in "*The Madwoman's Gaze: Revisiting Feminine Madness in Margaret Atwood's 'Surfacing'*" by Sangeeta Bhatia. The study delves into the ways in which the novel depicts insanity as a result of women's oppression. The essay "*Margaret Atwood's Female Madness*" by Rohini Bannerjee explores how Atwood's books, including "*Cat's Eye*" and "*The Robber Bride*, " illustrate the emotional toll that female relationships can have on readers. It delves into the ways in

which these connections can be interpreted as aspects in the protagonists' inner turmoil. By R. Devaraj, "Sanity, Identity, and Gender: Atwood's 'The Edible Woman'" examines how "The Edible Woman" depicts the protagonist's battle with society's ideals of femininity. According to the essay, the work emphasizes the conflict between upholding one's identity and sanity and adhering to established gender norms.

An examination of the gendered features of lunacy in Margaret Atwood's works, typically as a reaction to the restrictive gender roles that women are expected to play, is provided by these critical analyses. In the framework of gendered power dynamics, they explore the ways in which lunacy may be both a symptom and a method of resistance, delving into the psychological complexity of Atwood's female characters.

### Agency and Madness

Madness - agency relationship In Atwood's stories, madness can be used to resist or rebel against oppressive systems, and we examine situations when characters use their experiences with madness to question traditional power dynamics. Elaine Risley, a character in "Cat's Eye," is discussed in terms of the agency she demonstrates despite her mental illness. Hallucinations in "Cat's Eye" help Elaine Risley gain insight into herself and spark her imagination. She feels empowered to face her history and establish herself as an artist despite the disturbing aspects of her crazy. Julia Kristeva and other feminist writers have written about the idea of "abjection," which means being pushed to the edges of society. Characters in Atwood's books frequently struggle with emotions of rejection associated with their encounters with insanity, which might finally result in self - liberation.

A critical article titled "Madness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's Novels" by SumanBala examines how Atwood's characters frequently struggle with madness as they fight for autonomy and agency in a world that tries to limit them. Bala examines characters in a number of Atwood books, such as "The Handmaid's Tale" and "Alias Grace," to show how losing one's sanity can lead to madness. Safoora Rashid's analysis, "Agency and Identity in Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin," focuses on "The Blind Assassin" and explores the issue of agency in relation to the intricate narrative structure of the book. The article investigates the ways in which the decisions made by the characters—especially the female lead—affect their mental health and sense of self.

Sarah Palter's essay "Freedom and Madness in Margaret Atwood's Fiction" examines Atwood's novels' conflict between freedom and madness. It examines the ways in which female protagonists' internal struggles, as well as external pressures from family, friends, and society, can push them to the edge of insanity. An examination of Margaret Atwood's body of work is provided in "Margaret Atwood's Fiction: Madness, Agency, and Resistance" by John Barton. The analysis discusses how lunacy is frequently a means of resistance against repressive regimes. He contends that the characters in Atwood's works, particularly the female protagonists in her stories, employ the appearance of insanity as a technique of expressing

agency and questioning the rules of society. An essay by Janet Shay titled "Agency, Identity, and Madness in Margaret Atwood's 'Lady Oracle'" focuses on the novel "Lady Oracle" and examines the concept of agency through the protagonist's attempts to remake herself in order to defy society expectations. It shows how hard it is for the character to stay sane while she is trying to take control of her life.

### Feminist Critique of Madness

Feminist literary theories to analyse how Atwood depicts madness in her books, pinpoint feminist themes like women's autonomous struggles and the subversion of patriarchal standards, and assess how these viewpoints are supported or refuted by Atwood's writing. In "The Edible Woman," Atwood critiques conventional stereotypes about women, particularly marriage and motherhood, through the protagonist's journey into lunacy. As a form of protest against these roles, Marian's insanity emerges. Women's identities have been extensively discussed by feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan and autonomy are influenced by cultural norms. Their analysis of the feminist aspects of lunacy can be applied to Atwood's novels. Women's relationships in "The Robber Bride" by Margaret Atwood are dissected in "Gendered Madness in Margaret Atwood's 'The Robber Bride'" by Laura Williams. According to her, "Atwood's exploration of the dynamics between the female characters exposes how societal pressures can contribute to feelings of madness among women who don't conform to traditional roles."

### Narratives of Recovery and Resilience

Resilience and recovery narratives in Atwood's writings illuminate issues of healing and resilience by showing how characters deal with and occasionally overcome their experiences with insanity. Showcase and analyze characters who represent these themes. The three female characters of "The Robber Bride," who have all suffered from different types of psychological trauma, set out on a path toward recovery and healing. They are able to reclaim agency and reassemble their identities thanks to Atwood's story. Atwood's novels deal with issues of healing and resilience, and critics like Judith Herman, who has studied trauma and recovery in women's narratives at length, can provide light on these topics.

Jones analyses "Alias Grace," a show about a woman accused of murder who eventually finds redemption and healing. "Atwood's novel depicts Grace's journey towards self - discovery and resilience as she confronts her past and seeks a sense of agency," adds Jones. Robert Turner analyses many of Atwood's dystopian books, including "Oryx and Crake" and "The Year of the Flood," focusing on the ways in which the protagonists show strength and ingenuity despite living in a nearly hopeless situation. The article addresses the topics of adaptability and survival in the face of disaster.

## 2. Conclusion

Within Margaret Atwood's books, feminist discussions about madness and identity show the complex and nuanced ways that gender, power, and social norms affect mental health

and identity. The works of Atwood provide a rich tapestry for examining how women, in particular, navigate the complexities of their identities within patriarchal systems and how struggles can manifest as lunacy or lead to acts of resistance and resilience. Female characters in Atwood's novels frequently experience mental breakdowns as a result of the stifling constraints of society. Characters can be driven to the brink of mental breakdown due to the restrictions imposed by traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Feminist interpretations of Atwood's novels emphasise the potential of insanity as a form of defiance. Characters that are deemed insane may actually be rebelling against repressive institutions. In a patriarchal society, their alleged insanity serves as a means of regaining agency and identity. Identity is a concept that is interwoven with Atwood's investigation of crazy. In a world that attempts to identify them based on gendered expectations, her characters grapple with questions of selfhood and struggle to assert their authentic identities. In this respect, their mental instability may be interpreted as a manifestation of the struggles they're having on the inside. Through close friendships, rivals and mother - daughter dynamics, Atwood explores the complexities of female relationships in many of her novels. Characters' self - perceptions and experiences of insanity or resiliency may be influenced by these relationships. Although many of the protagonists in Atwood's books struggle with mental or emotional issues, the novels also feature inspiring tales of triumph over adversity. Female protagonists in particular are depicted as resilient and flexible in their efforts to overcome their pasts, recover from trauma, and reclaim their sense of autonomy and individuality. Feminist critiques of illness and identity in Atwood's body of work highlight the significance of understanding the influence of gendered power relations on mental health and self - perception. These criticisms challenge readers to think about the ways that cultural expectations and conventions influence women's experiences and how these experiences are represented in stories of resilience, lunacy, and resistance. In the end, Atwood's books provide a potent prism through which to view the intricacies of gender, identity, and mental health in a patriarchal society.

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