



Forging a Digital and Public Identity: the Self-fashioning of Margaret

Atwood

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ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to unravel how Margaret Atwood assumes, creates and manages her identity as a literary celebrity and how she uses digital media, media interviews and appearances for this purpose, especially with respect to an assertion of her Canadian identity; with a focus on her trip to India in 2016. The methodology involves analysing the creation of Atwood's literary celebrity and its management, by her increasing appearance and engagement with electronic and social media; particularly her website. Questions of autonomy, purpose and authorial position on issues are raised here and subsequently dealt with. Thus, this paper seeks to establish how the relationship of the author with the business of producing a literary text is a political stance, where in today's global world forging and managing an identity is crucial to the purpose of being heard.

KEYWORDS:

Margaret Atwood, self-fashioning, identity, Canada, popular, social media, digital, feminist.

Any writing assumes an audience; therefore, it needs to be looked at in terms of its presence in the cultural sphere. Authors are increasingly becoming aware of the scrutiny they face from not just literary critics, but also their readers in general. The global market, which crowns a literary piece as an international bestseller, deals with challenges of various kinds. Thus, to make a product seem popular as well as literary, a lot of hard work goes in, in spite of the postmodernists collapsing the difference between what was earlier known as high art and low art¹.

In today's fast paced world of dynamic and emerging theoretical tools, contemporary ideas regarding what constitutes a piece of literature need to be examined. Apart from the traditional genres like novels, plays, short stories and poems; newer forms of literary expression like graphic novels², six-word stories³ and micro blogging with Twitter fiction⁴; writers like Margaret Atwood are experimenting with

¹ See Jean-Francois Lyotard's essay, "Answering the Question - What is Postmodernism?", for a detailed discussion on this.

² On Atwood's soon to be released graphic novel three part series, Angel Catbird, see <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/09/margaret-atwood-creates-superhero-angel-catbird-comic>

³ Margaret Atwood's six-word short stories: "Longed for him. Got him. Shit."; "Corpse parts missing. Doctor buys yacht.", and "Starlet sex scandal. Giant squid involved." From <http://www.wired.com/2006/11/very-short-stories/> accessed on 14/04/2016

⁴ See http://twitterfictionfestival.com/archive/margaret-atwood-story/?timezone_string=America/New_York for details on Atwood's, "Film Previews on a Plane: the Helpful Summaries"

their range and it often results in a promotion of their celebrity status due to the publicity and popularity that is generated on social and popular media.

In *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*, Coral Ann Howells suggests that the greatest challenge for a woman writer is how to position herself in response to changing cultural definitions of 'woman' and its appendages like feminine and feminist. Margaret Atwood has constantly engaged with that challenge in a concerted attempt to widen the dimensions of the debate. In January 2016, while giving an exclusive interview to journalists in Jaipur, India, upon being asked about her brand of "feminism", Atwood replied, "What you actually mean by 'feminism' is the important thing. If you say 'feminism' means mean girls pushing boys off the roof, then, no, I'm not a feminist. But if you say 'feminism' means believing women are human beings too, then yes I'm a feminist...Feminism... has so many different associations for so many different people."⁵ Her view reflects on how she has kept herself abreast with the current global debates in feminist theory.

Margaret Atwood's writing is grounded in a strong sense of her own awareness of her racial and gendered identity of an English speaking-writing subject of a multicultural and multilingual nation. Yet, it constantly re-examines stereotypes and categorisations based on such constructs of identity; especially in order to question and work out the limitations imposed on a sense of understanding of the 'self' and the 'other'. At Jaipur the same year, she said, "Writing brings to light the unknown and the

⁵ See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/feminism-is-believing-women-are-human-beings-too-margaret-atwood/story-JLNhvujXs9vl9nJzfpSKEM.html>

obscure. It sheds light on darkness - whether it's the darkness of fascist regimes, poverty, oppression of women, or discrimination of so many kinds"⁶.

"One of the things I would like to squash underfoot like a cockroach is the idea of art as self-expression. You must say something about the world at large." As she said in the year 1982 in *Second Words*, the compilation of fifty reviews and essays:

I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture. We sometimes forget, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances towards others, both inside the country and outside it; and our concern about sexism, men's mistreatment of women, can blind us to the fact that men can be just as disgusting, and statistically more so, towards other men, and that women as members of certain national groups, although relatively powerless members, are not exempt from the temptation to profit at the expense of others. Looking back over the period, I see that I was writing and talking a little less about the Canadian scene and a little more about the global world. (282)

Hence, determined to position herself in the global literary scene, Atwood has done enough through her writings and interviews to make her local and national cultures visible to the world outside. As a critical insider, she has extensively commented upon the politics of the nation and the relationship of it with the citizens.

