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# A COMMEMORATION OF WOUNDS ENDURED: WRITING AS RESISTANCE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

**Abstract:** *Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin depicts repressive patriarchal practices such as insistence upon the cult of Victorian womanhood and the sacrificial angel trope imposed on women in 1930s and 1940s Canada. Focusing on the protagonist, Iris Chase Griffen, the paper will explore the ways in which female voices are silenced within patriarchal structures, finding an outlet of resistance in the act of writing. The Blind Assassin utilizes the mode of fictional autobiography to challenge dominant male perspectives, as Iris rewrites her own history, realizing the potential for female agency and self-expression.*

**Keywords:** *Margaret Atwood, The Blind Assassin, fictive autobiography, l'écriture féminine, personal trauma narrative, self-sacrifice.*

## 1. Introduction

A fictional memoir, told against the backdrop of wartime upheaval and ensuing economic dislocations, *The Blind Assassin* offers an insight into a deeply masculinist system that sanctions objectification of and sexual transgressions against women. A powerful confessional impulse pulsates throughout the novel, one compelling Iris Chase Griffen, the novel's narrator, to produce a memorial – “a commemoration of wounds endured” (Atwood, 2000:p.508) which would depict a personal history of victimization inflicted on her and her sister Laura. Building on the personal trauma narrative, the novel weaves a commentary on how societal structures and cultural norms perpetuate women's victimization.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood exposes the constraints, contradictions, and deceptions present in the gender ideology of 1930s and 1940s Canada to which

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the Chase sisters are forced to conform. One of the most prominent ways the novel demonstrates the harmful impact of these norms is through the portrayal of the cult of domesticity or the “trivialized Victorian angel in the house” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2020:p.20) paradigm. Namely, Iris is compelled to play the role of a wholly passive virginal bride who lives a pathetic life of cloistered ordinariness picked out for her by her father and husband:

‘For in the metaphysical emptiness their “purity” signifies they are, of course, selfless, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests [...] She ... leads a life of almost pure contemplation. ... in considerable isolation on a country estate ... a life without external events — a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. [...] She has no story of her own but gives “advice and consolation” to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes.’ (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020:pp.21, 22)

Marriage is established as a trade market where women are exchanged as commodities to uplift men to higher places in society or politics. It is an oppressive institution that forces Iris and her female predecessors to subordinate their needs and desires to their husbands. Another avenue of victimization to be explored is the way women are silenced in phallogocentric discourse. The way characters like Laura and Iris are silenced in sharing their story of abuse with the wider society demonstrates “the severity of the male text’s “imposition” upon women.” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020:p.20)

The novel challenges the gilded image of the self-sacrificing angel, exposing its role in maintaining women’s subordination and their blind acceptance of their own oppression. This paper will explore the subversive approach to modes of Victorian femininity inscribed in the text, as well as the underlying power dynamics and the traumatic consequences of conforming to societal norms.

Furthermore, the act of female writing, or *l’écriture féminine* will be explored as a way to dialogically contest the male-inscribed version of history. Women’s textual self-representation is explored as an avenue for escaping entrapment in literary and cultural constructs. Iris weaves her contradictory account navigating through inherited male-dominated texts, only to emerge beyond hegemonic categorizations: ‘Acting as an assassin by occupation, Iris writes and unwrites others’ identities, along with her own, leaving them open for change in ways to improve her progeny’s vistas’ (Hembrough, 2017:p.3). It is through the destruction of gender norms that female forebearers may leave a fruitful heritage for the generations to come. *The Blind Assassin* can therefore be seen as a postmodern narrative about Iris as a writer assassin who writes her own story in order to deconstruct female constructs singularly defined by the masculinist social strictures.

