

The Concept of Identity in *Cat's Eye* from the Viewpoint of Julia Kristeva

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KEYWORDS Abjection. Semiotic. Symbolic. Semiotic Chora. Revolt

ABSTRACT In *Cat's Eye*, the protagonist of the novel attempts to formulate her subject by recalling her past and her painting exhibitions. According to Kristeva, without the semiotic mode and abjection, developing an identity is impossible. So once more the role of semiotic gets obvious. The semiotic mode should revolt against the symbolic to make subjectivity. Here, if Elaine does not accede to the semiotic and revolt against the symbolic, she would not be able to get an identity. The authors of this paper attempt to follow the concept of identity in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* on the basis of Julia Kristeva's theories.

INTRODUCTION

Cat's Eye narrates a middle-aged painter called Elaine Risely who lives in Vancouver. She has remarried and has two daughters. She comes back to Toronto, where she grew up, to prepare a painting exhibition of her works. The story begins at this point when she exhibits her old and new works in a painting exhibition. The painter, who is both the narrator and the main character of the novel, immerses in her own thoughts looking past when a certain artistic and social event happened in her life and her personality was affected.

Cat's Eye should not be considered as a novel, which focuses solely on the story of its fictional characters over the past years. The audience of this novel, becomes familiar with Canada's social and cultural events in the mid-twentieth century. It also enables the audience to look at the cultural elements of the course and feminist movements that took place at that time. *Cat's Eye* can be seen as a reflection of childhood and adolescence story of the protagonist.

The author of this work keeps the nostalgia alive and makes feelings in common with the reader. In her childhood, Elaine used to keep a marble resembling a cat's eye in her red purse. The eye that unconsciously became the main theme of her paintings. Indeed, entering the childhood home and looking at that *Cat's Eye* helped her recall her past memories. One of the most central characters by whom Elaine was affected is Cordelia, her friend. Main questions seem striking: why is this exhibition in Toronto- her hometown? And what does Elaine look for? And why she does paint?

The Semiotic and Symbolic in Elaine's Painting

In painting class, Elaine should paint a portrait of a woman. Mr. Hrbik, her Master, told her: "you can draw objects very well. But as yet you cannot draw life. God first made the body out of dirt, and after he breathed in the soul. Both are necessary, Dirt and soul" (Atwood 1988: 692-693). Dirt and soul, it refers to something which Kristeva (1982) defines as "being inseparable the semiotic mode and the symbolic mode" (p. 12). Edward Mooney (2011) affirms that "the semiotic communication of embodied signification continues even as symbolic capacities emerge; it never diminishes despite increasing dependence on the symbolic" (p. 8).

In this part, Margaret Atwood agrees with her and mentions that both body and soul are

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imperative for life. Body can be applied to the semiotic mode and soul can be applied to the symbolic. Hence, that the being is an alive creature it needs both modes of signification together. At last, Mr. Hrbik told Elaine: "you are an unfinished woman," he adds in a lower voice, "but here will be finished." He does not know that "finished" means over and done with. "He intends to be encouraging" (Atwood 1988: 693).

Elaine stated that he is not aware of the meaning of "finished" but it can be inferred a main point. As a matter of fact, Elaine herself does not know the exact meaning of "finished". It means something is complete and "unfinished" means something which is not complete, something defective. Therefore, Mr. Hrbik stated "unfinished" to refer to an incomplete person in the separation of body and soul. It means that the being has to pay attention to those two modes of signification- the semiotic and the symbolic- otherwise, it will not be a complete being.

Abjection in Expelling Cordelia

Elaine suffers from lack of identity. In front of Cordelia's disturbance, Elaine's mother tells her: "You have to learn stand up for yourself, don't let them push you around. Do not be spineless. You have to have more backbone" (Atwood 1988: 409) and Elaine says:

"I think of sardines and their backbones. You can eat their backbones. The bones crumble between your teeth; one touch and they fall apart. This must be what my own backbones, is like: hardly there at all. What is happening to me is my own fault, for not having more backbone" (Atwood 1988: 409).

It indicates that Elaine needs to be an independent subject, but she is not. She is looking for her identity. Elaine can behave the way she likes. "I see that I don't have to do what she says and worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. I can do what I like" (p. 497) and also "Ten stacks of plates," say Grace. "This would once have reduced me. Now I find it silly. I keep walking. I feel daring, light-headed. They are not my best friends or even my friends nothing binds me to them. I am free" (p. 498).

What happened to make Elaine behave in this way? Before that, she obeyed Cordelia's order. She was completely obedient. Elaine was afraid of disobedience! But now, she can do what she likes. She is courageous and she does not obey

Cordelia. It goes back to that event which Elaine went to the down of bridge for picking up her hat. That event influenced on her. "Elian flounder through the water, the edge of the ice breaking off as I step, walking with waterlogged overshoes is hard; I could slip, and fall all the way in" (p. 484) and "I can see light along the edges of the ravine, from the houses there, impossibly high up. I do not know how I'm going to climb up the hill with my hands and feet hurting like this; I do not know how I'm going to get home" (p. 484).

