

MANIPULATION OF MEMORY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

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Abstract

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field of intellectual strands which examines the social, cultural, cognitive, political and technological shifts about how, what and why individuals, groups or societies remember and forget. It responds and seeks to shape public and academic discourses on nature, manipulation and contestation of memory in the contemporary era. Memory recollection always reshapes and reconsolidates memory. Mnemokinesis controls memories to oneself, modifying, influencing, fabricating, erasing, repairing and restoring them. It confuses memories causing amnesia which creates a psychic vision replacing memory. Amnesia is the selective erasure of any unwanted memories and so is a sub-power of memory manipulation. *Alias Grace* is a historical fiction by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood which was published in 1996. Inspired by a real event, the novel fictionalises the murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper; two servants of the Kinnear household were convicted of the crime. Grace, the central character was sentenced to life imprisonment and later suffers memory loss following an unstable psyche, deep psychological pain, violence and multiple experiences of sexual abuse. This paper aims to study and analyse the manipulation of memory in *Alias Grace*, which thematised traumatic amnesia using memory as a tool for characterisation and how memories can be manipulated to aid the existence and identity of a person.

Keywords : *memory, manipulation, trauma, psychology, characterisation.*

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Introduction

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, Canadian writer well known for her feminist perspective encompassing themes of gender, identity, religion, myth and power politics, in *Alias Grace* gives a fictionalized account of a real-life Canadian girl who was convicted of two murders in a sensationalist 1843 trial. Atwood first encountered the story of Grace Marks in *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* by Susanna Moodie and later wrote a television film *The Servant Girl* about Grace Marks, based on Susanna Moodie's account.

Margaret Atwood by intermingling fact and fiction portrays the mysterious inner workings of human mind. Memories never stay intact forever, they have the potential to be altered creating new ideas, thoughts, suggestive information and misinformation which can cause contamination, distortion, alteration of memory and can plant false memories in people's conscious awareness. Aristotle had made his early comparisons of memories with impressions of wax which can be formed and re-formed in different ways. Human memories can be manipulated while people talk to each other, recollect their past events and experiences, while being interrogated by someone or even under a high publicity event. The memory of facts can be manipulated to conform to the accepted version regardless of the reliability. The effect of social pressure on memory is stamped to the minds.

Identity is closely linked to autobiographical memory. According to philosopher John Locke, memory provides the basis for personal identity. The selective manipulation of good and bad memories and of the emotions associated with them has implications for how people consciously construct their notion of self and how they adhere to social norms. Public conformity takes place when individuals choose to outwardly comply, providing an account that fits that of others, but inwardly maintain certitude in their own original memory.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood with wider readings and discoveries changed her opinion about Grace and constructs a narrative with a fictional American doctor, Simon Jordan who researches the case. The novel was set in 1851, years before psychology was first recognised as a discipline giving the readers a chance to decide whether Grace Marks, the celebrated murderess who was convicted in the murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper and mistress Nancy Montgomery was guilty or not by impartially looking at the ongoing events through the eyes of Grace, Simon and the society. McDermott who was convicted of the crime along with Marks was hanged while she had her sentence amended and ended up in the Kingston Penitentiary. All the while the degree of involvement of Grace in the murders remained uncertain. A Methodist group in Kingston petitions a pardon for Grace and hopes that psychiatrist Simon Jordan can write a science backed memo to support their petition. Jordan gradually becomes more personally involved with Grace and

her stories about her childhood, difficult family life, job, Kinnear's affair with his housekeeper and of events which led to their deaths but throughout her story, Grace claims that she cannot remember the details of the murder and exhibits symptoms of hysteria. Jordan who fails in his attempt to penetrate Grace's mind, permits Grace to undergo hypnosis where an alternative identity claiming to be the spirit of Mary Whitney, Grace's friend who died from a futile abortion emerges. Later he abandons the case and escapes Kingston with his status unharmed, after conducting an affair with the landlady and a disastrous hypnosis session acknowledging that Grace may have mental disorder.

Alias Grace as a fictive memoir raises questions about the trustworthiness of memory and the reliability of story. In Atwood's retelling of the events, Grace suffers traumatic amnesia and claims to have lost the part of memory associated with the execution of murders and prone to terrific hallucinations and double consciousness. The third opening epigraph of the novel "I cannot tell you what the light is, but I can tell you what it is not...What is the motive of light? What is the light?" from *The Soul of the White Ant* by African naturalist and author Eugene Marais complicates Atwood's exploration of the power of the written word in *Alias Grace*, since the history of Marais's book shows that even written stories can be manipulated and reappropriated. This epigraph echoes the mystery that surrounds Grace Marks in the novel.

