

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S 'LIFE BEFORE MAN'

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Abstract. In Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*, Lesje, the protagonist goes through her life sticking to the civilized manners of the society. She resembles a machine when she shows a "boring sameness" in her daily routine. But she is not automaton. She has her own specific emotional needs, fears and sufferings. Though occupies with identical problem of everyday life, she has her own value system. In the beginning, she prefers the prehistoric world of her own making to the boring and threatening present. She runs from the real world as it seems alien and hostile to her and suffers with loss of identity. But as the story progresses, she moves to the active participation in life, which gives her the realization of real self. This paper focuses on her journey towards real identity. It also examines the ways in the process she has to pass, through torturous mental and emotional agony which affects her entire personality.

Keywords: Present, Prehistoric, Identity, Real-self and Realization.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979) is all about the life of three characters namely, Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje and their day to day problems. This paper mainly focuses on Lesje. It is a novel of social realism in which modern urban society is depicted. Lesje's life mirrors the monotony and emptiness surrounding her. The novel represents a new stage in Atwood's development. It is her first attempt at social and domestic realism unmediated by satire, comedy or symbolism. However, Atwood's aim is to crystallize precisely the bleak and dreary aspects of modern living. She clarifies her stance when she remarks that "serious writers these days don't write uplifting books because what they see around them is not uplifting" and declares, "but for me the novel is a social vehicle. It reflects society."¹ Although post modern critic, Linda Hutcheon does not find *Life Before Man* a "straight forward realist novel."² Critics are disappointed in it, however, because "it did not have the things in it that they were looking for", admits the author, and that is "why many people have missed its social and political content."³

Atwood attempts to highlight the sterility of the modern urban world. Nevertheless, the story does not stop with the presentation of social problems. It goes deeper and shows the journey of Lesje in search for identity.

2. Search for Identity

Lesje prefers the prehistoric world of her own making to the boring and threatening present. She dreams of a better 'life before man' among the dinosaurs of the Mesozoic period. Her "restful fantasy" of the Mesozoic world is the imaginative violation of the "official version of paleontological reality". It is self compared to the life outside, especially for the "insecure and tentative" Lesje. To cope with outside world, she lacks the socialized power and control. She does not want to socialize. So she turns to the cataloguing work and her science inspired fantasies to create a work she can control. Lesje turns to the fantasy world which is learned but child like. Margaret Atwood also makes it clear that fantasy provides Lesje means to escape the dreary present. Daydreams and fantasies are important for the human psyche. They represent wish fulfillment and stand for symbolic satisfaction. In Lesje's life, the relevance of fantasy is also from a different angle. She escapes temporarily from the despair of object life. It soothes her, she "finds it restful", "it stops that small noise in her mind, the worrying of something trapped behind the woodwork."⁴ These remarks give a semblance of peace but simultaneously show that she is making a move to withdraw from life and its complications. She runs to the world of dinosaurs. They serve as a haven, a refuge for her. She admits that "All she wants is a miracle, because anything else is hopeless."⁵ Some of Atwood's heroines like Marian in *The Edible Woman* run from their dual or fragmented identity while others like Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* run from their multiple identities. Lesje runs to this Mesozoic world because of her loss of identity.

For Lesje, the world seems alien and hostile. She has no identity, "she is only a pattern which will dissolve someday."⁶ She has no mooring in this alien world. So she follows the easiest course to withdraw from it. She adopts the strategies of withdrawal and compliance, alternately. She is caught up between the conflicting ambitions of warring grandmothers and her parents. She remembers how "her Ukrainian grandmother had wanted her to be an airhostess, while her Jewish grandmother had wanted her to be a lawyer and also to marry another lawyer if possible. Her father wanted her to make the most of her self. Her mother wanted her to be happy."⁷ Every human being has a self which includes an awareness of being human, individual and capable of making choices that affects one's life and that of others. The choice of Lesje is limited in this environment. To "stay out of the way"⁸ is her primary strategy to solve her conflicts. There is no move on her part, to participate in living, to strive for achievement or to socialize.

