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THE GAMES WE PLAY - BREAKING THE BONDS OF SISTERHOOD IN *CAT'S EYE* BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

The paper points to the unique relationships among young girls and the games they play in order to belong and avoid being ostracized from social cliques in *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood. The sisterhood that once was described as an ideal in the beginnings of feminism by V. Woolf, is challenged by M. Atwood. It will be depicted how Atwood went about this idea, and through the games that young girls played, she actually portrayed a reversal in feminism – a broken bond of sisterhood in female friendships affected by internalized patriarchy. Furthermore, emphasis is given to how processes of healing forge after games had been won or lost, and in this way a conclusion is provided that where sisterhood is not respected, all parties involved must suffer and heal from internalized self-hatred.

Key words: Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, women's writing, feminism, broken sisterhood, patriarchy, ostracism, subversion.

Ever since Virginia Woolf pointed out bonds of sisterhood, feminists have been debating what it meant to forge relationships between women, and whether those relationships were any different from the ones people have regardless of sex. In her critical essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf focuses on the idea that sisterhoods are to be forged so as to help pave the road for future female poets. Since "great poets do not die", if some women had no opportunities to show their greatness, it is just a matter of time, since they are "continuing presences" (2015: 86). Woolf expresses the idea that a woman poet "would come if we worked for her" (2015: 86), and that every single verse by a woman is slowly adding up to a collective voice.

In the novel *Cat's Eye*, Margaret Atwood is gripping strongly at the sisterhood topic, shaking it to its core and emerging ultimately with a re-

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newed, revised definition of "the challenge of the natural world, the thin quality of men-women relationships, the suppressed horror of the heroine's inner life, and the excitement and nourishment of creativity, in art and in science" (Yglesias, 1989: 3). Because Atwood tries to polarize the subject of sisterhood, claims are made that *Cat's Eye* could be seen as "antifeminist in nature" (Macpherson 2010: 59), and to people who have been attempting to clearly mould Atwood into feminist theory, this is, apparently, important.

Despite her personal requests to stay out of black and white hardline definitions, both in politics and feminism, Margaret Atwood has been battered into submitting her views on both. However, she has been avoiding the subject of belonging to textbook definitions with equal fervor. She claims not to be feminist in name. This stems from having been attacked too many times for her round female characters. Viner points out that Atwood is a feminist in her core, not in her statements, despite what her "spotty-handed villainesses"[3] might look like at first glance, so "it could be argued […] that her work is feminist in a much less literal and more mature sense, in that it features women who are good and bad, neat and messy; normal, damaged, whole, human[4].

There is a departure in her feminism, from Woolf discussing idealized women and sisterhood bonds as should be – "The truth is, I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their completeness. I like their anonymity" (2015: 84), to Atwood's idea that to – "create a flawless character and you create an insufferable one"[5]. Thus, unilateral views of sisterhood as something only positive, is not an option in Atwood. However, this is not negative per se, Atwood has tried and succeeded in creating female characters that are flawed in their perfection, as it should be in her world view, "spot as in guilt, spot as in blood, spot as in *out, damned*. Lady Macbeth was spotted, Ophelia unspotted; both came to sticky ends, but there's a world of difference"[6].

As Atwood herself explains, "there are mean girls", although it had

3 http://gos.sbc.edu/a/atwood.html [10/06/2018]
4 http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/16/fiction.bookerprize2000 [18/06/2018]
5 http://gos.sbc.edu/a/atwood.html [10/06/2018]
6 Ibid.

been sort of risqué for another woman to point something like that out in a certain period of time[7]. Presumably, that is the reason her novel *The Cat's Eye,* could have been viewed as revolutionary, and she, in turn, was questioned as a true feminist as she did not extrapolate clearly patriarchy as a sole culprit for meanness amongst women:

> I think there was a period of time in the 70s when you weren't supposed to say that, when you were supposed to polarise things so that bad behaviour came from men. And even if some bad behaviour did come from women, then it was the fault of the patriarchy, and if the patriarchy wasn't there then all women would be nice. Well, I don't happen to believe that.[8]

