

## The Social Critical Function of Female Discourse in *Alias Grace*

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### Abstract

In her ninth novel, *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood shifts her perspective on the Canadian past and reconstructs a historical murder case of the 1840s with her powerful imagination. Women's living condition is still the central concern. Grace Marks, the marginalized silent "other", is granted with female discourse to tell stories of lower-class women's miserable fate, which forms a spicy criticism and irony against the hypocritical Victorian social and gender ideology.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood; *Alias Grace*; Female discourse; Social critical function

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### INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood (1939- ), noted as the "the Queen of Canadian literature", enjoys a worldwide reputation for her gifted talents and prolificacy in literature creation. Her multiple works have been translated into more than forty languages and won her numerous awards including the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize and the Booker Prize. In her works, Margaret has touched upon various themes which focus on the three major concerns—the female living condition, the environmental problems and the nationalism.

*Alias Grace*, Atwood's ninth novel, became a bestseller since its publication in 1996. *The Handmaid's*

*Tale* and other novels have witnessed Atwood's talent for vivid imagining the present and even the future. In *Alias Grace*, again, Atwood uses her powerful imagination to revive a woman living in the Canadian past and brings to life a historical murder case of the 1840s. Grace Marks, a 16-year-old Irish immigrant, was accused of murdering her master, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper and mistress, Nancy Montgomery. The case incurred wide dispute for its sensationalistic nature, and Grace consequently became the subject of newspaper, historical documentation and literary works. Various descriptions of Grace leave people in delusions about her true nature and thus inspire Atwood's passion for rewriting the historical story. It should be said that the truth of the case is not the highlight of the novel. Instead, Atwood focuses more on the creation of a historical novel, just as she said, "in and of itself, [the past] it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word, and even so, listening means telling, and then retelling. It's we ourselves who must do such telling, about the past [...]" (1998, p.1516). When listening to the past, the readers may come to their own conclusion.

In the novel, Atwood reconsiders the gender and class problems involved in the murder case. As the notorious murderess, Grace becomes the central topic of the public discourse. That public discourse is closely related to the Victorian ideology and especially the gender ideology, which prescribed women as "the angel of the house" and that women should follow the "cult of true womanhood". Therefore, a woman like Grace, who dared to transgress the lines and committed a murder, was certainly despised as "demon". "Divided as public opinion was, Grace is defined in terms of the patriarchal anima figure: saint or whore, innocent or guilty" (Adamo, p.148). Ironically, Grace is like a doll in the box being deprived of her own voice, as she herself recognized, "There are always those that will supply you with speeches of their own, and put them their voice, at fairs and shows, and you are just their

wooden doll. And that's what it was like at the trial, I was there in the box of the dock but I might as well have been made of clot, and stuffed, with a china head; and I was shut up inside that doll of myself, and my true voice could not get out." (*Alias Grace*, p.295) However, Atwood doesn't put Grace totally in a position of nonmotility under the control of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideological system. Atwood uses poetic license to restore the voice that history has extinguished (Seidman, p.5052). In the discourse space with the psychologist Simon Jordan, Grace could utter her own voice. Instead of exposing to Jordan the truth of the murder, Grace tells stories of lower-class women, such as her mother, Mary and Nancy, whose miserable experiences constitute a spicy criticism and irony against the hypocritical social and gender ideology.

## 1. SERVANT GIRLS' STORY

As a woman, especially positioned in lower class, Grace Marks has too much to complain about the society in which she lives. During her childhood in Northern Ireland she has witnessed her mother's misfortune: a premarital pregnancy forced her to marry a man hastily, but "lucky" for her, according to Aunt Pauline, the man did agree to marry her in the end rather than escaping "on the next boat [...], leaving her high and dry on the shore" (*AG*, p.105); after marriage she was not so "lucky" and, repeated pregnancies and mistreatment at the hands of an irresponsible and violent husband propelled her to an early death.

