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The Robber Bride: a Dystopian Female World in Margaret Atwood's Mythology

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how Atwood's reformulations of myths contain hidden political messages from ancient and modern history and can be interpreted from Fredric Jameson's views on 'symbolic acts,' discourse and the ideology of form. Several scholars have explored the symbolic relationship between the three major protagonists in The Robber Bride and fragments of the omnipotent image of the Neolithic deity the White Goddess. As the symbolic counterparts of Diana, Venus and Hecate in the novel, Tony, Roz and Charis demonstrate how women's integrity has been crippled and how the restoration of female principle is just a utopian idea. However, our analysis has revealed that the younger generation of "goddesses" does not bring hope to the female gender in either the present or the future. Augusta, Paula and Erin symbolize oversimplified and parodied versions of the destructive Hecate in an unpromising world and "the not-good place" that resembles a dystopia.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, The Robber Bride, the White Goddess, a dystopian world, Hecate, Fredric Jameson

In her collection of critical essays Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982-2004, Margaret Atwood stresses that "it's a sad commentary on our age that we find Dystopias a lot easier to believe in than Utopias: Utopias we can only imagine, Dystopias we've already had" (Moving Targets 106). The echoes of what "we've already had," the patterns of the ancient narrative plots, images and worlds are often repeated and reshaped in a specific manner in Atwood's prose writing. In her prefigurations;[1] Atwood draws attention to the unfavourable circumstances of the marginalized

and the oppressed in our society. Her parodied images of female deities demonstrate how female power has been weakened, amputated by patriarchal political culture and relegated to fragments.

This stance is illustrated by three major protagonists and symbolic counterparts of the White Goddess in the novel The Robber Bride. In the ancient Neolithic period, where matriarchy was a predominant discourse and ideology, the most important role in religious ceremonies was played by the concept of the White Goddess or Triple Goddess (Persephone, Demeter and Hecate in one in Greek mythology and Diane, Venus and Hecate in Roman mythology), who symbolically represented female power, strength and creativity. However, when "the triumph of patriarchy over the matriarchal or tribal forms" occurred (Jameson 1955-56), the most dramatic manifestation of cultural revolutions in Jameson's view, the principles of the White Goddess were broken down to pieces, as well as the female dominance. Charis, Roz and Tony, the symbolic parts of the omnipotent image of the matriarchal Neolithic White Goddess theremind us of women's incompleteness, disintegration and the fact that the restoration of female principle is just a utopian idea, as revealed by the analyses of many theoreticians. To name a few, Brooks Bouson in Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, the Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake (2010) and "Slipping Sideways into the Dreams of Women: The Female Dream Work of Power Feminism in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride" (1995), Sandra Djwa in "Back to the Primal: the Apprenticeship of Margaret Atwood" (1994) and Hilde Staels in Margaret Atwood's novels: a Study of Narrative Discourse (1995) all draw parallels between the aspects of the White Goddess and their disintegration in the three major protagonists in The Robber Bride.[2] However, a perspective which hasn't been discussed in detail, when it comes to Atwood's 'symbolic acts', discourse and ideology of form, is the symbolic role of the younger generation of "goddesses" (Augusta, Paula and Erin) who might only personify a fragment of the oversimplified White Goddess – the intimidating Hecate.

Atwood has discussed the concepts of Utopia and the Dystopia in her critical essay "Writing Utopia":

> *Both the Utopia and the Dystopia concern themselves with the designing of societies; good societies for the Utopias, bad ones for the Dystopias. There is some of the same pleasure in this, for the writer, that we used to get as children when we built sand cities, or dinosaur jungles from*

Plasticine or drew entire wardrobes for paper dolls. But in a Utopia, you get to plan everything – the cities, the legal system, the customs, even facets of the language. The Dystopian bad design is the Utopian good design in reverse – that is, we the readers are supposed to deduce what a good society is by seeing, in detail, what it isn't. (Moving Targets 103)

Characters and events in The Robber Bride do not show that 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. Atwood reminds us that,

Utopias are often satirical, the satire being directed at whatever society the writer is currently living in; that is, the superior arrangements of the Utopias reflect badly on us. Dystopias are often more like dire warnings than satires, dark shadows cast by the present into the future. They are what will happen to us if we don't pull up our socks. (Moving Targets 104)