## 2. Masculinist Constructs and Female Identity

In addition to being a confessional memoir depicting personal family history, *Blind Assassin* also documents the ways in which social and political forces of a given time collude to shape and confine women into predetermined gender and class roles. It is a story centered on domestic life that gradually reveals larger patterns about history and identity. The personal traumas and sacrifices Iris and Laura go through under an oppressive patriarchal system are indicative of a classic, generationally transmitted cultural script available to women of the twentieth century.

The social myth of female sacrifice is also described in Gilbert and Gubar's seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They describe the cult of the "angel-woman" in terms of fragility and delicate beauty, these women are seen as compliant, ready to reduce themselves to art objects, they are 'slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead' (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020:p.25). The Victorian formula valorizes surrender of the self and one's own comfort and finds nobility in death. Victorian women were seen as angelic figures whose primary purpose was to create a haven for their husbands, offering emotional support and a respite from the challenges of the outside world. The authors imply that these eternal types such as the angel in the house are masks, impositions invented by male artists in their attempt to fight off inconstancy and to possess women more thoroughly (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020:p.17)

The masks Iris is forced to wear are socially constructed roles of the self-sacrificial daughter and sister, virginal bride and dutiful wife and mother. These roles also closely resemble the Victorian ideals of purity and passiveness. In *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Jeanette King describes "the madonna" as one of the polarizing images underpinning the Victorian vision of womanhood. It led to a gender ideology in which temptations of the flesh were rebuked and obedience and silent submissiveness favored. (King, 2005:p.11) Women who followed the Virgin Mary ideal of purity and self-sacrifice were sanctified, and others were associated with evil and disobedience:

'Images of the Madonna and of angels therefore contribute to the formation of the Victorian feminine ideal, in both visual and literary representations. What emerges out of this iconography is a highly idealised picture of woman as disembodied, spiritual, and, above all, chaste. Chastity, moreover, meant for many not only a lack of sexual experience, but a lack of sexual feeling, or "passionlessness"'. (Davies in King, 2005:pp.10,11)

In *The Blind Assassin*, the enduring lineage of these gender ideals of “good women” is underlined by the descriptions of Iris and Laura’s mother and grandmother. Their grandmother Adelia was married off, irrespective of her free will, as a commodity expected to “refine” the crude Chase money. The arranged marriage is described as her duty, and she is expected to use her taste and culture to uplift her husband in society. Iris romanticizes her grandmother by imagining her with agency – taking up a lover, or eating her food with her fingers once the nice company left, acutely aware of the improbability of such prospects.

Adelia constructs their family home as an Arcadian retreat reminiscent of Tennyson’s idyllic fantastical landscape, however, Iris detects its hollowness: ‘Surely Adelia’s choice of name signifies how hopelessly in exile she considered herself to be: she might be able to call into being by sheer force of will some shoddy facsimile of a happy isle, but it would never be the real thing’ (Atwood, 2000:p.61). While dying of cancer, Adelia still “bites the bullet”, has perfect posture, and dresses beautifully despite the tremendous pain she is in. And when Reenie recounts the story of her death to Iris, she wonders if there is a hidden message in the story – ‘that I too should display such fortitude—such defiance of pain, such bullet-biting’ (Atwood, 2000:p.64).

Their mother Liliana is similarly depicted in terms of a sense of duty which mars one’s personal desires. She is a devout Christian, of frail health, and yet steeped in altruistic pursuits of missionary work with the poor and wounded soldiers. Self-sacrifice is more than evident in Iris’s account of her mother, she recognizes a desire to pursue virtue at the price of her health and strength: ‘Nobody is born with that kind of selflessness: it can be acquired only by the most relentless discipline, a crushing-out of natural inclination, and by my time the knack or secret of it must have been lost. Or perhaps I didn’t try, having suffered from the effects it had on my mother’ (Atwood, 2000:p.73).