Early in life, then, Grace came to see women as sexual victims, not only because of her mother's sufferings but also because of her own suggested molestation by her father. Moreover, when Grace later worked as a maidservant at age thirteen, her marginalized class status enhanced her vulnerability to male predators. (Seidman, p.5048)

To her surprise, even her seemingly sophisticated roommate Mary Whitney, a girl with "democratic ideas" (*AG*, p.159), came into the possession of their master's son, and soon found herself with an unwanted pregnancy. Abandoned to find her way out in the face of this trouble, Mary had only three options: to be an unwed mother, to get an abortion, or become a prostitute. Even Mary insisted on giving birth to the baby, it couldn't escape the fate to be smothered, just as Mary claimed herself, because society could not tolerate lower-class women bearing the children of upper-class men which are taken for a threat to the class distinction<sup>1</sup>. Besides, as an unwed mother, Mary could have little hope to find another job for living. It seems that Mary had only one option left—

<sup>1</sup> In his *Working-Class Intruders*, Roxanne Rimstead illustrates that, if taking a perspective of the upper class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canada, the female domestics, such as Mary and Nancy, are intruders who disturb "the order of inheritance and class rights by bedding men of a higher class" (p.59). Atwood's novel, however, "testifies to the opposite: that gentlemen have historically infringed upon the space of female domestics and then abandoned them" (p.59).

to get an abortion. However, since abortions in that era were prohibited from both aspects of religion and law, they were usually performed secretly and in very terrible conditions. The risk operations often lead to a failure end, the women's death, as Mary had experienced. Even if Mary could survive the abortion, she would not survive for too long as a prostitute, whose life was always dangerous and disease-ridden. Each option for the singled pregnant woman meant the end of life. Despite her struggle for survival, Mary ended up dying for the botched abortion. As to Mary's misfortune, Roberta Rubenstein states that

Mary's brief life and gruesome death offer a vivid object lesson illustrating the double standard of nineteenth-century life that is reiterated in various ways throughout the narrative: Men were dangerous, and unaccompanied women were at the mercy of any man who felt free to pursue his own pleasures, yet women were expected to remain virginal until marriage and ignorant of their own sexuality afterward. (p.265)

Rubenstein's statement finds its reverberation in the novel as Mrs. Jordan mentions in her letter to Mrs. Humphrey, "Men, by nature and the decree of Providence, have certain latitude allowed them; but fidelity to the marriage vow is surely the chief requirement in a woman" (*AG*, p.421). Though Mary Whitney is impregnated by one of her master's sons, it is her reputation that will suffer if the affairs were known. This social reality is also discerned by Grace who decides to leave a well-paying job when the master of the house tries to break into her room since she will be the one condemned by society if people learn about his behavior. Once being a "fallen woman", the servant girls will face the three options as Mary claims and each of them will lead to extremity.

Mary's story finds parallel in experience of Nancy Montgomery, another maidservant Grace ever worked with. Nancy, like Mary Whitney, falls to be the object of sexual desire of males, but slightly different from Mary who yielded to the seduction of upper-class man, Nancy is more likely and more active to seduce her master in hope of getting out of the underworld through marrying an upper-class man. Luckier than Mary, Nancy is endowed with more rights in the house and can dress up like a "lady". Unfortunately yet, she can't shake off the role as a "dirty girl" (*AG*, p.279), ending as a sexual prey hunted by Mr. Kinnear. As the case stands, Nancy is hired just because of her loose morals which Mr. Kinnear is willing to exploit. The double standards of the Victorian gender ideology effect again on Mr. Kinnear and Nancy's relationship: he still gains some respect as a "gentleman", while Nancy is despised by almost everyone at the local church. Their "dirty affair" engenders some repercussions in the community. When Nancy and Girl go to church one Sunday, most villagers would shun them. Being in position of a spectator, Grace shows her keen observation about social situations and comments the villagers' hypocrisy ironically:

These are cold and proud people, and not good neighbors. They are hypocrites, they think the church is a cage to keep God in, so

he will stay locked up there and not wandering about the earth during the week, poking his nose into their business, and looking into the depths and darkness and doubleness of their hearts, and their lack of true charity; and they believe they need only be bothered about him on Sunday when they have their best clothes on and their faces straight, and their hands washed and their gloves on, and their stories all prepared. But God is everywhere, and cannot be caged in, as men can. (*AG*, p.254)

