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## Othering, Resistance and Recovery in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* and its depiction of alienation, victimization and recovery in the life of its protagonist, Elaine Risley. Highlighting Elaine's sense of displacement and her feelings of fellowship with minority figures, the paper provides insights into these processes by relying on postcolonial theories of othering and cultural resistance. It first explores how Elaine is bullied, marginalized and alienated when the cultural and social differences of a new environment make her a target for allegations of abnormality. The focus then shifts to Elaine's development and maturation as a form of recovery, as well as to the roles that art, memory and compassion play in this process. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *Cat's Eye* depicts both an instance of othering and the heroine's struggle to reverse it. However, even for Elaine, a member of the white middle class, such a reversal remains inevitably incomplete.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood; *Cat's Eye*; othering; memory; recovery; oppression; resistance

## Podrugačenje, uporništvo in ozdravitev v romanu *Mačje oko* Margaret Atwood

### POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava roman *Mačje oko* Margaret Atwood in opis alienacije, viktimizacije in ponovnega postavljanja na noge njene osrednje junakinje, Elaine Risley. V ospredju je Elainin občutek nepripadnosti in sočutje do obrobnihih figur, ki sta predstavljena s postkolonialnimi teorijami podrugačenja in kulturnega upora. V prispevku so uvodoma opisani načini trpinčenja, marginalizacije in alienacije, ko Elaine zaradi kulturnih in socialnih razlik v novem okolju postane tarča očitkov o nenormalnosti. Pozornost se nato preusmeri na Elainin razvoj in dozorevanje kot obliko postavljanja na noge, prav tako je predstavljena vloga umetnosti, spomina in sočutja v tem procesu. Prispevek se sklone z ugotovitvijo, da *Mačje oko* opisuje primer podrugačenja in nemoč osrednje protagonistke, da bi obrnila tok dogajanja. Vendar se celo za Elaine, belopolto pripadnico srednjega razreda, tak zasuk zdi neizogibno nepopoln.

**Ključne besede:** Margaret Atwood; *Mačje oko*; podrugačenje; spomin; postavitev na noge; zatiranje; upor

# 1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood's critically acclaimed 1988 novel *Cat's Eye* relates the story of Elaine Risley, a successful painter who returns to Toronto from Vancouver for a retrospective of her work, only to find herself haunted by the long-repressed memories of her childhood. What is revealed to lie at the heart of her buried trauma are the cruelties of her childhood friend Cordelia and the tumultuous, abusive bond between the two girls. To regain control over her life and a complete sense of self, Elaine must *negotiate with the dead*,<sup>1</sup> confronting the murky visions of her past and appeasing the phantoms that torment her.

As Carol Osborne points out, Atwood's highlighting of the recovery of lost memories makes *Cat's Eye* part of a wider trend in the fiction of its era, particularly prominent in the works of African American women writers (1994, 96). Atwood's project, Osborne further explains, is perhaps more conspicuously linked to works by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in her novel *Surfacing*, which "deals with the way in which one culture, that from the United States, threatens to obliterate another, that of Canadians, especially the native population of the North" (Osborne 1994, 112). However, grouping Atwood, as a white Canadian, together with postcolonial writers is inevitably problematic. According to Linda Hutcheon, although "Canada as a nation has never felt central" and has suffered from a sense of marginality, discussing the white Canadian experience of colonialism alongside those of Africa, India or the Caribbean is "both trivializing of the Third World experience and exaggerated regarding the (white) Canadian" (Hutcheon 1989, 155). Hutcheon thus points out that it would be much more accurate to refer to the Indigenous Peoples when discussing Canada and its culture in the context of postcolonialism.

*Cat's Eye*, however, strengthens Atwood's bond to minority writers and issues with its insistence on exploring the isolation and oppression of those labeled as outsiders in a middle-class, Protestant community. As Eleonora Rao suggests, Elaine grows up in "a place where she feels like a foreigner, where she felt and still feels out of place, isolated and excluded as if she were a member of a different culture or race" (2006, 103). Elaine's community seems to draw a similar parallel between her and colonial outsiders: at one point, she overhears Aunt Mildred, a former missionary in China, say that Elaine is "exactly like a heathen" and that no amount of instruction can make her change her ways (Atwood 2009, 212).