Iris also recognizes the perils of this selflessness, “its tyranny” (Atwood, 2000:p.77). The silent grudges that materialize between her parents after her mother passively accepts the devastating effects of war on her husband – the mistresses, the atheism, and the drinking, as she ‘understood that she was supposed to understand’ (ibid.) and her father’s resentment of her forgiveness. Ultimately, her mother dies from a miscarriage, becoming a victim of self-denial prescribed by the domestic ideal of motherhood. Iris and Laura, although aware of the deadliness of being a sacrificial good woman, still internalize the social script of female sacrifice. Iris carries the generational burden of self-sacrifice and bemoans her inability to shed the weight fastened onto her by her mother’s idea of her goodness:

'But I had no words to express this, my disagreement with my mother's version of things. I didn't know I was about to be left with her idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her (as would have been the normal course of affairs with a mother and a daughter—if she'd lived, as I'd grown older).' (Atwood, 2000:p.94)

Consequently, Iris and Laura grow up walking a precarious line between their legacy of compliance and sacrifice and their awareness of its devastating effects. When girls reach adolescence, Norval Chase decides to reinforce Reenie's lessons about proper femininity and social respectability. The values her father demands from his daughters are tantamount to those of an army: 'neatness, obedience, silence, and no evident sexuality' (Atwood, 2000:p.159), symptomatic of broader Victorian ideas of femininity and sexuality. As the girls grow older, he becomes much stricter, insisting on their obedience and silence. As a way to instill these values, he subsequently hires a tutor, Mr. Erskine, who subjects them to emotional and physical abuse, teaching them about their cultural role as submissive sexual objects and victims:

'He was fond of the suicide of Dido—or from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the parts where unpleasant things were done by the gods to various young women. The rape of Europa by a large white bull, of Leda by a swan, of Danae by a shower of gold—these would at least hold our attention, he said, with his ironic smile. He was right about that. For a change, he would have us translate Latin love poems of a cynical kind. *Odi et amo*—that sort of thing. He got a kick out of watching us struggle with the poets' bad opinions of the kinds of girls we were apparently destined to be.' (Atwood, 2000:p.163)

Iris and Laura also internalize the rules of femininity through exchanges with Mr. Erskine who shames them for supposedly female traits of mental deficiency, propensity for daydreaming, and "sloppy" sentimentality. He also sexually molests Laura, a fact that remains hidden from her father and wider society. Even Iris remains apprehensive when it comes to fully believing Laura's account. Laura's experiences with Mr. Erskine foreshadow her later victimization by Richard Griffen and the way she learns how to 'subtract herself in the blink of an eye' (Atwood, 2000:p.164), disassociate, and passively endure her tutor's abuse becomes her automatic response to Richard. Mr. Erskine represents the repressive forces of the masculinist society and the way the story of Laura's sexual trauma becomes concealed in the novel's multiple narratives mirrors the long cultural denial of sexual trauma.

Tara Hembrough describes Iris as ‘a captive of some masculinist-created stronghold’ (Hembrough, 2017:p.9), tied to sterile and antiquated male-dominated Victorian spaces. Images of enclosure and escape are embedded in the description of architecture which mirrors their entrapment in phallogocentric literary constructs. Avilion bears the mark of patriarchal trappings Iris is exposed to – her parents’ requests to take up the burden of Laura’s wellbeing, Reenie’s sanctimonious teachings about sexuality, and her father’s request to save their family name from ruin by marrying Richard. Ostensibly a romantic place of Tennysonian ideals of heroes and fairytale lovers, it proves to be a preparatory ground for sacrificial maidens to be consumed as masculinist society’s products: ‘Perhaps he considered [Avilion] itself her true monument. And so Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren’t’ (Atwood, 2000:p.62).