As for Mary, Nancy is also impregnated by her master, which traps her into a predicament. Once a man discovers that his lover is pregnant, as Grace pragmatically observes, he will “change from a woman in that condition to one who is not, and it’s the same with cows and horses; and if that happened, she’d be out on the road, her and her bastard” (*AG*, p.309). A pregnant Nancy loses her sexual value to the master, and for Nancy, this means losing financial security and socially acceptable reputation, which compels her to hide the fact from her master accordingly (Stanley, p.376). Nonetheless, Mr. Kinnear has gradually transferred his sexual interest into Grace, the younger beautiful girl, and intended to use his higher social class as the bait to seduce Grace into the master-servant sexual relationship just as he has done to Nancy. Out of jealous, Nancy not only vents on Grace but would kick her out of the house as well. “Unlike the loyal Mary, Nancy is willing to sacrifice Grace on the perversely self-destructive altar of female, and for this betrayal she comes under the avenging sword ‘Mary’ metaphorically puts in Grace’s hand” (Seidman, p.5058). Furthermore, the secular bias doesn’t let the dead woman go. After Nancy and Mr. Kinnear were murdered, their tombs were decorated differently: “Thomas Kinnear’s picket fence is painted white, Nancy Montgomery’s black, an indication perhaps of the town’s judgment upon her; murder victim or not, she was no better than she should be” (*AG*, p.386).

The stories told from Grace’s perspective bring readers a deeper insight into the wretched living conditions of the lower-class women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canada. They are vulnerable to the sexual desires of men, who can act as they please with these women without fear of being condemned by society. Once falling into the hands of men, those women will not escape the violence imposed by the Madonna/whore dichotomy, a typical one in a patriarchal society. Since they cannot live up to the standards of “an angel”, they can only be the demons and must be eliminated. The harsh experiences of Grace and her fellow serving women, Mary and Nancy, reflect the unequal and hypocritical essence of the patriarchal society. Grace’s discourse about the lower-class women forms a contrast to the extract from Coventry Patmore’s paean to feminine goodness and domesticity, *The Angel in the House*. The ironic contrast between Victorian ideals of womanhood contained in the extracts of the novel and the sordid series of events narrated by Grace, a real life Victorian female, creates a purposely subversive contrast between cozy stereotype and brutal reality.

## 2. MADWOMEN’S STORY

Before Grace was imprisoned in penitentiary, she had been incarcerated in a lunatic asylum as a “madwoman.” The harsh experience in the asylum brings Grace philosophical insights into some dark aspects of society. Her discourse of madwomen’s stories is not only a challenge to the Victorian gender ideology but also a disclosure of the hypocritical essence of the lunatic asylum, the institution of the patriarchal society.

According to Susanna Pauly, in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canada, the view of women and madness relates closely to the Victorian ideas of femininity, with Darwin’s theories of biological sexual difference serving as the scientific backing. Pauly expounds that

Darwin explained that through natural selection man had become superior to woman in courage, energy, intellect, and inventive genius and thus would inevitably excel in art, science, and philosophy. Furthermore, women were mentally constituted to take care of children as well as physically constituted to give birth. Mental breakdown, then, would come “when women defied their ‘nature’, attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions”<sup>2</sup>. Darwinian psychiatry undoubtedly intimidated many women with its prophecies of hysterical breakdown for women who transgressed their destined roles. Consequently, female rebellion against domesticity was itself regarded as mental pathology. Some women who radically challenged the norms of feminine conduct were often committed to lunatic asylums. (pp.138-39)

