

A Postmodern Historiographical Analysis of *Alias Grace*

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ABSTRACT Postmodern culture is a highly self-conscious culture which through its denial of the Enlightenment and modernity has brought about a maddening obsession with self-related topics. Atwood's *Alias Grace* deals with the issue of self and self-hood in a subtle way. In this novel, there are characters who are obsessed with self-realization and self-fashioning to an unprecedented degree. Atwood does not provide us with the final answer about this historical murder case; rather she adds more dimension and dubiousness to it. In her work, the protagonist becomes a character whose self cannot be decided no matter how one decides to examine her 'self' and her identity. The authors of this paper aim at examining Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* as a post modern historiographical novel.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Margaret *Alias Grace* is based on reality, it is a work of fiction. Its central character, Grace Marks, was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1940s, having been convicted of murder at the age of sixteen.

The Kinnear-Montgomery murders took place on July 23, 1843, and were extensively reported not only in Canadian newspapers, but in those of the United States and Britain. The details were sensational; Grace Marks was unusually beautiful and also quite young, Kinnear's housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, had previously given birth to an illegitimate child and was Thomas Kinnear's mistress; at her autopsy she was found to be pregnant. Grace and her fellow-servant James McDermott had run away to the United States together and were assumed by the press to be lovers.

The trial was held in early November. Only the Kinnear murder was tried, because both of the accused people were condemned to death by hanging, a trial for the Montgomery murder

was considered unnecessary. McDermott was hanged in front of a huge crowd on November 21; but opinion about Grace was extremely divided from the beginning, and because of the efforts of her lawyer, Kenneth Mackenzie, and a group of respectable gentleman petitioners who pleaded her youth, the weakness of her sex, her supposed witlessness, therefore her sentence was changed to life imprisonment, and she entered the provincial penitentiary in Kingston on November 19, 1843.

She continued to be written about over the course of the century, and she continued to divide and polarize opinions. On one hand, there were people who believed that Grace was a female friend and a temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery. On the other hand, there stand people who held the idea that Grace was an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life. What had added to the whole confusion about this murder case was that she herself had given three different versions of the Montgomery murder, while James McDermott had given two.

Margaret Atwood first encountered the story of Grace Marks through Susanna Moodie's *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*. This book is the account of Moodie's visits to many Penitentiaries in Kingston and the Lunatic Asylums in Toronto and other major cities of Canada. In Moodie's retelling of the murder Grace Marks is

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the prime mover, driven by love for Thomas Kinnear and Jealousy of Nancy. McDermott is depicted as an easily tempted and conveniently manipulated.

In the first decade of her imprisonment Grace Marks was held in The Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. After the appointment of a new media superintendent of the asylum – Joseph Workman – Grace was considered sane enough to be returned to the penitentiary. She passed her time in the penitentiary for the next two decades. During these years she through writing letters impressed a good many respectable people – clergymen among them – that they worked tirelessly on her behalf and submitted many petitions aimed at securing her release.

Finally, in 1872, Grace Marks was granted a pardon, records show that she went to New York States, accompanied by the warden and his daughter to a home provided. There are claims by some writers that she married there and had children. (Atwood 1996: 537-538)

***Alias Grace* as a Post Modern Historiographical Novel**

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* belongs to the category of historiographical metafiction. This epithet is used to critically examine post modern novel. There are so many postmodern novelists who are accounted for through the use of historiographical metafiction such as Roa Batos, Graham Swift, John Fowles, E.L. Doctorow, Toni Morrison, and so on. *Rag Time* by Doctorow, *the French Lieutenantwoman* by Fowles, *the Waterland* by Swift, and *the Beloved* by Morrison can be mentioned as examples of this new postmodern mode of novel- writing.

Historiographical metafiction, as the term denotes – is a genre which blurs the boundary between history and fiction; namely fact, to put it more precisely, historical facts and fictional stories. Intermingle together here to produce a narrative which is extremely maze- like and mysterious. Historical past records or incidents are combined with post modernist non- linear and notoriously puncture-less modes of writing influenced by the stream of consciousness techniques which in turn produce hard- reading and predominantly lengthy and detailed narratives.

At wood's *Alias Grace* belongs to these notoriously long and detailed narrations. Past history is retold and rewritten by these novelists in

a new way. As we know post modern novel has set as its aim to challenge the history and historical accounts not because it claims that novel can produce a more reliable account than history can, but to create this mentality that history itself is a kind of text, a kind of writing which shares on several aspects with fictional writings.

The aim of this new novelistic mode is to challenge and deconstruct the certainty and reliability which goes with historical accounts. Official history and historical accounts have always been considered as undeniably true and a world apart from fictional and imaginative experiences. Now, historiographical metafiction demonstrates that history is as much blurred and flawed as fictional writings, and that history is a kind of text, a fiction (Hutcheon 2002: 49).