Iris’s house with Richard, decorated by Winifred who is completely immersed in the world of predatory patriarchal expectations, ends up resembling Laura’s asylum. It becomes the symbol of patriarchal confinement, sterility, and isolation as both Iris and Laura become trapped in a patriarchally constructed universe. Her one form of escape is her rock garden, again symbolically empty of life, barren. When she revisits the house as an old woman, Iris describes it as ‘unowned, transient, like a picture in a real-estate flyer’ (Atwood, 2000:p.297), she is devoid of any emotion and disconnected from the home she used to occupy. At that moment, she imagines her past self, disembodied, gazing out the window, plotting her escape that never came to fruition. During the entirety of her youth, Iris seems to be trapped in an ivory tower, gazing at a proverbial glass ceiling, through which she can never escape just like “a decorated and bejewelled prisoner” (ibid. 132) from Sakiel-Norn.

The mise-en-abyme structure of Atwood’s novel allows a more in-depth analysis of the social strictures that shape female identity as these multiple discourses mirror each other thematically. In Alex’s science fiction story featured in *The Blind Assassin*, he describes a society predicated upon the suffering of sacrificial virgins of Sakiel-Norn that corresponds to the suffering of women like Iris who are trapped in paternally arranged marriages. He precisely describes one of them as a “pampered society bride” (Atwood, 2000:p.29), decorated with a veil and flowers, taught to lay her life freely and selflessly with her tongue removed to prevent any vocal resistance to the ritual sacrifice she is forced to undergo. Sacrificial virgins ‘were taught to walk with downcast eyes, and to smile with gentle melancholy, and to sing the songs of the Goddess, which were about absence and silence, about unfulfilled love and unexpressed regret, and wordlessness’ (Atwood, 2000:p.29). Their tonguelessness

is not seen as mutilation but as an improvement showing that Sakiel-Norn, a fictitious dystopian place born in Alex's imagination is not a far cry from a sanitized Victorian world of decorous self-sacrifice.

In establishing a connection between Iris and Laura and the sacrifice of the virgins in the science fiction story, Atwood showcases how violence against women is culturally and historically ubiquitous, and the repetitive nature of women's sexual victimization in the novel shows how this type of traumatization is often institutionalized.

When it comes to Laura, she is described as having "saintly impulses", and she becomes the mute sacrificial virgin in Richard's blackmail scheme who sexually sacrifices herself due to a religious devotion she feels for Alex: 'It was horrible, but I had to do it. I had to make the sacrifice. I had to take the pain and suffering onto myself. That's what I promised God. I knew if I did that, it would save Alex' (Atwood, 2000:p.487). Laura becomes the ultimate victim of the self-sacrificial mode of thinking and behavior when she commits suicide by swerving off the bridge. Similarly, in her childhood, faced with the finality of her mother's death, she attempts to drown in the Louveteau, hoping that her sacrifice would bring her mother back. By being present only in textual form, through the lens of her sister's perception of her, Laura becomes an archetypal composite of textual representations of the female self-sacrificial victim., showing just how ruinous this ideal can be to female subjectivity:

'Laura is a kind of missing person in the text, existing somewhere between the realms of social realism and cultural myth, suggests that the utterly "good" sacrificial woman is both a kind of textual illusion and a lingering female and cultural fantasy in the postfeminist world of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century.' (Bouson, 2003:p.252)

The core issues embedded in the plot of *The Blind Assassin* are "the social construction of female identity and the cultural denigration of the female body" (Bouson, 2010:p.2). Namely, Margaret Atwood outlines the traumatic effects of enacting the social ideal of feminine self-sacrifice. It shows femininity as being socially developed by repressive forces of masculinist culture that presuppose quiet suffering and selfless sacrifice. However, Atwood also explores subversive female writing as a way to rewrite the masculine code of subordination and escape the entrapment of cultural constructs.