Thus, the conclusion Margaret Atwood might have been leading us to is that, women and men, depending on personality, have the ability to exert needs and wants, albeit differently, but not solely based on their sexes. Although from a different angle, Chesler provides an explanation why girls sometimes mistreat each other more, harder and longer than any boy or man could, and that is because of internalized patriarchy – the "oppressed people internalize their oppressors' attitudes" (2009: intro). Perhaps, we lack the ability to be shocked at this point in feminist thought. However, it does resonate clearly how proposing girls could be mean and bullying at the age of 7 or 8, might have been an unsavory topic at the publication of this book.

According to Yiglesias, the "core of *Cat's Eye*" is placed in "the terrors and heart-break of the realm of *girls* and *best-friends*" (1989: 4). The outward, visible-to-the-eye plot is quite simple – Elaine Risley has become something of a celebrity in artistic circles and is holding a retrospective exhibition in Toronto, all the while travelling through the neighbourhoods of her childhood and reminiscing about her growing-up period. She is a purposefully re-thinking her past, and re-living her trauma so as to come to terms with the past, now, "at a safe distance", "when you can see it as décor" (Atwood, 1990: 384).

Soon the stories, like much of Atwood's prose, interlink and intertwine, and the reader is uncertain as to what time the plot is located. "Elaine

7 Ibid.

8 http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/16/fiction.bookerprize2000 [18/06/2018]

puts the fragments of her life together in a new order as intimidated in her brother's scientific theories: 'When we gaze at the night's sky', he says, 'we are looking at fragments of the past'" (McWilliams, 2009: 120). Furthermore, Atwood deals what happens in social circles of young girls on the verge of womanhood, how different friendship is between them and the boys of the same age, and finally, how the unique mechanisms of belonging and exclusion work in the inner intricate circles of girls. It is exactly this ambivalence between best female friends in a social clique – turned sour, that we are going to explore further in Atwood's cat-eye vision.

Sisterhood abound

The novel *Cat's Eye* provides a myriad of characters, male and female, who have erred, but the focus of this paper will be on shedding light on the sisterhood bonds between Elaine, Carol, Grace and Cordelia, who change, shift and metamorphose just as their sisterhood bonds emerge and dissolve in children's games they play. But before such bonds of broken sisterhood ties are established, there must first be some explanation into how they take hold in the young world of 7-year-olds. Since most of their days are comprised of games and playing at that age, Atwood masterfully played with the "innocent games" idea, by writing all of them down, as well as how the games changed as psychological abuse evolved.

First there was one. After Elaine's avangard family returned from living in the forests because of her father's job as an entomologist, the only person on the bus ride with her to school – was Carol. They became friends because were bound by proximity, as the only two girls from that neighbourhood, and children "are in danger of finding themselves without a partner when the bell rings" (Atwood, 1990: 47). The reader immediately feels a poignant necessity in children, a need to belong. As explained by Eleonora Rao discussing exile, belonging somewhere begins from the smallest levels of society, and Atwood is preoccupied in her fiction "with questions of home and estrangement, national identity and belonging runs through this novel, which is populated by characters who experience a literal or metaphorical exile" (2016: 102).

Being in exile or similarly, being ostracized, are direct juxtapositions to Woolf's sisterhood bonds and helpful female camaraderie of the

oppressed. Atwood uses her characters to point that belonging to a social group is a bigger necessity than church, prolongation of bullying or lack of individuality. At this point, Elaine is contented as "Carol sits beside me on the school bus, holds my hand in line, whispers to me, eats her lunch beside me on the wooden bench in the cellar" (Atwood, 1990: 47).