Memory always asserts power over Grace, the sight of Dr. Simon Jordan triggers memories so powerful that she loses consciousness; it reminded her of the sexual abuse she had experienced from Dr. Bannerling. Grace uses her memories of Mary Whitney as a comfort rather than oppressing them. This supports Grace's selective use of memory as a tool for characterisation and existence.

Grace in her interactions with Dr. Jordan withholds information's and intentionally feeds him misinformation about her life account as she has profound distrust of men. Grace tells Dr. Jordan that many of the women she met in the asylum did not have troubled minds but were pretending so to escape their abusive husbands or secure a warm place to sleep. Madness derived as a result of terrible treatment in patriarchy.

Grace's comment "this is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story" can be taken as an instance where she deliberately misinforms Jordan. Grace's internal dialogues reveal the bleak gap between what she says and what she is actually thinking. There is a part of Grace's mind to which the reader can never have access. Dr. Bannerling characterisation of Grace as "an accomplished actor and a most practiced liar, who has never been actually insane" cannot only be completely considered as the sexist views of an immoral character.

Grace's comment that "people want a guilty person" draws light to her deliberate action to conform to people's idea of her. Grace in her interactions with Dr. Jordan selectively shares edited information asserting her right to her inner life.

Her statement that the confession she gave isn't really hers is a hint to the fallibility of written word. Later Grace wonders what she should tell Dr. Jordan about the day the murders took place; she herself is unable to identify which of her memories are real and which are fabricated.

Throughout the novel Atwood indirectly praises Grace for her observation skills detailing every minute fragments. Grace claims to have no memory of the day murders took place, though she remembers the days leading up to and after the murders. While narrating her life account to Dr. Jordan she recalls every event before and after the day of murder and elaborately details them but Jordan couldn't penetrate into the missing parts of her memory which can be seen as her conscious act to erase off her own memories which she was afraid off. Grace marks remembers where the vegetables were stored in the underground cellar, how lonely she felt on her birthday in the farm, the way how sun fell on the house's front porch but not how its owner and housekeeper were murdered.

Absence or gaps in memory lurk into deepest secrets, damaging recollection. Remembrances can bring back guilt, shame and a sense of loss. Grace does not believe in her own innocence and is reluctant to expose herself to more traumas after having had countless traumatic experiences. Her father was an abusive alcoholic and later on her life Grace faced multiple sexual harassments at different stages of life.

Atwood in the novel insists on the fundamentally flexible and malleable nature of memory. Grace wonders what a keep safe album should be "should it be only the good things in your life or should it be all the things?" suggesting that memories are a kind of story the characters tell themselves rather than the truth what we think it is.

Atwood in *Alias Grace* critiques the class structure of Victorian era, where notions of proper behaviour was considered central to people's identity. Grace's experiences explore the way societal forces manipulate and control women's ability to tell their own story. Women committing crimes in the Victorian era was castigated and criticised for deviating from the prescribed ideology of feminism. The deliberate suppression of Grace's memory is a result of the repression of female sexuality which negatively affects women's self expression. The male dominant Victorian era women are robbed of their dignity and right to have complicated identities, where women are treated as objects compared with nothingness.

Dr. Jordan who escaped from Kingston fearing of being seen as a quack gets engaged to a woman his mother picked and enlists as a military surgeon, during war sustains a head injury and his mother claims that her son lost his memory of his time in Canada and do not remember treating Grace but he often mistakenly refers his betrothed as Grace, complementing his own statement "We are what we remember and we are also preponderantly what we forget".

Conclusion

In *Alias Grace* memory is a key factor creating Grace's own identity but her recollection of memories cannot be considered as a reliable or trustworthy way of creating a sense of self. Grace's memory loss can be associated to her conscious strategy to forget, creating a context shift as forgetting requires more conscious effort than remembering. Selective removal and addition of memory play an important role in treating post-traumatic stress disorder and the unreliable nature of memory.

Forgetting can be considered as a psychological behaviour or defence mechanism where negative memories are placed out of reach so that they are less distressing. Thought suppression is the conscious act of excluding thoughts and memories from awareness to block anxiety arousing memories. Sigmund Freud and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who developed the idea of motivated forgetting, had similar view of repression of memories as a form of self preservation. The motivated forgetting theory suggests that people forget things because they either do not want to remember them or for another particular reason. Painful and disturbing memories are made unconscious and very difficult to retrieve, but still remain in storage.

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