⁶ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/jlf-2016-writing-sheds-light-on-all-darkness-says-atwood/story-E5YjeaVrd031BXiZF0JhPP.html>

She attained international literary recognition through the numerous awards and accolades she collected throughout her writing career. Her trip to India, displayed her knowledge about our postcolonial existence, and while she was here she spoke about how the “centres of literary conversations had moved to places that were never the centres of imperial power; ‘we are all ex-colonial, publishing somewhere else’, she said”⁷.

In her fiction, Atwood has closely charted Canada’s story with its political crisis and shifts of ideological emphasis, as a novelist engaged in an ongoing project of cultural representation and critique.

Far from thinking of writers as totally isolated individuals, I see them as inescapably connected with their society. The nature of the connection will vary – the writer may unconsciously reflect society, he may unconsciously examine it and project ways of changing it; and the connection between writer and society will increase in intensity as the society (rather than, for instance, the writer’s love-life or his meditations on roses) becomes the ‘subject’ of the writer. (*Second Words* 148)

Her job as an established writer often demands from her suggestions and advice for young writers. In her keynote address on 21st January 2016 at Jaipur, and probably aware of the state of literacy in urban India, she said, “A child, from the age of one, can

⁷ <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/cjbYteTJvobWnXPGXt5WeP/Writers-are-cheap-dates-Margaret-Atwood.html>

follow a narrative thread,”⁸. Encouraging writers, she said, “The thought that you can write a novel is optimistic. Then, the thought that you can finish your novel, someone will publish it, people will read and like it, all are highly optimistic processes,” she said adding that the most optimistic thing about writing is that it establishes a belief in the fact that human communication is possible⁹. Atwood relied on neurology to make a final comment in a discussion at a panel in Jaipur about TV serial scripting and novel writing, and she said, “The brain lights up much more when you read a book than when you watch television.”¹⁰ Thus inspiring young writers to not give up, and move to the supposedly greener pastures and limelight offered by television. She also warned them by saying, “The beauty of the novel is that it can be done in isolation and doesn’t require resources. You can have your pen and paper or plod away on a typewriter in a world of your own. But can you write a TV show without people from the channel telling you what the audience wants? It can be as absurd as creating topless women warriors? You may think it is outrageous but if they say the audience wants topless women warriors, what can the TV writer do?”¹¹ Clearly, she was making a dig at one of the most highly rated television shows of our times, *The Game of Thrones* series.

⁸ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/jlf-2016-writing-sheds-light-on-all-darkness-says-atwood/story-E5YjeaVrd031BXiZF0JhPP.html>

⁹ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/feminism-is-believing-women-are-human-beings-too-margaret-atwood/story-JLNhvujXs9vl9nJzfpSKEM.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/jlf-2016-tv-shows-are-superb-but-can-t-match-novels-feels-atwood/story-WagNGDgSt02biaQqoE4r0O.html>

¹¹ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/jlf-2016-tv-shows-are-superb-but-can-t-match-novels-feels-atwood/story-WagNGDgSt02biaQqoE4r0O.html>

Atwood, not one to mince her words, has often commented on the way literary celebrities are expected to perform in society in terms of their politics, mannerisms, dress, colours they should be associated with; and she has received both support and criticism for being so vocal. She has also been active in the Canadian public sphere, appearing on the TV or writing for newspapers and magazines regarding issues at the heart of Canadian identity and politics¹², even commenting on the recent elections¹³.

My first formal encounter with Atwood's writing was during my final year of undergraduate studies, while pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English from a renowned college of the University of Delhi. I had read *The Handmaid's Tale* while I was in high school, but Atwood was not a part of our Central Board curriculum back then. In College, however, three of her poems were a part of a paper titled Contemporary Literature¹⁴, where she stood as the sole representative of Canadian Literature. With this burden on her shoulders, Atwood arrived in India only to be greeted and fawned over by hundreds, or possibly thousands, of fans. All the public events at which she spoke, were not only house-full, but the organisers had to make special arrangements for the fans who waited for long hours in queues to get a glimpse of Atwood; to sit outside in the lawn while suffering the Delhi winter and watch what was happening inside the auditorium on a giant screen. At both public events in India in January 2016, the keynote address that she delivered at the Jaipur Literature Festival and then the

¹² For a detailed discussion on Atwood as a celebrity in the Canadian public sphere, see Lorraine York's "Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity", 2013.

