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Disrupting Female Stereotypes

The Feminine Difference and the
Challenge of Patriarchal Norms
in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

Marianne Clausen



HÖGSKOLAN
DALARNA

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Introduction

“Knowing too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened” (Atwood 240). This claim might be the antithesis of Margaret Atwood’s bildungsroman, *Cat’s Eye*. It is pronounced by the main protagonist Elaine Risley, and reveals her unreliable first person voice, and refers to her narrative project of understanding and recollecting her past self and past relationships. It is an attempt to come to terms with repressed memories caused by childhood traumas stemming from abusive relationships with other girls. As the novel progresses, and as Elaine gains more knowledge about herself and others through her narrative, the above stated hypothesis is proved wrong by alluding to its opposite that one can never know enough about other people, and that the more we know, the better we are able to understand people, which also gives us a better insight into ourselves.

This attitude of not wanting to know too much about other people is particularly apparent in the protagonist’s interaction with women; in the way they reduce and label each other to fit a certain stereotyped image. The novel does indeed depict stereotyped female characters, but they are imagined through the ignorant eyes of the young protagonist. These are, however, later transformed into more complex characters through the process of Elaine’s art and her self-transforming narrative. The female stereotypes are thus disrupted through the development of Elaine.

One of the ways *Cat’s Eye* disrupts stereotypes is by showing “Feminine Difference”. Helena Michie accuses American second-wave feminism of ignoring individual differences between women and of reducing them to a “hegemonic ‘woman’ safely

ensconced at the political and rhetorical center of feminist discourse” (4). In addition, her concept of “Sororophobia” designates the complex relationships between women in literature, which are expressed by negotiation of sameness and difference between the female characters (9). This is in opposition to the feminist idea of sisterhood, understood as a universal sense of loyalty between women, and Michie thus advocates a more nuanced portrayal of female relationships in literature (9). According to Michie, a common feminist interpretation of female literary characters involves the equation of the terms “woman” and “otherness”, which are reduced to “sameness” in order to categorize the group (3). She challenges the category by asserting that differences between women are impossible to ignore and adds that: “No political or physic marker from "human" to "self" can exclude division, conflict, duplicity, or multiplicity” (4-5).

In *Cat's Eye* women represent such duplicity and multiplicity. The feminine difference between the female characters does indeed cause conflict and division. Michie's concept of Sororophobia is reflected in Elaine's relationships with Cordelia, her childhood bully and teenage friend, and Mrs. Smeath (the mother of Grace Smeath, another childhood friend). These relationships have a powerful influence on Elaine's sense of identity. At first Elaine is mostly aware of the differences between them, which are basically encountered as negative, but later she realizes through her paintings and her narrative that they are “reflections” of herself that need to be incorporated within her (Atwood 450). Feminine difference is thus transformed, from being a purely negative and traumatizing event into a means of maturity and personal growth as a result of Elaine's acceptance of her own internal differences.

Previous research on *Cat's Eye* has mainly been concerned with either the genre of female autobiography and *künstlerroman*, or feminist issues such as female repression and patriarchal domination. Most approaches to the novel have tried to find a signifier for feminine experience through the prism of feminist or Canadian national politics. There has been little research on female stereotypes and in particular individual feminine difference in *Cat's Eye*.

However, Charlotte Beyer is one critic who is preoccupied with feminine difference in relation to post-colonial characters and Canadian landscapes in Atwood's novels. She argues that Atwood resists an assimilation of the dominant discourse by "exploring marginal subject positions" within Canada (72). In specific relation to *Cat's Eye*, Beyer reads the novel as an "analysis of national and gendered identity which links multiplicity of place with a plurality of feminine differences, and a portrayal of the centrality of relationships between women in feminine subject-formation" (Beyer 86). Hence Beyer's focus is related to Canadian locations connected to representations of marginal post-colonial female voices. Nevertheless, she does not specifically relate these representations of women to patriarchal society or to the "performativity" of gender roles as a means to question patriarchal norms.

Pavla Chudejová looks at stereotypes of women in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye* and focuses on recognizable stereotypes of the 1950s in North America, such as the "Happy Housewife Heroine", which was presented as an ideal for women resembling that of the Victorian female ideal "The Angel in the House". She argues that the female main characters in both texts are forced to conform to a

stereotyped image of women, which conflicts with an internal refusal to be confined by patriarchal society (20).

In another paper on female stereotypes, Laura Gronewold explores the Jungian archetype of “The Evil Woman” in three novels by Atwood, including *Cat’s Eye*. She argues that the novel disrupts female stereotypes by showing representations of The Evil Woman and by letting the characters embrace and accept their Evil Woman as a part of themselves in order to turn it into “a source of strength” (100). She states that to accept The Evil Woman within, “is to reject gender norms that render the evil woman as wholly negative” (100).