Gordin, Tilley and Prakash explain the concepts of Utopia and Dystopia in a similar way as Atwood: "Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now" (2). In dystopian literature, writers mostly warn that "innovation brought about by technological advancement might potentially be disruptive and upsetting" (Booker 6). Atwood's novels The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood are based on that premise. However, in The Robber Bride, she signals that the transformation of gender roles encouraged by feminist efforts to gain equality and power might also have undesirable effects. 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. However, it is interesting that their ideal, Zenia, or the new generation of young women do not prove that a better future for women can derive from the present. Therefore, Augusta, Paula and Erin symbolically and implicitly suggest how "dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality" (Booker 15) and might also stand for "imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradiction" (Jameson 1944), which Jameson discusses in his Preface to The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. Jameson emphasizes his interest in "codes

through which we read and receive the text" (1937), claiming that "our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience in the present" (1938). Texts are infused by different references and symbols and our analysis is usually influenced by current literary and cultural movements. Jameson sees interpretation as an "allegorical act" which relies on a certain master code or "method" in rewriting any given text (1937).

Three factors "understood as dialectical equivalents of what Frye called the successive 'phases' in our reinterpretation" (Jameson 1941) should be taken into consideration when analyzing literature: political history, society and history. The aspect of political history is related to 'the text' as 'a symbolic act' of an individual and "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" in the author's surroundings (Jameson 1942). The second factor presumes that "individual texts are grasped as 'utterances' in an essentially collective or class discourse" (Jameson 1945) and that narratives reflect social and ideological circumstances in which two discourses often fight for predominance:

> *The individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act: yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged. On this rewriting, the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes, and to describe it in these terms (or to reveal it in this form) demands a whole set of different instruments. (Jameson 1948)*

When it comes to the third important horizon in interpreting a literary work, Jameson holds that a text reflects and incorporates elements and symbolic messages of various modes of production and historical transformations in the past, suggesting that,

> *[W]ithin this final horizon the individual text or cultural artifact (with its appearance of autonomy which was dissolved in specific and original ways within the first two horizons as well) is here restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. These dynamics – the newly constituted "text" of our third horizon – make up what can be termed the ideology of form, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation. (Jameson 1948)*

Apart from postmodernism and postcolonialism, one of the most predominant "methods" in The Robber Bride is feminism. The occasions in the lives of Atwood's major protagonists are 'symbolic acts' that reflect women's fragmentation and subordination until the "second wave" feminism and the appearance of female authors who have been trying to "establish a specifically female literary tradition that breaks the male stranglehold on the canon" (Sim and Van Loon 149) and "break out of the snare of silence" (Cixous 2044). Therefore, in accordance with Jameson's views on the second important factor in literary analysis, Atwood challenges the patriarchal ideology and the centuries-long mainstream discourse. However, in line with Jameson's third factor, this significant Canadian female author incorporates in her writing "the specific messages" of several different political moments in the ancient and modern history. The majority of scholars who have investigated Atwood's works have devoted their attention to a symbolic rewriting of the old mythological structures from the mentioned perspective of "second wave" feminism and gender inequality. Therefore, Tony, Roz and Charis in The Robber Bride have often been interpreted as oversimplified, subjugated and parodied fragments of the White Goddess, "broken up" by patriarchal domination. The symbolic role of the younger "trinity" in the novel – Augusta, Paula and Erin – has not been analyzed. What do female deities or the elements of the White Goddess represent and why? If "utopias and dystopias are histories of the present" (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 1), are they prefigurations and reformulations that respectively create a utopian or dystopian image of the current state of female gender?

In The White Goddess, Robert Graves writes about the overthrow of the matriarchy by Achaens in 1250BC, the repudiation of the rule of the White Goddess and the amputations of female myths, emphasizing that "the fact was, that by Socrates' time the sense of most myths belonging to the previous epoch was either forgotten or kept a close religious secret, though they were still preserved pictorially in religious art and still current as fairy-tales from which the poets quoted" (Graves xlvii). The Great or Triple Goddess was "terrible, beautiful, inspiring and destroying" according to Graves (xxiii) who wrote of her as the White Goddess "because white is her principle colour" (90). However, Graves describes the complexity of the image by mentioning three different aspects of the White Goddess, united in a Holy Trinity: "the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Fool Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the old moon, the black goddess of