¹³ For Atwood's column on the elections, see <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/margaret-atwood-column-pulled-from-national-post-website/article26062654/>

¹⁴ For details see, http://www.du.ac.in/du/uploads/old-ug-courses/14711_BA_H_ENGLISH.pdf

event at the Habitat Centre, New Delhi, where she was in conversation with the celebrity biographer and writer Patrick French; she joked, "I have come a very long way. To be invited here I must be very important or very old, and I assume it must be the latter,"¹⁵; and thus, in her usual disarming humour, at both the events, she conveyed to the fans that she was aware of her popularity in the Indian subcontinent, while further endearing herself to them.

"Authors are, popularly speaking, visible and active in the promotion of their wares in a major way, and yet critical writing on literature directs attention away from this figure, often fruitfully reframing the discussion in terms of ideology and power." (York, 3) In Atwood, we have a particularly rich instance of performance of celebrity as an adaptive response.

Just like everywhere else in the world, the Canadian literary market wasn't a place for women authors at the time Atwood began writing in the 1950s, and it was only allowed insofar as it could be reconciled with traditional, heterosexual duties; which she refused to be confined to. It was in the 1960s that Atwood decided to get herself an agent; and then in 1976, became the first Canadian author to incorporate herself as O.W. Toad, an anagram of her own name (York, 7). This enabled her to carefully manage the projection of her "self" in the Canadian literary scenario, and to the world at large. With her team, she manages what Graham Huggan (2001) has called "Atwood Inc.," very well.

¹⁵http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/50667636.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

In fact, up until the year 2013 her website url was www.owtoad.com; which was changed to www.margaretatwood.ca in order to make it more mainstream. Puzzled by this change, one of my first questions to her at the Canada House, New Delhi reception dinner on the 29th of January 2016, was about this change. I was particularly interested in finding out, why the study-drawer graphic; which had different drawers labelled as different tabs, was removed from the “About the author” section; which now appeared on the Homepage of the new website. Before answering my query she thought for a moment, and then replied, “You see, technology has developed, and we have many bright young minds at work now, than before. The idea was to make the website more accessible as the reason is that when somebody was looking at my website, it wouldn’t be very difficult for them to read (sic)”¹⁶. This idea of providing such access by the writer to the reader, and to make reading accessible is a recurring theme in most of her interviews and speeches off late.

This is what she had to say in her keynote address delivered at the Jaipur Literature Festival in January 2016, “Reading has not diminished although platforms are changing... The Internet is encouraging people to read in new ways. Now you can read or write a story on your mobile phone. It has provided a new kind of access.”¹⁷ “In places, which do not have a library or where people cannot afford books, there is a cell

¹⁶ Personal interview, transcript and video available

¹⁷ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/books/jlf-2016-writing-sheds-light-on-all-darkness-says-atwood/story-E5YjeaVrd031BXiZF0JhPP.html>

phone to not only read but also to write. There is a lot more access to literacy,"¹⁸ Atwood said.

Literary festivals, like the ninth Jaipur Literature Festival, which she was attending in January 2016, provide opportunities to new writers, that weren't ever available before; and are equally a delight for book lovers. In her keynote address, answering the question of why literature festivals are proliferating; her witty reply was, "Because writers are cheap dates,"¹⁹ She called JLF a service to not only readers but also writers who can find their other half, that is their readers, who she termed the musicians of each book, with every musician rendering an individual interpretation.²⁰

Her advice to young writers also appears on her website in the form of a section called "Your online presence", which starts like this, "Your online presence is everything you say online", and goes on to give meaningful suggestions regarding various modes of online presence writers can express themselves in; and how scary the world is where, "what happens in Vegas no longer stays in Vegas". It talks about blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Goodreads, Pinterest, Instagram, Wattpad and even library sites and book clubs; wittily highlighting their advantages and even the dangers involved in getting lured by these like the song of a siren and deflecting from your chosen path of completing your work. The other section, "Resources for Writers", is a tactful piece on

