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CONFLICTS IN MODERN WOMEN: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF MARGARET
ATWOOD'S "LIFE BEFORE MAN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the women characters in Margaret Atwood's novel *Life Before Man* from a psychological standpoint. Their feelings and memories are studied with the aid of three neurotic needs of Karen Horney's Psychoanalytic social theory. Margaret Eleanor Atwood is the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian literature. She is internationally acclaimed as a poet, novelist and short-story writer. She was born on 18th November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario. Her father Carl Edmund was an Entomologist who carried out his research work in the bush of northern Quebec. This later on worked its way into Atwood's admiration for nature and natural surroundings. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in eminent magazines. She has special interest in Science-fiction. As an editor, she has edited numerous anthologies. She is the editor of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983). Her versatility is acknowledged from her creation of numerous poetry collections, television scripts, libretto, radio recordings, and drawings as well. Atwood's novels centre on images, of bush and wilderness. The bush symbolizes darkness; wilderness inspires fear and isolation. *Life Before Man* is a realistic novel of manners, which represents the twentieth century life. Atwood has incorporated densely interwoven feelings, memories, and texture, which adds life to the novel.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Conflict, Psychological study, Marriage, Family, Modern Women.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a means to transmit the language of a land, its people, and their emotions. In this sense, Canadian literature undoubtedly presents a pen-portrait of Canada's landscape, together with the mindscape of its people. *Life Before Man* consists of five parts and covers a span of about two years from October 1976 to August 1978. Part One of the novel covers the events from October 29, 1976 to October 31, 1976. Similarly, Part Two narrates the events that take place from November 12, 1976 to December 28, 1976. Part Three incorporates the events from January 3, 1977 to February 16, 1977. Part Four of the novel comprises of happenings from March 9, 1977 to July 9, 1977. Part Five includes the incidents that occur from September 3,

1977 to August 18, 1978. The narration is in present tense by the three main characters namely Elizabeth Schoenhof, her husband Nate Schoenhof, and Nate's lover Lesje Green. These three characters belong to the ordinary middle class and are involved in love triangle. The novel is interesting and hard to put down as it deals with themes like marriage, love, man-woman relationship, psychology of women and children, and so on. Such topics are appropriate to the modern men and women in the present-day scenario as well.

Conflict

Life Before Man can be called a social, domestic, and a realistic novel with a triangular plot. Lives of modern men and women are beautifully presented. It mainly deals with the deterioration of modern marriage. The novel revolves around two main women characters, Elizabeth and Lesje.

The term 'conflict' as defined by the Oxford English Minidictionary means, "a fight, a struggle" (Coventry 101). Women in general are in a struggle to establish their identity. They fight against the oppression that is caused to them. They are in a position to combat all odds that strike them in their family, and in their community. In today's world, modernity has taken up the lives of men and women. Terms like family, protection, love, care, marriage, and children have become synonymous with struggle. Women in Canadian society are doubly- colonized which is said by Damayanti Chakrabarty in "Exploring New Avenues: A Literary Study of a Few Themes in the Recent Trends in Canadian Studies" comments:

Just like the nations having Post- colonial history, the women in the Canadian milieu are doubly- colonized. They have to establish themselves in their own communities as well to the 'other' Canadians, especially those who have more space, more say in the mosaic of cultures. (93)

They undergo frustration because of the violence inflicted on them. They are subjugated by men, be it their father, husband, uncle, or grandfather. But they have the sense of togetherness, and the sense of preservation.

Elizabeth who is the protagonist hates power over her. The opening lines of the novel "I don't know how I should live... I live like a peeled snail" (LBM 3), reveals Elizabeth's helpless, confused state. She initially loved Chris who is no more. She married Nate with a hope of getting refuge and safety for her life. Like Elizabeth, Lesje also had a former lover, William who was her co-worker in the Royal Ontario museum.

Concept of Marriage in Modern Scenario

Both Elizabeth and Lesje are misled by the term marriage. They have either not understood or misunderstood the true meaning of marriage. According to Lesje, marriage was not a commitment. Her view of marriage was, "Marriage is an event, a fact, it can be discussed at the dinner table. So is divorce. They create a framework, a beginning, an ending" (LBM 184). The protagonist Elizabeth had "married him easily like trying on a shoe" (LBM 15). Thus such wrong notion about marriage later disrupts Elizabeth's happy marital life and Lesje's life as well. Rao in *Sociology of Indian Society* comments:

Marriage is one of the universal social institutions... [It] is one of the deepest and most complex involvements of human relationships. It is a corner stone of a society... It is closely connected with the institution of family. In fact, family members are complementary to each other. (101)

Lesje is not actually married to Nate. She lives with a man who is already married and has two girl children. She therefore stands as an epitome of modern women who make sudden decisions that ends in perpetual trouble.