This is the case of what Grace describes about some “mad” women constrained in the asylum. These women “were no madder than the Queen of England” (*AG*, p.31), as Grace ironically narrates, “many were sane enough when sober, as their madness came out of a bottle, which is a kind I knew very well” (*ibid.*). According to Cecilia Morgan, temperance was a province-wide movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Upper Canada. The movement, as the public discourse then put, “would rescue families from degradation, as well as improving social, economic and political conditions” (p.163). In the context of temperance language, “the drunkard was rarely constructed as female” because women were always considered as purveyors of morality and virtue (p.164). However, once women performed some deviations from the social norms, like over-drinking, they would be abused as aliens, even insanity by the patriarchal society. As to how madness is categorized, some feminists think of madness as a category constructed and imposed by the society to the “other”, the figure who does not conform to the social norm. Barbara Hill Rigney, for instance, argues that “sanity and insanity, then, are designed as polarities only by a society, largely masculine in its assumption of power, whose own ‘sanity’ depends on such distinction”

<sup>2</sup> Pauly is here citing Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p.123.

(p.62). In this connection, the drunkard women who were incarcerated in the lunatic asylum only serve as the victim of the patriarchal power.

The weird story in the Asylum doesn't stop here. Grace also tells stories of women who feigned madness. One woman was there to get away from her husband, who beats her black and blue. Grace says "he was the mad one but nobody would lock him up" (*AG*, p.31). The inequality between men and women is obvious here. In Victorian people's eye, as Elaine Showalter puts it, "[women] are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind, [...] madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady" (qtd. in Pauly, p.137). The bias results directly in women's plight, such as the case of the woman who feigned madness to escape domestic abuse. Behind the seemingly flat narration of Grace reverberates her undertone to criticize the black-right nether world where sane women are locked up while insane men act freely and wildly. Besides, some women feigned madness in order to keep alive. Grace recounts that one woman went insane in the autumn and would become sane again in good weathers. For the poor homeless woman, the lunatic asylum was a warm place to keep her from being frozen to death. This story illustrates, on the one hand, the lower-class women's miserable life; on the other, if taking an active view yet, that feigning mad is also a strategy for women to struggle for survival, a point which echoes Grace's hysteria and amnesia<sup>3</sup>.

Grace's narration about the mad women also extends to the matrons in the asylum, who were "all fat and strong" like men and rude towards the psychological patients, as Grace complains: "Sometimes they would provoke us, especially right before the visitors were to come. They wanted to show how dangerous we were, but also how well they could control us, as it made them appear more valuable and skilled" (*AG*, p.32). The matron's violent attitude towards the madwomen reflects the essence of the lunatic asylum, an issue which is elucidated by Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault maintains, asylums were instituted under the guise of offering appropriate medical attention to those individuals categorized by "humanity" as "mad", but in reality to contain them; this era was deceptively termed "that happy age when madness was fully recognized" (qtd. in Trigg 5). Tina Trigg pushes the argument further by pointing out that "such cant, however, smacks of insincerity and hints at the questionable motivations shadowing the practice of segregation" (p.5). This again points to the crux that madness was a condition arbitrarily determined by the ruling power. The lunatic

asylum was part of the social apparatus to marginalize and segregate the "other", the figure who was considered to have broken the social norms, and the matrons, the conspiracy of the patriarchal order, apparently serve as machines to perform the task of oppression.

## CONCLUSION

As an Irish immigrant maid, a "notorious murderess", Grace was multiply marginalized, in the sense of gender, class and nationality. The identity of silenced "other" places Grace in the position of being written and described. Lucky for her, Atwood does not confine Grace in a totally passive role by granting Grace with the female discourse as the struggling strategy and the power to revolt. Through telling the stories of lower-class women's miserable fate, Grace exerts some sense of initiative, which is not merely a good way for achieving inner peace, but a way to disclose and criticize the hypocrisy of Victorian social and gender ideology. This may not save Grace from incarceration and transform her life, but at least, as Siddal maintains, "to destabilize normalized ideas of gender and class", and thereby Grace's story of her past is "politically charged" in spite of its fictive elements (p.95).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, many feminists have read various institutionally diagnosed pathologies such as hysteria, insanity, and amnesia as a cry against institutional powers, as a means of an "embodied protest" (p.377).