Therefore, putting history and novel side by side and considering history as a kind of fiction, and novel as a kind of history is what postmodern metafiction is struggling to represent (Abrams 2005). Postmodern metafiction is one major quality of highly multiple, multi- national societies such as United States and Canada- where Atwood comes from.

Such societies along with major European capitals such as London, Paris are signified by the severe power conflicts between center and periphery since such societies are already multiple and democratic and the weaker and repressed parties and groups can conveniently make their voices heard by others.

Postmodern metafiction aims at rewriting history and produces a world which is dominated by multiplicity; one can notice this multiplicity in the point of view, in the material, in the narration, in the ending of such novels. Such a situation creates multiple ways which one can interpret these works, and also multiple ways, a story is represented in its novels the modernistic enlightenment desire for unity, homogeneity, and oneness gives its place for variety, doubleness and disunity. Atwood's *Alias Grace* represents a historical murder of two people by McDermott and Grace Marks. Nothing is clear as far as these murders are concerned.

Atwood is not challenging the facts about this murder case to reveal the truth about it, rather she adds her own narrative to this incident to make it multiple, to indicate that there are other ways to think about it. Her detective, Dr. Simon Jordan, at the end of the story confesses to his own inability to decide and to come to a conclu-

sion about whether Grace is a murderess or not. Modernist detective fiction is a novelistic genre in which the protagonist stands for a detective who is trying to solve a murder case, or he is trying to find an answer to a mind-bugging question. This kind of fiction consists of a plot which moves toward a closure which coincides with finding the murderer or solving the problem of whatever is of importance. Of course, this inclination to search for definite and find answers does not belong to mentality from the time humanity came into this world.

The earliest example of detective writing belongs to Greek dramatic literature; Oedipus the king by Sophocles is an archetype in this field. In that drama- written about twenty-five centuries ago- a murder happened and the protagonist of the drama finds the person who had committed the murder and restored order and prosperity to the people of the country or city. After so much struggle and constraints the protagonist or to put it more precisely, the detector of the narrative understands- through acceptable and unchallengeable evidences- that he himself is the murder. At this final decidable moment he blinds himself and goes to a self-imposed exile.

Accordingly, prosperity returns back to the city of Thebes. Examples of such modes of writing are abundant in the field of literature; *Crying of lot 49* by Thomas Pinchon is another example of detective fiction in the twentieth century in which Pinchon parodies Oedipus the king's obsession and ideals. Of course, *Alias Grace* by Atwood can also be considered as a detective fiction in the postmodern world.

The term which is used for this kind of literature is "Who has done it" genre. The post modernist detective fiction- *Alias Grace* is one representative of this genre in this study- is similar to historiographical metafiction in that in both of them a kind of rewriting, or challenging or parodying of past historical and fictional literature becomes wholly prominent.

Modernist Detective Fiction versus Post Modernist Detective Fiction

Before examining this novel in the light of post modernist detective fiction as well as historiographical metafiction, a brief discussion of the difference between modernist detective fiction and post modernist detective fiction which is quite related to what comes after this part is ab-

solutely necessary. Modernist detective fiction, which is extremely influenced by the enlightenment tradition of thought is teleological in essence; it means that it is end-centered in itself.

At the end of a modernist detective story, a final, conclusive moment is arrived at and the question for which the central character goes to so much pain and affliction is finally closed and answered. The ending of such stories puts an end to all suspense and confusions the character experiences. This pleasure and lure of ending forms the major characteristic of this type of fiction. Postmodern detective fiction, on the other hand is totally the reverse of the modernist one in this regard; in a postmodern era we are living in the sphere of a final answer, and closure is undeniably unpractical.

In postmodern critical theory, the final, unobserved and unchallengeable cannot be reached because the nature of our questioning has changed; now questions are ontological; questions are about the nature of our existence, about ourselves, about being itself which cannot be answered (McHale 1987: 36-39).

Now, questions are in the era of un-decidability and difference (Bertens 1995: 133). Endings, therefore, become multi-dimensional and narratives or experiences become questionable-centered and process-centered rather than end-centered endings and we cherish the pleasure of questioning.

Another aspect of this postmodern detective fiction is the obsessive interest in details which provides the reader with a never-ending suspense; this lure of retails and suspense creates a multiplicity in all major aspects of this type of narrative- in narrative techniques, in points of view, in characterization. The influence of Lacanian reading of both the Saussurean linguistic criticism as well as Freudian psychoanalysis is quite evident in this postmodern literature. After Lacan world is dominated by signifiers and questions rather than by signified and answers.