The dynamic between Carol and Elaine seems on an even keel, Carol is teaching Elaine about girls, "her hair is honey-blond, that her haircut is called a pageboy" (1990: 47), and Elaine introduces Carol to the world of boys, in turn – Steven "makes chewing and slurping noises" (1990: 50). Elaine notices that boys and girls are different in what they find fun, she is surprised that Carol delicately will not touch animals and constantly says "Ew" to anything she deems unladylike (1990: 50).

Perhaps, Elaine's conundrum as to why girls demonstrate such a quick departure from nature and instincts towards socially acceptable behavior, is best explained in the words of Yglesias – "boys are easier in some ways […], she dissects frogs with aplomb, but the complexities of sweater-sets, girdles, perms, Church-going and Sunday School are unattainable however hard she strives (1989: 4). Having been brought up with a brother outside social conventions, Elaine accepts that boys' behavior is less controlled in games they play, and having been a part of that freedom, she is having difficulties being "penciled in" strict and exact lines of appropriate female behavior.

And then there were two. After Carol introduces Grace into their small social circle, Elaine is befriended by the two girls, and they become a threesome – "these clumps of whispering girls with their spools and colored wool tails […] with the separateness of boys" (Atwood, 1990: 102). This friendship takes place in the aftermath of her childhood with her brother. Since three is already a crowd in its own merit, power plays start slowly to form among the girls, although still innocently enough at this point. Elaine concludes that sterile separation of boys and girls is what forms clusters at school yards, and a need for strongholds in the form of same gender play, "each cluster of girls excludes some other girls, but all boys. The boys exclude us too, but their exclusion is active, they make a point of it. We don't need to." (1990: 102)

In the world of girls, and women later on in life, subversion is how exclusion is done, a feeling not an overt reaction. Elaine notices a pattern, sometimes Carol is her best friend and sometimes Grace. "Often,

now, Grace Smeath asks me over to her house after school without asking Carol" (1990: 56), and officially she says "Her mother is tired, so Grace can only have one best friend over that day" (1990: 56). While the bonds of sisterhood are in place, feelings must be kept in check so as not to get hurt, which is a rule to live by in a clique.

The most powerful girl in the threesome, Grace, determines the games they play and presides over them, because she is older and "because if we try to play anything she doesn't like she says she has a headache and goes home, or else tells us to go home" (1990: 52). Her power is derived also from refusing to raise "her voice", she does not get "angry, or cries" (1990: 52), female qualities which obviously lose respect even among girls. Elaine explains about Grace that "she is quietly reproachful, as if her headache is our fault", so "she gets her way in everything" (1990: 52). In return for their obedience, Grace allows Carol and Elaine to play merrily and have a sense of belonging to something with a clear structure: "Grace is always the teacher, Carol and I the students […] We can't pretend to be bad, because Grace doesn't like disorder" (1990: 53). Purely feminine constructs are taught through repetition of the words the girls have heard at home, as these are "methods by which femininity is constructed in our culture" (Bouson, 1993: 166).

However, even in this initial blessed period of sisterly bonding to the benefit and security of all girls, Margaret Atwood remarks on a lack of individuality for fear of being different, and subsequent trauma and internalization of quilt. Having been raised to roam around alone, with a lot of critical thinking and individuality, Elaine feels "self-conscious", as if "only doing an imitation of a girl" (Atwood 1990: 52). The skin of a submissive does not always fit her, and yet in order to incorporate into this new world, Elaine has to shed some of the old, free-thinking skin she has acquired roaming the woods and cities with her brother. The gender role she is asked to play will have become more coined to suit her needs, but only later, of course, when it is channeled into artistic talent and freedom, once she has found her voice and place in the world.

Sisterhood broken

And then there were four. Cordelia's appearance in the once harmonious threesome, allows for a slow, yet relentless assertion of power and

dominance by Cordelia, the last addition to the group. As soon as Cordelia came into the picture, the girls seem to have lost some of their exuberance and instinctive reactions – "they don't come running over, but stop what they're doing and stare, as if we're new people, as if I've never lived here" (Atwood, 1990: 69).