The setting, in the beginning of *Cat’s Eye*, is Canada in the post World War II period. The novel is narrated by Elaine who, at the age of nine, moves to Toronto after having lived most of her life in the North Canadian wilderness with her family, due to her father’s entomologist lifestyle. In her teenage years and young adulthood she struggles to succeed as an artist, and the story culminates when she as a 51-year old well-reputed artist is encouraged to return to Toronto to do a retrospective exhibition of her paintings. The narrative consists of memories and associations in non-chronological order which, besides attending to issues connected to patriarchy, feminism and art in particular deal with her traumatic childhood experience of being bullied by her girlfriends, and their remaining influence on her life, as well as her art.

Consequently a psychoanalytical reading of the relationship between Elaine and her childhood girlfriends is relevant. Elaine’s unconscious both threatens as well as lures her, and represents her traumatized state. Her insistence on reuniting with Cordelia when

returning to Toronto can be understood in the light of Jacques Lacan's theory of The Mirror Stage.

The Mirror Stage involves the process from which the infant learns to separate itself from the mother and first discovers itself as a unified being, a perception that is based on an illusion. Later it enters "The Symbolic" stage, which is associated with patriarchal authority and constitutes the infant's first encounter with language as an all-encompassing reality. The entering into The Symbolic furthermore entails a sense of loss and a desire or longing for a unified self, which the prior stage represented (Loos pars.5-11).

In *Cat's Eye* Elaine's move to Toronto can resemble a transition into The Symbolic; a new order in which she sees herself as "other" and has to learn a new set of rules. This is a traumatic event, and it is experienced as a sense of loss. Cordelia and the other girls' threatening behavior results in contradictory feelings within Elaine, which symbolize the collapse of language and a regression into a pre-symbolic stage: "They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please" (Atwood 131).

Besides making readers aware of stereotypes and feminine difference through individual psychological challenges of the female characters, *Cat's Eye* also makes the reader pay attention to women in socially constructed power roles, and the manner in which they challenge these roles. In post-war Toronto, patriarchal society was a restrictive force of power for women. This is emphasized by the novel's symbolic use of "the gaze", originally a Lacanian concept based on his theory of The Mirror Stage. The

gaze is here a part of The Symbolic that constitutes the Other. The concept of the gaze has more recently been applied to feminist and psychoanalytical film theory by Laura Mulvey. According to Mulvey, the cinema acts out the male spectator's "phallogocentric desire" by making him identify with the male hero, whose gaze is directed towards "the female other" (Loos par. 12). This screen image is internalized as an ideal within the spectator as "a constructed image representing desire" (Loos par. 14).

Accordingly, in *Cat's Eye* the gaze is associated with male domination over women. The gaze is represented as an internalized ideal expressed by both men and women. Women are to some extent victims of the gaze, shown particularly by the consumer magazines showing perfect women, or directing the gaze towards their imperfectness: "This is a watchbird watching YOU" (Atwood 154).

However, in the novel these stereotypes of women are disrupted by showing girls and women being cruel to each other, acting out their negative feelings and frustrations, which has traditionally been seen as "un-feminine". Cordelia's power over Elaine's weakness often bears reference to the gaze: "stand up straight! People are looking!" (Atwood 131). Later Elaine and Cordelia seem to have changed roles within the power hierarchy. Elaine's brutal transition into the world of girls seems to have hardened her and supported by her "mean mouth", she takes the dominant position in her relationship with Cordelia, as well as with other women. Hence, *Cat's Eye* disrupts stereotypes of women by showing how feminine difference, separated from male influences, constructs feminine power relations.

In addition, *Cat's Eye* also disrupts stereotypes by exploring the confines of the poststructuralist idea of identity as a social construction. In this context, Judith Butler's theory of "Performativity", is linked to feminism and constructions of gender. Butler bases her theory on the assertion that both gender and sex are socially constructed (43). She further states that humans have agency to act against the socially constructed hegemony; here referring to the dominant discourses established through language. Agency is possible since gender is an "act" or "performance" "that is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism" and which reveals the artificiality of gender (187). Butler thus represents an optimistic view of gender by proposing the possibility of choice in regard to the individual's gender identity.

Butler's idea of gender Performativity can be adopted to an analysis of *Cat's Eye*. Most of the female characters in the novel are somewhat unstable, seemingly playing a role, which is often reversed; such as the power roles between Cordelia and Elaine. After Elaine's numerous struggles to fit into the norms of her girlfriends, she one day discovers that "It's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game" (Atwood 213). With this new insight she decides to end the relationship.

By performing roles and acting out feminine difference, women in *Cat's Eye* not only challenge stereotypes, they also to some extent question patriarchal norms. Butler's idea of agency through performance is mirrored in *Cat's Eye*, for example through Elaine's relationships with Jon, her first husband and Josef, her middle aged lover and art mentor. By dating both of them, she acts out different roles as a sort of "experiment", which also puts her in control of the relationships. With Josef she does give-in to stereotyped ideas of women, for example by letting him dress her up in his image: "You should wear

purple dresses [...] It would be an improvement” (Atwood 331); but by making it a performance, she observes herself from a distance, conscious of her choice of role: “I recognize the style: late nineteenth century. Pre-Raphaelite. I should be holding a poppy” (Atwood 333). Thus by consciously performing different roles, women in *Cat’s Eye* disrupt female stereotypes and question patriarchal norms.