In exploring Elaine's trauma, critics have dealt extensively with the depictions of isolation and exclusion in *Cat's Eye*, with authors such as Banerjee and Jones linking Elaine's susceptibility to bullying to her "cultural position of a savage" (Banerjee 1990, 516) and to her family's "nomadic lifestyle" (Jones 1995, 30). "Odd Woman Out," a review written by Helen Yglesias, draws attention to the heroine's "precarious sense of herself" and suggests that it is mirrored in the sense of displacement experienced by Mr. Banerji, her father's guest from India (Yglesias 1989, 3). Analyzing Atwood's depiction of Christianity in the novel, Derry relies on Homi Bhabha's theories to interpret Elaine's initiation into middle-class culture (2016, 97). On the other hand, he also suggests that Elaine's privilege inevitably separates her fate from those of

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Atwood's 2002 non-fiction *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, in which she compares writing to a descent to the underworld.

the actual minorities in the novel. Vickroy and Osborne have both discussed Elaine's "sense of separateness" (Vickroy 2005, 135) and the ways in which she responds to a hostile society, with Osborne arguing that "Atwood encodes racial difference within the text to accentuate Elaine's feelings of oppression" (1994, 104). What remains to be seen is whether Elaine's journey – including both her marginalization and subsequent resistance – might be explored using the notions which originate from colonial and postcolonial contexts, and to what extent.

While it must be emphasized that Atwood's protagonist Elaine, a white Canadian girl living in Toronto, is not by any means Indigenous or a member of a minority culture, and that her experiences of alienation cannot be equated with those of postcolonial subjects, this paper posits that postcolonial theory, as a framework for all critical theories dealing with human oppression (Tyson 2015, 398), might help to illuminate her experiences. In interpreting Elaine's victimization and the necessity of her confrontation with the past, the paper therefore relies on the postcolonial notions of othering and resistance, with a view to contributing to our understanding of both her community's intolerance and Elaine's path to recovery.

## 2 Elaine as a Displaced *Other*

One element that initially stands out in Elaine's recollections of the past is her family's unconventional lifestyle. The protagonist spends her early childhood in relative isolation with her parents and her brother Stephen, as their father, a forest-insect field researcher, pursues his work in the Canadian bush. The family's nomadic way of life changes when Elaine is eight, with her father taking a new position as a professor in Toronto. For Elaine, however, the change is far from an improvement: "Until we moved to Toronto," she confesses, "I was happy" (Atwood 2009, 23). In a new environment, comparing herself with other girls, whose company she used to long for, she starts for the first time to suspect that there may be something lacking in her life and her behavior, realizing that "more may be required" of her family and herself (Atwood 2009, 57).

What Elaine notices first is her family's financial status: as she puts it, their new home is "a far cry from picket fences and white curtains" (Atwood 2009, 37), and it "occurs to [her] for the first time that [they] are not rich" (Atwood 2009, 84). What is more, she becomes aware of her parents' unconventionality and their misfit status in the community. Her mother, for one, is not a typical housewife, which makes her seem like an oddity: she does not enjoy housework or shopping, prefers spending her time outdoors, never visits hairdressers and fails to teach Elaine about twin sets, mail-order catalogues and pageboy haircuts. Her father, on the other hand, is a quirky scientist who seems truly himself only when he "shed[s] his city clothing" and who doesn't believe in organized religion, which becomes a source of embarrassment for Elaine when she blunders her way through her first visit to church (Atwood 2009, 77).

Repeatedly reminded of her perceived peculiarity and unfamiliar with other girls' games and customs, Elaine grows apprehensive about making the wrong move in their company, sensing that she is "always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (Atwood 2009, 55). Yet she manages to make friends with Carol Campbell, a girl who revels in Elaine's reputation of exotic anomaly, using it, as Osborne (1994) points out, to enhance her own status. For Carol, Elaine's behavior resembles the "antics of some primitive tribe: true, but incredible"

