



Resisting Narrative, Narrating Resistance: Resistance and Narrative in

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper deals with Margaret Atwood's celebrated novel *The Blind Assassin* and reads the novel using the idea of resistance. It presents a reading of the novel as a site of resistance with the help of the various forms of writing present in the text, mostly Iris' memoir and Laura's (and Iris') novel within the novel. The paper makes use of Foucault's idea of resistance along with the concept of "everyday resistance", history, memory and Lyotard's idea of writing as resistance to reveal the various ways in which the novel becomes a site of Iris' resistance against forces much more powerful than her. The present paper attempts to analyse her famous novel *The Blind Assassin* as a site and strategy of resistance, where Iris' story serves a dual purpose: that of resisting the official narratives and at the same time that of narrating her resistance.

KEYWORDS:

Atwood, power, resistance, Foucault, Lyotard, writing, narrative, history, memory, memoir.

Margaret Atwood is one of the major contemporary writers who has been writing on a plethora of issues, very often related to women. She occupies a major position in the canon the world as well as the Canadian literature. A study of Atwood's novels would be incomplete without paying attention to the women characters who often take center stage in most of her works. Her novels explore the subjectivity of the woman in its various aspects and present before her readers multidimensional representations of woman in her various forms – from woman as victim to the woman as monster. Her novels, however, can also be read as sites and strategies of resistance where most often her women characters engage in resisting the dominant discourse in one way or the other. The present paper attempts to analyse her famous novel *The Blind Assassin* as a site and strategy of resistance, where Iris' story serves a dual purpose: that of resisting the official narratives and at the same time that of narrating her resistance.

The Blind Assassin, published in the year 2000 was also the recipient of the prestigious Booker Prize in 2000. Like many other novels by Atwood, this too is set in the backdrop of Canada and has the potential to be read on many levels. One can read it as a story of two sisters, Iris and Laura; as a saga of the Chase family; a historical

account of Canada during the years before and after the world wars and, of course, as a novel which relates the socio-economic position of women in a fast changing Canada. Some critics have made use of Linda Hutcheon's idea of *historiographic metafiction* to study the text as a rewriting of history. Whatever standpoint one looks at the novel from, it is impossible to ignore the element of resistance in the novel. This resistance is present not only in the forms of the actions of the various characters, particularly Iris and Laura, but also in the overall structure of the text which is written by Iris as a point of resistance to all the official discourse that has set in, and against all the aspects of history that talk often just about the macro level, the grand narratives. In writing her own memoir and suffusing it with other "official" text like newspaper clippings, magazine cut-outs and certain "unofficial" writings like Laura's (actually Iris') novel and the various instances of graffiti Iris reads in different rest rooms, Iris moves from the macro to the micro level, from the grand to the mini narrative.

The idea of resistance is invariably linked with theory of power and resistance by the famous post structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault. Although it is true that Foucault in his works deals more with the concept of power than resistance, it is interesting to apply his ideas of power and resistance to *The Blind Assassin*. In his work *Power/Knowledge* he describes power as "something which circulates" (qtd in Taylor 35) and calls individuals the "vehicles of power" (35). In a discussion with Michael Bess from 1980, Foucault sheds more light on the nature of power and informs his readers that power "takes place when there is a relation between two free subjects, and the

relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon the other and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon" (qtd in Taylor 5). Foucault also linked the concepts of power and resistance by proclaiming that "where there is power there is resistance" (qtd in Mills 40). Resistance then, becomes an inherent part of any power relation, power equation.

In the narrative also, one can come across various ways in which Iris opposes the power that both Richard and Winifred Griffen exercise over her in various minor and major ways. It is very clear that both these individuals exercise great power over Iris and they want to keep her in check, in her place by impressing upon her time and again the fact that they have done a lot for her and her sister Laura and that they demand complete silence and docility in return. Clearly, for various reasons, Iris doesn't revolt openly against the duo, at least not till after Laura's death when she realises the fact that Richard had been molesting Laura for a long time, blackmailing her in the name of Alex, whom both Iris and Laura are in love with. She however, presents her revolt, her "resistance" to them in minor ways, using methods of what James Scott calls "everyday resistance". Everyday resistance can be described as "quiet, dispersed, disguised or otherwise seemingly invisible" (Vinthagen and Johansson 4). Scott also shows the various ways in which the subaltern and the marginalized groups resist the power being practiced on them through various seemingly innocuous yet ingenious methods like foot-dragging, escape, sarcasm, passivity, laziness, misunderstanding, disloyalty, slander, avoidance or theft. These activities are prolific in "contexts where rebellion is

too risky" (4). In the case of Iris, most of these techniques can be seen present in her narrative. Iris very capably makes use of the technique of feigning ignorance and laziness and passivity when it comes to the relationship between her and Winifred. Winifred tries to make Iris feel that she knows nothing and that Winifred is trying to do everything in her power to develop her into a society lady. Iris, since she cannot oppose anything said by Winifred, uses these methods to resist her. The same is true of Richard as well. She uses these resistance techniques against the brother-sister duo in a very effective manner: "I agreed, but did not listen. Not listening was the only way I had, those days, of keeping my balance. . . . Winifred thought I was innocuous. Put another way, she thought I was a fool" (Atwood 452). At other place she says about her asking naïve questions that "I knew the answer perfectly well, but I'd drifted into the habit of asking naïve questions just to see what Richard or Winifred would say. The sliding moral scale they applied to almost every area of life had not yet ceased to amuse me" (479). Incidents like these show how Iris uses her techniques of everyday resistance to offer resistance to whatever these two say, as a counter to the power exercised over her. At other places, she shows laziness, passivity and ineptitude simply to frustrate the schemes of Winifred for her that she does not to be a part of. Theft also becomes a part of her routine for she always manages to steal something like cigarettes or a bottle of wine when going to meet Alex.