Performativity is also reflected in the novel in relation to fashion and dress. Elizabeth Williams argues that fashion and dress are “playful” means to explore one’s individuality. She thus opposes the common feminist view of fashion; that it is socially repressive and cannot be approved as an artistic expression (231). Williams challenges this view by stating that nature is not superior to culture, and that fashion should be regarded as an art form, since human beings are social creatures, and therefore fashion is a reflection of the social context (234).

The female characters in *Cat’s Eye* use fashion as a creative means to express their individuality and to re-invent themselves, which is mainly a liberating experience and correlates with Butler’s idea of gender Performativity as an individual choice, and which makes agency possible. However fashion and dress are also used to disguise the ageing process, which in Elaine’s middle age becomes a slightly obsessive behavior, in order to adhere to an externally imposed dress-code. Nevertheless, fashion in *Cat’s Eye* mainly seems to be a means of self-creation and -expression, which emphasizes the fluidity of the post-structural identity and the feminine difference within and between the female characters.

This thesis will initially adopt a psychoanalytical approach to *Cat's Eye* in order to explore the inner struggles of the female characters and their relational differences. For this purpose Jacques Lacan's theory of The Mirror Stage will be applied in order to investigate traumatic experience. Helena Michie's concepts of otherness, sisterhood and Sororophobia will supplement this approach by focusing on representations of feminine differences within Elaine's character and in her relationships with other women. Furthermore, the thesis will investigate feminine difference by looking into the novel's representations of socially constructed power roles between women and the challenge of patriarchal norms. In addition a feminist/poststructuralist approach is applied in order to examine how the female characters manage or fail to manage the challenges of patriarchal norms, by exploring and re-inventing their gender roles, through Judith Butler's concept of gender "Performativity". This concept is founded on the poststructuralist idea that gender is socially constructed through language and adopted to feminist theory.

The thesis argues that *Cat's Eye* disrupts stereotypes of women by exploring representations of feminine difference within individual characters as well as within the female characters' relationships. In addition, the novel to some extent questions patriarchal norms, by representing women who consciously reflect on their own gender role as a socially constructed performance, and as a result liberate themselves from patriarchal society.

The Feminine Difference and Psychological Struggles

“I don't want to remember. The past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across water, like postcards: I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a blank” (Atwood 231). Throughout most of the novel Elaine Risley struggles with this pronounced blankness even though she is unaware of its cause. This is due to her forgotten childhood memories in relation to her friends Cordelia, Grace and Carol. As a child she is defenseless against Cordelia's and the other girls' bullying because of her different background. Her first nine years spent in the North Canadian wilderness with her family leaves her unprepared for the rigid gender norms of 1940s Toronto. Her ignorance of her own place in the social hierarchy is her weakness, and gender suddenly becomes an important marker of her identity, something she is unaware of, perhaps due to her mother's indifference to social ideas about gender: “My mother did most of the cooking but it was not her favorite thing. She was not fond of housework generally” (Atwood 166). Consequently, Elaine's ignorance of social gender roles exposes her otherness in contrast to other girls and women in Toronto.

According to Michie “otherness” in literature is “a place in which differences between women are played out” (7). In addition, her concept of “Sororophobia” is discussed in relation to the concept of “sisterhood”. Sororophobia represents the often complex relationships between women which entail “the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women” (9). Sororophobia thus constitutes an attempt to identify with other women as well as to retain difference from them. This idea of Sororophobia is opposed to the idea of sisterhood often presented by feminist critics, which is the idea that there exists a certain sisterly loyalty between women. Michie advocates for a more nuanced notion of female relationships. Accordingly, the process of

Sororophobia reveals itself when sisterhood is threatened by otherness or feminine difference (9).

In addition to Michie's concepts of Sororophobia, Otherness and Feminine Difference as a psychological struggle within and between women Lacan's theory of The Mirror Stage deals with trauma and explains the unconscious and often contradictory feelings a victim of trauma is exposed to. Lacan's concepts of The Imaginary, The Symbolic and The Real are different stages that follow The Mirror Stage. The Mirror Stage is the process in which the infant acknowledges its own subjectivity. It starts when the infant sees itself in the mirror and discovers itself as a unified being in contrast to the pre-symbiotic state of "fragmentation and libidinal needs" (Loos par. 5). This is what Lacan calls "the ideal I", an illusory sense of wholeness (Loos par. 5). This stage is called The Imaginary and is prior to knowledge of the other and of language. The next stage is called The Symbolic, which determines the subject as separate from other human beings and constitutes a sense of loss and a desire to regain what is lost; the idea of a unified I. The Symbolic is also the order of language. Language functions as an organizer of the subject and constitutes access to the psyche (Loos par.10). The Real is a "pre-mirror, pre-imaginary and pre-symbolic state" (Loos par. 11), a state which cannot be symbolized or expressed through language.