(Atwood 2009, 57). But if Elaine is like a member of a barbaric tribe, then it is only natural for her peers to assume that she must eventually be reformed and civilized – especially since Elaine's society, as she recalls, teaches children that

in countries that are not the British Empire, they cut out children's tongues [...] Before the British Empire there were no railroads or postal services in India, and Africa was full of tribal warfare, with spears, and had no proper clothing. The Indians in Canada did not have the wheel or telephones, and ate the hearts of their enemies in the heathenish belief that it would give them courage. The British Empire changed all that. (Atwood 2009, 93)

Such sensationalist depictions of brutish, spear-wielding barbarians rescued from their deprivation by the civilizing mission of the noble Empire – sardonically compiled by Atwood in this passage – seem bound to contribute to the girls' belief that Elaine, the closest thing to a savage that they have encountered, must be similarly reformed. It is at this point that the pieces cementing Elaine's status as one comparable with the position of the colonial 'other' begin to fall into place.

According to Gayatri Spivak, colonial discourse creates its 'others' by the process of 'othering.' The other is therefore the excluded or 'mastered' subject created by the discourse of power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998). Spivak further argues that "by this process, the creation of borders between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders does not occur accidentally but is intended and fuelled by established social laws, principles, and practices which mark boundaries between a group and other social groups" (Vichiensing 2017, 126).

In *Cat's Eye*, such social practices initially take the form of prescribed norms, customs and roles in puritanical Toronto, where Elaine and her family fail to meet the established standards of respectability. While community values place Elaine in a vulnerable position and implicitly encourage othering, within the group of girls this process is directly fueled by the appearance of Cordelia. As the leader of the group, Cordelia uses her power and authority to confirm and promulgate Elaine's othered status. She reinforces Elaine's sense of exclusion and inadequacy by reminding her at every turn that there is something abnormal about her:

I worry about what I've said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. 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. (Atwood 2009, 140)

Lacking the conventional background of her friends, Elaine becomes an easy target for Cordelia's allegations of abnormality. Looking for an outlet for her anxiety, she devises elaborate methods of self-harm and peels the skin off her feet; as Hite points out, this may be Atwood's allusion to Andersen's Little Mermaid, another woman who suffers mutilation in order to enter an alien universe (1995, 143). Meanwhile, Cordelia conveniently casts herself in the role of a civilizer by emphasizing Elaine's otherness, which ties in with the suggestion that, in the words of Valerie E. Besag, "girls who bully may alienate another simply to prove that they, unlike their target, are part of the group" (Jones 2008, 29).

In postcolonial terms, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1998) similarly maintain that imperial discourse needs its others to confirm its own reality. This is reminiscent of Said's assertion that the Orient has helped to define Europe, and that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978, 3). The empire therefore engages in the process of constructing an enemy and "delineating that opposition that *must* exist, in order that the empire might define itself by its [...] others" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998, 173).

In the same vein, Cordelia must construct Elaine's heathenish inadequacy to be able to assert herself by subduing it. But behind Cordelia's cruelties, as we later learn, is an attempt to channel her own sense of inadequacy within her family. Not as beautiful or gifted as her older sisters, Cordelia is somehow always the wrong person in the eyes of her father, whose words she mimics when she humiliates Elaine. Similarly, another person in the position of power who sanctions the othering of Elaine, proclaiming it to be God's rightful punishment, Mrs. Smeath, turns out to be an equally broken and pitiable figure: "I used to think they were self-righteous eyes," Elaine thinks while examining a portrait of Mrs. Smeath. "And they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty" (Atwood 2009, 477). Elaine's tormentors, it appears, are those who need her otherness to escape their own marginality and defend their identity as members of the dominant group.

Be that as it may, the suffering Elaine experiences at their hands is overwhelming; in her alienation, she identifies with the other outsiders in the novel – all of them, as Carol Osborne rightly points out, alienated from the dominant culture (Osborne 1994, 103). Later in her life, she immortalizes her gratitude to these displaced figures in the painting *Three Muses*:

Mrs. Finestein, Miss Stuart from school, Mr. Banerji [...] Who knows what death-camp ashes blew daily through the head of Mrs. Finestein, in those years after the war? Mr. Banerji probably couldn't walk down a street without dread, of a shove or some word whispered or shouted. Miss Stuart was in exile, from plundered Scotland still declining, three thousand miles away. (Atwood 2009, 479–480)

Mr. Finestein, the first "muse" listed by Elaine, is her Jewish neighbor whose little boy she babysits. When her friends tell her that the baby is a Jew, at the same time pointing out that the Jews killed Christ, Elaine quits the job for fear that she may not be able to protect the child. However, she feels there must be something heroic about the Finesteins, some ancient important matters that go along with being Jewish; in her suffering, Elaine admires them as members of a group that has endured extreme hatred and oppression.