But after a while "I'm lying on my back beside the creek, looking up at the sky. Nothing hurts anymore...The bridge is different- looking; it seems higher above me, more solid, as if the railings have disappeared or been filled in" (p. 485) and she said: "I know I should get up and walk home, but it seems easier to stay here, in the snow, with the little pellets of ice caressing my face gently. Also, I'm very sleepy. I close my eyes. I hear someone talking to me. It's like a voice calling only very soft as if muffled" (p. 486).

It was that event which affected on Elaine and Julia Kristeva defines it as semiotic effect. In pain and fear situation, Elaine goes back to her imagination- that time when she is unable to keep on and closes her eyes- she communicates with a woman in her mind. On the basis of Kristeva, it was returned to semiotic Chora. The semiotic Chora is the place of drives and imagination. In Kristeva's view, in semiotic Chora, there is no difference and no boundaries between the being and other (Kristeva 1982: 14). Elaine can't differentiate between herself and Cordelia. She has to find borders to get subjectivity.

It is possible by abjection. After semiotic Chora, abjection happens. According to Kristeva, abjection means expelling what is not for the being and consequently, the being gets independency and identity. In *Cat's Eye*, when Elaine expels Cordelia, abjecting takes place and in this way, Elaine feels free and can do what she likes and there is no compulsion. "I see that I don't have to do what she says and worse and better, I've been had to what she says. I can do what I like." And she says: "it is as if I can see right into them. Why was I unable to do this before?" (Atwood 1988: 499).

Kristeva (1982: 136) stated that the semiotic mode is revolutionary because it affects on the symbolic mode. Here, in this part of novel, return

to semiotic mode shows that it revolts against the symbolic (Cordelia's behavior which is the symbol of patriarchal society and the symbolic mode).

Abjection in Art

Literature can be purifying as well as abjection. As Kristeva (1982) writes in *Powers of Horror*: "literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the crisis of the world" (p. 208).

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes Celine's work to understand better the relation between literature and abjection. (In Kristeva's view, Celine is an abject author). In Noelle McAfee's words: "Celine is the author of abjection as Kristeva shows; When reading Celine, our own borders of self are put on trial. We begin to lose the ability to discern between inside and outside, self and other, strange and familiar" (McAfee 2004: 35).

Then this makes us to go back to *thetic phase* of the signifying process, unable to identify, "becomes ambiguous, grows hollow, decays, and crumbles; it is a fleeting, derisive, and even idiotic illusion and one which is yet upheld" (Kristeva 1982: 135). In Kristeva's view, "Celine's texts do not discard things but they make object, of course hateful object. And this is part of the pathology of abjection: turning the phantasm of what is abjected into a dreaded object, an object of hate" (McAfee 2004: 53).

It can be applied to art (literature is a kind of art). Art acts as abjection. In some works of art, we see hateful objects. In them, we can't differentiate between self and other. In these kinds of works, we look for borders. An artist goes back to the *thetic phase*- unable to distinguish boundaries. It can happen by drawing or writing.

By creating a work of art, abjection takes place and we find borders by drawing or writing something in disgust. An artist can abject them and differentiate borders. This stage leads to develop subjectivity. According to Kristeva (1982: 76), abjection is the most vital and critical stage in making subject and developing identity.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine as a painter draws some portrait, especially of women. For instance, in her painting: "Farther along are Jon and Josef. I look at them with some fondness, them and their muscles and their cloudy headed notions about

women. Their youngness is terrifying. How could I have put myself into the hands of such inexperience?" (Atwood 1988: 1017).

Josef and John were lovely for her and now, they act as abjection. Elaine blames herself because of her relation with them. She loved them but next to them, she can't differentiate between herself and them. They act as abject, so Elaine has to expel them. She did it before by leaving them, but now, she recalls her past.

By remembering the past and painting their picture, Elaine discharges them. Dismissing them is vital for developing identity. That's why Elaine did it. That the art acts like abjection, Elaine expels them by painting to make her subject. Relation with them hurts the boundaries and she has to eliminate that to distinguish the borders.

On the other hand, in this painting, "Next to them is Mrs. Smeath; many of her. Mrs. Smeath sitting, standing, lying down with her holy rubber plant, flying, with Mr. Smeath stuck to her back, being screwed like a beetle" (p. 1017). According to Kristeva, the distinction between subject and object (self and other) happens through abjection. In her words, "the abject has only one quality of the object- that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva 1982: 1).

In this painting (Mrs. Smeath), this fact is clear. Kristeva (1982) asserted that literature helps to work in some maladies of the soul. This thing which suffers the soul contains abjection. Art acts in this way (p. 207). Here, in this part of the novel, Mrs. Smeath acts as abjection since in childhood, Elaine hated her. It was annoying for her. So it acts like abjection. Elaine paints her and in this way, she expels what suffers her and disturbs her boundaries. This picture contains disgusting and shows Elaine's hatred. She says:

I put a lot of work into that imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork fat. Hairly as the inside of an ear; I labored on it, with, I now see, considerable malice. But these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration. I put light into them too. Each pallid leg, each steel-rimmed eye, is there as it was, as plain as bread. I have said, *look*. I have said, *I see* (Atwood 1988: 1018).