¹⁸http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/50667636.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

¹⁹ <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/cjbYteTJvobWnXPGXt5WeP/Writers-are-cheap-dates-Margaret-Atwood.html>

²⁰http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/50667636.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

deflecting any requests that may come to her or to the Office, while being disarmingly charming in appearance where the intent is to help out anyone with the suggestions, including posture, clothes and voice modulation on offer; but not with comments, a book blurb, a review or help in getting published. There are videos, iTunes – Meet the Author links, photos and even links to video games based on the *MaddAddam* trilogy. In keeping with her active concern for the environment, there is a detailed “Green policies” document, which lists the way in which she and her Office preserve the environment.

On the home page of the website, is a section called “What’s on my Desk”. In the earlier version of the website, as has already been mentioned in this paper, it was an informal invitational graphic of a desk with drawers where the readers could click on and open each drawer at a time to access more information. By putting this on the Home page of the new website, Atwood is seeking to balance out the regulatory, protective aspects of the website. At the bottom of the Homepage, one finds the “Upcoming events” section, and further down is a list of icons of some of the “green organisations” she supports; and critical praise by reviewers from various newspapers etc. At any rate, whether seeming to offer readers access or denying it, the website shows Margaret Atwood and her agents directly intervening in the array of media texts about her that are in circulation. There is a section on the website, that contains cartoon strips drawn by Margaret Atwood, the cartoonist! These are mainly related to the book tours that she has undertaken and then having been interviewed by people who hadn’t read her works. The drawings contain all the stock descriptions of her as a short woman

with squiggly hair and mostly dressed in black, almost like a witch. Thus, by taking a hold of her caricature version, Atwood has managed to intervene in the way she is represented. In fact, she takes the role of being a cartoonist very seriously, and has contributed cartoons to Kickstarter-funded Hope Nicholson's *The Secret Loves of Geek Girls*, about love and romance²¹. She has also designed superhero costumes for fans²².

In India too, Atwood's entire trip was marked by numerous references to these stock images of her, of how witty she is and the most often repeated query was about her work being classified as Sci-fi. Her invention the LongPen, which allows people to sign books or any document from a remote location, was also launched in a private ceremony on 28th January 2016 at Canada House by the Canadian High Commissioner Nadir Patel²³. It was in the year 2004, on a book tour for *Oryx and Crake* that she came up with the idea of the LongPen. As of September 2014, Atwood is still Co-Founder and a Director of Syngrafii Inc. and holder of various patents related to the LongPen technology. She has also won the Innovator's Award at the 2013 Los Angeles Times Book Prizes, for being a technology trendsetter. The LongPen is also important because Atwood understands the challenges faced by writers today. At a recent lecture this month on CanLit in the 1960s in Edmonton, Canada, she said "In the old days, icons

²¹ <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/08/12/margaret-atwood-interview>

²² <http://gawker.com/5673195/how-a-famous-author-designed-a-doctors-superhero-costume>

²³ <http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/long-distance-when-margaret-atwood-pushes-her-signature-pen/#sthash.4jYtSnat.dpuf>

could just stand there looking dignified...Nowadays, you have to smile while people take selfies with you...It's a workout."²⁴

What could be a better example of Atwood's acute awareness of the potential and the dangers of celebrity, and the rewards of managing it wisely, than learning about her participation in the Future Library Project. Keeping her legacy alive and ensuring that she is remembered well into the future, Atwood is the first contributor to the Future Library project. Her novel *Scribbler Moon*, was completed in 2015 and handed over to the project in a ceremony on 27th May 2015. The book will be held by the project until it is published in 2114, when Atwood thinks that readers will probably need a paleo-anthropologist to translate some parts of her story. In an interview with *the Guardian*, Atwood said, "There's something magical about it...It's like Sleeping Beauty. The texts are going to slumber for 100 years and then they'll wake up, come to life again. It's a fairy-tale length of time. She slept for 100 years."²⁵; and thus Atwood ensures the survival of her legacy, in just the way she deems it to be fit.

²⁴ <http://www.edmontonexaminer.com/2016/04/13/margaret-atwood-takes-audience-on-a-humorous-tour-of-1960s-canadian-literature>

²⁵ Alison Flood, "Into the woods: Margaret Atwood reveals her Future Library book, *Scribbler Moon*", *The Guardian*, 27 May 2015.

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