Elaine's childhood move to Toronto and her encounter with the girls can resemble the experience of the infant when it enters The Symbolic and sees itself as an Other, which induces a sense of loss and a longing to regain a unified sense of self. The new Symbolic order is determined by language, which in Elaine's case, signifies her initiation into the world of girls and women. As a child she desires to identify with Cordelia and the other

girls no matter the cost. In one scene where Cordelia orders Elaine to go down into the ravine where the bad men hide, she is terrified but sees no other way: “I don't want to do these things, I'm afraid of them. But I think about Cordelia telling me to do them, not in her scornful voice, in her kind one. I hear her kind voice inside my head. Do it Come on. I would be doing these things to please her” (173). In this instance Cordelia's voice is internalized within Elaine as a result of the compromise between the subject and the object; in the latter case it is Cordelia who represents the symbolic order. For Elaine it is experienced as a traumatic event of contradictory feelings. She does not want to go to the ravine, but her anxiety is repressed in order to avoid her anxiety of being excluded by the group of girls. Cordelia is simultaneously experienced as kind and evil, and Elaine has to please her, even if it means risking her own life.

In most of her teenage and adult years Elaine is still under the influence of her childhood tormentors which manifests as an inner state of “nothingness”, and which threatens her sense of identity and almost makes her commit suicide. At the age of 51 she still struggles with this sense of worthlessness. Because of her retrospective exhibition, which she, due to her status as a well-reputed artist, has been encouraged to participate in by leading members of the art scene of Toronto; she is forced to return and confront her childhood memories and her past relationship with Cordelia. Her hope is that the occasion might lead to a reconnection between the two. She reflects that although Cordelia has her own version of the story, they need each other's perspective: “This is the part of herself I could give back to her. We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key” (450).

Accordingly, based on Lacan's Mirror Stage theory, Cordelia represents a loss to Elaine, which she believes will disappear when seeing Cordelia again. To Elaine, Cordelia is the missing part of her cat's eye marble in which she sees her "entire life" (434); a symbol of her unconscious that can come to the surface at any time. However, from Lacan's perspective this attempt to find her past self through Cordelia is an impossible quest, since Cordelia represents a longing for a unified self, which is an illusion. Elaine realizes this, at the end of the novel, when sitting next to two elderly women on the plane when leaving Toronto: "This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea" (462). In this episode Elaine seems to both mourn and accept her loss of Cordelia, as well as her own self, eventually recognizing her own incompleteness.

This is also a realization that is unleashed by the process of creating her paintings, paintings that appear to have a life of their own and that somehow become mediators between the inner and external world as a therapeutic means to recover from her traumas: "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (249). In this instance, her painting has transformed her idea of Cordelia, making her understand that Cordelia is the real victim and she herself the dominant individual.

Accordingly, Elaine's numerous paintings of Mrs. Smeath can be seen as a therapeutic means to recover from trauma. Mrs. Smeath as the primary source of inspiration for her paintings can, in line with her behavior towards her childhood tormentors, be understood as a regression into a pre-symbiotic state, where logic and language collapse. Her

repetitive creation of this hateful object is an irrational act and represents contradictory forces within her: “One picture of Mrs. Smeath leads to another. She multiplies on the walls like bacteria, standing, sitting, flying with clothes, without clothes, following me around with her many eyes [...] Sometimes I turn her faces to the wall” (367). However, her paintings appear to change her hateful attitude toward Mrs. Smeath. They eventually become a means to forgiveness:

I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man; the eyes of a small town threadbare decency. Mrs. Smeath was a transplant to the city, from somewhere a lot smaller. A displaced person; as I was. (443)

Elaine thus comes to realize her kinship with Mrs. Smeath by their common otherness, which transforms her hatred into forgiveness.

Michie’s concept of feminine difference is in *Cat’s Eye* reflected in Elaine’s experiences with her otherness in relation to other girls and women in Toronto. Mrs. Smeath who tries to save Elaine from her “heathen” upbringing, is one of the female characters, who makes Elaine aware of her otherness. At first Elaine attempts to identify with Mrs. Smeath’s religious pursuits, but when she finds out that Mrs. Smeath had known all about the bullying of which Elaine is a victim, and approved of it as “God’s punishment” (199), she gives up her faith and her trust in Mrs. Smeath, since she realizes that this is not just a single occurrence of “girls’ play”. Adult women also resent her for

her otherness: “Mrs. Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right” (199).