Exclusion seems to be the weapon of choice in young women, and their scary tactics are nothing but seriously painful, since Elaine herself notices girls are "cute and small only to adults", however from an inside out perspective – "To one another they are not cute. They are life sized" (1990: 118). The fact that female aggression has long been neglected in serious scholarly studies, Kapuscinski notes, can mainly be put down to the fact that "in not leaving behind physical scars, psychological violence is both assumed to occur without real harm" (2008: 39).

Aggression and violence are patriarchal notions learned and spread through the ranks. Namely, in *Cat's Eye*, women internalize lack of power at home, and exude the same humiliating behavior on each other. Hite elaborates that "Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category "girl" and thus a stand-in for the girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of a patriarchy" (1995: 137). Although bullying is mainly aimed at Elaine, one must perceive that Carol and Grace become willing accomplices, they are complicit most of the time, if not always active in the scheming games.

Innovative games are added to the mix to suit Cordelia who grew up with two older sisters, so she seems worldly to the girls – the games are dress up and role play of Shakespeare. It is quite relevant what costume is allowed to be put on by each girl, based on their perceived importance to the social clique, "On Halloween Grace wears an ordinary lady's dress, Carol a fairy outfit, Cordelia a clown suit. I wear a sheet, because that's what there is" (Atwood, 1990: 106). In order to avoid being bullied, the oppressed further torture, by which action they avoid being attacked themselves. Namely, Grace and Carol become the driving force behind naming and enumerating the massive wrongdoings Elaine has committed, just so they themselves would be spared criticism and punishment that one time. Pointing a finger and shifting blame, seems to be a necessary collagen tying the friends tighter together by excluding others at the same time. " I have to sit on a window ledge by myself because they aren't speaking to me. It's something I said wrong, but I don't know what it is" (1990: 116).

A feeling of inadequacy starts to crop up in Elaine, she is "not measuring up" (1990: 117), the rest of the girls have meetings about her privately, Grace begins talking about Elaine "in the third person" (1990: 123). Conversely, Elaine has become pivotal for the bonding of the other girls, by excluding her, they reconnect. And in turn, she develops self-loathing that turns into bodily harm and "basic disfigurement of the oppressed: being taught, and learning well to hate oneself" (Yglesias, 1989: 4).

Due to the fact that Elaine's quilt over being "inadequate" becomes internalized at this point, Atwood provides vivid descriptions of bodily harm she is putting herself through in order to control her mental state, she learns to faint and throw up on a whim, disappear and hide in her mind, and to peel her feet so that the inflicted pain would subdue the emotional pain. Atwood' language is masterful, Elaine is "safe, small, wrapped in my illness as if in cotton wool" (Atwood, 1990: 137), "I still call it playing" (1990: 121), the mental abuse of being watched and corrected constantly.

Elaine has a sense of "honor" not to tell, while "Carol cries too easily and noisily, she gets carried away with her own crying. She draws attention, she can't be depended on not to tell." (1990: 121), thus Elaine she is sought out so that the group survives. This appears to be answering the question how some children are more fit for the role of victim than others, and how they are victimized because of their silence and yearning for belonging within some kind of a system, a notion Elaine is to outgrow as soon as her life is at stake.

Finally, Atwood places Elaine in more perilous game-playing expedition – in one of their pretense games, Elaine is forced to be buried with planks on top, she is "supposed to be Mary, Queen of Scots, headless already" (1990: 107). A symbolic game, since she is always warned to think a certain way, because her opinions are inevitably misguided. So, Elaine, headless and buried, lies waiting for compassion since the ball of power is in the girls' court. "I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one", she waits for friends who have eventually left her alone, despite having tried to fit in numerous times, so she is bereft, "I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror" (1990: 107). Gernes describes that Elaine "is so disempowered by her family's failure to conform to expected gender and religious roles that she must find a means to escape Cordelia's tyranny without challenging the order Cordelia has imposed. She does this through self-punishment and self-loathing" (1991: 145).

