

Survival of the Artist in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye

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Introduction

“Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our heart knows that is not true. In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.” (Lorde, 631)

Normalization pertains to arbitrary sets of rules and standards that express the concepts of individualization and exclusion. The majorities labeled normal take these signs of standards for granted and the excluded ones are those who give no heed. The second group is called abnormal. Normalization divides normal and abnormal. For this division there are some techniques to evaluate, oversee and correct.

“The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time...The existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, Supervising and correcting the abnormal.” (Rivkin and Ryan, 469)

Foucault talks about normalization and the procedures through which people are limited and dominated. According to Bertens,

“Foucault argues that over the last two centuries a whole army of psychiatrists, doctors, sociologists, psychotherapists, social workers, and other self-appointed guardians of ‘normality’ has sprung up that has created a stifling apparatus of social surveillance in which, as we will see in a moment, language plays a major role.” (152)

It means that a person can be termed ‘patient’ just because of discrepancy with the standards of society. Standardizing is enacted through organizations, psychologists, religious men, teachers and even ordinary people. As Foucault (1980) narrows it down:

“... the liberation of mentally ill in the asylum, the march of enlightenment in the human sciences, the reform of the imprisoned in the penitentiary, the liberation of the self in the overcoming of sexual repressions. In each of these movements of emancipation, Foucault discovered a process that he came to call “normalization”, a narrowing and impoverishment of human possibilities.”(151)

There are three different reactions in society: adaptation, resistance, and invention. I examine to explicit the applications of these three reactions in four girl characters’ lives in *Cat’s Eye* by Margaret Atwood.

It is a story of the narrator’s family, and her childhood in wilderness. The narrator, Elaine spent some years of her life in the bush with her mother, brother, and etymologist father. While staying in town, and attending school, she made friends with Cordelia, Carol, and Grace. Elaine married twice and now is quite a prominent artist. I would study Elaine, Cordelia, Carol and Grace. All four of them have gone through rough situations in different periods of their lives that made them respond differently. They are the human being that according to Bertens (152), “...have, first of all, accepted and completely internalized a discourse about normality.” They are the individuals to be controlled by the authorities. The crux of the whole scheme is binary division; normal/ abnormal. Society, through different groups of organizations and titles, generates the normality, categorizes people with various labels, includes and excludes them. All people are entangled in this network of division; however, every individual’s reaction optimistically determines the lifeline of that person. Nevertheless, the normalized standards are extremely rational and hard to be suspected. The rules of normalization are so persuasive and convincing

that in a period of history, Nazism existed. Foucault, in his article, "*Space, knowledge, and power*", declares,

"It was on the basis of the flamboyant rationality of social Darwinism that racism was formulated, becoming one of the most enduring and powerful ingredients of Nazism. This was, of course, an irrationality, but an irrationality that was at the same time, after all, a certain form of rationality." (325)

Adaptation

The first and the easiest reaction to the dominating normalization is adaptation. One is content with the enforced division and has no objection or some minor temporary and passing points. These people are incapable of taking any actions. Nevertheless, a question rises that Foucault (1980) expresses it superbly, "Why do we accept this 'panoptical' state of affairs- a word in which we are under constant surveillance and, even more importantly, in which we constantly monitor ourselves for signs of abnormality or even mere strangeness?" (119)

An immediate response comes out, power. Being overseen and dictated some codes of normality, people accept, adapt and enforce them. They are supposed normal if only they accept these codes. It would seem wiser and easier to accept the norms rather than fighting back these codes. Like Carol and Grace in *Cat's Eye*. For example, Carol Campbell is the first school girl that made friend with Elaine, got back home on foot after school. She invited Elaine to her house and there Elaine received the first codes of normality/ abnormality divisions. Taken to Carol's house for the first time, Elaine reflected, "She lets me look at her living room from the doorway, although we are not allowed to go into it. She herself can't go in except to practice the piano."(51) Carol is not allowed to go there and she does not even try it!

Carol shows her closet of clothes and other parts of the house to Elaine in attempt to demonstrate the degree of normality they obtain in their house and family. Nevertheless, when it comes to Elaine and her house and her clothes, Carol gets shocked. It seems that normalization does not impress Elaine and her family. "This is where you sleep? This is where you eat? These are your clothes?"(51) Carol's reflections are these. Back to school Carol torments Elaine a second time by telling everybody about their abnormality. Elaine is stigmatized and consequently excluded, as Elaine herself says, "It is as if she's reporting on the antics of some

primitive tribe: true, but incredible.”(52) Carol is punished physically by her piano teacher and mother and she is dominated by normalizing rules. Likewise, she torments Elaine to gain power and dominate another person. As Foucault (1980) says,

“If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say No, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive net work which runs throughout the whole social body. (119)

Carol takes every normal code in society for granted, adapts and has no objection. She seems to get in no trouble.