When her parents sensed that she was getting too wrapped up in a world of her own, so in order to make her more sociable, they gave her dancing lessons. but as the narrator puts it, it was too late. She could not be sociable. For this they blamed silently of course, her grandmother, Etlin. This delineates the psychic turmoil, fear and anxiety of Lesje who fails to relate to her world. Lesje has lost herself intentionally. In the case of Lesje, her false self sees herself as an independent person, above all socialization and competition. She likes to imagine herself "watching through binoculars, blissful, uninvolved,"⁹ This is the demand of her idealized self. To save herself from self berating, she quickly builds around her a citadel of self glorifying virtues commensurate with her withdrawn self. She knows, "She is regressing"¹⁰. She is also aware that "She's been doing that a lot lately. This is a daydream left over from her childhood and early adolescence, shelved sometime ago in favour of other speculations. Men replaced dinosaurs, true, in her head as in geological time; but thinking about men has become too unrewarding. Anyway, that part of her life is settled for the time being."¹¹ Nothing is settled, though her idealized self wants to believe it. In reality, she is experiencing a conflict between complaint and resigned drives. These tendencies pull her in opposite directions. She must keep a safe emotional distance yet she cannot help being drawn to Nate, a married man. Her attitude of resignation warns her that she must avoid any entanglement. These observations work on her unconscious, the wish to win Nate's love from her family.

She feels very insecure. She is usually afraid of saying the wrong thing anyway and likes to play the role of the appeasers. "She's an appeaser and she knows it."¹² As an ideal daughter, she devotes her efforts to appease her mother. "Lesje's mother...wants her to appear to be happy. Lesje's happiness is her mother justification. Lesje has known this forever and is well practiced at appearing, if not happy, at least stolidly content..."¹³

Lesje cripples her capacity to fight, to demand her rights, to be self assertive. Her life pattern amply illustrates it. She is appeasing her mother and her self-denial goes so far that she does not like to speak about herself and wishes to become the woman Nate believes she is. In doing so she is pushing her resigned tendencies to the background. The new way of viewing things makes her feel free. Becoming a mother of Nate's child gives her a fair measure of self recognition. She regains her identity like Rachel Cameron does in Laurence's *A Jest of God*¹⁴. In this novel, Margaret Laurence writes with grace, power, and deep compassion about Rachel Cameron, a woman struggling to come to terms with love, with death, with herself and her world. Rachel longs for love, and contact with another human being who shares her rebellious spirit. Through her affair with Nick Kaazlik, a schoolmate from earlier years, she learns at last to reach out to another person and to make herself vulnerable. Lesje also realizes that the mere biological fact of having a child means that a woman has control of her life. This equips her to cope with the contingent reality.

3. Conclusion

Now Lesje's attitude towards her fantasy world has transformed totally. She realizes that "The Mesozoic isn't real. It's only a word for a place you can't go to anymore because it isn't there."¹⁵ It has been her theoretical opinion that man is a "danger to the universe, a mischievous ape, spiteful, destructive, and malevolent."¹⁶ Now she knows this is not true. She struggles to survive and commits herself to life. Lesje is a "success" to herself. From the patriarchal perspective one would expect the single woman to be a figure of derision and social ostracism but as Annis Pratt says, "In much of women's fiction she becomes a hero representing the possibility of growth and survival"¹⁷. Lesje has become a hero in this sense as she has shown growth as well as survival. The word 'survival' has been defined differently by Margaret Laurence. She defines it as the ability to continue experiencing relationship with others, to continue reaching out and giving and returning love. Lesje has moved to active participation in life, "She has learned more than she even intended to, more than she wants."¹⁸ She has always evaded the reality of the present but now the acceptance of her decision and the responsibility that follows that decision changes her life.

4. References

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