And "this is part of the pathology of abjection: turning the phantasm of what is abjected into a dreaded object, an object of hate" (McAfee 2004: 53). Consequently, Elaine has turned what is abjected into an object of hate. The fourth picture in her exhibition is *Cat's Eye*. In fact, in her portrait:

"Behind my half-head, in the center of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier glass is hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame. In it, a section of the back of my head is visible; but the hair is different, younger. At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow" (Atwood 1988: 1027).

This painting acts like abjection but what is going to be abjected? Elaine describes herself. In this way, she discharges part of herself. She removes parts of herself which is dependent on her and disturbs her boundaries. When the infant recognizes boundaries, it removes the abject mother because it is a barrier to distinguish. Abjection is both foreign and familiar.

As a result, Elaine destroys this barrier to recognize boundaries to develop her identity. By painting her portrait, she expels some parts of herself, both foreign and familiar. She is dependent on that part and that is a fence for making her subject. Hence, she eludes this part to have an identity. This process is necessary for her since she is looking for her subjectivity.

And the last painting in the exhibition; It is called the *Unified Field Theory*. This picture relates to that terrible event in Elaine's childhood: "Cutting across it a little over a third up is a wooden bridge. To either side of the bridge are the tops of trees, bare of leaves, with a covering of snow on them, as after a heavy moist snowfall. This snow is also on the railing and struts of the bridge" (p. 1027).

That event made Elaine feel free and be free of Cordelia- who was in abjection role- and made an independent character for herself. In this painting, Elaine recalls that event and once again eludes it. On the whole, it can be inferred that Elaine as, an artist, expels whatever does not belong to her through her paintings.

Revolt in Recalling the Past

"Tubular neon in cursive script decorates the restored brick façades, and there's a lot of brass trim, a lot of real estate, a lot of money. Up ahead there are huge oblong towers, all of glass, lit up, like enormous gravestones of cold light; Frozen assets" (Atwood 1988: 39).

If the symbolic mode of signification overcomes, the being will change to a dead person.

In this state, coolness and unfeelingness depart. For instance, the society of spectacles (In the society of spectacle, people forget their real desires and they are at the service of society. That's why it leads to unfeelingness) is the one. In *Cat's Eye*, Toronto has changed. It has turned into a society of spectacle. The description which Elaine renders of Toronto proves this fact. Then in this kind of society, people are cool and unfeeling and indifferent. Then, the beings have to revolt to keep alive psychic life.

According to Julia Kristeva (1982), the soul is in danger without revolt. It's essential to revolt to make and keep a suitable psychic space and inner garden (p. 2013). In this way, the being has to revolt against the rigid symbolic mode and against the society of spectacle. That's which Kristeva (1982) called "interior revolt" (p. 45). In her view, this kind of revolt is critical for individual independency and communication with others.

Kelly Oliver (1993) believed that "intimate revolt is the process by which the subject-in-process displaces the authority of law which it takes to be outside of itself onto its own individual authority, which it takes to be inside itself. In this way, the individual belongs to the social; in a way that supports its own sense of self as well as relations to others" (p. 86) and Kelly says that this intimate revolt is a return, a return to identity.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine says: "I don't look much at the towers though, or the people passing me in their fashionable getups, imports, handcrafted leather, and suede, whatever. Instead, I look down at the sidewalk like a tracker" (Atwood 1988: 40). It shows that Elaine is rebelling by recalling her past. She lives in a cool and unfeeling atmosphere.

Elaine is looking for her identity and as Kelly expressed, revolt is a return to identity. Then Elaine is revolting for reviving her identity. How is it indicated? Elaine looks at sidewalk like a tracker. Tracker can imply two conceptions: 1- it reveals changing the situation and being powerful, the symbolic mode. It involves a cool and apathetic atmosphere. 2- It refers to the past. It goes back to the semiotic mode. Therefore, this conception includes "revolt". In other words, it shows two sides- semiotic and symbolic. But for revolt, it is vital to revolt semiotic against symbolic. How is it clear in *Cat's Eye*?

Elaine says that she looks at the sidewalk. This sidewalk can be a symbol of Chora. Ac-

According to Kristeva (1982: 14), Chora is a place which the being situates in it. It can be inferred, Elaine is coming back to the semiotic Chora by looking down at the sidewalk. In this way, revolt happens. By recalling her past (returning to semiotic), revolt takes place.

CONCLUSION

As noted, one of the important themes of Atwood's novel is self-identity or looking for female identity. By means of Kristeva's theories, it was showed, that Elaine is looking for her identity. From the perspective of Kristeva, identity is not a fixed entity. With respect to the semiotic and the symbolic mode, which are alongside and motherhood model which are applied in the nov-

el, the reader reaches this point that Elaine has no fixed identity but her subjectivity is in a process. This refers to the post modern's point of views. In their view, everything is in a process. In postmodern world, there is no place for fixity and passivity.

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