Unhappy Childhood Causes Distress

Elizabeth has undergone a bitter childhood experience and therefore she does not want her children to suffer the same. This is clearly revealed in the lines, "Elizabeth is an adult in much of her life, but when she's with Auntie Muriel she is still part child. Part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple, part insane; Auntie Muriel the implacable wardress" (LBM 115). The domination imposed on both of these women disrupts their happy childhood. It creates failure in relationships leading to their conflict. It affects their mind, and alienates them.

Karen Horney's Psychoanalytic Social Theory mainly stresses on the importance of childhood experiences that is mainly responsible for shaping the traits of an individual. The social relationship between the child and its parents is the key factor in personality development. Failure in such a healthy relationship causes distress. Elizabeth suffered the pain of being abandoned by her mother. She soon develops a kind of indifference towards marital life with Nate. Prabhakar in "Life Before Man: Negation of Marital Power Politics" describes Elizabeth to be a "frustrated, rebellious, and an indifferent woman in regard to the institution of marriage" (126). She is merely imitating a wife or a mother. This is evident from the lines:

Most people do imitations; she herself has been doing imitations for years. If there is some reason for it she can imitate a wife, a mother, an employee, a dutiful relative. The secret is to discover what the others are trying to imitate and then support them in their belief that they've done it well. (LBM 209)

Eventually her marriage becomes a failure. Lesje had a similar childhood episode that was influenced by her two grandmothers - Grandmother Simylski and Grandmother Etlin. While one was Ukrainian the other one was Jewish. Restriction was made even in attending the church. It was definitely an agonizing childhood experience that she was caught between grandmothers of two different cultures.

Intra- Psychic Conflicts of Women

Horney's theory explains how people who were bereft of parental affection generate intra-psychic conflict. Elizabeth's happy marital life turns into a miserable one, after knowing about Nate's new relationship with Lesje. Even though Nate confesses his love for Elizabeth she is not convinced and develops a sense of betrayal. She starts distancing from her husband. Nate, for her, has now become her children's father than being her own husband. "She thinks Nate as the father of her children but not as her husband" (LBM 119). The causative agent who interrupts the cozy marital life of Elizabeth and her family is none other than Lesje.

The lives of these two women become complicated and intertwined and they form a link of inevitable chain of events that slowly ruins them. The inner experiences of the women characters include their memories of home and their children. Their childhood is not something that they wish to treasure throughout their life. It was not a happy childhood but a painful one. Elizabeth's mother deserted her. In case of Lesje, it was her grandparents who raised her. Thus they were denied of parental relationships. They experienced betrayal in terms of love and marriage.

According to the first neurotic need of 'moving toward people', Lesje and Elizabeth sought love in different men. Later Lesje sought Nate's relationship, when he was married to Elizabeth. The second neurotic need is "moving against people" in which they become domineering, demanding, selfish, and sometimes even cruel. Elizabeth's proposal to seek a lawyer in order to divorce from Nate shows her act of moving against him. She does it not out of vengeance but for the sake of her legal protection. Lesje also fits into the neurotic need of moving against people. She demands Nate to divorce his wife. The third neurotic need is "moving away from people". In this kind of personality, a person adopts indifference to others. The two women have strongly felt pain, hopelessness, and abandonment in their lives. Therefore they decide to move away from those who are closely related with them. Elizabeth, after knowing her husband's affair with Lesje, moves away from Nate. Lesje also moves away from Nate. "[She] feels for the first time that she has wronged Elizabeth, that she has trespassed" (LBM 161). This brings out Lesje's feeling of guilt, as she has wronged Elizabeth and her children.

Women: The Inescapable Victims of Love and Marriage

Women are exposed to face problems in almost every stage of their life. They are subjected to difficulties right from their childhood and it continues even when they grow up. Distress is passed on from one stage to the other, previous stage being the driving force for conflict in the next. Elizabeth's agony is intensified because she has faced problems not only as a child and a wife, but also as the mother of her daughters. When Nate slips away from his responsibilities of a father, it is she who takes up the next charge. She works hard in order to meet out her daughters' needs "to eat, wear clothes, go to the dentist, play with toys..." (LBM 254).

CONCLUSION

The novel shows the conflicts faced by modern women in terms of love and marriage. Elizabeth and Lesje are victimized to such extent that they are psychologically affected in so many ways. Psychological study helps in understanding how the characters lack their self-expression. The application of Horney's psychoanalytic social theory in *Life Before Man* helps in diving deep into the mysterious seas of inner-self of these women. Auntie Muriel is characterized in the novel as Atwood's mouthpiece. She tells her opinion of marriage and that how perfect marriage should be. In her opinion, marriage gives esteem to women.

Life Before Man is an eye-opener driving home the message that, marriage should help personal growth of men and women. The realization that dawn in the mind of Elizabeth motivates her to go on with her life as a courageous person. Lesje also becomes conscious about her condition. She feels bad for her betrayal to Elizabeth. The way these two women overcome their troubled situations show them as typical Atwoodian women. *Life Before Man* portrays how women are victimized in marriage that is destined in the patriarchal society. It presents how marriage that is supposed to be a sacred testimony for the happy lives of couples disrupts the peaceful life of women.

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