Since all games must come to an end, the true rebirth of our heroine happens after Elaine is forced to retrieve her cap that Cordelia threw "into the ravine" (Wyenne-Davis, 2010: 46). From this icy water, where she collapses and is again left by her little friends, Elaine emerges a different, "an eye for an eye" type of girl. Finally, she hears in the get-well cards and phone calls that Cordelia is "careful, precise, rehearsed, unrepentant" (Atwood, 1990: 192). Thus, in a final game of her own, Elaine is breathed in a breath of courage to leave. She escapes the tormentor even though she feels "the same flush of shame, of guilt and terror, and of cold disgust with myself" (1990: 253), because she allowed terror to last long. There is no winning in the world of girls, but always a learned behavior of quilt.

This is a turning point in the novel and Atwood's signature wind-in-the-back for the underdog. Elaine is aware work will be needed, but she does not need the oppressors anymore. Unlike the bullies' need for her, she explains that an inner belief in herself is placing her in survival mode: "I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed" (1990: 193), however, "stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up", she escapes. She finally cries out in her mind "Nothing binds me to them. I am free" (1990: 193).

"There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled" (1990: 193 – 194). Sisterhood had dispersed after Elaine was unwilling to continue playing the game of "who loves whom more", sensing her power only in the end of that relationship. The sisterhood never recovers in its former "glory", as "Elaine eventually goes to art school and eschews most feminine accoutrements, whereas Cordelia might be said to take her femininity too far: into hysteria" (Macpherson, 2010: 62). It would appear sisterhoods are never repaired after one member decides to abandon ship, however, is that truly the case in an Atwood world? Is there redemption for failed friendship between women?

Sisterhood repaired?

Having broken the bond of sisterhood in a certain clique, one has to ponder whether it is ever possible to repair it among the same "sisters", as "women collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape" (Atwood, 1990: 378). If in childhood, the lessons of womanhood are acquired – "in

order to survive as a woman, among women, one must speak carefully, cautiously, neutrally, indirectly; one must pay careful attention to what more socially powerful women have to say before one speaks; one must learn how to flatter, manipulate, agree with, and appease them" (Chesler 2009: 231), then how does a woman demonstrate she has forgiven or been forgiven and return to the periodically nurturing embrace of sisters?

In *Cat's Eye*, silence seems to be key. Elaine never mentions outright that she had been hurt, but she is aware she will be punished "I know I'll be made to pay for the badminton net, sooner or later" (Atwood, 1990: 129), or for the uniqueness of her family who had placed Christmas cards on the net. In a sisterhood, one sister is not to try and shame others with her congeniality and talent, but also if she is ostracized, she is not to tell in hope of being returned to the mother nest.

What Elaine does, after regaining her voice and individuality, is to internalize the oppressors' game – she decides to "make friends with a different girl", and they "go to her house and play Old Maid, Snap, Pick Up Sticks" (1990: 194), thus she learns the hard way that the ostracized can also ostracize the clique. Meaning that, the once humiliated and bullied, becomes the bully, "I hardly hear them any more because I hardly listen" (1990: 194). However, the ability to forge new female friendship, does not say that sisterhood among the old ones has survived in some form or another.

Perhaps most painful unconscious decision that Elaine takes is "torturing" Cordelia, or turning a cold shoulder in her hour of need and her sickness, which seems to be Atwood's way of pointing to the fact that there is no turning back once a sisterhood has been forlorn. The quilt of this decision haunts Elaine, the reenactment of torture she had endured, Elaine inflicts upon Cordelia eventually. Revenge is taken by excluding and judging Cordelia in their little duo, Elaine would naturally "use" her "mean mouth" on Cordelia as "target practice" (1990: 235). After being asked to help Cordelia escape from a mental institution, many years later, Elaine says no, as a final act of mercy or revenge, even she is never sure. But the internalized quilt remains for not having helped, so in a dream Cordelia appears to Elaine – "She knows I have deserted her, and she is angry" (1990: 360).