The other girl that Elaine meets through Carol is Grace Smeath. On Sundays, Elaine plays with Carol and Grace, through which she comprehends the different atmosphere and rules from those with boys. At first, she feels a bit strange and tries just to copy everything, because these codes seem to be considered normality. Grace and Carol adapt the dominant normalization in society; tell lies to each other just to survive,

“Carol and Grace look at each other’s scrapbook pages and say, ”Oh, Yours is so good. Mine’s no good. Mine’s awful.” They say this every time we play the scrapbook game. Their voices are wheedling and false; I can tell they do not mean it, each one thinks her own lady on her own page is good. But it’s the thing you have to say, so I begin to say too.”(57)

Nevertheless, Elaine cannot get along with such hypocrisy- a rule in society- and gets tired soon. As she says, “I find this game tiring- it’s the weight, the accumulation of all these objects, these possessions that would have to be taken care of, packed, stuffed into cars, and unpacked.”(57) This is one of the first signs of dissimilarity between Elaine and her siblings. They do not find the game boring, tiring or even abnormal; Elaine finds it so, though. According to Fiske,

“Social norms are realized in day- to- day workings of the ideological state apparatuses. Each one of these institutions is “relatively autonomous”, according to Althusser, and there are no overt connections between it and

any of the others- the legal system is not explicitly connected to the school system nor to the media, for example- yet they all perform similar ideological work. They are all patriarchal; they are all concerned with the getting and the keeping of wealth and possessions; and they all endorse individualism; and competition between individuals.”(307)

Thus, people try to moderate themselves, repress some desires and eradicate their wishes. However, under what kind of rules they enact these changes and repressions is the main question. Self- surveillance was a common practice in the monasteries in the 4th and 5th centuries. Nevertheless, by the 16th century, it was prevalent in the whole society. Their common activities included self- examination and confession. Therefore, the direct product of observation and confession would be obedience. They pursued their true self that was leading to tractability.

Regarding Carol and Grace, they did not get into a serious problem at school and the narrator does not relate any especial story about them. It sounds like that they have been content with the norms and society. It could be a profitable scheme to pursue the rules and not to ponder over the possibility of another path.

Resistance

The second practice of reaction to the normalizing codes and forces in society is the mere resistance. Resistance to normality is a kind of resistance to power relations imposed in the network of power in society. As Taylor remarks in his article,

“In addition to resistance against forms of domination and exploitation, a political ethic necessarily entails combat with a pastoral power that “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize,” and that “makes individual subjects.”(155)

Thus the individual subjects in society are in ever- present combat and struggle with their own selves and society. They push themselves forward one-step more than first group- adaptation. At least they perceive that they are dominated and are stuck in a network of power. They apprehend that there are implements of

limitation and compulsion created and enforced upon people. At first, they attempt to duplicate and enact the same rules and activities dominant in society. Then they try to resist the codes and endeavor to change, but misled and consequently inept to survive; such as Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*.

When Elaine and her family come back from north, she sees a third girl with Grace and Carol- Cordelia. Elaine describes her as a completely different girl from Grace and Carol, "Both Carol and Grace are stubby- shaped, but this girl is thin without being fragile, lanky, and sinewy."(74) Apart from physical dissimilarities, Cordelia's behavior is also different, "She has a smile like grown- ups, as if she's learned it and is doing it out of politeness. She holds out her hand."(74) Elaine is absolutely startled and bewildered and does not discern how to respond. She also feels shy.

On the other hand, Cordelia is measuring everything, particularly Elaine's parents and their appearances. Elaine feels the gaze that is the artifact of societal rules and codes. Cordelia lives in a two-story house and has two older sisters. In fact, it is through Cordelia that Elaine apprehends her family is not rich. Cordelia delivers a lot of normality codes to Elaine so badly that even during her adulthood Elaine remembers Cordelia and her sentences recurrently and interminable. As a child, Cordelia is distressed and subjugated in her house. She reflects the same codes of oppressions and she implements them on Elaine. In one scene, talking about her sisters, Cordelia says that they are gifted and when was asked about herself, "I ask Cordelia if she is gifted, but she puts her tongue in the corner of her mouth and turns away, as if she's concentrating on something else."(77) Where did Cordelia get this knowledge of her sisters being talented and not herself? The sisters can adapt the normal society without disappointing Mammie; nevertheless, Cordelia is less capable of this. When Mammie gets disappointed in Cordelia, father is the one that will be called in to it. Elaine just recollects the yelling of a charming father who is indeed the executor of social norms and punishments.