### 3. Rewriting the Madwoman: Trauma and Textuality

Female writing, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, assaults and deconstructs societal values which created the patriarchal paradigm of the angel in the house, reconstructing images of women inherited from male literature. Female writing can therefore be used to remove the mythic masks of the phallogocentric discourse that impose submissiveness, silence, and domesticity: “Women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art.” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020:p.7)

There is a split in Iris’s identity as she attempts to navigate the socially imposed pattern of an obedient and dutiful politician’s wife and clandestine meetings with Alex Thomas in which she performs the role of a mistress, further emphasized by elderly Iris’s attempt to bridge the gap between her past and present selves. The contradictory roles she needs to perform leads to a schism in her subjectivity (Hembrough, 2017:p.5). The fractured identity that emerges as a result is not seen as dysfunctional in Atwood’s postmodernist discourse, though, the ontological fluidity is seen as empowering. She is free to position herself as ‘a victim, product, villain, and avenger’ (Hembrough, 2017:p.3), which helps constitute a larger, more diverse sphere of identities to be recognized and identified with by women.

Bouson (2003) mentions not only the aforementioned roles imposed on the sisters by social strictures in terms of “femininity as a kind of formative trauma” (p. 255), but she also provides a deeper insight into Iris’s complicity and collusion with these harmful practices. In her view, the internalization of ideals of self-restraint and self-sacrifice causes Iris’s blindness and denial when it comes to Laura’s victimization by Richard, and her memoir is seen as an attempt to attenuate her culpability and ease her consciousness. Tara Hembrough further posits Iris as ‘a casualty, product, villain, and usurper of her masculinist culture’ (Hembrough, 2017:p.2). The fluidity of given identities allows the reader to contest Iris’s initial narrative of ‘the conventional Edwardian female roles as dutiful daughter, “good sister to Laura,” (...) appropriately dressed and frivolous Toronto society wife and mother in a loveless arranged marriage’ (Howells, 2003:p.44). Iris’s account of the truth may at times be interrupted by intrusion of other voices such as Laura’s that contest her self-portrait and tell an entirely different story. These contradictory fragments are important as they show that even though Iris can keep secrets or tell half-truths or lies in an attempt to hide the fact that she participates in her role as a social product, the act of her telling her own story is still important as it challenges logocentric masculinist truths.



After her engagement, Iris feels “erased, featureless” and observing her trousseau before her honeymoon, she ponders how full of emptiness, empty space – surely her way of subconsciously fighting off the signifiers imposed upon her by masculinist discourse. Perhaps Iris recognizes the same script her mother observed that arguably killed her in the words her father utters to her before the proposal: ‘A certain amount of resolve might be required. A certain amount of courage. Biting the bullet and so forth’ (Atwood, 2000:p.226). Ultimately, Iris’s noble act of self-sacrifice proves futile as her father’s factories still shut down and she fails to protect Laura, which leads her to the discovery similar to those of the sacrificial maidens in the story who ‘realize they were being murdered as lip service to an outworn concept’ (ibid. 29). Faced with the fact that her whole life has been authored by her father and husband, older Iris writes a story in an attempt to get away from their definitions. A woman must learn how to assimilate and transcend these extreme images, which, for Iris, is done through her memoir. It is a written attempt at self-definition, i.e. the “killing” of the imposed aesthetic ideal, through which she can replace the patriarchal definitions she conformed to in her girlhood.

Atwood further implies that through the act of writing, women can erect a memorial for the buried female voices from the past, allowing for its reparation which will allay the fears of upcoming generations of women. ‘Your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation. You’re free to reinvent yourself at will,’ Iris tells her granddaughter Sabrina (Atwood, 2000:p.513). According to Coral Ann Howells, Iris intends to free her granddaughter from ‘the constraints of legitimating myths of origin’ (Howells, 2003:p.51). By emphasizing the illegitimacy of Laura and Sabrina’s origin and the fact that Alex Thomas is her real grandfather, Iris shakes the foundation of predetermining structures of identity. It is a hopeful ending, which suggests that Sabrina, as an exponent of the newer generation can reinvent herself, unburdened with culturally constructed entrapment her predecessors were defined and confined by.