In fact the movement from modernist detective to the post modern detective fiction is a departure from signified to signifiers. After Lacan questions are difficult to answer. No matter what those questions are; the reason is Lacan emptied language from final meaning. In Lacanian world we are left with signs and signifiers, with questions without unified answers, each question lead to more questions and more ambiguity (Lodge 2000: 67).

It is as if the mirror has been broken into a million pieces and we need to see ourselves in this mirror, and each piece of this mirror is possessed by one person. Now we turn to *Alias Grace* to examine it through the 'who has done it' slogan of post modernist detective fiction. Since it is the case of verifying and finding if Grace Mark is a murderess or not.

Grace Marks as an Instance of Postmodern Unknowable Self

Two people have been murdered in this novel and one of the murderer's has been punished by hanging and there is another person, Grace Marks, who has been condemned to life imprisonment. This is a controversial murder case. It is said that at the time of trial, Grace was sixteen. That is the reason, perhaps her punishment was reduced to life imprisonment. As we read through the novel, we understand that there is so much confusion and obscurity surrounding Grace Mark's character; to pin down whom she is if she is a murderess or a mad and insane woman is at the heart of this novel.

This confusion can be put in other ways; is she the one who murdered Nancy? Is she an accomplice in her murder? Who murdered Nancy – the housekeeper of Mr. Kinnear? One can claim that this novel begins with the aim of shedding light on the murder of Nancy. The above-mentioned questions relate this novel to the genre of detective fiction and the famous "who done it" type.

On the other hand, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the novel is based on a historical reality and its central character, Grace Marks, was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s? We know that Atwood herself has claimed that she had not changed all major known facts and written account of this horrible murder case (Atwood 1996: 541).

This embeddedness in history equally relates *Alias Grace* to historiographical metafictional which came in to fashion in post modern era. At the beginning of the novel we encounter Dr. Simon Jordan, who visits the governor in order to talk to Grace to find about her character as well as to understand if she is a murderess, a criminal or a lunatic. Dr. Simon can be considered as the detective, a criminal investigator in this novel.

The whole novel is addressed to him, it is as if Grace is confessing to whatever that has hap-

pened to her or she had done up to the time of Dr. Simon's visit. A short while before the arrival of Dr. Simon the Governor's wife had sent for the matron from the penitentiary, Matron's conversation with the Governor's wife reflects the way Grace is viewed by people around her:

It's the only way with the hysterics, you may be sure ma'am, said the matron, we have had a great deal of experience with that kind of a fit, this one used to be prone to them, but we never indulged her,... it might be her old trouble coming back, for despite what they said about it up there in Toronto she was a raving lunatic that time seven years ago (Atwood 1996: 33).

In the eyes of most of people who come across her Grace is not only a criminal or a murderess, but she is also a, hysteric; a person who suffers 'fits' and a raving lunatic". For people such as the matron of the penitentiary Grace signifies a hysteric sufferer and a mad woman who is dangerously threatening to people around her. If we think of society as a mirror through which individuals such as Grace can see and view themselves, we can argue at the same time that this mirror is a broken one because, as it will become clear, each fragment of this mirror shows a special Grace to the reader. Doctor Joseph Workman, the medical superintendent of the provincial lunatic asylum in Toronto, where Grace was held for some years writes a letter to Dr. Simon in 1859 and gives another account of Grace's self:

The female prisoner, Grace Marks, whose crime was murder, was returned to the penitentiary at Kingston in August of 1853, as to the degree of insanity by which she was primarily affected, "I am unable to speak. It was my impression that for a considerable time past she had been sufficiently sane to warrant her removal from the asylum. I strongly recommend that in her discipline, gentle treatment should be adopted (Atwood 1996: 54).

On the one hand Dr. Workman as a specialist in the field of lunacy reminds Dr. Simon that Grace is a murderess and on the other hand, he announces that to "the degree of her insanity" he is unable to speak. He adds that for him Grace does not pose much threat since for a long time she has been 'sufficiently' sane. Of course her removal from the asylum can be a good indication of her sanity.

Another piece of this mirror through which we reader's as well as the detective see on murder case Dr. Simon can see Grace is held by Dr. Sam-

uel Bannerling, another medical examiner of Grace marks; he writes a letter dating back to the April 20th, 1859 to Dr. Simon:

"She [Grace] is an accomplished actress and a most practiced liar. While among us, she amused herself with a number of supposed fits, hallucinations, capering, warbling and the like, nothing being lacking to the impersonation but Ophelia's wildflowers entwined in her hair; but she did well enough without them, as she managed to deceive, not only the worthy Mrs. Moodie, who like many high-minded females of her type is inclined to believe any piece of theatrical twaddle served up to her, provided it is pathetic enough, and whose inaccurate and hysterical account of the whole sad affair you have no doubt read; but also several of my own colleagues" (Atwood 1996: 81).