With reference to Michie’s concept of Sororophobia, Cordelia’s and Mrs. Smeath’s influence on Elaine can originally be seen as negative. The sisterly loyalty seems to be disrupted and Sororophobia is revealed as a psychological struggle between the female characters’ differences. The dynamic negotiation of sameness and difference is apparent in Elaine’s alternating attempts to identify with the other girls and women as well as to differentiate herself from them. As a young child she mainly wants to identify with Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath and imitate their behavior, but at a later stage she chooses to differentiate herself from them. Due to their powerful influence on her early childhood, they remain an important part of her identity in positive and negative ways. However, these characters are eventually transformed by Elaine’s paintings and narrative into more positive characters, who need to be incorporated within Elaine in order to see her own complexity and accept her otherness: “Now I can see myself, through these eyes of Mrs. Smeath: a frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where [...] I am unbaptized, a nest for demons: how could she know what germs of blasphemy and unfaith were breeding in me? And yet she took me in” (443). The complex relationships conflicted by feminine difference are therefore necessary for the integration of differences within Elaine herself.

In summary the reader is made aware of the inner psychological struggles of Elaine’s character, which has to do with her traumas of being the other in her encounters with women and girls in Toronto. Her traumas induce a sense of loss which follows her throughout her life, personified by Cordelia’s character. Her relationships with especially

Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath entail a dynamic process of negotiation of sameness and difference, which is at first experienced as negative but which, by the means of Elaine's paintings and narrative, is transformed into a source of strength within Elaine due to her acceptance of her own internal differences.

The Feminine Difference and Patriarchal Norms

“All fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers. But fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power” (Atwood 182). In *Cat's Eye's* postwar Toronto patriarchal norms dominate society. For women and girls this means restrictive social roles and a somewhat ambivalent position caused by narrow hierarchical structures. Women, accordingly, are presented as subjects who need to be improved, and society as a construct of power is the guarantor of this improvement. Women are to some extent forced to conform to stereotypical gender images imposed on them by patriarchal norms. The power games between the girls mirror this and show the consequences for girls and women in particular: “All of this is for my own good, because they are my best friends and they want to help me improve” (Atwood 127). Elaine conforms to Cordelia's rules because she believes she needs improvement. In *Cat's Eye* the challenge of patriarchal norms imposed on the female gender is symbolized by the judging “gaze”.

The gaze is a psychological concept developed by Lacan and relates to his Mirror Stage theory and The Symbolic. According to Lacan, the gaze constitutes an experience of “being externally scrutinized” by an “invisible other”, which reduces the subject to anxiety and shame (Krips 93). The invisible gaze turns the object into a passive state of

“being looked at” and causes “castration anxiety”, a sense of lack that resembles the feelings experienced by the child who enters The Symbolic (Krips 93). Lacan’s theory of the gaze is founded on Sigmund Freud’s concept of “The Scopic Drive”, where the gaze is produced by “exhibitionistic and voyeuristic impulses” that generates both anxiety as well as pleasure (Krips 93).

The concept of the gaze has been taken up by the feminist film theoretician, Laura Mulvey. Where Lacan’s notion of the gaze is related to an invisible one, Mulvey assigns the role of the gaze to visible subjects within the cinema. According to her, the cinema favors the male “Phallogocentric Desire” and turns female images into passive objects controlled by the active male gaze, which is represented by the male hero on the screen. The male hero becomes the “ego-ideal”, which the (male) spectator can identify with (Loos par. 12). The screen image Mulvey compares to Lacan’s idea of The Imaginary, where the mirrored image of the infant makes it identify with a unified self. In the same manner the screen image becomes an internalized ideal within the spectator. The screen image thus constitutes “a constructed image representing desire” (Loos par. 14).

In *Cat’s Eye* being in control of the gaze means being in power. Toronto in the 1940s is represented as a place where people live out the maxim of an eye for an eye. Cordelia is in the beginning of the novel a victimizer, who seems to have internalized this idea. Her constant observation of Elaine makes Elaine feel anxious and paranoid: “I feel I’m always being watched. At any time I may step over some line I don’t even know is there” (134). Elaine’s insecurity and weakness are exposed by the gaze. Her cat’s eye marble becomes a protection against the external world and functions as an internal frozen gaze

where other gazes are denied access: “I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colors, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only” (157).

The gaze as a feminist concept can be assigned to the novel by the way in which consumer images victimize women and make them conform to gender stereotypes. Fiona Tolan introduces “The Happy Housewife Heroine” ideal in relation to her analysis of *Cat’s Eye*. This feminine ideal was a counterpart to the Victorian “Angel of the House” and was an image reinforced and maintained by consumerism in the 50s: “The post-war rise in consumerism stimulated a market-driven compulsion to keep women in the home where they would maximise their product consumption, and which productively coincided with an intellectual wave of conservative family psychology” (Tolan 26). In the novel this is epitomized by the Eaton catalogues and their strategic exposure of women’s imperfections, and by pointing out what is to be improved in the name of consumerism: “Other pictures show women doing things they aren’t supposed to do. Some of them gossip too much, some are sloppy, others bossy. Some of them knit too much” (154). Elaine herself is indoctrinated by this gendered ideology as she is introduced to the world of girls: “I begin to want things I’ve never wanted before” (59). According to Pavla Chudejová the female main characters in two of Atwood’s novels, including *Cat’s Eye*, are forced to conform to these stereotypical images. Although they try to resist these images, their resistance proves “often futile since innumerable sophisticated methods are deployed to lure them into the comfortable and gloriously feminine role of the immaculate suburban housewife” (Chudejová 20).