Thus, Cordelia turns to be a tormentor and finds a target in Elaine. The worst part of it is the one that Cordelia forces Elaine to go down into the ravine. According to Taylor,

"The techniques that Cordelia and the two other girls use to bully Elaine are the same as those employed by repressive governments: intimidation, isolation,

instilling self-doubt by forcing paradoxical questions, sarcasm, invective, and brainwashing, as well as direct physical threats and torments.”(167)

However, Cordelia, as a child seems to be a little disobedient and intractable. Hence, she disappoints her parents as a child. She has the traces of resistance; she is not as docile as Grace and Carol. She is an aware victim of normalization while the other two girls are ignorant.

The reflections of having resistant character show up from the time that Cordelia starts going to high school. She is expelled from school for despising the dominant rules and codes of respect- though slightly mentioned in the novel- for drawing penis on bat. Her style of clothing is largely different and her sisters comment about it to her. She is searching for freedom, though vainly.

According to Bernauer and Mahon,

“The quest for freedom is diverted into a series of illusory liberations from repression. . . . modern knowledge and technologies of the self-aim however, to foster the emergence of a positive self; one recognizes and attaches oneself to a self-presented through the normative categories of psychological and psychoanalytic science and through the normative discipline consistent with them.”(159)

According to Elaine, as the narrator, Cordelia commences to behave weirdly, “she loses things, such as combs and also her French homework. She laughs raucously in the halls....she takes up smoking and gets caught doing it in the girls’ washroom.”(244) Cordelia keeps resisting the dominant rules and codes and simultaneously failing more and more tests. She has trouble focusing on things and finally changes high school. After a while Elaine sees her, “her hair is lusterless, the flesh of her face pasty. She’s gained a lot of weight, bloated and watery.” (275) she is wretched, pathetic, and reluctant to do anything even when Elaine requires her.

After all, of these fluctuations, she runs away from home, tries pills and ends up with nuthatch as Elaine calls it. As a child, she rejected the rules and codes of normality but is not creative or artist enough to originate a comprehensive different Cordelia. Subsequently, she is stuck in the doctors’ hands- the executors of codes of normality.

Objection and Invention

Objection and invention is the third and the preeminent respond to this society of normalizing rulebooks and programs. I call this group of people ‘artists’. They are so gifted and accurate who can understand the veiled codes of regularization, resist them and invent another being of themselves- rather than the imposed ones. As Foucault (1985) declares,

“Process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the percept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.”(28)

So does the narrator and the main character in the *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine Risley. An innocent girl, grown up in nature and wilderness is suddenly exposed to the society of other children. These children, grown up in culture and civilization, have social codes of behavior and cruelties. Grace, Carol, and Cordelia bully her all the time and boss over her. From the beginning, she is considered the abnormal, regarding the mode of family life that she has. Her mother teaches her and her brother at home and they attend school for a short period. However, other people have unwavering house and school. Her friends- the epitomes of society- criticize her signs of abnormality by all means; her manner of eating, taking the sandwich in hand, standing, and even walking. Initially, Elaine is vulnerable and submissive. As she says, “Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, and they all do. They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends, I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please.”(127) due to the sense of insecurity of being left alone in the rigorously normalizing world, she fancies having some companies and is apt to behave herself in order not to lose them.

After a while, she tries to survive through seeing things in a different way as a child and as an adult via her paintings- apparently, she avoids victimization. Elaine lived eight years in the woods with her only brother as a playmate. She did not have any presuppositions of the world of the girls and their rules of games. They played homemaker and figures of fashion with various regulations of behavior. She was ready bait for Cordelia and two other girls, to be oppressed and brutalized for two years. Cordelia has a very dominating role in Elaine’s mind and convinces her to believe many stories; for instance, the river under the bridge that carries dead

people's souls. Her behavioral reaction to these sorts of stories is that she began to tear her feet skin. She has a feeling of inadequacy. "I am not normal, I am not like other girls, Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time." (125)

One winter evening Cordelia and two other girls made her go into the ravine, under the bridge, and they left her there. She slipped in the freezing water and her feet were numb. Lying emotionless, she imagines the Black Virgin that awakens her and provides her the power to survive. Hallucination becomes a means of survival. After this incident, Elaine gains the power to circumvent and snub these girls and their society of rules. After the ravine incident, Elaine goes back to school and her friends, but this time with an immense change; daring indifference to them. "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." (207)