Howells depicts Elaine's art as a constant feeling of "lack and loss" of Cordelia. Seemingly, Elaine has come to see, or has always seen her oppressor – as the other half of her personality, someone she has become: *"Half a Face,* it's called: an odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is vis-

ible […] I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (1990: 227).

Although they never meet again, Cordelia and Elaine have been impactful in each other's lives as influences in future relationships. Elaine dreams of sisterhood repaired again, she and Cordelia as "two old women giggling over their tea" (1990: 421). Atwood's image of sisterhood bonds between them remains appreciation, quilt, a what-if aura, and yet it is broken forever. So much understanding of Atwood's characters may be attributed to how she had described herself in an interview for Vintage living texts "what you have to picture is someone who essentially wants a quiet life, but if you put your foot down its rabbit hole, you might get a nasty bite" (Noakes, Reynolds 2002: 25).

Much like Atwood, Elaine too has tried to maintain belonging in her sisterhood of, initially three friends, and ultimately four. However, once she was poked one too many times, she was ultimately the one to dissolve the whole friendship and take revenge too. Atwood allows for rounder, human female characters and a true cultural feminism to emerge, because she does not stifle their voices and experiences, and because she has a range of female characters, none of whom are clearly "mothers" or "whores". Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar argued that female creativity began if "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of *angel* and *monster* which male authors have generated for her" (2004: 812). With this in mind, Atwood's heroines are not "mad women in the attic" unleashed, but liberated constructs allowed to speak for themselves. It is a potent image Atwood is evoking, one of heroines such as Elaine Risley, who find their voice, be it a "monster" or a monster-angel or even any shade in between, but resonating clearly on its own. Nevertheless, there is a "mad woman in the attic" – Cordelia, but she is allowed her voice as well, she adds to the mix of characters as a haunting, victorianesque sort of female.

Finally, *Cat's Eye* is rippled with female relationships in which it is implied loyalty exists, since no one can leave or talk about the inner intricacies of the games they play. Sometimes this loyalty is misguided and requires some deliverance, thus Elaine becomes the artist whose paintings tell a story of female bonds, the set of paintings of Grace's mother – Mrs. Smeath, gets us right back where we started from – Virginia Woolf and a cry for compassion among women. Mrs Smeath eyes are "the eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man (Atwood, 1990: 198).

At the end of the day, after Atwood snatched Elaine from the brink of disaster, gave her

talent to paint all her enemies and take revenge, Elaine comes to terms with her childhood only after she has forgiven – "*Unified Field Theory,* is tinged with light and hope of deliverance" (White 2009: 178). Even in a broken sisterhood, forgiveness for oneself leads to forgiveness for all, Atwood proves.

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IGRE KOJE IGRAMO - PREKID SESTRINSKE SOLIDARNOSTI U *MAČJEM OKU* (*CAT'S EYE*) MARGARET ETVUD (MARGARET ATWOOD)

Sažetak

Ovaj rad ukazuje na jedinstven odnos između devojčica kao i igara koje one igraju kako bi pripadale i izbegle izopstenje iz društvenih klika u delu *Mačje oko,* autorke Margaret Etvud. Sestrinstvo koje je nekada opisivano kao ideal u počecima feminizma kod Virdžinije Vulf, Etvudova osporava. Biće opisano kako Etvudova pristupa ovoj ideji, kako kroz igre koje devojčice igraju, ona opisuje preokret u feminizmu, neku vrstu prekida sestrinske solidarnosti pod uticajem internalizovanih patrijarhalnih vrednosti. Dalje u radu, naglašava se kako dolazi do isceljenja nakon što su igre dobijene ili izgubljene, a na taj način se i zaključuje da gde sestrinstvo nije ispoštovano, sve uključene strane moraju platiti cenu i isceliti se od internalizovane mržnje ka sebi.

Ključne reči: Margaret Etvud, *Mačje oko*, ženska književnost, feminizam, prekid sestrinstva, patrijarhat, izopštenje, subverzija.