Except for the popular magazines, the symbol of the gaze in relation to patriarchal victimization of women is difficult to find in *Cat’s Eye*. This is because women are

themselves victimizers and in control of the gaze. Men are somewhat excluded from the “power games” which are mostly played out between women. Furthermore, the women are represented as rather “unfeminine” in contrast to gender stereotyped ideals, and they certainly do not fit either the ideal of The Angel of the House or the Happy Housewife Heroine. Women, on the contrary, are often aggressive and cunning towards each other, showing negative feelings such as jealousy, anger and distrust. This is exemplified in Elaine’s young adult years and in her attitude towards Susie, another art student who, like Elaine, also has a love affair with Josef, their mutual art-mentor. When Elaine discovers Susie’s pregnancy, which prompts Susie to harm herself, a voice within Elaine speaks: “It serves her right” (349). Additionally, Elaine often feels threatened by other women: “Women collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape [...] Women know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted” (414). Her tense relationships with women make her turn to the opposite gender for support: “boys are my secret allies” (Atwood 181). This competitive relationship between women can be seen as a consequence of patriarchal norms causing feelings of frustration within women. The gaze is thus an internalized means of survival within the patriarchal hierarchy. Molly Hite supports this claim: “to be object of the look is to look like, the trope of simile instantly invoking stereotypes of women who have aged past the point of being rewarding to the acquisitive gaze. Women look like, while in general men only look” (139). In Hite’s opinion the gaze makes women the object and victim of patriarchy.

In contrast to Hite, Michie argues that competition between women is not necessarily a product of patriarchal repression as some feminists claim. She suggests that; “envy and competition can be thought of as constitutive factors in sisterly dynamics” (9). In addition

Laura Gronewold advocates a literary canon which embraces “The Evil Woman” archetype as a sign of feminine strength and complexity, instead of rejecting it as a threat to the social norm. The female characters in Atwood’s novels, she believes, embrace their Evil Woman as a source of strength, which eventually becomes a constructive, rather than a destructive force within them:

Atwood's evil women are smart, shrewd, cunning, and aggressive - traits that when possessed by a woman are often characterized, by both men and women, as malevolent, manipulative, overzealous, and cruel. But Atwood's evil women may also be scared, loving, confused, or lost; they are multifaceted characters who do not succumb to archetypes and become stock characters with negative stereotypes stamped on them. (Gronewold 2)

Hence according to Gronewold, Atwood’s female characters challenge stereotypes by showing both negative as well as positive traits. The evil women in *Cat’s Eye* are thus evil for a reason, and by embracing their Evil Woman they also learn to forgive and let go of their controlling and judgmental gaze, as Elaine also comes to realize: “An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (Atwood 443).

In *Cat’s Eye* the archetype of The Evil Woman is evident and can be regarded as a source of power in relation to the female characters, which challenges the stereotyped ideal represented in the popular magazines. When Elaine is interviewed in regard to her retrospective exhibition, her attitude towards the female interviewer is quite aggressive. Elaine wants to be in control of the interview, but feels that the interviewer tries to reduce her into a stereotyped image of the female artist colored by feminist assumptions: “Male

art teachers pinching your bum calling you baby, asking you why there are no great female painters, that sort of thing” (96). The irony is that Elaine herself belittles the female interviewer by her critical attitude and presupposed ideas of her generation: “What I have to say is not altogether what she wants to hear. She'd prefer stories of outrage, although she'd be unlikely to tell them about herself, she's too young” (96).

The reader is challenged to look beyond the surface of the discourse, making him/her aware of the female stereotypes and the feminine difference between the female characters revealed by demonstrations of power and the symbolism of the gaze. The patriarchal norms are a limiting factor for women in *Cat's Eye*, but the representation of the female characters challenges these norms by showing women as powerful aggressors, who are in control of the gaze.