Moreover, she keeps blue cat's eye marble as a symbol of power and self-confidence; "Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out....I am alive in my eyes only." (151) thus, Elaine gains power to survive through visual understanding and imagination. She finds a way to set free from the entangling network of girl society. As White says, "It would seem that visual perception is the least threatening and the most empowering means of experiencing the world under duress." (169)

As an adult, Elaine has other types of predicament to deal with. She is portrayed in two relationships; her first lover, Joseph Hrbik and her first husband, Jon. Both of these men are shown as hindrances to her artistic advancement. The first lover wanted to change her to a Pre- Raphaelite woman without knowing the young rebellious Elaine. He desired to normalize her in his own fashion. However, Elaine's experience with Cordelia has taught her to be resisting. As it is expressed in the novel,

"“Would you do something for me?” he says, gazing into my eyes. I sway toward him, far away from the earth. Yes would be so easy. “No,” I say. This is a surprise to me. I do not know where it has come from, this unexpected and stubborn truthfulness. It sounds rude.” (325)

On the other hand, her first husband, Jon is very busy with different trendy arts. Nevertheless, Elaine is entangled in the normal vicious circle of womanhood;

giving birth to a child, taking care of household chores and having no time for painting. To this condition, also she resists and leaves the impeding unfaithful husband and aspires for a better and more fertile life.

After all these life-long denunciations, Elaine tries to invent herself like her childhood. According to Foucault (1980), "If one side of this resistance is to "refuse what we are", the other side is to invent, not discover, who we are by promoting "new forms of subjectivity."(336) Meanwhile, *the question* comes up through studying Foucault: what kind of subjectivity are we capable of originating to resist this prevalent power? The sole answer seems to be "a defamiliarization" of desiring man. We should distance ourselves! Thus, Foucault recommends the practice of creativity, to create ourselves as a work of art. Therefore, we need a revolutionary artist, as it is declared in "Useless to Revolt?"

"It is through revolt that subjectivity (not that of great men but that of whomever) introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life. A delinquent put his life into the balance against absurd punishments; a mad man can no longer accept confinement and the forfeiture of his rights; a people refuses the regime which oppresses him."(452)

In the normal and normalizing society, a girl like Elaine is forced to obey and act wisely, unless she would be considered an alien. If she wants to remain a stranger and not a diminished person, she will need power. Painting, visual arts, is a good means of retaining power that results to survival. Like the woman in *Blind Assassin*, through writing she reserved the balance of power. Therefore, Elaine Risely in *Cat's eye* is more capable than the other characters in discovery the resources to generate artworks out of her painful memories and achieves what Atwood calls, "Creative Non- victimhood."

Conclusion

"I hate parties, I hate ghettos." Cat's eye (94)

Elaine Risely always rejects being dominated. Even in her maturity, while she is a famous artist, she avoids being called or categorized as a feminist. She feels and believes, out of childhood experiences, that she should not trust groups and society. Each group has some regulations to classify people in it and she declines them and their normal standards.

She is an isolated figure, distanced from others. She is honest, trick-free, and desires to express herself. She is a visual artist who struggles to set herself free from the entangling surface of life—a societal gift. She keeps aloof from the so-called normal life. Actually, Elaine starts as a passive puppet and easy to be bossed over. Due to some tormenting incidents, she ponders over her status, and starts to take some serious actions.

Therefore, comprehending the roles of rules and the impression they have reflected on her life can be considered as a crucial step. Then, she begins to ignore normalizing world and creates a world of herself. However, the other characters are not artists enough to pass these procedures and gain a life worthy of themselves as human beings. They are the mere victims of social normalization. They imitate, dominate and eventually evaporate. The only survivor is Elaine that recovers and reconstructs her subject.

Consequently, one should be an artist with all valor and bravery to see beyond the restraining outlines. The only real life survivals are the *human artists*.

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Summary

Survival of the Artist in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

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The present paper is to explicate different sorts of responses to the normalizing rubrics of society specifically in a microcosm of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* as an epitome. Three different groups of characters are taken under observation to illuminate the processes of enacting domination on human being and their various reactions; moreover, their struggle for survival. Applying different critics' theories- particularly Foucault- the authors try to demonstrate and attest the need of having an artistic character to be able to fight back the subjugating rules and invent a new life line and a new character.

Keywords: normalization; exclusion; adaptation; rejection; invention; surveillance; subjectivity.