Hélène Cixous’ essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* outlines a strategy for women to subvert and reclaim the patriarchal discourse that has marginalized them throughout history:

‘If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.’ (Cixous, 1976:p.887)

According to Cixous, the only position within the existing order is one of compliance with masculine standards, however, female writing possesses both destructive and regenerative potentials. It is volcanic and subversive towards the established order and it dismantles the patriarchal system. It is also a radical reimagining of feminine self-expression. Cixous challenges the patriarchal dominance of language and narrative by ironically contesting the idea that female desires, pleasures, and identities were accurately represented by the male discourse (Cixous, 1976:p.888). This new revolutionary feminine language, which will meld body and text, will dismantle patriarchal power structures and create a language capable of expressing the fullness of women's experiences:

‘Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence,” the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end.”’ (Cixous, 1976:p.886)

Similarly, Madeleine Davies (2006) analyzes power politics through the connection between the female body and the text. It is an approach that echoes Spivak's idea that ‘there is no such thing as an uncoded body’ (Spivak in Davies, 2006:p.60) and that the body bears the mark of cultural and political forces. Davies sees the body as a blank page, a figurative text encoded by others, in the case of *The Blind Assassin* the proof of the cruelty enacted by Iris's abusive husband who leaves bruises on her body.

Iris's self-authored narrative about endured abuse is an attempt to erase old codes and reclaim authorship of her own story and her own body, which she feels were taken from her: ‘I sometimes felt as if these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it? I was sand, I was snow—written on, rewritten, smoothed over’ (Atwood, 2000:p.371). Her subversive narrative confession is a rejection of cultural myths that favor silenced female voices: ‘Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts. (Cixous, 1976:p.886)

Cixous argues that women have been historically excluded from writing and their bodies by patriarchal forces. She suggests that women should inhabit their bodies fully and thus reclaim their bodies and subsequently their voices through writing. By writing from their bodies, women can create a female language that subverts historical and political constructions as well as the dominant linguistic order.

In a metafictional remark she makes in the novel, Iris recognizes in herself the urge for 'a thread thrown onto the empty page, into the empty air' (Atwood, 2000:p.473). Roberta White recognizes this impulse as indicative of Atwood's view of art as a strategy for survival (White in Bloom, 2009:p.159). Atwood explores how personal experiences, particularly traumatic childhood events, can shape an artist's work. These internal processes, in Iris's case navigating the world of culturally sanctioned misogyny lead to the urge for artistic creation by which she would re-engage with society on her own terms.

Introducing the perspective of the Gothic, Coral Ann Howells suggests that Margaret Atwood uses this genre as a dark lens through which history can be perceived from a different angle (Howells, 2003:p.28). As the Gothic positions the uncanny other as a threat to the official narratives of history, a parallel can be drawn with female storytelling. Women, who have been politically marginalized, but also the victims of political and social structures of history, offer an alternative story that undermines any totalizing narratives. The author believes that in *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood uses the genre of fictive autobiography to tell the history of the feminine gender posited as an alternative to the existing male-inscribed master narrative (Howells, 2003:p.27).

Furthermore, fictive autobiography can be imagined as a constructed representation of the self. It poses a question about the authenticity of Iris's identity and the role her text plays in shaping it – how much of it is self-presentation and how much concealment. And more widely, fictive autobiography highlights the challenges of defining a stable female identity in fiction:

'Such "life writing" immediately raises questions about the historical and social contexts within which identity is constructed, just as it encourages questions about concepts of the self. Is there an authentic self, or is the self only a construction with different multiple figurings constructed through the text? If this is so, then the fictive autobiography becomes a kind of textual theater where a changing self displays and hides itself through a series of disguises and a parade of doubles, always eluding fixed representation. In this case the fictive autobiography, far from constructing a coherent identity, foregrounds nothing so much as the problematic construction of female subjectivity in fiction.' (Howells, 2003:p.29)