The Feminine Difference and Gender Performativity

“I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty. So much depends on the light, and the way you squint” (Atwood 6). *Cat's Eye* seems to support the post-structural notion of identity as socially constructed, which is expressed by character traits based on fluidity, plurality and imitation. Post-structural critics support the claim that “there is nothing outside the text” (qtd. in Barry loc. 1284 n.p.), which refers to the idea that all reality is linguistically constructed. Furthermore they reject the assumption that individuals have a stable identity or a so called “essence”, since they are “a product of social and linguistic forces” (Barry loc. 1236 n.p.). In a feminist gender context this correlates with Simone Beauvoir’s famous statement that: “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Tolan 176). Tolan asserts that Atwood’s

novels recognize the feminist anti-essentialist “refusal to be homogenised within a single political expression” (197). Beyer supports this statement in relation to her exploration of places and post-colonial marginal identities in Atwood’s novels. In her reading of *Cat’s Eye* she sees a symbolic connection between the differences in Canadian locales and spaces, such as the metropolis and the wilderness, to the complexity and differences between the female postcolonial characters. She argues that Atwood’s use of localities shows a “resistance towards a monolithic ‘truth’ and identity, by the very marginality and diversity which these localities represent” (73).

In addition to this post-structural notion of identity as fluid and complex, Judith Butler grounds her theory of “Performativity” in relation to gender as a social construction. She believes that both gender and sex are socially constructed entities, and states that the tendency to “naturalize” gender as well as sex, is due to inherent binary oppositions, such as the terms “real” versus “artificial”, within language itself (43). Hence, according to Butler, gender roles can be modified by being aware of the dominant structures of language. A means by which gender roles can be modified is therefore Butler’s concept of “Performativity”. By performing gender, not according to stereotypical behavior, but as an individual exploration of roles, the performer changes the structures of language and the social ideas about gender, as well as being changed internally in the process: “My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (181). The process of Performativity is thus a dialectic exchange between the individual performer and the external world. The individual, according to Butler, has the possibility of agency, rather than being socially determined: “Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary, scene of agency,

the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (187). This, however, is a complicated project, since the subject is “a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules” (185). Accordingly agency is “to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (185). Butler thus encourages individuals to reflect on their own repetitive behavior, and to consciously perform roles that show variation rather than stereotypical behavior (189).

In *Cat's Eye* Performativity is related to the characters' fluid identity traits and is expressed as an imitation based on either conscious or unconscious behavior. When Elaine is introduced to the girls' play she is ignorant of the specific rules it entails, though she is aware that she is doing an imitation of some sort: “Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it” (57). Thus Elaine's self-conscious awareness of the artificial situation turns into habit and the game becomes “natural”, as it is frequently repeated. After many unconscious attempts to fit into the group of girls, she eventually becomes aware of the social power structures that have positioned her as a victim within the social group hierarchy: “They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them” (214). When realizing that it was all just “a game” (213) she learns that she has a choice, and as a result she takes action and becomes stronger. Thus with reference to Butler's idea of performativity, Elaine appears to gain agency from her awareness of socially constructed gender roles and power roles in general.

This is also reflected in her relationships with the opposite sex, where she appears to be more or less in control. In her relationship with Jon, her first husband, she is aware of their stubborn power struggles to do with parenthood: “Neither of us wants to take it on,

not the whole thing [...] We fight over our right to remain children” (371). In her relationship to Josef, which is likewise based on contradictions and power struggles, she remains in control of him although she is aware of his attempts to dominate her: “he wasn't real. The reason I've never dreamed about him was that he belonged already to the world of dreams: discontinuous, irrational, obsessive” (399). Josef's demanding attitude towards her becomes unreal, and she cannot be changed or hurt by him.

Cordelia is a performer as well, but contrary to Elaine, her behavior is unconscious. An example is her failed attempt to communicate with boys: “Her laugh, when she's with them, is refined and low, like a woman's laugh on the radio, except when she forgets herself. Then it's too loud. She's mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see” (268). Cordelia's irrational behavior results in her failure to attain agency in her life, and this appears to be the reason why she ends up in a psychiatric hospital. Elaine's eventual superiority over Cordelia is thus due to her rational mind and her acknowledgement of socially constructed power roles.

Hence Butler's idea of agency through performance can be illustrated by Elaine's character, but not in the case of Cordelia. As teenagers Cordelia and Elaine admiringly observe people who dress differently, and these come to represent an escape from social convention: “They have escaped, though what it is they've escaped from isn't clear to us. We think that their bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose” (5). Based on this observation, it seems that both Cordelia and Elaine in their teenage years are partly aware of the possibility of female agency as a sense of escape from social conventions. They are, however, at this point, not consciously aware of the existing patriarchal hierarchy and its limiting impact on their

lives, and therefore they are not completely free to choose their gender role. Nevertheless, it appears that female agency is, to some extent, possible in *Cat's Eye*, but it also appears to come at a price. Elaine has suffered for her knowledge, and Cordelia who never gains it, is deemed to suffer as well. However, Elaine's self-reflective attitude towards these inter-relational struggles and her own performance gives her agency in her life. For this reason Elaine not only disrupts stereotypical images of women, but also questions patriarchal norms.