Elaine's admiration for Mr. Banerji, her father's student from India, is perhaps the most obvious case of her identification with immigrants. "He's a creature more like myself," comments Elaine, "alien and apprehensive. He's afraid of us. He has no idea what we will do next, what impossibilities we will expect of him, what we will make him eat. No wonder he bites his fingers" (Atwood 2009, 153). Believing Mr. Banerji to be a fellow other, Elaine finds in him an unknowing ally; at one point she even dreams that he and Mrs. Finestein are her real parents. She longs for his visits, perceiving them as encouragements or confirmations that she is not alone:

I lurk in the corner of the hallway in my flannelette pyjamas, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. I don't have a crush on him or anything like that. My wish to see him is anxiety, and fellow-feeling. I want to see how he is managing, how he is coping with his life, with having to eat turkeys, and with other things. Not very well, judging from his dark, haunted-looking eyes and slightly hysterical laughter. But if he can deal with whatever it is that's after him, and something is, then so can I. (Atwood 2009, 187–8).

Elaine finds consolation in seeing her separateness mirrored in Mr Banerji's unease when faced with strange food and foreign customs; nevertheless, this mirroring can only go so far. As Derry observes, Elaine, however oppressed, remains a figure of privilege: "she simply *is*, like her girlfriends, white and middle-class. And so when Mr. Banerji is harmed [...], he disappears. When Elaine is harmed, she (eventually) rebels against her oppressors – with great success" (Derry 2016, 107).

Miss Stuart, the third alienated figure, is Elaine's teacher; unlike Mrs. Lumley, who teaches children about the superiority of the British Empire, Miss Stuart lets them freely learn about other cultures. In such lessons Elaine finds comfort and the possibility of a way out and other worlds existing beyond the one where she feels displaced:

I desperately need to believe that somewhere else these other, foreign people exist. No matter that at Sunday School I've been told such people are either starving or heathens or both. No matter that my weekly collection goes out to convert them, feed them, smarten them up [...]. If these people exist I can go there sometime. I don't have to stay here. (Atwood 2009, 191–2)

The older Elaine comes to understand that she was unable to grasp the gravity of displacement that her "muses" experienced, as evidenced by her contemplation of death camps, assaults and jeers of which she knew nothing (Atwood 2009, 479–480). Yet later in life, Elaine still seems to identify primarily with outsiders: her first lover is her professor Josef Hrbik, another immigrant who claims to have no country. In the same vein, highlighting the portrayals of racial difference in the novel, Osborne (1994, 104) goes on to state that "Atwood associates her more and more with the color black while her oppressors, Cordelia, Carol and Grace are aligned with white images." The existence of such black and white opposition, however, is not entirely supported by the text, since the girls are not consistently aligned with either color. For instance, the three girls who pressure Elaine to come out and play are portrayed as menacing shadowy figures, "almost black" and "too dark" (Atwood 2009, 161–2). Elaine's skin in old photographs, on the other hand, is "ultra-white" (30). Nevertheless, in the scene where Elaine almost freezes to death after falling into a creek, black and white imagery is pervasive: Elaine is a lone dark figure abandoned in the blinding darkness of the snowy ravine, her head "filling with black sawdust." Even the Virgin Mary, her imaginary rescuer, does not appear in her traditional image, but dressed in black, with her heart shining "like a coal" (Atwood 2009, 223–4). However, perhaps it would make more sense to interpret this darkness in terms of Elaine's feeling that she is "nothing" and her attempts to slip outside her own body into blackness (Atwood 2009, 204–205), than to see it as racial imagery.