Atwood's multidimensional novel explores the complex interplay between identity, memory, and the nature of autobiographical text. It blurs the lines between the past and the present, objective and subjective reality, fact and fiction. Iris sees

herself as disembodied from the writing process, as a severed hand detached from her consciousness, writing about the past, and her writing as a kind of hemorrhaging until the final silencing of death:

‘Sometimes it seems to me that it’s only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me, like some embalmed, enchanted Egyptian fetish or the dried rabbit claws men used to suspend from their car mirrors for luck. Despite the arthritis in my fingers, this hand of mine has been displaying an unusual amount of friskiness lately, as if tossing restraint to the dogs. Certainly it’s been writing down a number of things it wouldn’t be allowed to if subject to my better judgment.’ (Atwood, 2000:p.373)

Describing the narrative duplicity in *The Blind Assassin* Magali Cornier Michael states that a prerequisite for the production of a liberating and multifaceted identity lies in women uncovering all the aspects of their lives which were silenced by socially sanctioned representations of them. (Cornier Michael in Bouson, 2010:p.102) Moreover, by writing the story of her life Iris puts forward a fuller, multi-dimensional identity that goes beyond what was available to her in a patriarchal society. Textual self-representation is consequently seen as constitutive of female agency and subjectivity.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Blind Assassin* is a poignant exploration of the repressive effects of masculinist ideologies present in 1930s and 1940s Canada. Atwood’s novel unveils the existing class and gender norms that shaped Iris’s formative years, which she, having once internalized, ventures to deconstruct in her narrative. The novel challenges the idealized image of the self-sacrificing “angel in the house” by showing how it can come to shape and confine women’s lives. The text subversively explores the modes of Victorian femininity inscribed within it, highlighting the underlying power structures and the devastating effects of patriarchal dominance. Having publicly performed all the prescribed cultural roles, Iris in her old age chooses to go against societal strictures and delve into taboo topics once deemed inaccessible to her.

Writing is herein seen as a form of silent resistance, which helps her subvert the norms that circumscribe her. The act of female writing, or *l’écriture féminine* – a form of specifically female discourse in which the female body is written in the text emerges as a powerful tool to contest the male-inscribed version of history and make previously silenced voices heard.

The purpose of *The Blind Assassin's* labyrinthine story may be found in what Atwood calls 'the Ancient Mariner element, the Scheherezade element, a sense of urgency. *This is the story I must tell*' (Atwood, 1989:p.xviii). The Atwoodian novel such as this one therefore often possesses the writing impulse, what she calls a "voice" — 'a speaking voice, like the singing voice in music, that moves not across space, across the page, but through time' (ibid. xiv). She views words and writing as a lifeline cast into the unknown, a stratagem to survive the precariousness of a woman's modern existence, or a thread of ink thrown onto an empty page, in the hope that it will be witnessed by someone, even in another time.

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*ZNAMEN ZA PRETRPLJENE RANE: PISANJE KAO OTPOR U  
SLEPOM UBICI MARGARET ATVUD*

*Rezime*

*Slepi ubica* Margaret Atvud prikazuje represivne patrijarhalne prakse kao što je insistiranje na kultu viktorijanske ženstvenosti i figuri žrtvenog anđela nametnute ženama u Kanadi 1930-ih i 1940-ih godina. Fokusirajući se na protagonistkinju, Iris Čejs Grifen, rad će istražiti načine na koje se ženski glasovi utišavaju unutar patrijarhalnih struktura, pronalazeći otpor u činu pisanja. *Slepi ubica* koristi žanr fiktivne autobiografije kako bi izazvao dominantne muške perspektive, dok Iris ponovo ispisuje sopstvenu istoriju, ostvarujući potencijal za žensko delovanje i samoizražavanje.

► **Ključne reči:** Margaret Atvud, *Slepi ubica*, fiktivna autobiografija, „žensko pismo“, narativ lične traume, samožrtvovanje.

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