Gender Performativity is also reflected in the way the female characters identify with dress and fashion. According to Hite, the female characters in *Cat's Eye* are slaves to fashion due to repressive patriarchal norms symbolized by the male gaze: "But the tactic has only limited efficacy because it is combined with a continued concern to control an appearance that is still female, to combine the dominating gaze with an awareness of being fashionably 'cool' and 'ultrasharp'" (140). Elizabeth Wilson on the other hand opposes the feminist idea that fashion is repressive by placing importance on the "playfulness" that dress and fashion represents for the individual. She asks: "Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women, or is it a form of adult play? [...] Does it muffle the self, or create it?" (231). In addition, she states that feminists have made the assumption that nature is superior to culture and therefore regard fashion as a lower form of identification. Accordingly, she aligns herself with the post-structural notion of identity: "Human beings, however, are not natural. They do not live primarily by instinct. They live in socially constructed cultures" (234). Hence fashion, according to Wilson, is just another form of self-expression which creates the individual, and she thus positions herself in line with Butler's theory of Performativity.

In *Cat's Eye* Elaine accordingly explores dress to show and create her identity. She is self-consciously aware of its significance in a social context: "I grow out my high school bangs and pin my hair back off my face, hoping to look austere. The girls at university, in their cashmere and pearls, make jokes about arty beatniks and talk to me less" (301). Here she uses dress to differentiate herself from the group of girls and to reject the values this group represents. Her experimentation of dress additionally shows playfulness as well as disguise: "I pull on my powder-blue sweatsuit, my disguise as a non-artist, and go down the four flights of stairs, trying to look brisk and purposeful. I could be a businesswoman out jogging, I could be a bank manager, on her day off" (19). Disguise in this context becomes a sign of playful re-invention of her own complex personality, which is not reduced to solely revolve around her professional identity as an artist.

However, her age seems to have an impact on her style of dress and appears to be a limitation to its transformative powers: "What I'd like is to be transformed, which becomes less possible. Disguise is easier when you're young" (48). In this context her age becomes a limiting factor, and dress and fashion seem to become a means to conceal the ageing process. Although fashion generally is depicted as a creative and liberating self-exploration in *Cat's Eye*, it also appears to bring out slightly obsessive behavior in regard to adhering to a "correct" dress code imposed by the external world.

In summary, *Cat's Eye* seems to support the post-structural idea of identity as socially constructed. This is personified by the fluid and complex identity traits of the female characters and their imitative behavior in the form of gender Performativity, which becomes a conscious means to gain agency in patriarchal society. Performativity involves fashion, which to some extent is a liberating expression of playfulness and self-

exploration. The novel's emphasis on these post-structural concepts makes the reader reflect on the complexity of the female characters and their dealings with social challenges, which eventually disrupts stereotypical images of women.

Conclusion

Feminine difference in all its variety is made available for the reader in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. The reader is involved in a process of differentiating the female characters from one another, which makes him/her focus on the female characters' inner qualities as well as their internal relationships. By representing complex female characters and feminine difference, *Cat's Eye* shows the reader what female stereotypes really are; narrow social images to which otherness is a threat.

In this thesis otherness or feminine difference was at first explored in the context of psychological struggles and trauma and related to Jacques Lacan's theory of The Mirror Stage and Helena Michie's concept of Sororophobia. With reference to Lacan the main emphasis is on Elaine's traumatizing experience of being Other in her relationship with Cordelia and the other girls, as well as in her relationship with Mrs. Smeath. Cordelia's influence over Elaine creates a loss within her, which she struggles to fill throughout her life. However her paintings gradually transform her hatred and traumas into something creative, and she eventually comes to accept her otherness and forgive her past tormentors. In addition, Michie's concepts of Sororophobia and Feminine Difference are exposed in the novel by the dynamic negotiation of sameness and difference between the female characters, which originally can be seen as a disruption of sisterhood, but which eventually, in the case of Elaine, becomes a means of maturity and personal growth due

to her acceptance of her own internal differences, specifically personified by Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath. The psychological struggles show the complexity of Elaine's character, reflected by her negotiation between inner and outer circumstances, which reveals feminine difference within and between the female characters and eventually disrupts female stereotypes.

Patriarchal norms are another challenge to the female characters. This challenge is symbolized by the gaze and the demand for improvement that it imposes over women. However women prove to be victimizers and in control of the gaze as much as they are victims. This transgresses stereotyped images of women as meek and submissive by exposing their inner Evil Woman, which is to be regarded as a source of strength, not entirely evil, but rather human. These powerful new images of women challenge stereotyped female ideals as well as pay attention to power dynamics within female relationships.

The post-structural influence in *Cat's Eye* is reflected by the emphasis on the fluidity and complexity of the characters, which is linked to the idea that identity is a social construction. This idea is applied to feminism by Judith Butler's concept of Performativity, which can be seen as a liberating force of gender exploration and which, in Elaine's case, proves to be a means to question patriarchal norms, by consciously reflecting on her own gender role, and by performing and being changed during this performance. Fashion likewise becomes a means to escape social and repressive structures, but simultaneously embodies a demand to conform to a social standard.

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