The incident in the ravine is both the peak of Elaine's victimization and othering and the turning point of her childhood. Having survived the harshest of the girls' cruelties, Elaine finally sees through their threats and is able to walk away. "Nothing binds me to them," she thinks. "I am free" (Atwood 2009, 229). She abandons the girls and goes on to make new friends, forgets everything about the traumatic bullying, and ultimately even inverts the dynamics of her friendship with Cordelia upon encountering her again. Yet in *Cat's Eye* the act of walking away does not provide closure. Ostensibly grown-up and settled into a new life far from Toronto, Elaine is not entirely free from her friend's domination; many years later, the voice of nine-year-old Cordelia will drive her to attempt suicide. It should therefore be explored how the rest of her journey towards recovery unfolds, and whether the reversal of her othering might also be interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory.

### 3 Resistance and Recovery

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said lists three separate but related topics that emerge in the cultural resistance and recovery of colonized spaces (Said 1994, 215–216). The first is the imprisoned nation's right to see its history wholly and coherently, restoring it to itself. He defines this as the act of a nation reclaiming, among other things, its pre-colonized language, culture and literature. The second is the idea of resistance as not merely a reaction to imperialism, but an alternative way of conceiving history. Said stresses the importance of *writing back* to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting or replacing their narrative with new styles, as a major component of this process. Finally, the third topic addresses a "pull away from separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (Said 1994, 216).

Elaine's status as a person displaced and othered because of her cultural difference allows for an attempt to transpose these aspects of resistance into Atwood's fictional world. Bearing in mind, of course, that Elaine is an individual dealing with personal trauma, the scope and nature of her struggle must inevitably differ from those of colonized nations and oppressed cultures; nevertheless, some parallels may be drawn between the two kinds of recovery.

#### 3.1 Seeing Life Entire

After the ravine incident and the subsequent break with her friends, the young Elaine no longer sees herself as abnormal or weak; on the surface, she turns into an ordinary, cheerful and carefree girl. Her reinvention of herself, however, rests upon the suppression of unwanted and disturbing memories:

I've forgotten things, I've forgotten I've forgotten them. [...] I know I don't like the thought of Mrs. Smeath, but I've forgotten why. I've forgotten about fainting and about the stack of plates, and about falling into the creek and also about seeing the Virgin Mary. [...] nobody mentions anything about this missing time, except my mother. Once in a while she says, 'That bad time you had,' and I am puzzled. What is she talking about? I find these references to bad times vaguely threatening, vaguely insulting: I am not the sort of girl who has bad times, I have good times only. There I am, in the Grade Six class picture, smiling broadly. Happy as a clam, is what my

mother says for happy. I am happy as a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed. (Atwood 2009, 237)

Although Elaine is never directly pressured into accepting another's version of history, her disconnection from the past emerges as a consequence of her trauma. Elaine's blocking out of painful memories, however indispensable as a coping mechanism, becomes a factor that inhibits her further development. It is evident that Elaine's recovery from the "bad times" is severely hindered by her act of forgetting them, especially if we consider the idea that seeing history as a whole is an integral part of resistance to oppression. This is supported by the fact that Elaine's fear and shame never entirely fade but resurface unpredictably and uncontrollably. There are feelings in her life for which she cannot account, like pieces of a puzzle that fit nowhere. Elaine paints objects of her childhood inexplicably "suffused with anxiety" (Atwood 2009, 395), feels a strange hatred for Mrs. Smeath, hears a child's voice urging her to slit her wrists, and seeks out statues of the Virgin Mary for no apparent reason. During a visit to Mexico, she finally finds a statue that, unlike others, does not leave her with a baffling sense of disappointment: it is the statue of the Virgin dressed in black. Elaine identifies her as "a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost" and falls on the floor in front of her, but ultimately fails to think of something to pray for (Atwood 2009, 235).

Only much later, when visiting her dying mother in Toronto, does Elaine realize what lost things could be restored. While going through an old trunk, the two women uncover layers of items preserved from Elaine's childhood, including the cat's eye marble and the red purse she associates with the Virgin Mary. With the discovery of these items, Elaine rediscovers the symbolic language of her past and is able to remember: "I look into it, and see my life entire" (Atwood 2009, 468). She is therefore finally given the chance to reconnect with herself, comprehending the meaning of her "bad times," the origins of her anxiety, and her mother's need for forgiveness.