Unlike Dr. Bannerling defines Grace as 'a liar', an accomplished actress, and a deceiver. He warns Dr. Simon not to believe what Grace says or does, because all she does is 'sham' and 'fake' (Atwood 1996: 81). Dr. Bannerling directly attacks Grace and he is totally pessimistic about Grace and he believes that Grace is powerful and deceitful enough to influence everybody to her own advantage.

Equally noteworthy in Dr. Bannerling's letter is his firm belief that he knows Grace more than other specialists who has examined and encountered her up to that time. He asserts that people such as Mrs. Moodie as well as Dr. Workman have failed to know Grace in a correct way: "Dr. Workman has the opportunity of examining Grace marks for a few weeks, therefore his opinions on the subject of her character cannot be worth a great deal" (Atwood 1996: 82).

This firm way of talking about Grace adds more confusion in Dr. Simon's mind about Grace's case. On the other hand, through this argument Dr. Bannerling attempts to tell Dr. Simon not to be deceived by Grace in the way people like Dr. Workman and Mrs. Moodie had been deceived.

Another side of Dr. Bannerling remarks indicates that Grace is a person who is always trying to reshape and refashion herself another way, for him Grace is a 'theatrical' figure, 'an actress' who is in love with playing and 'amusing' other people; the explicit reference to Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, and comparing Grace with Ophelia is another indication and invoking the theatricality of Grace's character. Of course words such as 'theatrical', 'capering', 'actress', and 'sham'

all are words which Dr. Bannerling uses to reveal Grace's character to Dr. Simon. At this point, another piece of the broken mirror is held by Bannerling which further complicates things for Dr. Simon.

Dr. Simon goes to meeting other people and talking to them about Grace Marks in the hope that one day he will reach a definite decision about this case. The next person Dr. Simon goes to meet is Reverend Verringer who is the head of a committee in Toronto. Verringer tells Dr. Simon: "I can see your dilemma"; it is difficult to know what to believe. Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and, after her death sentence has been commuted, yet a third.

In all three, however, she denied ever having laid a finger on Nancy Montgomery. But then, some years later, we have Mrs. Moodie's account, which amounts to a Confession by Grace, of having actually done the deed; and this story is in accordance with James McDermott's dying words, just before he was hanged. Since her return from the Asylum, however, you say she denies it (Atwood 1996: 89).

According to this passage, it is easy to understand that one major barrier for Dr. Simon to recognize the true character of Grace is Grace herself. She has produced a multiple and a variety of narratives about herself in different Occasions. It complicates the matter for Dr. Simon when he hears such remarks and it makes the process of decision-making even more Complex. She does not know which one of these accounts is more reliable than the others. Dr. Simon encounters many 'Graces', Mrs. Moodie's Grace, McDermott's Grace even for herself, Grace is 'Graces' rather than one Grace; Grace of the trial, Grace of the inquest. At this point Dr. Simon becomes acquainted with 'Graces' rather than Grace. Another occasion is one of the members of this committee - Reverend Verringer's - meets Dr. Simon and explains to him that:

"We are sure she is innocent" says Mrs. Quenelle, "All of us on the committee we are convinced of it" Reverend Verringer is getting up a petition. It is not the first, but we are in hopes that this time we will be successful. 'In any case', says Simon, I am less interested in her guilt or innocence than in the mechanisms at work (Atwood 1996: 98).

The assertion is in sheer opposition of what has already been said about Grace. Mrs. Quen-

nell vehemently announces that Grace is an innocent victim and has nothing to do with murdering Nancy Montgomery. Mrs. Quennell's Grace, therefore, is an ordinary person just like any other normal and sane member of society.

In his letter to Dr. Edward Murchie, Dr. Simon explains that his own methods are 'gradual' and 'cumulative' in their effect and that he did not expect rapid results (Atwood 1996: 152). Dr. Simon continues to remark that he is surprised by Grace's conducts and the way she appears and her calmness; He does not consider her as a mad and a lunatic person at this point (Atwood 1996: 153). So we don't know who the real Grace is or is there a real Grace or not or presumably all are fake.

CONCLUSION

In this novel, the true identity or the real self of Grace remains a puzzle. Dr. Simon's mission to resolve this murder case results in his despair and puzzlement. This postmodern detective ac-

cepts defeat at the end of his enquiry and tells his colleagues that it is impossible to know who Grace is. Grace remains a signifier, a question without any definite answer or a final signified. She is also multiple, a person capable of fashioning herself for different people according to what the circumstance allows. Grace turns into Graces; the only clue is who is speaking about her; and whose Grace we want to know; Mrs. Moodies Grace, Reverend Verringer's Grace, Dr. Bannerling's Grace, or Edward Murchie's Grace.

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