But the greatest act of resistance that Iris indulges is in the clandestine affair with Alex. Both Iris and Laura have been attracted to Alex since their first meeting with him.

After her marriage to Richard, which is more of a business deal done to save the Chase industries and to ensure a future for Laura, Iris is an unhappy woman. There is clearly no love or respect between the couple and Iris finds Richard repulsive and even ludicrous at times. She, however, cannot break the bond of marriage easily because she has to think of Laura as well and therefore her affair with Alex, conducted in different places, at different hours of the day and mentioned in the novel within the novel *The Bird Assassin* becomes a telling move of resistance on her part. This does not mean that resistance is the only motive behind her relationship with Alex, and yet, one cannot ignore the fact that resistance plays a great role in inducing her to start this relationship with Alex. Being with Alex gives her a chance at trying to live life the way she wants to, it makes her feel free and every time she successfully comes back after meeting Alex, lying and making up stories to satisfy her family, it is a small victory for the resistance that she is offering Richard in particular. This also becomes a resistance to the sexual advances of Richard towards Iris where her body is treated as just that – a body meant for the pleasure of the husband without any concern as to the wishes of the wife.

Finally, one can and must talk about writing, which is the most important process of resistance that Iris offers. Writing itself can be seen as an act of resistance. In her essay “Writing as Resistance”, Elizabeth A Flynn refers to Lyotard for whom writing is a form of resistance, “a means of giving testimony which is not yet included in the circulation of commodities, not yet known” (Flynn 397). In Lyotard’s own words, to write becomes to resist the “already done, the already written, the already thought”

(qtd in Flynn 397). Iris' writing, then, already becomes a resistance she offers to the official versions of history that have already permeated the system. An example of this resistance can be seen in the form of her personal accounts of the various people and events in her life that are totally different from the official version of the same person or event. One of the most important of these events is the death of her sister Laura. While to the outsiders, those not in the know of Iris' memoirs Laura's death was an accident, any reader of the text knows very well that it was a suicide made to look like accidental death to save the reputation of the Griffen family, particularly Richard. Another official narrative resisted by the novel is regarding the identity of the writer of the novel within the novel, also titled *The Blind Assassin*. While the official narrative calls Laura the author (because the novel was published under her name), Iris' narrative subverts this fact for her readers, giving them the true identity of the writer as herself: "As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it. . . . I wrote it myself, during my long evenings alone, when I was waiting for Alex to come back, and then afterwards, once I knew he wouldn't" (Atwood 626).

And she does this, not once but twice in the course of her life. The first time Iris offers resistance through her writing is when she writes the novel *The Blind Assassin*. Although she gets it published under the name of Laura, her sister for various reasons like fear of losing her daughter and that of being infamous in her small town. As she herself says:

You might decide it was cowardice that inspired me, or a failure of nerve – I have never been fond of spotlights. Or simple prudence: my own name would have guaranteed the loss of Aimee, whom I lost in any case. But on second thought it was merely doing justice, because I can't say Laura didn't write a word. . . . The real author was neither one of us: a fist is than the sum of its fingers. (626)

This becomes an interesting thought because, when Iris describes Laura as her spiritual partner in writing, when she acknowledges that Laura was as involved in the process of writing the novel as she was, she seems to be offering resistance not just from her side but from that of Laura as well.

Another interesting standpoint from which this work can be seen as a work offering resistance is if we look at it from the perspective of memory as a tool of resistance. A large fragment of the novel comes from Iris' personal memory, since it is a memoir. When writing down her memories, she brings to the foreground that which has been repressed for a very long time in favour of the correct, official discourse that has gone down as history or fact. One of the most important reasons why she does it at her ripe old age, at a time when she finds it increasingly difficult to write is because she wants 'truth', her truth or the subjective truth to be handed over to the future generation, i.e. Sabrina, her great-granddaughter. In "Storied Memories: Memories as Resistance in Contemporary Women's Literature", Vinson argues that the stories told by women writers "of the past, and their stories of memories in general . . . give voice to

those who have traditionally been silenced, providing resistance to dominant narratives and presenting new ways of conceiving of women's stories, memories and identities" (Vinson 3). Seen from this perspective, the old woman Iris, writing down her memories becomes an active agent of resistance, resisting the very powerful official discourses that surround her.

To conclude, the novel *The Blind Assassin*, like many other works by Margaret Atwood is a site of resistance. Here, Iris is narrating her resistance at the same time as her narrative is resisting the already existing, official discourse that has surrounded her throughout her life. Through her behaviour and primarily by the act of narrating itself she becomes a very potent tool of resistance, foregrounding her subjective truths, her mini narratives and backgrounding the all-encompassing and readily available macro histories and grand narratives.

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