In depicting Elaine's emotional release, *Cat's Eye* stresses the importance of memory in the process of maturation, while also highlighting the need for reconnection with the spurned figures of the past. When it comes to Cordelia, however, this reconnection is for Elaine only imaginary; Cordelia is gone, and some of the stories to which she holds the key can never be recovered, which gives Elaine's journey a lingering sense of incompleteness. "Really it's Cordelia I expect," thinks Elaine in the final moments of her story, "Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why" (Atwood 2009, 485).

### 3.2 Painting Back to the Past

While Elaine may never get Cordelia's side of the story, it matters that she is able to uncover and tell her own. Her Toronto retrospective prompts her both to shape her story and retell it to herself, and to look at her oeuvre as a visual reimagining of her past. As Coral Ann Howells points out, the way Atwood represents Elaine's past is curiously doubled, with both a "discursive memoir version and a figural version presented through her paintings" (Jones 2008, 31). The discursive version is the one Elaine is able to shape after recovering her lost time and negotiating with the memories and ghosts she finds there. What is particularly



interesting is that she can construct her story in her art before consciously comprehending it; she paints its “figural version” before rediscovering her history and the language to express it. In Said’s terms, Elaine therefore manages to use new forms to compose an alternative conception of the past. This act, reminiscent to some degree of the original concept of writing back, could be interpreted as an individual attempt at *painting back* to her oppressors.

The paintings offer an emotional outlet to Elaine by allowing her to portray her unresolved feelings and murky memories. She paints her “three muses” with gratitude; she depicts the Virgin Mary floating above a bridge, dressed in black and holding a cat’s eye marble; she paints three small dark figures in a field of snow. With what she admits to be “considerable malice” (Atwood 2009, 477), she exacts her revenge by laboring on the mocking, distorted portraits of Mrs. Smeath, multiplied like bacteria and at one point grotesquely merged with Mrs. Lumley.

It is not, however, only the subject matter of Elaine’s paintings that offers catharsis – it is also the act of painting itself. As Molly Hite suggests, the vocation of painter is a “professionalized embodiment of a one-way gaze” (Hite 1995, 140). In other words, it is a way to reverse the look that has condemned Elaine to the position of otherness and expose her oppressors to its humiliation: “I have said, *I see*” (Atwood 2009, 477).

It should, however, be pointed out that gaping and comical discrepancies repeatedly occur between what Elaine ostensibly aims to depict and outside interpretations. In the case of Mrs. Smeath, what Elaine intends to be mockery and vengeance is interpreted by critics as a compassionate portrayal of an aging female body. However, as Hite (1995) argues, it is not necessarily the viewers who misread the painting. Elaine herself is an unreliable interpreter of her own work, occasionally unaware of its potential layers of meaning. For instance, her subsequent sympathy for Mrs. Smeath’s suffering is triggered precisely by those “malicious” paintings. It therefore appears that in Elaine’s life, artistic representations both precede and exceed conscious knowledge, revealing the memories and realizations her consciousness has not yet unlocked.

### 3.3 Distancing and Reconnecting

Even if her paintings may unwittingly reveal traces of empathy, for much of *Cat’s Eye* Elaine is deliberately trying to deny it. To protect herself from remembering her own experiences of abuse, she needs to avoid relating to fellow victims. Those self-defense mechanisms are what prompts her to be cruel and withhold empathy, believing that “young women need unfairness, it’s one of their few defenses” (Atwood 2009, 430). Those she fails to show compassion for are often the women who are closest, or most similar to her. When Cordelia begins to “let herself go,” failing exams and becoming sloppy, Elaine starts to avoid her, not entirely knowing why. “How can she be so abject? When will she learn?” (Atwood 2009, 295), Elaine thinks. “*Smarten up*, I want to tell her. *Pull up your socks*.” When she hears about Cordelia’s troubles with her domineering father, who tells her to “wipe that smirk off of [her] face,” just as Cordelia used to command her, Elaine feels inexplicably threatened:

There is that glimpse, during which I can see. And then not. A wave of blood goes up to my head, my stomach shrinks together, as if something dangerous has just missed

hitting me. It's as if I've been caught stealing, or telling a lie; or as if I've heard other people talking about me, saying bad things about me, behind my back. (Atwood 2009, 299)