death and divination" (Graves 90). In her study Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, Sharon Rose Wilson relies on Graves's imagery of the White Goddess and goes on to discuss the omnipotence and supremacy of the ancient female deity focusing on Graves's definition: "As Goddess of the Earth she [is] concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter: she animate[s] trees and plants and rule[s] all living creatures. As Goddess of the Sky she [is] the Moon, in her three phases" (Wilson 52). Wilson summarizes Graves's symbolical division of Woman into three mythological categories or identities: "First comes the elusive Diana or Maiden figure, the young girl; next the Venus figure, goddess of love, sex and fertility; then the Hecate figure, called by Graves the Crone, goddess of the underworld" (52-53).

In her critical essay "Disintegration of the Great Goddess: The Effect of the Community on Individual Integrity in Atwood's The Robber Bride," Vesna Lopičić also interprets Tony, Roz and Charis as the fragments of the White Goddess: "They are god-mothers to each other's children forming a protective triangle as inseparable aspects of one another and of the Great Goddess" (48). Lopičić emphasizes the failure of three major characters in The Robber Bride to achieve full integrity, and assigns blame for that circumstance on unsupportive and uninterested families and society. Having considered Tony's, Roz's and Charis's traits, thoughts, goals and lifestyles, it might seem that they represent three completely different aspects of personality and, as Lopičić claims, they resemble "schematic representations of various human faculties that Eliot would categorize as intellect, senses and feelings, belonging to the mind, body and soul" (39). The symbolic fragments of the White Goddess are described by Lopičić in the following way:

> *Tony is a dedicated historian who Zeus-like gives birth to brain-children, her scientific papers, but never to real children. Her dwarfed figure by contrast strongly accentuates her undoubted intelligence. Roz is a common-sense mothering character whose large body gave birth to three children. She is fond of food and other pleasures of life so that she embodies the sensual part of the human being. Finally, Charis is all feelings, intuitions, premonitions, a typical blonde long-haired sensitive creature shunning negative vibrations and opting for love at all costs. (39)*

If we were to apply Graves's division of woman into three mythological categories and rely on Lopičić's views, Charis might be identified with Diana, Roz would be a Venus and Tony might represent Hecate. Furthermore, Charis is a Diana whose virginity was defiled violently, Roz is a

corpulent Venus who is deprived of love and Tony is a Hecate incapable of taking vengeance on her enemies, although she is an expert on war techniques.

In "Questioning the Triple Goddess: Myth and Meaning in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride," Jennifer Murray also sees Tony, Roz and Charis as the Maiden, the Matron and the Crone figures. Tony is "a paradoxical Diana" (Murray 80), while Roz "can be associated with the Matron figure of the Triple Goddess, the guardian of health and family values" (Murray 81). According to Murray, Charis can be related to death and necromancy, Hecate's attributes: "Charis has already been associated with the realm of death through her proximity with the figure of Charon and incarnates just as clearly the mystical aspect of the Crone phase" (82). All three protagonists are parodied versions of the attributes of the White Goddess: "For, in the same way that Tony is a paradoxical Maiden and Roz a reformed nurturer, Charis, lacking strength of will, is a problematic Hecate figure" (Murray 83). Whereas parallels between Atwood's major protagonists and the White Goddess have been, as previously mentioned, extensively analyzed, these analyses do not devote enough attention to the mythological roles or dystopian dimensions of the younger generation of women.

While Tony, Roz and Charis personify depleted parts of the White Goddess, their acquaintance Zenia, with her strength and charism of a deity, represents a symbolic, although vile embodiment of the aforementioned mythological figure. She overcomes all obstacles with her beauty, self-assurance and skillfulness. For them, Zenia is the ideal that they have never achieved. While they are struggling to conquer and keep men or their position in society, Zenia attains her goals without difficulties. Zenia alone is what the three of them are together – a personified image of the White Goddess. Lopičić notices that "her presence blinds people and reduces women to sub-human species" (46), a view which can be confirmed by the depiction of Zenia in her first encounter with Tony. Tony attends the party thrown by Zenia and West in their strange black-painted apartment, where all the guests are wearing the same dark monotonous color. Nevertheless, as always, Zenia differs from them all:

All the others, in their black, sink into the black background of the walls. Zenia stands out: her face and hands and torso swim against the darkness, among the white crysanthemums, as if disembodied and legless. She must have thought it all out beforehand, Tony realizes – how she

would glow in the dark like an all-night gas station, or – to be honest – like the moon. (Atwood, The Robber Bride 149)

Atwood compares Zenia to the Moon, the leading attribute of the White Goddess. Like the moon, she vanishes and recurs suddenly throughout the novel. However, it is interesting that the destructive Hecate is the strongest aspect in Zenia and, in clarifying aspects of Zenia's identity, both Sandra Djwa and Hilde Staels "come to associate her more closely with the figure of Hecate" (Murray 73). Chastity and love, the positive characteristics of Diana and Venus, are missing in her personality. Murray comments that "there is nothing in Zenia's constructed personality which could be seen as positive within the human context" (86). Zenia enchants all characters in the novel with her stories and appearance, manipulates them and leaves them with dashed hopes. First, she succeeds in befriending people and brings them closer by making up stories that they would like to hear; then she takes advantage of her friends and abandons them. She tells a different story about herself and her past to each of the three major protagonists. Each of those versions is shaped by current circumstances in her life and her desire to obtain something particular from some of them. In order to approach Charis and find her way to Charis's home, Zenia shows herself as fragile, vulnerable and ill. On the other hand, Zenia draws Roz's attention by a sentimental story about meeting her father during the war, makes friends with Roz and later on takes her husband. Even the most intelligent, Tony, is caught in her trap and becomes the victim of Zenia's blackmailing.

At first Tony is embittered by the fact that, apart from Zenia, women of her generation were not allowed to make progress in the way they chose. Tony has achieved great success in her academic career, but she has noticed man's domination and control in her sphere of interest:

She used to think that her work was accepted or rejected on its own merits, but she's begun to suspect that the goodness of her lectures is somehow not the point. The point is her dress. She will be patted on the head, praised, fed a few élite dog biscuits, and dismissed, while the boys in the back room get down to the real issue, which is which one of them will be the next society president. (Atwood, The Robber Bride 130)

The fact that younger women such as Charis's daughter Augusta and Roz's twins Paula and Erin are not doomed to this fate excites Tony's sympathies. Nevertheless, she notices, in an alarming

way, that those new circumstances for female gender might have an adverse effect, and depicts the mentioned girls in the following way:

?hey have none of the timidity that used to be so built in, for women. She hopes they will gallop through the world in style, more style than she herself has been able to scrape together. They have her blessing; but from a distance, because close up Augusta is faintly chilling – she's so intent on success – and the twins have become gigantic; gigantic and also careless. Tony is slightly afraid of them. They might step on her by mistake. (Atwood, The Robber Bride 482)

Although Margaret Atwood fights against women's subordination, she does not exclude them from irony and parody and she does not support them at all costs. When she is describing younger generations, Augusta and the twins, Atwood implicitly criticizes the almost aggressive approach of some feminist fractions in gaining power. These circumstances reflect on the behavior of the three girls in their childhood who "play Barbie doll games together in the twins' playroom, violent games in which Barbie goes on the warpath and takes over the world and bosses everyone else around" (Atwood, The Robber Bride 466).

Margaret Atwood ironically describes the twins' tendency to experience all characters from cartoons (Winnie the Pooh, Piglet, Peter Rabbit) as females: "If Roz slipped up and said 'he,' they would correct her: She! She! they would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female, too" (The Robber Bride 350). It is interesting that they also liked to change the end of every fairy-tale or story: "They would fight her for control of the story – Change the ending, Mom! Make them go back! I don't like this part! They'd wanted Peter Pan to end before Wendy grew up, they'd wanted Matthew in Anne of Green Gables to live forever" (Atwood, The Robber Bride 350). These sentences capture the essence of contemporary literary and cultural orientations, such as feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism where "both women and other suppressed and marginalized individuals and groups are attempting to obtain different, equal and more significant roles in society and literary production" (Ćuk 266). Therefore, The Robber Bride centers on the dilemma whether the position of marginalized people (women, some national minorities, and so forth) would be different provided that historical circumstances turned in their favor. By reexamining war techniques in different historical periods, Tony actually tries to identify ways in which the

defeated side, women in the Neolithic period and all oppressed discourses, might have won the battle:

> *She studied the maps and the accounts, the disposition of troops, the technologies. A different choice of ground could have tipped the scales, or a different way of thinking, because thought could be a technology. A strong religious faith, because God too was a military weapon. Or a different weather, a different season. Rain was crucial; snow also. So was luck. (Atwood, The Robber Bride 138)*

Women were not lucky to win the victory in the Neolithic period and their defeat has left traces for centuries, since the mythologies, historical chronicles and literature have mostly been written from the patriarchal perspective. In the second half of the twentieth century, women started to change their status and rewrite their personal and collective histories and (her)stories and confirm what Tony explains: “History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary” (Atwood, The Robber Bride 4). Each major protagonist tends to clear and forget the burden of her past and become a new person. Karen changes her name to Charis, Antonia prefers being called Tony, while Roz’s real name is Rozalind. By using a new name, Charis is trying to erase the memory of her sad upbringing and her uncle’s abuse. Tony sounds like a common male name, which Antonia has chosen as a shield from discrimination in her advancing in academia. Furthermore, Tony created for herself in her childhood an imaginary doppleganger, “Inot,” who was what Tony wasn’t. Rozalind seeks a short and inconspicous name, Roz, which would stand in contrast to her excessive wealth which her father gained in a suspicious way. However, although creating a new identity might have advantages because it allows the possibility of starting over, putting aside old mistakes, Atwood discusses negative aspects of this credo and warns against losing control and going to extreme in this reinvention of the self and the new role of female gender in the future. Tony, Roz and Charis, that is to say Antonia, Rozalind and Karen, have almost forgotten who they really were. Furthermore, their daughters and the younger generation of women have completely destabilized the traditional patterns and trends in society and created “a utopia that has gone wrong” (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 1).

Tony, Roz and Charis are pale and parodied images of Diana, Venus and Hecate. However, in the case of Augusta, Paula and Erin, the elements of Diana and Venus do not exist at all. The three

girls are not that old, but the actions in their childhood and youth may show that they are driven by the same motive as Zenia. However, although Zenia is an ideal for Tony, Roz and Charis and her dominance and attractiveness don't cease or fade with age, we don't know who she really is and what she feels. Zenia's identity is a construct and herself "a toxic figure" and "for the women, a catastrophe" (Murray 86). Zenia's transformation and rejuvenation after plastic surgery is commented on by Roz: "You are what they see. Like a renovated building, Zenia is no longer the original, she's the end result" (Atwood, The Robber Bride 120-21). This excerpt and the behavior of all female protagonists in the novel make us wonder what remained from "the original" concept of the White Goddess nowadays and how it might reflect on the future.

Atwood does not hide her approval and support for women's emancipation and the emergence of new ideas and lifestyles. However, throughout the novel, she also makes us think that the end results of feminist struggles, apart from their positive characteristics, also show adverse consequences. It seems that women have fulfilled a utopian dream of equality and stood up to gender stereotypes, but there are indications that the destabilization of patriarchal concepts has put at risk the basic principles of the matriarchal sacred feminine and is causing unexpected and unfavorable outcomes. Can a woman today and in the future achieve total integrity and be a strong Great and White Goddess – Diana, Venus and Hecate all at once – or does she need to be just a depleted part of a Goddess? Tony, Roz and Charis, the symbolic counterparts of the three aspects of the White Goddess, are fragmented, incomplete and weak. Zenia, a symbolic embodiment of the characteristics and charism of this female deity, lacks the positive characteristics of the Goddess. The destructive aspect of Hecate is also predominant in the new generation of women and the descendents of the major protagonists. Similar to Zenia, careless, terrifying and unscrupulous Augusta, Paula and Erin, illustrate how the role of female gender has been changed, but not in a good way. Those oversimplified and parodied versions and symbols of the most intimidating part of the White Goddess signal and warn against dystopia-like conditions and depressing and disruptive social transformations in the future.

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[1] Introduced by John White in 1971, ‘prefiguration’ stands as one of the key terms in contemporary mythological analysis in literature. See: White, John J. Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

[2] See also Lopičić’s Developing Identities: Essays on Canadian Literature, Murray’s “Questioning the Triple Goddess: Myth and Meaning in Margaret Atwood’s The Robber Bride” and Wilson’s Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics.

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