Much later in her life, Elaine similarly feels a strange surge of fury after Cordelia asks for her help, leading her to abandon Cordelia with a half-hearted promise of another visit. But Elaine's urge to distance herself from weak, suffering women is not limited to Cordelia. After Susie, a fellow student who is also having an affair with Mr. Hrbik, suffers a life-threatening abortion, Elaine comes to her aid, but also claims that she hardly even knows her: "I don't want to be implicated," she thinks. When Elaine comments that "[e]verything that's happened to her could well have happened to me," it might be expected that she will go on to identify with Susie. Instead, her final reaction is that of distancing, since "there is also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere inside my head: *It serves her right*" (Atwood 2009, 376); this juxtaposition seems to highlight Elaine's unresolved and conflicted feelings towards herself as a victim.

Rather than inspire sympathy, the realization that she may not be too different from Susie or Cordelia prompts Elaine's guilty, conflicted retreat. In an act of self-preservation, she distances herself from those whose suffering reminds her of her own and threatens to bind her to them. Likewise, Elaine claims that sisterhood is a difficult concept for her to grasp; as Hite explains, she persistently "denies her inclusion in the category of women" (Hite 1995, 140). Victimized in a community of girls and unable to relate to them, Elaine retreats into the belief that boys are her allies. In their company, the "abnormality" that separates her from other girls can be used to her advantage: "Stunned broad, dog, bag and bitch are words they apply to girls. [...] I don't think any of these words apply to me" (Atwood 2009, 280); "I think I am an exception, to some rule I haven't yet identified" (Atwood 2009, 330).

Elaine's willful separation from other women resembles what Said defines as separatism of colonized nations – inevitably complicated, of course, by the fact that she is allowed to align herself with the male majority during the process of her recovery. Derry's suggestion that Elaine's white middle-class background opens convenient paths towards rebellion – paths unavailable to actual minority figures – is perhaps even more pertinent in this context. However, the need for her to reconnect with others in order to heal is undeniable. The integrative view of humanity that she needs to adopt involves not only identifying with those who share her feelings of alienation and otherness – nor protecting herself by finding shelter within male communities – but also reconnecting with the women who acted as her oppressors.

This stage of Elaine's recuperation begins when, after uncovering her memories, she first manages to reconnect with her mother. She then comes to see Mrs. Smeath as a fellow displaced person; ultimately, she can see Cordelia for who she truly is: a lonely, frightened girl desperately trying to please her bullying father and displacing her feelings onto Elaine. Only then is Elaine able both to let Cordelia go and experience a cathartic re-enactment of her own trauma:

There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were. [...] I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. (Atwood 2009, 495–6)

“Going home” signifies not only the girls’ release from the cold darkness of the ravine, but also the resolution of Elaine’s trauma in extending forgiveness and empathy to both herself and Cordelia. There may be some things in Elaine’s past that can never be recovered; the scars of her trauma may never entirely fade. As the author concludes, Cordelia and Elaine will never be “two old women giggling over their tea.” Nevertheless, for Elaine, the light of understanding and compassion that her hard-earned insights offer may prove to be “enough to see by” (Atwood 2009, 498).

## 4 Conclusion

It has been stated that the disappearance of Cordelia and her story, as the piece she needs to give back to Elaine, renders the recovery of the past in *Cat’s Eye* incomplete. Yet Elaine is granted a tentatively happy ending, made possible by the emergence of a unifying compassion which constitutes a reversal of alienation and othering. Such a reversal, however, is achieved only when she can perceive Cordelia, her main tyrant, as her equally troubled twin.

This liberating realization – that the oppressor, is, in fact, a similarly weak and oppressed double – dramatically highlights the way Elaine’s position diverges from the experience of postcolonial subjects. While her exclusion may bind her to other othered figures – perhaps in a manner that somewhat resembles the way white Canadian culture is linked to postcolonial issues by what Bharati Mukherjee calls a “deep sense of marginality” (as cited in Hutcheon 1989, 155). As a member of the dominant class, Elaine is given a much wider variety of options for rebellion and recovery. What the analysis of her experience through the lens of postcolonial theory highlights, however, is the complexity of attaining recovery for individuals who are othered and marginalized. In *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood depicts such a quest – even if it is undertaken with Elaine’s advantages – as immensely strenuous and never entirely complete.

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